

**Kazimir Malevich: Painting, Architecture and the Avant-Garde in  
Russia — A New History of Suprematism**

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# Kazimir Malevich: Painting, Architecture and the Avant-Garde in Russia — A New History of Suprematism

## Abstract

In 1915, Kazimir Malevich painted *The Black Square* and began establishing the movement of Suprematism. Although it initially operated within the field of painting, from 1919 Suprematism entered the realm of architecture. The majority of Suprematist scholarship, however, has privileged the movement's painterly phase. Scholarship has examined Malevich's activities in close relation to many contemporary literary and theoretical ideas and linked the artist's achievements on the canvas with his many spiritual or metaphysical statements. Suprematism's later architectural thinking has received comparatively little scholarly attention and is often seen as an appendage to Malevich's work on the canvas rather than examined on its own terms.

This thesis affords equal attention to Suprematism's painterly and architectural phases and re-situates the movement in its historical context. Secondly, it examines how Malevich's numerous interactions with other creative individuals played a major role in the emergence and further formulation of Suprematism. In its third ambition, this thesis analyses Malevich's continued efforts towards building a professional legacy. This thesis combines analysis of visual imagery with various sources; however, this work draws from very recently published primary source material and explores biographical details in its examination of Malevich's life and work. This historicist project argues that Malevich's activities were far closer to the circumstances and conditions around him than scholarship has thus far suggested. It demonstrates that Malevich's interactions with others, his friendships and his rivalries played a significant role in how Suprematism evolved. In this thesis, Malevich's priorities regarding individual authorship and his concerns for the implications of copyright emerge. In what is a new history of Suprematism, this project demonstrates that Malevich's utopianism, his idealism and his aspiration to establish Suprematism and construct a professional legacy were continually balanced by his pragmatism and, at times, his human impulse to simply survive.

*In loving memory of my Nanna,*

*Catherine Cole*

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I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work, and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University or elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

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## Preface

It is important to make a number of clarifications regarding terminology. While Malevich and Suprematism are the two essential characters of this thesis, which appear in every chapter, this work does not employ the proper nouns ‘Malevich’ and ‘Suprematism’ interchangeably. When the terms ‘Malevich’ and ‘Suprematism’ are used, they are employed deliberately to denote either the man or the movement. Malevich was responsible for the emergence of Suprematism in painting, but he was not the only figure who taught or promoted the movement. Many avant-garde figures came into contact with Suprematism and experimented with its various modes of artistic expression. Some incorporated it into their practice for their whole lives, while others interacted with the movement only briefly. Indeed, as this thesis demonstrates, Suprematism was able to make innovative advancements through collective achievement. That this thesis refers to Malevich, and Malevich alone, as ‘the Suprematist’ indicates that he was the only figure who remained committed to the movement throughout his career.

A second clarification corresponds to the translation of *bespredmetnost* – objectlessness. In 1936 Alfred H. Barr wrote that ‘the Suprematist Non-Objectivist movement was by far the most important development in Russian abstract painting’.<sup>1</sup> Barr was arguably correct in the sentiment of his observation, but the translation of *bespredmetnost* was not helpful. This term ‘non-objective’ was adopted from the German translation of Malevich’s most famous text on objectless art, *Die gegenstandslose Welt*, originally published by the Bauhaus in 1927, which introduced unnecessary complications into the English-speaking world.<sup>2</sup> This thesis follows the more recently established convention and translates *bespredmetnost* as ‘objectlessness’, as used in the new translation of the Russian manuscript for Malevich’s Bauhaus book.<sup>3</sup>

Another clarification refers to the idea of revolution. This thesis refers to either the revolutionary era or the revolutionary spirit as something separate from the February and the October Revolutions. The latter two are well-known and specific historical events, whereas the revolutionary period, with its many utopian and idealist associations, is not something that belonged to the Bolsheviks.

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred H. Barr, *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 122.

<sup>2</sup> Kasimir Malevich, *Die gegenstandslose Welt* (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1927).

<sup>3</sup> Simon Baier and Britta Tanya Dümpelmann, eds., *Kasimir Malevich: The World as Objectlessness*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel / Hatje Cantz, 2014).

From Chapter Two, this thesis deals with a group and a journal both of which share the same name. The group is referred to as Supremus, whereas the journal, which never materialised, is cited in italics and inverted commas as ‘*Supremus*’. In 1920, Malevich published a text named *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*.<sup>4</sup> For ease of reading, each subsequent reference to this book within any given chapter is cited as *34 Drawings*.

In light of Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, major institutions, such as the Stedelijk Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, have reclassified Malevich’s national identity as Ukrainian.<sup>5</sup> Before this time, scholars had already brought forward the artist’s Ukrainian and Polish heritage.<sup>6</sup> Although the majority of Malevich’s professional life was spent in Russia, he was born just outside of Kyiv to Polish parents. Malevich grew up in the Catholic rather than Russian Orthodox tradition and Polish was his first language.<sup>7</sup> When Malevich was born, Ukraine was under the yoke of the Russian Empire and, at the time of his death, was incorporated into the Soviet Union. This thesis is attentive to this history of Ukraine as much as it is to the plurality of Malevich’s identity. Prompted by these very contemporary realities, this thesis intentionally favours the phrase ‘the avant-garde in Russia’ rather than the inherently possessive terminology ‘the Russian avant-garde’. Russia was indisputably one crucible of avant-garde activity, but not every figure who operated within it was ethnically Russian.

Regarding transliterations and translations, this thesis follows the Modified Library of Congress system which omits soft and hard sounds. The only deviations from this system are when this thesis refers to well-established variants of particular names, such as Marc Chagall and El Lissitzky, rather than Mark Shagal and Lazar Lisitskii. I have included English translations of Russian or other foreign language sources where they exist. All other translations are my own.

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<sup>4</sup> K. Malevich, *Suprematism: 34 risunka* [Suprematism: 34 Drawings] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), 123-164.

<sup>5</sup> Gareth Harris, ‘Russian or Ukrainian? Museums Update Kazimir Malevich’s Nationality’, *The Art Newspaper*, 1 March 2023, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/03/01/russian-or-ukrainian-museums-update-kazimir-malevichs-nationality>.

<sup>6</sup> George G. Grabowicz, ‘Rethinking Ukrainian Modernism’, *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 36, no. 3-4 (2019): 237-273; Dmytro Horbachov, ‘Kazimir Malevich and Ukraine’, in *Ukrainian Modernism 1910-1930* (Kyiv: National Art Museum of Ukraine, 2006), unpaginated; Jean-Claude Marcadé, *Malévitch* (Paris: Nouvelle Éditions Françaises, 1990), 8-11; Myroslava M. Mudrak, ‘Malevich and His Ukrainian Contemporaries’, in Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich’s Birth* (London: Pindar Press, 2007), 82-120; Andrzej Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie: rekonstrukcje i symulacje* (Cracow: Universitas, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Mudrak, ‘Malevich and His Ukrainian Contemporaries’, in Douglas and Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich*, 82-83.

Place names are given in accordance with contemporary designation. St. Petersburg, for example, is referred to as such, until it was renamed Petrograd in 1914. The city is later referred to as Leningrad once it was renamed after Vladimir Lenin's death.

Similarly, dates in this thesis are given in accordance with the contemporary system in use at the time. Prior to 31 January 1918, Russia used the Julian calendar, which was 13 days behind the Gregorian calendar used in Europe. The Julian calendar is commonly referred to as the Old Style. From 31 January 1918, when the Gregorian calendar was adopted, this became known as the New Style.

## Introduction

In 1915, Kazimir Malevich painted *The Black Square* (1915) (Fig. 1.1) and a series of geometric abstract works which he shortly afterwards explained as Suprematism. At *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0.10 (Zero-Ten)* [*Poslednaia futuristicheskaia vystavka kartin, 0,10 (nol' desiat')*] (Fig. 1.2), which opened at the Dobychna Gallery in Petrograd on 19 December 1915, *The Black Square* appeared alongside thirty-eight Suprematist paintings.<sup>8</sup> Malevich defined Suprematism and its particular aesthetic mode of painting as objectless art [*bespredmetnoe iskusstvo*], by which he meant that Suprematism did not depict objects and was uncoupled from the world around it. Malevich explained that Suprematism was free from the constraints of figurative representation and that he had arrived at 'painting as such'.<sup>9</sup> At *0.10*, Malevich positioned *The Black Square* across the top of the corner of the gallery space, a gestural act which invoked the traditions of the way icons were hung in Russian Orthodox homes, as if he sought to imbue Suprematism with metaphysical ideals. In 1916, the artist claimed that this new aesthetic language was not informed by the world around him but emerged from a process of 'creation of intuitive reason'.<sup>10</sup> In the mid-1920s, after Suprematism began to experiment within the realm of architecture, Malevich suggested that 'Suprematism seems to enter another sphere, perhaps, in its ideological essence'.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, at every stage of its development, Malevich professed that Suprematism was concerned with identifying a new mode of existence. As the Malevich Society has succinctly stated, Suprematism was 'free from all associations with the material world'.<sup>12</sup>

Despite his insistence that Suprematism was detached from the world of objects, Malevich was deeply entangled in a number of contemporary circumstances. Although scholarship has acknowledged that

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<sup>8</sup> See '0,10 Exhibition Catalogue, 1915', in Matthew Drutt, ed., *In Search of 0,10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting* (Basel: Fondation Beyeler/Hatje Cantz, 2015), 228.

<sup>9</sup> K. Malevich, *Ot kubizma k suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm* (Petrograd: L. Ia Ginzburg, 1916); English translation in Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Press, 1980), 107.

<sup>10</sup> K. Malevich, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm* [*From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism*] (Moscow: Obshchestvennaya pol'za, 1916); English translation in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), I: 38.

<sup>11</sup> Kazimir Malevich, letter to Lissitzky, 8 December 1924; English translation in Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), I: 176.

<sup>12</sup> The Malevich Society, 'About the Artist', <https://malevichsociety.org/about-the-artist/>.

Malevich was stimulated by a complex set of theoretical and aesthetic ideas by the time Suprematism emerged in painting, the artist was also stimulated by far more than just this cultural context. For almost a year before his achievement in painting, Malevich was preoccupied with the possibility that he would be conscripted into the Tsarist army and that he would be sent to fight in the First World War. From the moment Germany declared war in August 1914, Malevich lived with an acute fear of being conscripted and killed at the front. Fortunately, Malevich survived this period and was subsequently stimulated by the freedoms that arose within the revolutionary environment. In the ensuing Civil War, however, the Suprematist had to navigate the implications of extreme food shortages and material austerity which came to define his personal and professional life. Ultimately, the artist felt that he had to leave Moscow in order to maintain not only Suprematism's relevance but also to preserve life itself. In October 1919, Malevich explained that he was 'forced to accept the invitation of the Vitebsk studios', which offered him all the necessary material 'conditions for living and working'.<sup>13</sup>

Although Malevich initially anticipated that his departure from Moscow would be a temporary measure, Suprematism thrived in Vitebsk. Unexpectedly, Malevich made an important set of professional relationships in the city and a creative group, named Unovis (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva – Champions of the New Art), formed around Suprematism in early 1920 and began contemplating questions of architecture. This new area of creative activity was due, in no small part, to the comparatively improved material conditions in Vitebsk, the participation of other creative individuals as well as the activity of the wider avant-garde. Malevich's period in Vitebsk, the relationships he formed and the architectural ideas which emerged here played a major role in defining the remainder of his career. As the Civil War moved towards its conclusion, and as Bolshevik Russia started to think about rebuilding, Malevich produced *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, a small lithographic book of text and images which explained his individual conception of architecture.<sup>14</sup> From 1923, Malevich produced a number of architectural models, known as the *Arkhitektony Experiments* (Figs. 5.5-5.9), and pencil sketches, known as the *Planity Series* (Figs. 5.10-5.12).<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Malevich, announcement to the council of Second State Free Art Studios, 29 October 1919; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 451.

<sup>14</sup> K. Malevich, *Suprematizm: 34 risunka* [Suprematism: 34 Drawings] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 123-164.

<sup>15</sup> For a catalogue of Malevich's architectural models and sketches, see Troels Andersen, *Malevich: Catalogue Raisonné of the Berlin Exhibition of 1927* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970), 139-144.

Although often regarded as abstract or non-realizable architectural conceptions, Malevich suggested in 1928 that these works in fact ‘reveal those features which it seems to me ought to be in the new architecture’.<sup>16</sup> Apparently in total contradiction to metaphysical ideas more commonly associated with Suprematism, Malevich even wrote in the early 1920s that he was ‘thinking about material, white opaque glass, concrete, tarred felt, heating by electricity’.<sup>17</sup> As these statements suggest, contrary to much of Malevich scholarship, Suprematism’s creative aspirations were firmly grounded in and responsive to the material and social conditions of its time and depended on the people and the world that surrounded it.

The majority of early scholarship on Malevich, which emerged from the 1960s, closely examined the emergence of Suprematism in painting in relation to the cultural milieu in which the artist had become established. Almost habitually, it linked Malevich’s practice with contemporary aesthetic, theoretical and literary ideas. Scholarship which deals with later phases of Suprematism, and particularly its architectural period, often interacts with Malevich’s thinking in 1915 and the artist’s first formulation of Suprematism. Malevich’s words, especially those which embrace the metaphysical ideals, are often taken at face value. In contrast, Malevich’s other statements which engage with the world around him – and especially those which do not readily align with metaphysical ideals – are often overlooked. The paradoxes in Malevich’s ideas, words and statements, and likewise the many biographical details of the artist’s life and work, are often not addressed.

The ambition of this thesis is to directly engage with the paradoxes and contradictions summarised above through an examination of the creative fields of painting and architecture in Suprematism. It explores the relationship between Malevich’s assertions that Suprematism was a movement entirely separated from the world around it and the close and inextricable links that, in fact, existed between the two. The second objective in this thesis is to examine how Malevich’s interactions with many artists, architects and other creative individuals played a major role in the development of Suprematism. The third ambition is to examine Malevich’s activities in relation to his continued efforts to build an individual legacy. This thesis

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<sup>16</sup> Kazimir Malevich, ‘Maliarstvo v problemi arkhitektury’, *Nova generatsiia*, 2 (Kharkov/Kharkiv, 1928): 116-124; English translation, as ‘Painting and the Problem of Architecture’, in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), II: 17.

<sup>17</sup> Kazimir Malevich, inscription on *Future Planis for Earthlings*, 1923-24, pencil on paper, 39 x 29.5 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (Fig. 5.10); also see Troels Andersen, *Malevich: Catalogue Raisonné of the Berlin Exhibition 1927* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970), 104; and Andrei B. Nakov, *Kazimir Malevich: Catalogue Raisonné* (Paris: Adam Biro, 2002), 341.

considers how questions of individual authorship and copyright arose for Malevich and were negotiated throughout his career in relation to Suprematism's practice in painting and architecture.

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In 1927, Malevich visited Europe with a large number of paintings, models, writings and theoretical charts. When he returned to the USSR, Malevich left all of these materials in Europe.<sup>18</sup> Over subsequent years, a majority of these items have been preserved in Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum and New York's Museum of Modern Art. Camilla Gray's pioneering work, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863-1922*, drew from much of this material and was responsible for stimulating a great deal of interest in Suprematism in the West.<sup>19</sup> From 1968, Troels Andersen produced four translated volumes of Malevich's writing.<sup>20</sup> In 1970, Andersen published a catalogue raisonné of Malevich's 1927 exhibition in Berlin.<sup>21</sup> This includes images of Malevich's *Planity Series*, *Arkhitektomy Experiments* and his theoretical charts, which similarly generated significant interest in Suprematism. Another important and foundational text was Milka Bliznakov's 1978 work, 'Suprematism in Architecture', which summarised much of what was known about Malevich's thinking and practice in architecture.<sup>22</sup> Two years later, Jean-Hubert Martin of the Centre Pompidou oversaw the reconstruction of many of Malevich's architectural models and held an exhibition entitled *Oeuvres de Casimir Severinovitch Malévitch*, which was followed by a publication of the same name.<sup>23</sup>

Much of the early Suprematist scholarship examined Malevich through the prism of the cultural setting in which the artist and the movement operated, rather than the full historical moment. This cultural context, however, was certainly very significant in shaping Malevich's artistic and intellectual thinking. For this reason, these creative networks are important to outline at this early stage.

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<sup>18</sup> Aleksandra Shatskikh, 'Aspects of Malevich's Literary Legacy', in Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth* (London: Pindar Press, 2007), 318-319.

<sup>19</sup> Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863-1922* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962).

<sup>20</sup> Malevich, *Essays*, I & II; Kazimir S. Malevich, *The World as Non-Objectivity: Unpublished Writings 1922-25*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Hoffman and Edmund T. Little (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1976); Kazimir S. Malevich, *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism: Unpublished Writings 1913-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Hoffman (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1978).

<sup>21</sup> Troels Andersen, *Malevich: Catalogue Raisonné of the Berlin Exhibition 1927* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970).

<sup>22</sup> Milka Bliznakov, 'Suprematism in Architecture', *Soviet Union/Union Soviétique*, 5, no. 12 (1978): 242.

<sup>23</sup> Jean-Hubert Martin, *Oeuvres de Casimir Severinovitch Malévitch (1878-1935)* (Paris: Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, 1980).

The Suprematist moved to Moscow sometime after the turn of the century and, from 1907, exhibited his work at the Moscow Association of Artists.<sup>24</sup> Malevich then exhibited with the Knave of Diamonds group in 1910, at the *Donkey's Tail* exhibition in 1912 and the *Target* exhibition in 1913. The personal and professional relationships the artist formed, particularly through his involvement with the St. Petersburg group the Union of Youth which he joined in January 1913, were central to the evolution of Malevich's creative thinking.<sup>25</sup> Through his participation in this group, Malevich met two important contacts: Mikhail Matiushin and Aleksei Kruchenykh. These were formative years for Malevich, allowing him to incorporate a range of theoretical ideas into his aesthetic experimentation, which included Cubism, Futurism, Cubo-Futurism and Alogism.

In *Kasimir Malevich's Black Square and the Genesis of Suprematism 1907-1915*, W. Sherwin Simmons explored Malevich's evolution through many stylistic approaches and placed a particular emphasis on French and Cubist art. In his 1981 publication, Simmons argued that Malevich continually sought to transcend the limits of the framework in which he was working. The author suggested, for example, that *Portrait of Ivan Kliun* (1913) (Fig. 1.5) can be interpreted as a bridge for the artist between his earlier experimentation in Cubism and a 'more dialectical relationship between observation and thought'.<sup>26</sup> Charlotte Douglas, who conducted her research for *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia* in the Soviet Union in the late 1970s, was able to bring together many of the theoretical stimuli Malevich was engaged with prior to 1915.<sup>27</sup> Douglas privileged theory ahead of formal analysis in her discussion of the emergence of Suprematism and examined a variety of ideas advocated by the Latvian theorist Vladimir Markov, the Futurist Nikolai Kulbin, and the French philosopher Henri Bergson.<sup>28</sup>

The emergence of Suprematism in painting is often associated with contemporary ideas related to the fourth dimension, which both Simmons and Douglas have examined. Through Matiushin, who translated Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger's *Du 'Cubisme'* into Russian and associated the text with the

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<sup>24</sup> For a biographical overview of Malevich's life, see Charlotte Douglas, 'Biographical Outline', in *Malevich: Artist and Theoretician*, trans. Evgeniya Petrova and Evgenii Kovtun (New York: Abbeville, 1991), 8-27; and The Malevich Society, 'About the Artist', <https://malevichsociety.org/about-the-artist/>.

<sup>25</sup> Jeremy Howard, *The Union of Youth: An Artists' Society of the Russian Avant-Garde* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992).

<sup>26</sup> W. Sherwin Simmons, *Kasimir Malevich's Black Square and the Genesis of Suprematism 1907-1915* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1981), 52.

<sup>27</sup> Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 21-35.

philosophy of Peter Ouspensky, the fourth dimension became associated with higher spatial realities which Malevich incorporated into his art.<sup>29</sup> Linda Dalrymple Henderson has written about this concept extensively.<sup>30</sup> A new form of sound language known as *zaum*, pioneered by Velimir Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh and which usurped established linguistic and grammatical rules, is also considered an important impetus. *Zaum* was intended as a new, universal language of sound forms and linguistic formations which supposedly emerged from the writer's higher consciousness. Kruchenykh's text 'New Ways of the Word' has been noted by Simmons, Douglas, Dalrymple Henderson and others as an important theoretical impetus for Malevich as he embraced ideas relating to *zaum* in his art practice.<sup>31</sup>

The opera *Victory over the Sun*, which Malevich undertook with his friends and colleagues Matiushin and Kruchenykh, is commonly viewed as the most significant impetus before the emergence of Suprematism. Performed at Luna Park in St. Petersburg on 3 and 5 December 1913, the play featured music written by Matiushin, a prologue by Khlebnikov and a *zaum* libretto by Kruchenykh. The stage sets, backdrops and performers' costumes were designed by Malevich. The opera, which brought together formal and theoretical ideas, particularly in relation to new conceptions of language and higher spatial realities, is rightly viewed as an integral factor for Malevich in the emergence of Suprematism.

So significant is this opera that Aleksandra Shatskikh has argued that *Suprematist Composition* (1915) (Fig. 1.9) was the first Suprematist painting, given its close resemblance to a sketch Malevich reproduced in 1915 entitled *Design of a Backdrop for the First Act of the Opera Victory over the Sun* (Fig. 1.8).<sup>32</sup> Similarly, Douglas has identified many credible links between the opera and the emergence of Suprematism.<sup>33</sup> Douglas maintains that 'the most specific link' between Malevich's decor for *Victory over the Sun* and Suprematism is the 'square within a square format that represents the box set' of the opera, as noted in *Design for a Backcloth*

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<sup>29</sup> See P. D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum: The Third Canon of Thought, A Key to the Enigmas of the World*, trans. from 2nd Russian ed. (1916) by Claude Bragdon and Nicholas Bessaraboff (2nd American ed., rev., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922); Mikhail V. Matiushin, 'O knige Metzanzhe-Gleza 'Du Cubisme'', *Soiuz molodezhi* (St. Petersburg), 3 (March 1913): 25-34; English translation as Appendix C, Mikhail Matyushin, 'Of the Book by Gleizes and Metzinger Du Cubisme', in Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 527-536; and Dalrymple Henderson, 'Transcending the Present: The Fourth Dimension in the Philosophy of Ouspensky and in Russian Futurism and Suprematism', *ibid.*, 371-434.

<sup>30</sup> Dalrymple Henderson, 'Transcending the Present: The Fourth Dimension in the Philosophy of Ouspensky and in Russian Futurism and Suprematism', *ibid.*, 371-434.

<sup>31</sup> Aleksei Kruchenykh, 'New Ways of the Word', in Anna Lawton, ed., *Russian Futurism Through Its Manifestoes, 1912-1928*, trans. Anna Lawton and Herbert Eagle (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988), 69-77.

<sup>32</sup> Aleksandra Shatskikh, 'Malevich, Curator of Malevich', in E. A. Petrova, ed., *The Russian Avant-Garde: Representation and Interpretation* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2001), 149.

<sup>33</sup> 'Victory over the Sun', in Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds*, 35-47.

for the Fifth Scene of the Second Act of the opera *Victory over the Sun* (1913) (Fig. 1.6).<sup>34</sup> Dmitri Sarabianov believes the opera's significance is so profound that he describes it as 'the real launching pad for Malevich's abstract system'.<sup>35</sup> The opera was indisputably a manifestation of the many ideas Malevich and his associates were experimenting with and is appropriately viewed as an important catalyst in the emergence of Suprematism.

Although aspects of this cultural context are considered integral in the evolution of Malevich's creative thinking, it is important to note that there is no consensus around a single idea about the causality of the emergence of Suprematism in painting. Appropriately, the complexity and breadth of ideas contemplated by scholars mirrors the palimpsest of ideas that had come to exist in Malevich's mind by 1915. Surprisingly, even though the emergence of Suprematism is a well-trodden path in scholarship, much of the broader historical context including the implications of the First World War has been overlooked. Generally, the conflict is afforded only cursory treatment, noted as a backdrop to Malevich's professional activities or ignored entirely. Nina Gurianova, for instance, has written that for avant-garde artists in Russia, the war was 'more a metaphor than a subject' and has not examined the ramifications the conflict had for Malevich personally or professionally.<sup>36</sup> In rather dismissive language, Shatskikh stated that 'Suprematism arose against the backdrop of the twentieth century's First World War' and, in doing so, summed up how scholarship at large associates Malevich with the conflict.<sup>37</sup>

There are exceptions to this scholarly oversight. Aaron J. Cohen's *Imagining the Unimaginable* challenges this general view and explores the different ways that the First World War may have impacted avant-garde artists in Russia, including Malevich.<sup>38</sup> Cohen asserts that the First World War 'had a more profound influence on the politics and aesthetics of Russian visual culture than even the revolution'.<sup>39</sup> He makes a number of persuasive arguments in support of this statement. For Cohen, the First World War galvanised the avant-garde to 'operate inside the existing public sphere', and this closer participation in society meant that non-representational art was a strategy developed through an ambition to produce a new

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>35</sup> Dmitrii Sarabianov, 'Kazimir Malevich and His Art, 1900-1930', in Jeanne D'Andrea, ed., *Malevich 1878-1935* (Los Angeles: The Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, 1990), 166.

<sup>36</sup> Nina Gurianova, *Exploring Color: Olga Rozanova and the Early Russian Avant-Garde 1910-1918*, trans. Charles Rougle (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 2000), 71.

<sup>37</sup> Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 149.

<sup>38</sup> Aaron J. Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable: World War, Modern Art, and the Politics of Public Culture in Russia, 1914-1917* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008).

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 1.

‘aesthetic for a new era’.<sup>40</sup> The impact of the war on the avant-garde in Russia has been investigated in *‘A Game in Hell. The Great War in Russia’: Graphic Art and Photography from the Collection of Sergey Shostakov*, a publication that follows an exhibition of the same name.<sup>41</sup> Like Cohen’s work, Christina Lodder’s text, ‘Kazimir Malevich and the First World War’, explores a number of ways that the conflict may have impacted the artist.<sup>42</sup> Lodder’s essay examines Malevich’s engagement with the Russian tradition of Lubok, a simple and traditional style of popular print, at the start of the war and also contemplates how the artist’s Alogist paintings may indicate his thoughts on the conflict.

It is important, at this juncture, to note that when Malevich introduced Suprematism to his colleagues, he claimed to have ‘discovered Suprematism’.<sup>43</sup> The artist maintained this terminology throughout his life and, owing in part to this self-mythologising language, a strand of academic thought has emerged which corroborates this idea. Douglas has empathised with the notion of discovery and stated that ‘Suprematism seemed so startlingly new to [Malevich], that he found it difficult to trace logically its gradual development from earlier forms’.<sup>44</sup> Shatskikh, by contrast, goes further and fully embraces Malevich’s interpretation. She allows herself to be drawn by the artist’s rhetoric and, consequently, her main understanding of the emergence of Suprematism is that it was ‘a leap across an abyss’.<sup>45</sup> Shatskikh freely uses the word discovery in her work, often the term ‘epoch-making discovery’, to characterise the origin of Suprematism in painting.<sup>46</sup> Shatskikh enjoys the backing of Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, whose work she cites at length: ‘Suprematism did not in fact grow out of Cubism, Futurism, and Cubo-Futurism’, Khan-Magomedov wrote, ‘it is an independent artistic system. It is an artistic discovery’.<sup>47</sup>

While such views on discovery do not represent the consensus in scholarship, this interpretation of history has problematic consequences. Briony Fer has astutely noted that the compulsion to reveal a specific ‘point of origin’ is accompanied by ‘too defensive’ operations which ultimately end up being

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 117.

<sup>41</sup> John E. Bowl, Nicoletta Misler, and Elena Sudakova, eds., *‘A Game in Hell. The Great War in Russia’: Graphic Art and Photography from the Collection of Sergey Shostakov* (London: Grad Publishing, 2014).

<sup>42</sup> Christina Lodder, ‘Kazimir Malevich and the First World War’, *ibid.*, 99-120.

<sup>43</sup> Varvara Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit’ bez chuda. Pis’ma. Poeticheskie opyty. Zapiski khudozhnitsy* [A Person cannot live without a miracle. Letters. Poetic Experiments. Artist’s notes], O. V. Melnikov, ed. (Moscow: Sfera, 1994), 62; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 173.

<sup>44</sup> Charlotte Douglas, ‘Defining Suprematism: The Year of Discovery’, in Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 39.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>46</sup> Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 58.

<sup>47</sup> S. O. Khan-Magomedov, quoted in *ibid.*, 52.

‘characterised by a whole series of contradictory moves’.<sup>48</sup> It forces views, such as Shatskikh’s, that Vladimir Tatlin’s *Corner Counter-Reliefs* (see for instance Fig. 1.28) are the ‘legitimate offspring’ of Cubism, while Suprematism is portrayed as something achieved solely through Malevich’s own ‘great inspiration’.<sup>49</sup> Although the notion of discovery seeks to elevate the artist’s accomplishments, paradoxically and in contradiction to its intention, it diminishes Malevich’s innovative thinking and overlooks entirely the turbulent context in which it appeared.

The discovery narrative, which underpins the broader heroic-artist model, contributes to a neglect of the historical context which extends beyond the period of emergence of Suprematism. This tendency is reflected in the fact that the implications of the Civil War, for instance, are not foregrounded in interpretations of Suprematism as much as they might be. Contrary to this approach, Gurianova and Margarita Tupitsyn have both looked at the connections between Suprematism and the Civil War and Malevich’s further formulation of the movement.<sup>50</sup> Both art historians have identified links between the early revolutionary environment and Malevich’s alignment with anarchist modes of freedom. Gurianova and Tupitsyn, however, have drawn attention to the fact that the ensuing fighting is rarely considered in depth. The impact that the Civil War itself may have had on Suprematism is frequently treated as a footnote in scholarship rather than a main aspect of consideration.

A similar scholarly neglect of the historical context is evident in discussions of Suprematism’s architectural phase. Moreover, literature which deals with this stage of Suprematism is limited in comparison to scholarship which examines the movement’s painterly phase. When scholarship has investigated Suprematism’s architectural thinking, it often reduces it to that of an appendage of Malevich’s assumed metaphysical achievements on the canvas rather than as an enterprise in its own right. Furthermore, Suprematism’s architectural phase is often disconnected from what was an intensive period of new architecture in Russia and instead linked with Malevich’s earlier theoretical ideas related to his painting.

One aspect of scholarship which has examined the relationship between the historical context and Suprematism’s ideas in painting and architecture focuses on a variety of implications relating to flight.

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<sup>48</sup> Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 10.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Maria Tupitsyn, ‘The Subject of Nonobjective Art’, *MoMA*, 1 May 2019, <https://post.moma.org/the-subject-of-nonobjective-art>; Nina Gurianova, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy: Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012).

Douglas has noted the ‘changes in the way the world was viewed due to the popularisation of new scientific concepts and the rush of new technology’, including flight.<sup>51</sup> Christina Lodder has expanded on the importance of this creative stimulus in her text, ‘Transfiguring Reality: Suprematism and the Aerial View’.<sup>52</sup>

These ideas of flight associated with painting are often linked with Malevich’s ideas in architecture. As Andersen pointed out, the first known references Malevich made to architecture invoked a utopian mode of existence in a postcard to his new friend, Matiushin, as early as 1913. Malevich envisioned ‘a time when the earth and the moon will serve man like the energy of movement’ and that ‘large cities and the studios of artists will be held up on enormous airships’.<sup>53</sup> In another essay, Lodder has demonstrated that Malevich’s ideas in architecture can also be associated with Russian Cosmism.<sup>54</sup> Milner’s chapter ‘The Architecture of Flight’ in his book, *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry*, engages these concerns but is emblematic of scholarship’s broader relationship with Suprematism’s architectural phase in that the author affords it only perfunctory inclusion.<sup>55</sup> Shatskikh perhaps neatly sums up the prevailing attitude that is taken of Suprematism’s architectural phase. Of Malevich’s models Shatskikh states: ‘they were supposed to be transformed into “planits” – installations soaring into space and inhabited by “earthlings”’.<sup>56</sup> The Australian art critic John Hughes has asked: ‘what would be the right house for one of the heroes of modernity, an aviator?’<sup>57</sup> ‘What but a building shaped like a biplane made of bright blocks of slabs?’, he rhetorically responded to his own question.<sup>58</sup>

There have been more grounded arguments made which associate Suprematism’s ideas in architecture with the institutional settings in which they emerged. Bliznakov wrote that while Malevich was living and working at the Vitebsk People’s Art School (Vitebskoe narodnoe khudozhestvennoe uchilishche) (Fig. 4.1) he might ‘have conceived of the possibility of transposing the temporal excitation of the theatre

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<sup>51</sup> Douglas, ‘Malevich and Western European Art Theory’, in *Malevich: Artist and Theoretician*, 56.

<sup>52</sup> Christina Lodder, ‘Transfiguring Reality: Suprematism and the Aerial View’, in Mark Dorrian and Frederic Pousin, eds., *Seeing from Above: The Aerial View in Visual Culture* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 95-117.

<sup>53</sup> Malevich, quoted in Troels Andersen, ‘De R<sup>2</sup> à R<sup>3</sup>’, in Martin, *Oeuvres de Casimir Severinovich Malévitch (1878-1935)*, 12; also see Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 9 May 1913; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 50.

<sup>54</sup> Christina Lodder, ‘Living in Space: Kazimir Malevich’s Suprematist Architecture and the Philosophy of Nikolai Fedorov’, in Douglas and Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich*, 172-202.

<sup>55</sup> Milner, *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry*, 190-200.

<sup>56</sup> Aleksandra Shatskikh, ‘The Cosmos and the Canvas’, *Tate Etc.*, no. 31 (Summer 2014), <https://www.tate.org.uk/ta-te-etc/issue-31-summer-2014/cosmos-and-canvas>.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1991), 85.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

into permanent architectural forms'.<sup>59</sup> This idea, however, has not been further explored. In her essay 'Architecture as Such', Gough argues that Malevich's architectural models must be seen in the context of the research institution – the State Institute of Artistic Culture in which they were produced.<sup>60</sup> Even though she suggests that Malevich's *arkhitektons* possessed a 'primary character as research materials', Gough does not link Malevich's practice in architecture with the people or the circumstances around him.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Pamela Kachurin has written that the Suprematist outwardly framed his work to reflect the 'increasingly science-orientated bureaucratic apparatus'.<sup>62</sup> Certainly, the fact that Malevich produced these works in a research-based institution is important, but neither Gough nor Kachurin situate the artist's activities within the broader historical conditions that shaped his life. Perhaps because of its sympathies with Soviet politics necessary for its publication, Larissa Zhadova's monograph *Malevich* offers important ideas in relation to the contemporary context of Suprematism's painterly and architectural thinking, which are useful in this thesis.<sup>63</sup>

As this discussion so far demonstrates, although Malevich is well integrated into the cultural scene pre-1915, he is often treated as a peripheral character in a number of major studies which address later phases of avant-garde activity. This gives the impression that 1915 was a kind of mythologised rupture for Malevich and the moment of his emergence as a heroic artist. This tendency in scholarship suggests that Malevich's engagement with contemporaries was limited and that Suprematism existed somehow apart from other strands of creative activity. In *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*, for instance, Maria Gough positions Suprematism as an aesthetic enterprise that was less engaged with the revolutionary spirit and less entangled in Bolshevik ambitions of post-revolutionary Russia than productivist ideas.<sup>64</sup> Gough implies that the avant-garde essentially divested themselves of Suprematism as a way of moving forwards with a new agenda. Similarly, Christina Kiaer's *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist*

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<sup>59</sup> Bliznakov, 'Suprematism in Architecture', *Soviet Union/Union Soviétique*, 242.

<sup>60</sup> Maria Gough, 'Architecture as Such', in Achim Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Malevich* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 158-163.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>62</sup> Pamela Kachurin, *Making Modernism Soviet: The Russian Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era, 1918-1928* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 73.

<sup>63</sup> Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930*, trans. Alexander Lieven (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982).

<sup>64</sup> Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 21-23.

*Objects of Russian Constructivism* makes only marginal references to Constructivist artists' interactions with Malevich or Suprematism.<sup>65</sup>

Consistent with this narrative, Malevich's departure from Moscow in 1919 is often treated as one born of artistic isolation. André Nakov, for example, argued that Suprematism 'found itself increasingly relegated to the province of an unintelligible opposition to the ideologically correct Proto-Constructivist mainstream'.<sup>66</sup> Nakov's statement, which positions Malevich as not only apart from his historical moment but wholly uncoupled from his contemporaries, is far from uncommon in scholarship. In *Farewell to an Idea*, T. J. Clark examined Suprematism's move into architecture in relation to the mass mobilisation that occurred in the Civil War. Unfortunately, in Clark's interpretation, the political over the historical is foregrounded and although Clark investigates the work of El Lissitzky in Suprematism, the broader picture of Malevich's life and his collaborative practice is diminished.<sup>67</sup>

The artist's relocation to Vitebsk, however, and the formation of the artistic group, Unovis, have rightly been noted as significant in the emergence of Suprematism's architectural front. In her book *Vitebsk, A Life in Art*, Shatskikh identifies many of the collaborative relationships which emerged within this phase of Malevich's life.<sup>68</sup> A 2018 exhibition at the Centre Pompidou, *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk 1918-1922*, brought the city and Malevich's early ideas in architecture to light.<sup>69</sup> Certain essays in *Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914-1932*, also offer a more nuanced account of Suprematism's interactions with other currents of creative thinking.<sup>70</sup> In doing so, they present a more convincing set of narrative histories. Anatolii Strigalev's essay 'The Art of the Constructivists: From Exhibition to Exhibition, 1914-1932' is one example of this.<sup>71</sup> Lodder's famous *Russian Constructivism* explores the complex tapestry of avant-garde activity in Russia and brings forward the numerous interactions that Constructivists had with Malevich and Suprematism, which makes it an important text in this thesis.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> Andréi Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, trans. Michael Taylor with Helen Knox (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2010), III: 410.

<sup>67</sup> T. J. Clark, 'God is Not Cast Down', in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University, 1999), 225-297.

<sup>68</sup> Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art*, trans. Katherine Foshko Tsan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

<sup>69</sup> Angela Lampe, ed., *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk 1918-1922* (Paris: Centre Pompidou; Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2018).

<sup>70</sup> *Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914-1932* (Seattle: Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington, 1990).

<sup>71</sup> Anatolii Strigalev, 'The Art of the Constructivists: From Exhibition to Exhibition, 1914-1932', *ibid.*, 15-39.

<sup>72</sup> Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983).

Similarly, there are a number of texts which address Malevich's evolving practice in architecture, in relation to collaborative practice, that are useful for this thesis. Douglas recently produced an essay, 'Aero Art, The Planetary View: Kazimir Malevich and Lazar Khidekel', which examines how others participated in Suprematist architecture.<sup>73</sup> The publication in which Douglas's essay appears makes a number of important connections between Malevich and the people around him. Richard Anderson's illuminating text *Wolkenbügel: El Lissitzky as Architect* is a very useful resource in helping to situate Lissitzky's practice in relation to Malevich.<sup>74</sup> Samuel Johnson has examined what he calls the 'identity' of Suprematist architecture and has investigated the relationship between Lissitzky and Malevich in what is another important work for this thesis.

Strikingly, in his discussion of the origins of the architectural model, Nakov's expansive four-volume work on Suprematism entirely overlooks the artist's period in Vitebsk. For Nakov, architecture remained an abstract enterprise for Malevich, uncoupled from his interactions with those around him and the contemporary context. Nakov stated, 'The word *'architecton'* has an abstract, allusive and conceptual ring to it; it suggests the level of aesthetic fiction the artist had opted to work on'.<sup>75</sup> In contrast to the interpretation this thesis adopts, Nakov wrote that the artist's 'architectons are by no means specific projects for concrete architectural situations'.<sup>76</sup> Instead, for Nakov, Malevich's architectural models brought him 'back to the aesthetic of the ideal'.<sup>77</sup> In contrast to Nakov's position, E. Ovsyannikova situates Malevich's practice in architecture relative to his contemporaries as a way of differentiating, rather than uncoupling, his work from those around him. While Nakov wrote that Malevich was 'fully aware of his lack of training in the field of architecture', Ovsyannikova has argued that it was precisely because of Malevich's non-traditional route into architecture that he was able to exploit 'a means of alternative thinking' which led to 'extremely original compositions'.<sup>78</sup>

Selim O. Khan-Magomedov was a major figure in histories of avant-garde architecture in Russia whose work is integral to this thesis. In *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture*, Khan-Magomedov adhered to a formal

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<sup>73</sup> Charlotte Douglas, 'Aero Art, The Planetary View: Kazimir Malevich and Lazar Khidekel', in Regina Khidekel, ed., *Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism* (Munich: Prestel, 2014), 27-34.

<sup>74</sup> Richard Anderson, *Wolkenbügel: El Lissitzky as Architect* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024).

<sup>75</sup> Nakov, *Painting the Absolute*, III: 58.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>78</sup> Nakov, *Painting the Absolute*, III: 58; E. Ovsyannikova, 'Superarchitecture or Supergraphics?', in *The Russian Avant-Garde*, 189.

interpretation of Malevich's work and those around him and, in doing so, credited Lissitzky with recognising the architectural potential of Suprematism. Khan-Magomedov suggested that 'volumes and stereometric compositions' in Suprematism 'pointed the way to Suprematist architecture. Volumetric Suprematism introduced novel architectonic relationships into formal aesthetic experiments'.<sup>79</sup> Khan-Magomedov's *Suprematizm i arkhitektura* similarly takes a formalist approach, although with little inclusion of the context or of biographical details, which reflects his view that form and ideology can drive social transformation.<sup>80</sup>

A final issue for this literature review concerns scholarly approaches to Malevich's writing in relation to the artist's efforts to shape an individual legacy. Malevich's writing is most frequently treated as a tool for understanding his art practice. Much less frequently has it been considered in relation to biographical questions or the artist's ambitions to build a legacy. For scholars in the West who sought to understand the art Malevich left behind, Andersen's four volumes of Malevich's writing were the first points of access. This meant that texts such as *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism* were important in approaching Suprematist painting, just as *34 Drawings* is often seen as a gateway text for Malevich's ideas in architecture. It is perhaps because of the abstract and conceptual nature of Suprematism that scholars have looked to the artist's writing and sought – as far as this is possible with Malevich – clarification on formal and theoretical intentionality, which has meant that biographical details and questions of legacy have been treated as peripheral.

Malevich's writing, however, poses serious challenges. In 1924, Lissitzky wrote of his frustrations as he attempted to translate Malevich. 'I still have the most difficult task left: the chapter on Suprematism. There is no consistency in Malevich's writing about this. [...] I am translating this more or less like poetry, because otherwise I would have to raise a lot of objections'.<sup>81</sup> For Zhadova, Malevich's pamphlets 'contain a good deal of deliberate obfuscation'.<sup>82</sup> Along with many other historians, John Bowlt has appropriately remarked that Malevich's writing does not 'clarify the meaning of his paintings'.<sup>83</sup> He observed that

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<sup>79</sup> Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and 1930s*, trans. Alexander Lieven (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983), 63.

<sup>80</sup> S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Suprematizm i arkhitektura (problemy formoobrazovaniia)* (Moscow: Arkhitektura-S, 2007).

<sup>81</sup> El Lissitzky, letter to Sophie Küppers, 21 March 1924; in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. Helene Aldwinckle (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 46.

<sup>82</sup> Zhadova, *Malevich*, 83.

<sup>83</sup> John Bowlt, 'Kazimir Malevich and the Energy of Language', in *Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1990), 183.

Malevich's written work appears to have been produced 'in spite of or counter to the visual works'.<sup>84</sup> On 2 February 1922, Unovis member Lev Iudin wrote in his diary: 'in the evening, I attended the lecture. I didn't understand a thing'.<sup>85</sup> Iudin made this note even though he had been studying Suprematism and had been in Malevich's proximity for two years.

Despite all of the above, for some historians Malevich is viewed as a philosopher as well as an artist. Shatskikh takes the position that Suprematist 'philosophy grew out of Suprematist painting'.<sup>86</sup> This seems logical insofar as ideas in painting follow practice, but Shatskikh also adopts the position that this 'makes Malevich a unique figure in the history of world culture'.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, Jean-Claude Marcadé has considered the relationship between Malevich's painting and writing and concluded that 'Malevich is not a professional philosopher-theologian. He is a painter who expressed discursively. [...] What makes Malevich a unique figure in the universal history of the arts is that he was not a painter-philosopher but a great painter and a great philosopher'.<sup>88</sup> The assertion of uniqueness is unnecessary. Countless artists who produced abstract and figurative art also provided linguistic discourse. It must also be said that Malevich never produced any clear or well-argued philosophy. His arguments were complex, but they never truly constituted anything that can be defined as philosophy. Moving even further away from the idea of Suprematism as philosophy, Éva Forgács produced a more balanced analysis of Malevich and considered whether the idea of theoretical continuity even exists in the movement. She concluded that 'Malevich may have had many ideas and insights, but no overarching and consistent theory'.<sup>89</sup>

It is also the case that questions of legacy and authorship are not considered where they might be most appropriately addressed. Gurianova wrote an important essay about '*Supremus*', which Malevich did not manage to realise, entitled 'The *Supremus* "Laboratory House": Reconstructing the Journal'.<sup>90</sup> However, this text does not probe Malevich's motivations to see this journal in print, nor does it contemplate the

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Irina Karasik, ed., *Lev Iudin "Skazat-svoe"... Dnevnik, dokumenty, pis'ma, svidetel'stva sovremennikov* [Lev Iudin "In His Own Words..." Diaries. Documentation, Letters, Testimonies of his Contemporaries] (Moscow: RA, 2017), 44; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 224.

<sup>86</sup> Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 71.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Jean-Claude Marcadé, 'Malevich, Painting and Writing: On the Development of a Suprematist Philosophy', in Matthew Drutt, ed., *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2003), 42.

<sup>89</sup> Éva Forgács, *Malevich and Interwar Modernism* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022), 6.

<sup>90</sup> Gurianova, 'The *Supremus* "Laboratory House": Reconstructing the Journal', in Matthew Drutt, ed., *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2003), 44-59.

reasons for its failure to materialise. As the title suggests, Gurianova was concerned with how the journal would have appeared and does not consider its role in relation to Malevich's legacy. In a similar vein, Patricia Railing's analysis of *34 Drawings* takes many of Malevich's statements as conceptually coherent.<sup>91</sup> Railing's work risks attributing a logic to Malevich's written ideas that is not necessarily there. Her account does not address the motivation Malevich may have had for producing *34 Drawings* in his own name, nor does she examine how the idea of individual authorship can be understood against the collective principles of Unovis.

Although Malevich never took absolute positions and he was rarely consistent, the artist's writings represent a challenging – although essential – aspect of his practice for scholarship. Malevich advocated a system of art and promoted a set of principles that indicated an approach to painting and architecture, but his ideas were always in flux. One statement could be usurped by another at any moment. Scholarship, however, tends either to embrace Malevich's statements in an effort to celebrate the artist, to approach his words with caution or to iron out the inconsistencies. How Malevich's many publications function in relation to individual authorship and copyright has not been adequately considered. Missing from Suprematist scholarship is a full examination of how Malevich's writings may have functioned alongside his paintings, architectural works and his teaching to reframe his past work and to resituate his future ambitions relative to questions of legacy.

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This thesis retraces the origin of Suprematism in painting in 1915 and its subsequent development in architecture from 1919. Its overarching objective is to reconnect Malevich's professional activities to the world around him. It examines how Malevich was intertwined with his historical milieu and investigates how the turbulent context in which he operated was central to the formulation of Suprematism. This thesis investigates how Malevich's relationships with others remained significant throughout his entire career. It examines what were often intense interactions with artists, architects and theorists as Malevich sought to develop Suprematism. Finally, this thesis explores how Malevich's art practice, pedagogy, writing and his

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<sup>91</sup> Patricia Railing, *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism: 34 Drawings (1920)* (London: Artists' Bookworks, 2018).

efforts to formalise creative groups and a new distinctly Suprematist mode of architecture can be seen as endeavours to establish his individual legacy.

The central methodology in this thesis, which connects life and work, is neither a common nor a straightforward conceptual approach within the history of art. Charles Salas, for instance, has written that while ‘the life and work model has long been a part of humanistic disciplines’, bridges between ‘artist and artwork continue to be built, though how much weight they can bear is an open question’.<sup>92</sup> Michael White’s *Generation Dada: The Berlin Avant-Garde and the First World War*, however, is a good example of this methodological approach.<sup>93</sup> ‘Biographical information’, White states, ‘is there not for its own sake but to support an analysis of how the Dadaists organised various forms of “life writing” and “life representation” into types of cultural production’.<sup>94</sup> The terms ‘life writing’ and ‘life representation’, White cites, are borrowed from an essay by Timothy Dow Adams, which considers the many forms of writing within the definition of autobiography. Dow Adams notes, however, that autobiographical readings of the artist are habitually confined to analyses of the self-portrait.<sup>95</sup>

Building on the approach White adopts, this thesis constructs a bridge, to use Salas’ analogy, between biographical information and artistic production. It engages with the complexity – at times the messiness – of Malevich’s personal life, his creative thinking and his artistic process. To do so, it draws on formal analysis of paintings and architectural images, but it also examines diaries, letters, photographs, lithographic prints, journals and other printed material. Formal analysis is not secondary; rather, it is used when appropriate rather than employed in every instance. Equally, this thesis is alert to the risks of biographical determinism and treats personal experience as one strand among many that shaped Malevich’s decision-making.

This thesis proceeds from the assumption that Suprematism – in the fields of art and architecture – was deeply connected to the turbulent historical period in which it emerged and developed. It situates Malevich’s practice through the entirety of his career in close proximity to the cultural milieu and the

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<sup>92</sup> Charles G. Salas, ‘The Essential Myth’, in *The Life and the Work: Art and Biography*, ed. Charles G. Salas (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2007), 2.

<sup>93</sup> Michael White, *Generation Dada: The Berlin Avant-Garde and the First World War* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013).

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>95</sup> Timothy Dow Adams, ‘Introduction: Life Writing and Light Writing; Autobiography and Photography’, *Modern Fiction Studies* 40, no. 3 (1994): 459-477.

network of artists, architects and theorists with whom he worked. The priority of this thesis is to reassess how the shifts in Malevich's writing indicate his ongoing concerns with individual authorship, copyright and legacy. Just as the historical moment was continually in flux, so too were Malevich's artistic priorities and preoccupations. Given that there is no way to read Malevich's writing as though he arrived at any sort of clarity, this thesis makes no effort to overcome the inherent paradoxes in his thinking, nor does it iron out the inconsistencies in his arguments. This work does not accept the notion of philosophy in Suprematism. It uses the language of emergence rather than discovery and participates in the idea of process that Krauss, Fer and others have emphasised. This thesis examines the motivations behind Malevich's writings and investigates how his many texts and publications existed alongside his art practice and were employed in an effort to propagandise not only for Suprematism but also for Malevich's individual authorship. Throughout, this thesis challenges the dominant portrayal of Malevich as an isolated, heroic and philosophical figure. It presents Suprematism as an artistic process that was shaped by the historical moment and collaboration and defined by Malevich's ambition to secure his legacy.

Chapter One of this thesis re-examines the significance of the First World War in the emergence of Suprematism in painting. It explores how the personal implications of conscription for Malevich and the possibility of his death after Germany's declaration of war on Russia on 1 August 1914 interacted with what were a complex set of artistic and theoretical ideas. The chapter examines the relationship between, on the one hand, the many ideas Malevich was exploring in his art, including the aspiration to identify a new aesthetic language, flight and notions of ascent, and, on the other, his fear that international realities were inevitably going to envelop his freedom and possibly end his life. It also considers questions of identity which eventually defined Malevich, principally those of soldier and Suprematist. In addition, this chapter examines the financial and practical concerns Malevich had during this period. The chapter considers how war amplified what was already a rich nexus of creative ideas and led Malevich to revise elements and ideas already present in his practice, establishing a strategy which would recur throughout his career. It will argue that Suprematism emerged as a result of Malevich's continued process of innovation. It will suggest that the personal implications that the conflict had for Malevich and his artistic and theoretical concerns converged by 1915 as he reimagined, revised and reprioritised his practice.

Chapter Two examines the impact that the First World War and the early revolutionary era had on Malevich immediately following the emergence of Suprematism in painting. It examines how the artist began to establish the movement and analyses how he navigated an emerging set of priorities, including the need to assert his authorship, exhibit his work, write a supporting theory and establish an artistic group and journal, all under the pressure of impending conscription. Introducing a recurring theme in this thesis, this chapter considers the role of writing in establishing Malevich's ideas on the canvas. This chapter analyses how Malevich's ambition to found a journal, which he first named '*Nul*' and then '*Supremus*', was motivated by an impulse to establish an individual legacy. This chapter examines how Malevich approached questions of legacy through a broad set of cultural actions rather than through legal means. This chapter will suggest that the upheaval caused by the war and then the immediate revolutionary period was the principal factor in the demise of the *Supremus* group and its journal. In its latter stages, it will propose that Malevich's priorities by early 1917 had shifted precisely because the world around him had drastically altered. This chapter introduces a theme that recurs throughout this work: from 1917, Malevich's freedom and his ability to practise were always relative to the discretion of the Bolshevik government.

Chapter Three examines the trajectory of Suprematism in the immediate revolutionary period, up to the moment that Malevich left Moscow for Vitebsk in the autumn of 1919. The chapter explores how Malevich set about promoting Suprematism following the end of the *Supremus* project, during a period of relative freedom, as the Bolsheviks organised cultural activity. It examines how Malevich was stimulated by the revolutionary spirit and how he operated within this new political framework as he worked to promote Suprematism. This chapter reassesses the reasons behind Malevich's artistic isolation in the early stages of the Civil War and examines the circumstances that motivated him to move to Vitebsk in the autumn of 1919. It examines why Suprematism found itself on the back foot in 1919 and investigates how, in addition to artistic isolation, the harsh circumstances that dominated life and his teaching practice in Moscow at this moment played a major role in his decision to leave the capital. The chapter argues that the austere material reality Malevich faced during the Civil War in Moscow ultimately created a dilemma for him as he sought to address his obligations to his family and to Suprematism. It considers why Vitebsk represented an attractive option for Malevich, particularly in relation to the opportunity to publish new print materials in

his own name. This chapter will demonstrate that Malevich had a strong instinct for survival and that, when necessary, he acted to preserve his life and Suprematism.

Chapter Four resumes the chronological narrative of this thesis and begins with Malevich's arrival in Vitebsk in November 1919. This chapter, however, introduces a new thematic concern: Suprematism's architectural enterprise. This chapter begins by establishing how Malevich installed himself and Suprematism in the Vitebsk People's Art School. It examines how the activities of the school's student body, Malevich's implementation of an educational programme and the establishment of the artistic group Unovis were foundational in the emergence of new architectural ideas in Suprematism. This chapter evaluates how experimentation in theatre stimulated new thinking in architecture for Unovis. It considers Lissitzky's embrace of Suprematism as a pedagogical framework and as a stimulus in his own architectural thinking. The chapter then explores what motivated Malevich to produce *34 Drawings*, which purported to represent Malevich's individual conception of a new architectural idea in Suprematism. This chapter suggests that all of these activities reveal a tension between the ambition to move forward with Suprematism within Unovis into new creative fields of activity and the requirement to look back to Malevich's past achievements. This chapter will show that Suprematism's emergence into the field of architecture in Vitebsk in 1919 and 1920 was a collective achievement, enabled by favourable conditions of the city and the input of Unovis. It will also suggest that Malevich's publication of *34 Drawings* and the abstract idea it contains was intended to give direction to Unovis. The chapter will also argue that the appearance of *34 Drawings* was motivated by Malevich's impulse to assert individual authorship and to stamp his name on this new field of creative activity.

Chapter Five takes the winter of 1920-1921 as its starting point and follows Malevich's publication of *34 Drawings*. The first objective of this chapter is to explore how Suprematism persisted in the composition–construction debates, held at the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture (Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury – Inkhuk), from January 1921. It examines how Suprematism persisted even as Inkhuk sought to purge it from the theoretical framework it was attempting to formalise. This chapter examines how the Bolshevik victory in the Civil War led to Malevich's departure from Vitebsk and investigates how Malevich's establishment of Petrograd's State Institute of Artistic Culture and the framing of his activities were directly related to the state's consolidation of power. This chapter examines how

Malevich's professional activity in Petrograd was strategically framed to ensure his continued employment. This chapter examines the *Planimetry Series* and *Architectural Experiments*, produced in Petrograd from 1923, and analyses how they were conceived out of a dual ambition to cement Malevich's individual legacy and to resituate Suprematism's conception of architecture into direct relation to the built environment. This chapter will argue that Malevich's approach to form in architecture remained closely aligned with many contemporary architectural movements often seen in opposition to it, and that he looked to differentiate, and thus justify, his originality through theory. This chapter will argue that Malevich's ideas in architecture, initially abstract and conceptual, consciously shifted in the mid-1920s in order to reposition Suprematism to ensure that it remained relevant to activities in architecture on the ground in Russia.

Chapter Six of this thesis explores the relationship between Malevich's idealism in architecture, his connections with others in the field and questions of legacy in domestic and international settings. This chapter scrutinises how Malevich's authorship of Suprematist architecture, which he had attempted to establish through a range of media, functioned in practice as others around him sought their own creative autonomy. This chapter examines the factors which instigated the demise of Unovis and considers how, in particular, frustrations within the group regarding attribution of authorship played a major part. It analyses how Malevich subsequently responded to others who operated in architecture, with a particular focus on Lissitzky and Khidekel. It examines how new circumstances that dictated Malevich's professional practice led him to soften his earlier dogmatic stance both in regard to his own practice and his stance towards others. This chapter examines how a similar shift can be noted in Malevich's engagement with the international realm. It examines Malevich's trip to Poland and Germany, which illuminates how his view of the West had shifted in his mind from a crucible of professional opportunity to a place that might offer him refuge. It explores the reasons behind what was a transition from utopianism to more pragmatic positions, particularly as the domestic political context from 1927 forced Malevich to increasingly prioritise survival. Throughout, the chapter will demonstrate that as the 1920s progressed, Malevich ultimately accepted the reality which defined his new professional conditions and became less dogmatic in his approach to new buildings and the conception of Suprematist architecture. The chapter will show that, both domestically and internationally, Malevich was forced to shift his priorities from utopianism and idealism to practical considerations and ultimately survival.

The concluding chapter holds a unique place in this thesis. It draws together the themes explored throughout this work in relation to the fields of painting and architecture. It examines Malevich's enduring commitment to Suprematism during the final years of his life through the prism of identity, which had become increasingly contentious. The conclusion begins by examining how, on his return from Berlin in 1927, Malevich had become deeply aware of the complex and problematic nature of his identity and realised that his survival would depend, not on the free pursuit of creative activity as it did in earlier years, but on how he presented and conducted himself within an increasingly hostile political environment. This conclusion argues that even though Malevich had to significantly adapt his avant-garde impulses, he still looked to balance his creative innovation and his aspiration to manage his legacy with the need to survive. In its final stages, the conclusion reflects on the wider implications that this research has for the study of Suprematism and the historiography of the avant-garde.

## Chapter One

### *Kazimir Malevich and The First World War: The Emergence of Suprematist Painting*

In late June or early July 1915, while staying at his dacha in Kuntsevo, west of Moscow, the artist Kazimir Malevich received a visit from his friend Ivan Kliun.<sup>96</sup> During his visit, Kliun observed a collection of canvases on a shed roof, positioned to dry in the sun. When he later wrote about his stay in Kuntsevo, Kliun recorded that Malevich had expressed a desire to paint a total of ‘forty paintings, in which simple geometric shapes of different colours will be depicted’.<sup>97</sup> ‘These shapes will be situated in a way’, Malevich apparently said, ‘that there is no connection or gravitation between them’.<sup>98</sup> Famously, this objective was more than accomplished. Thirty-nine of these works, including *The Black Square* (1915) (Fig. 1.1), were presented to the public under the banner of Suprematism at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10 (Zero-Ten)*, [*Poslednaia futuristicheskaia vystavka kartin, 0,10 (nol’-desiat’)*] (Fig. 1.2), which opened on 19 December 1915 at the Dobychna Gallery in Petrograd.

It is easy to visualise the bright sun shining down on Kliun and Malevich in Kuntsevo and imagine just how engrossed the artist was in the excitement of this creative achievement. It is important to note, however, that this moment was far from peaceful. The first paintings of Suprematism emerged within a febrile domestic climate which was greatly exacerbated by the advent of the First World War. Russia’s participation in the war defined a new reality for Malevich and instigated new professional and personal conditions. In August 1914 Malevich was thirty-five years old and acutely aware that, because of his age, the Tsarist government automatically identified him as a second-class reservist. As the war dragged on and as conscription threatened, events beyond his control fought for possession of his body. Malevich’s life became defined by a sense of instability and uncertainty which he felt almost tangibly. The knowledge of his status as a reservist, the possibility of enlistment and the likelihood of a fatal outcome weighed heavily on Malevich. This imposing reality greatly affected his behaviour, actions and his art from the outbreak of

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<sup>96</sup> I. V. Kliun, *Moi put’ v iskusstve. Vospominaniia, stat’i, dnevik* [My path in art. Reminiscences, articles, diaries] (Moscow: RA, 1999), 93, quoted in Irina Vakar, ‘The Black Square’, in Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2019), 27.

<sup>97</sup> Kliun, *Moi put’ v iskusstve*, 93.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

war until he was eventually enlisted in July 1916.<sup>99</sup> Crucially for the discussion in this chapter, Suprematism emerged in painting in the middle of this two-year period.

As noted in the literature review, prior to his achievement in painting and before the outbreak of war, Malevich had become immersed in the intellectual avant-garde in Moscow, had worked through a range of aesthetic modes and had experimented with a variety of theoretical ideas. From 1913, Malevich experimented in Cubo-Futurism, of which *The Knife-grinder* (1912-13) (Fig. 1.3) is a typical example. This work adopts the fragmented formal vocabulary of Cubism and explores the Futurist concern with movement in its representation of the craftsman at his wheel. Through his relationship with Alexei Kruchenykh, Malevich became familiar with *zuum*, a transrational form of 'beyondsense' words and poetry, which led him to pioneer a new style in painting he termed Alogism.<sup>100</sup> In *Cow and Violin* (1913) (Fig. 1.4), which is an early example of the artist's Alogist concerns, Malevich combined objects which seemingly have nothing in common with one another, as if hoping to upturn the viewer's expectations. Through Mikhail Matiushin, who translated *Du 'Cubisme'* into Russian and interspersed the text with ideas of the philosopher Peter Ouspensky, Malevich absorbed notions of the fourth dimension and higher spatial realities into his art.<sup>101</sup> In *Portrait of Ivan Kliun* (1913) (Fig. 1.5), Malevich extended these theoretical ideas further and blended formal innovation with more elusive conceptual ideas which seemed to go beyond the canvas itself.

As the literature review also noted, through his participation in the 1913 opera *Victory over the Sun*, Malevich was able to bring together many of the ideas he had been experimenting with over the preceding 12 months within the realm of theatre.<sup>102</sup> Led by its protagonist, the plot centred around an aviator who overthrows reason and captures the sun. Through his use of curtains, spotlights and costumes, Malevich

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<sup>99</sup> Malevich, letter to Aleksei Kruchenykh, 5 July 1916; English translation in Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), I: 91.

<sup>100</sup> See Charlotte Douglas, 'Malevich, Larianov and Kruchenykh', in *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Press, 1980), 21-34; Gerald Janacek, *Zaum: The Transrational Poetry of Russian Futurism* (San Diego, CA: San Diego State University, 1996), 14-21; John E. Bowl, 'Kazimir Malevich and the Energy of Language', in *Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1990), 178-186.

<sup>101</sup> See P. D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum: The Third Canon of Thought, A Key to the Enigmas of the World*, trans. from 2nd Russian ed. (1916) by Claude Bragdon and Nicholas Bessaraboff (2nd American ed., rev., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1922); Mikhail Matyushin, 'Of the Book by Gleizes and Metzinger Du Cubisme,' appendix C in Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 527-536; and Dalrymple Henderson, 'Transcending the Present: The Fourth Dimension in the Philosophy of Ouspensky and in Russian Futurism and Suprematism', *ibid.*, 371-434.

<sup>102</sup> See Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Pobeda nad solntsem* [Victory over the Sun] (St. Petersburg: Svet, 1913); Douglas, 'Victory over the Sun', in *Swans of Other Worlds*, 35-48.

disrupted traditional spatial perceptions and challenged the viewer's sense of familiarity in the theatre by concealing and revealing the performers and the stage. This strategy went hand in hand with Matiushin's music and Kruchenykh's *zaum* libretto and produced a similar assault on the audience. Certainly, in formal terms, *Design for a Backcloth for the First Scene of the Second Act of the opera Victory over the Sun* (1913) (Fig. 1.6) clearly recalls *The Black Square*. The photograph published in *Ranee Utro* in December 1913, which captured the *Beginning of Scene One of the opera Victory over the Sun* (Fig. 1.7), shows characters interacting with abstracted forms within the temporal setting of the play. Likewise, Malevich's 1915 reworking of a *Design of a Backdrop for the First Act of the Opera Victory over the Sun* (Fig. 1.8) was clearly an important impetus behind *Suprematist Composition* (1915) (Fig. 1.9).<sup>103</sup>

The emergence of Suprematism is habitually associated with many of these preceding formal and theoretical ideas and, for this reason, is linked with the avant-garde milieu in which it emerged. In fact, so significant is *Victory over the Sun* that scholars have frequently contemplated why Suprematism did not emerge earlier. Linda Dalrymple Henderson has suggested that for all of the various creative forces at play in Malevich's mind in 1913 and 1914, it must have taken him 'some time to realise the artistic potential of the independent use of these geometric shapes and to achieve total abstraction'.<sup>104</sup> Interestingly, Elina Basner has brought the First World War into her discussion on early abstraction in Russia and has asked why Malevich did not accomplish his Suprematist breakthrough in the period before the conflict, 'especially since he was so close'.<sup>105</sup> Like Henderson, Basner has also alluded to the importance of *Victory over the Sun* and to Malevich's admiration for Wassily Kandinsky, whose text *Concerning the Spiritual in Art* appeared in Russian translation in 1915.<sup>106</sup> The question of why not sooner is made all the more intriguing by the fact that Matiushin was intent on putting together a publication on *Victory over the Sun* in February 1914 and needed to include Malevich's visual work in this project. Matiushin wrote to the artist, who replied in February 1914, 'you have now whetted my curiosity about the publication of your opera with a complete

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<sup>103</sup> Aleksandra Shatskikh, 'Malevich, Curator of Malevich', in E. A. Petrova, ed., *The Russian Avant-Garde: Representation and Interpretation* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2001), 149.

<sup>104</sup> Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, 412.

<sup>105</sup> Elina Basner, 'The Early Work of Malevich and Kandinsky: A Comparative Analysis', in Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth* (London: Pindar Press, 2007), 38.

<sup>106</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, 'On the Spiritual in Art', in Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (Boston, MA: GK Hall, 1982), 2-41.

set of my drawings'.<sup>107</sup> This statement confirms that, even if Malevich did not physically reexamine his work on the opera in 1914, he was at the very least stimulated by Matiushin's idea and prompted to reflect on his recent work.

Why Suprematism did not emerge sooner is certainly an intriguing question. Perhaps more intriguing, however, is another: what exactly did Malevich paint in the late spring and early summer of 1915? The first and briefest answer to this question is that these paintings were not, strictly speaking – at least not yet – Suprematist paintings. These first paintings were simply of colour and form against white backgrounds. There was no obvious association with the familiar figurative world or any identifiable subject matter in these paintings. Malevich did not first establish a theory of Suprematism and then sit at his easel. Although these paintings were non-representational, the explanation of objectlessness did not precede them. Titles for each canvas appeared later and even the name Suprematism was not used to describe these works until late September 1915.<sup>108</sup>

Malevich's clarification of what these paintings actually meant surfaced sporadically in the months and years after 1915. When Malevich did eventually put forward an explanation for these works, the main thrust of his argument could alter unpredictably and could be rewritten in a seemingly capricious manner, a feature which itself became a characteristic of Suprematism. What exactly Malevich achieved in Kuntsevo in 1915 was not obvious to himself, but from May and June of that year he tried to explain his new paintings to his colleague Matiushin. 'In view of the alarming times that the war is bringing upon us', he wrote, 'I am being forced to work terribly intensively, and I am painting pictures (they are not exactly pictures, the time for pictures is past)'.<sup>109</sup> As this statement makes vividly clear, external factors continually imposed on the timing, nature and even the content of Malevich's art practice.

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To understand how the First World War and its implications may have converged with Malevich's creative thinking, it is necessary to explore how the first days of the conflict were perceived in Russia's

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<sup>107</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 10 February 1914; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 57.

<sup>108</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 24 September 1915; *ibid.*, I: 68.

<sup>109</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [beginning of June 1915]; *ibid.*, I: 66.

major cities where the artist spent most of his time. As tensions between Europe's major powers mounted, on 26 July 1914 Tsar Nicholas II ordered the military districts in the west of Russia to prepare for war.<sup>110</sup> These political movements made an immediate and visible impact in Moscow and St. Petersburg. The writer and champion of the avant-garde, Nikolai Punin observed:

Since the mobilisation was announced, St. Petersburg stopped being what it always was. Just a few coachmen and no trams. Pavements are not swept since there is nobody to do it. [...] Every once in a while, reserves are going to war [...] most people came back from their dachas as there are no short-haul trains.<sup>111</sup>

Similar observations were made by Russia's General Basil Gourko, who later rose to chief-of-staff to the Tsar. Gourko recorded that both 'Petrograd and Moscow were practically deserted'.<sup>112</sup> He observed that 'only those who confined themselves to the city remained in residence'.<sup>113</sup> These inconveniences, however, were subtle in comparison to the destruction that subsequently happened in the villages, towns and cities further west. Although Moscow and Petrograd did not come under heavy artillery fire, this was not the case for towns and cities located within the Pale of Settlement. Here, where the Tsar's army was heavily engaged, hundreds of thousands of civilians were killed, displaced or went missing and were presumed dead.<sup>114</sup>

Despite there being no immediate threat to Moscow or Petrograd, a sense of what was to come was deeply pervasive. In place of bombs and bullets, Russia's major cities were dominated by an eeriness, as Punin observed, in which a strange and unfamiliar atmosphere prevailed. In fact, signs that a dark period was emerging were evident even before the war began, and a growing sense of its inevitability made a tremendous impact across cultural life. Kandinsky suggested that his *Improvisation No.30 (Cannons)* (1911-13) (Fig. 1.10), 'could probably be explained by the constant war talk that had been going on throughout

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<sup>110</sup> Joshua A. Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 21.

<sup>111</sup> Nikolai Punin, quoted in Natalia Murray, *The Unsung Hero of the Russian Avant-Garde: The Life and Times of Nikolay Punin* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2012), 47.

<sup>112</sup> General Basil Gourko, *Memories & Impressions of War and Revolution in Russia, 1914-1917* (London: John Murray, 1918), 1.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> See Peter Gatrell, *A Whole Empire Walking: Refugees in Russia during World War I* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999).

the year', even if he did not deliberately intend to create a representation of war.<sup>115</sup> In her poem, *July 1914*, Anna Akhmatova conveyed a sense of catastrophic upheaval. 'Fearful times are drawing near. Soon fresh graves will be everywhere. There will be famine, earthquakes, widespread death, and the eclipse of the sun and the moon...'.<sup>116</sup> Natalia Goncharova's lithographic folio, *Mystical Images of War* [*Mysticheskie obrazy voiny*] (1914), echoes the celestial words of Akhmatova and illuminates a similar aspect of the Russian psyche. In *The Christian Host* (Fig. 1.11) (1914) and *Angels and Aeroplanes* (Fig. 1.12) (1914) Goncharova engaged the contemporary styles of Futurism and Cubism, but she also drew from the more familiar tradition of Orthodox Christianity, thus adding a timeless spiritual element to the physical reality of bombs falling from the sky that was about to affect so many.

These indicators of war had profound implications for the public at large, once the war got underway. Evocatively, the historian Aaron J. Cohen wrote that the war 'created havoc in ordinary lives. [...] it sent ripples through society that altered millions of lives, even those whom it did not touch directly, much as a tree blown down across a road can divert thousands of individual journeys'.<sup>117</sup> As one observer put it, 'the small hamlets of Poland, the narrow creeks, the little Carpathian paths, and the previously unknown towns of Northern France – this is all brought so near to us. It is as if a magic hand removed the space between us and them'.<sup>118</sup>

One of the war's greatest effects on Russian society was the prospect of conscription. This was real, constant and made all the more disconcerting by its scale and the unpredictable manner in which it was implemented.<sup>119</sup> Men within the avant-garde or associated with it enlisted or found themselves conscripted right from the start of the war. The poet and writer Benedikt Livshits, who attended the *Victory over the Sun* performance, was conscripted in 1914.<sup>120</sup> Although Livshits served as an infantry soldier, he survived and won the Cross of Saint George. Artist Mikhail Larionov was also conscripted at the start of the war and served as a warrant officer in the 210th Bronnitsky Infantry Regiment, before he was concussed

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<sup>115</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, quoted in Arthur Eddy, *Cubists and Post-Impressionism* (Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1919), 126.

<sup>116</sup> Anna Akhmatova, 'July 1914', quoted in Elaine Feinstein, ed., *Anna of All the Russians: The Life of Anna Akhmatova* (London: Phoenix, 2006), 48-49.

<sup>117</sup> Aaron J. Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable: World War, Modern Art, and the Politics of Public Culture in Russia, 1914-1917* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 52.

<sup>118</sup> Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable*, 62.

<sup>119</sup> Josh Sanborn, 'Conscription, Correspondence, and Politics in Late Imperial Russia', *Russian History* 24, no. 1/2 (1997), 27-40.

<sup>120</sup> Benedikt Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer* (Moscow: Palace Editions, 2004), 243.

by an exploding shell in October 1914.<sup>121</sup> The artist Petr Konchalovsky, who was involved with the avant-garde group the Knave of Diamonds in 1913, enlisted voluntarily in 1914 and served as a gunner.<sup>122</sup> As all of these cases demonstrate, the avant-garde was not merely an observer in the First World War. Rather, from its first months, the war became an active feature of daily life for many avant-garde figures.

It would have been no comfort to Malevich that he was not under direct threat from artillery fire or advancing infantry battalions. The prospect of conscription would have been a constant weight to bear. In fact, as his letters make clear, the war became a preoccupying concern for the artist and his wife from the moment the conflict was declared. In November 1914, Malevich wrote to Matiushin:

I can't gather my wits to visit you. Everything is really very, very bad, I'm just sick and tired of scraping by, and now a really ghastly time is upon us. People write, but where are you going to find more money. My trip to see you will cost so much money. Something horrible is going on inside me, as if terrible forces are fighting for possession of my body, that is, life and death. [...] But this war goes on. Of course, it's impossible to describe it all.<sup>123</sup>

A few weeks later, Malevich wrote again and stated that there had been 'no word about second-class soldiers'.<sup>124</sup> Evidently, he kept a close eye on the government's movements and anticipated that his own enlistment was sooner or later inevitable. In a letter to Matiushin, Malevich's wife, Sofia Rafalovich, shared her own anxieties.

I have been planning to write to you for a long time and just couldn't get things together. Kazimir was overjoyed when he came back from seeing you and began to work with a passion. [...] We live in anticipation of the spring, but in vain, it seems. Even though the spring will come, we won't be able to get to the dacha because there won't be any dacha trains this year. This is very sad for us,

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<sup>121</sup> John E. Bowlt and Nicoletta Misler, 'Playing with Fire', in John E. Bowlt, Nicoletta Misler and Elena Sudakova, eds., *A Game in Hell. The Great War in Russia: Graphic Art and Photography from the Collection of Sergey Shostakov* (London: Grad Publishing, 2014), 55.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 4 November 1914; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 60.

<sup>124</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 25 November 1914; *ibid.*, I: 60.

what is Kazimir going to do all day in his room, instead of out in the open air and swimming? I'm in a constant tremble that Kazimir will be taken off to war, that's what it looks like, but maybe it will pass him by.<sup>125</sup>

This quote vividly illustrates two central themes in this chapter and thesis: the importance of Malevich's connections with those around him in relation to his art practice and the significant extent to which external conditions impinged on his ability to practise at all.

While the prospect of enlistment was an inescapable torment for Malevich, the letters that he and his wife wrote following the outbreak of war also reveal more immediate concerns for day-to-day practicalities and, in particular, their financial situation. In the closing months of 1914, Malevich produced a collection of anti-German war posters for the Contemporary Lubok company which seem to have been a response to this question of money. In the traditional popular print style known as *lubki*, Malevich produced a number of figurative designs, such as *Look, The Vistula Isn't Far Now* (1914) (Fig. 1.13). In this unfavourable characterisation of the German army, a battalion of men trudge east towards their intended destination of the Vistula River. The men are led by an extremely overweight figure with a limp and wispy moustache and an absurdly enormous corporation which is much too big for his tunic to contain and which a set of braces can barely hold in place.

This work, however, was no endorsement of the war or an indication of support for the imperial regime. To the contrary, as Christina Lodder has remarked, these compositions encouraged 'loyalty to the land and its people – rather than to the Tsar'.<sup>126</sup> It seems that Malevich deliberately produced these prints in an attempt to engage the feeling of national identity and anti-German sentiment that was felt at the start of the war in an effort to achieve some financial gain. Malevich planned to post four *lubki* to Matiushin, who was in contact with the publisher of the journal in which Malevich hoped they might appear.<sup>127</sup> Having no words to say about how the political content of these prints might function, Malevich wrote instead of financial matters. 'I'll propose terms to you' he said bullishly to his friend.<sup>128</sup> 'God willing, she'll like them

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<sup>125</sup> Sofia Rafalovich Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [late 1914]; *ibid.*, I: 60.

<sup>126</sup> Lodder, 'Kazimir Malevich and the First World War', in Bowlt et al., *A Game in Hell*, 102.

<sup>127</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 12 December 1914; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 63.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*

and we'll be wolfing down an eel two metres long', he ended light-heartedly.<sup>129</sup> The mundane challenge of putting food on the table was as real for Malevich as it was for anyone else, regardless of the success he was about to achieve.

Malevich also hoped that his avant-garde paintings might help him to raise some much-needed capital. In November 1914, Malevich wrote in frustration: 'I am impatiently waiting for new canvases so I can begin my Fevralism'.<sup>130</sup> Malevich adopted this term after a public declaration in February 1914, which he named after the Russian word for February, *Fevral*, to describe his Alogist painting that he had been experimenting with since 1913.<sup>131</sup> However, as this suggests, the idea of Fevralism was little more than a conceptual fiction. By naming his practice after the month of February, Malevich sought to consolidate all of his preceding creative innovation and to fix a precise moment of origin, despite its continuity with his own practice and its connection with *zaum*. Aleksandra Shatskikh makes much of Fevralism, calling it the 'forerunner of Suprematism'.<sup>132</sup> Malevich, however, made no mention of this after early 1915. Although the idea of Fevralism was essentially a fabrication, the adoption of this term is indicative of Malevich's drive to mythologise his own beginnings and to construct a legacy, even before he had formulated Suprematism.

Beyond questions of terminology and legacy, Malevich's impatience was also motivated by financial concerns. 'Petrograd is becoming ossified', the artist complained in January 1915, but it was a different story in Moscow, where the artist was engaged with the idea of a new salon which would have encompassed hundreds of square metres, remained open all-year-round and offered the possibility of a regular stream of income.<sup>133</sup> Unfortunately, this salon did not materialise but a month later Malevich wrote, almost giddy with excitement, about a new exhibition that would soon open. 'The Futurist Exhibition is ready, it opens on 1 May. Hurray!'<sup>134</sup> In the same letter Malevich wrote with anticipation: 'all of Moscow is talking about the exhibition. I went to a party attended by nearly all the Moscow millionaires who told me that they would go to St. Petersburg as a group to the opening, and all the Moscow Futurists are going too'.<sup>135</sup> The urgency to produce and exhibit what, so far, was his greatest work was integral to resolving his financial predicament.

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 28 November 1914; *ibid.*, I: 61.

<sup>131</sup> Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 47-48.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 1-32.

<sup>133</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [early January 1915]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 63.

<sup>134</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 18 February 1915; *ibid.*, I: 64.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*, 64-65.

It is also very easy to see this commitment to his work as a distraction from the anxiety he felt about conscription. Interestingly, this discussion concerning the necessity of raising money should be linked with Cohen's broader argument that avant-garde artists like Malevich were moved to 'operate inside the existing public sphere', once war broke out.<sup>136</sup> There was hope that life would become easier – relatively speaking – for Malevich, who had become 'sick and tired of scraping by', should he achieve some degree of financial security from wealthy art patrons.<sup>137</sup>

Malevich certainly hoped to gain financially from his art, but it is also evident that his anxieties about the war began to permeate the content of his work. In the pencil drawing *War* (Fig. 1.14) (1914), Malevich juxtaposed a west-facing horse, a fork, an arrow pointing to the word Berlin, the word teeth (*zub*) written diagonally across the composition and the word delusion or error (*zabluzhdenia*) along the bottom. When viewed together, the elements in this sketch conjure up ideas pertaining to cavalry, deployment and troops on the move. The Russian cavalry was engaged at its full strength at the start of the First World War and remained so for much longer than it was for armies fighting in France and Belgium, which settled into trench warfare comparatively quickly. The image also alludes to ideas of food shortages. The Tsar's military leaders could barely manage to feed their troops and the fear of hunger may well have played on Malevich's mind.<sup>138</sup> Indeed, Malevich's quip about a two metre long eel suggests he was already dealing with this issue. The word delusion or error, one might reasonably speculate, alludes to Malevich's own view that the war was precisely that, sheer folly.

*An Englishman in Moscow* (1914) (Fig. 1.15) suggests, to an even greater extent, that Malevich's growing consciousness of the war had begun to intersect with his artistic preoccupations. In this work, the protagonist is observed amongst a seemingly miscellaneous and illogical assortment of objects and fragments of words. Within this fragmented visual field, Malevich's treatment of the man's face and his identity is crucial. It is striking that one half of the Englishman's face is obscured by a white fish. Only his left-hand side is visible to the viewer and the Englishman's ability to return the gaze is partially withheld.

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<sup>136</sup> Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable*, 117.

<sup>137</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 4 November 1914; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 60.

<sup>138</sup> S.G. Wheatcroft, 'Agriculture', in R. W. Davies, Mark Harrison and S. G. Wheatcroft, eds., *The Economic Transformation of the Soviet Union, 1913-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 106-130; and Mauricio Borrero, *Hungry Moscow: Scarcity and Urban Society in the Russian Civil War, 1917-1921* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 11-45.

This tension between vision and occlusion is underscored by the fragmented words *chas/tich/noe, chastichnoe* (partial) and *za/tmenie, zatmenie* (eclipse). These words had an established symbolic meaning for Malevich that recalls *Victory over the Sun*, in which the central character succeeds in his ambition of eclipsing the sun. The division of *za* (beyond) from *tmenie* (darkness) functions to emphasise an enveloping sense of darkness, but it also hints at going beyond the concealment of eclipse and transcending the darkness. Charlotte Douglas believes that this painting reveals that Malevich was concerned with the fact that ‘the visible world is not what it seems to be, that one thing conceals another, and that it is necessary to penetrate this illusion’.<sup>139</sup>

The word *chast* in Russian refers to a small self-contained military unit. Its usage here could refer to the avant-garde, but it may well be a reference to the military itself. The two were indeed merging, as already discussed. The ladder and the other very profane objects in this painting possess a spiritual symbolism which must be seen in relation to the war. The ladder is a physical reference to ascent and visualising new spatial realities but may also allude to its use in trench warfare. This tension between the metaphysical and material dimensions in this work is further indicated by the image of an Orthodox church, the white fish and the candle. The fish and the candle are bisected by a sword and form a cross, a gesture that is symbolic of a unification of the spiritual with the material world, which had become dominated by war. This statement reinforces W. Sherwin Simmons’ very limited mentions of the war, when he suggested that the cutting tool in this painting takes on ‘a more menacing character, one influenced, perhaps, by the war’, and alludes to the division or break-up, perhaps not only of the words, but also of one thing from another.<sup>140</sup> Indeed, the Englishman situated in Moscow is himself displaced and encountering an unfamiliar spatial reality.

Although this painting may be read in relation to the war, Malevich does not privilege any single overarching idea. Themes of concealment, time, eclipse, ascension, east and west, light and dark, the spiritual and the profane as well as life and death must be acknowledged as interacting with one another. Paradoxically, given the idea of occlusion in this work, it is possible that *An Englishman in Moscow* discloses the complex interactions that were taking place in Malevich’s thinking between his theoretical

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<sup>139</sup> Charlotte Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 82.

<sup>140</sup> W. Sherwin Simmons, *Kasimir Malevich’s Black Square and the Genesis of Suprematism 1907-1915* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1981), 197.

preoccupations, such as transcendence, the aspiration to achieve a new formal language and the inescapable concern for the war. This work articulates certain dualities, principally between the material and the spiritual and the worldly and the intangible, which were becoming more pronounced aspects of Malevich's psychological state. As Cohen has astutely stated, paintings such as *An Englishman in Moscow* were not 'antiwar representations, but they certainly demonstrate that the culture of war directly infiltrated his life and work'.<sup>141</sup> This painting forms a tapestry of competing ideas in which the identity of the protagonist, like the complex psychological state of the artist, had become displaced, muddled and, at the very least, influenced by the war.

Painted in autumn 1914, the cubist collage *Reservist of the First Division* (Fig. 1.16) more explicitly reveals the impact of Germany's declaration of war on Malevich's psychological state. In this work, Malevich combines figurative and non-figurative painterly forms and objects that provoke interpretations relating to the conflict. Many of these elements can be read as allusions to military events, the theatre of war and two competing realities. These include the word *opera*, the digit 8, half a moustache, a green shoulder board, a postage stamp, the Cross of Saint George, fragments of letters and words cut from newspapers or letters and a thermometer. These figurative and semi-figurative elements interact with other fully abstracted painterly forms, the most dominant of which are a large yellow form at the lower half of this work and a smaller blue square in the upper section.

It is Lodder's view that this painting is, to some extent, a self-portrait of the artist at a significant moment in his life.<sup>142</sup> Amongst many observations, Lodder suggests the thermometer may have indicated Malevich's hope that the harsh winter would help defeat the Germans, just as it had helped the Russians to defeat Napoleon a hundred years earlier.<sup>143</sup> The letter, stamp and ear suggest practical worries and are possible references to the problems soldiers faced in communicating with those at home. The idea of self-portraiture, however, must be read in relation to Malevich's preoccupation with the war and his evolving psychological state.

A vertical division in this work is an important formal device in relation to this transition. Beyond the formal division, which establishes a left and a right-hand side, this work contains a symbolic idea of

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<sup>141</sup> Cohen, *Imagining the Unimaginable*, 128.

<sup>142</sup> Christina Lodder, 'Kazimir Malevich and the First World War', in Bowlt et al., *A Game in Hell*, 105.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*

partition which alludes to the two transitions that would shortly define Malevich's life. One of these transitions is from the free artist towards the identity of a soldier, a shift which Malevich increasingly felt to be inevitable. The well-groomed, bisected and upturned moustache in this painting was commonly worn by Russian soldiers, even amongst reservists called up in 1914 (Fig. 1.17) and corresponds to a projected vision Malevich had of himself after mobilisation. This moustache can be contrasted with the many representations of the ugly and frazzled moustache of the Kaiser or of the bulbous German officer that Malevich drew trudging towards the Vistula River. More importantly here, it is markedly different to Malevich's own which he wore in various styles, often bushy and thick, but never upturned in this way.

A second transition in this work concerns Malevich's identity as a Suprematist, even if he did not yet anticipate it at the moment he painted *Reservist of the First Division*. The two aspects of the figure's head are central here. The large white form resembles the kind of figurative template employed by artists when sketching a face. This white form, however, is shown interacting with a non-figurative blue square, which Lodder has suggested might be read as the face of the soldier.<sup>144</sup> Here, the central tensions of this work as a self-portrait collide. The figurative white head aligns with other representational elements in this painting, while the non-figurative blue square indicates something unfamiliar and unknown. This distinction between the figurative and the abstract is not stable, however, and the two converge. The white template and the blue square can each be read as provisional templates for the new identities that the subject – that is, Malevich himself – was on the verge of assuming.

*Reservist of the First Division* is emblematic of a number of transitions: civilian to soldier, free to controlled, life to death, the profane to the metaphysical and, perhaps most significantly, the figurative to non-figurative. Evidently, by the end of 1914 there was a great fluidity in Malevich's creative thinking and psychological state. This painting prefigures two very different identities for Malevich: one he anticipated with dread and another he was not as yet aware of but would define his career for the rest of his life. It was not clear to Malevich in late 1914, but when he painted *Reservist of the First Division* the artist was on a trajectory towards enlistment and Suprematism.

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

Flight was a central concern for Malevich and its importance intensified in the context of the First World War. The idea of flight, however, occupied a position in the artist's imagination long before the emergence of Suprematism, the outbreak of war and even the advent of aviation itself. In the 1907 symbolist painting, *Triumph of the Heavens* (Fig. 1.18), for instance, Malevich explored religious and metaphysical notions of ascension. For John Bowlt, this spiritual flight enabled Malevich to believe that art could be employed as a medium of transcendence, which he later 'transmuted into Suprematism'.<sup>145</sup> When mechanical flight was achieved, the aircraft offered Malevich a brand-new context for conceiving of new definitions of flight. Accomplishments made in Western Europe ignited a tremendous appetite for aviation in Russia.<sup>146</sup> In 1910, an Imperial All-Russian Aero-Club was formed which soon became the Imperial Russian Air Service.<sup>147</sup> Malevich's first engagement with this national excitement in his art, however, was not one that indicated any faith in the machine of flight.

In the lithographic print, *Simultaneous Death of a Man in an Aeroplane and at the Railway* (1913) (Fig. 1.19), the moment of death is captured as an aircraft falls and collides with a train. Here, Malevich combined semi-abstracted forms with more conventional artistic techniques including perspective lines, a propeller, the aircraft's wheels, and telegraph posts positioned alongside what seem to be either railway tracks or telegraph lines. The Cubo-Futurist idiom, and the inherent technical and aesthetic limitations of the lithographic process, produces a stark and very grim visual scene. Amid this visual cacophony and near-total abstraction, the direction of the railway or telegraph lines remains ambiguous. It is not clear whether they are observed horizontally along the landscape or if they ascend towards a higher and more elusive metaphysical realm.

Malevich was already conceiving of flight as a metaphor for transcending the distinction between aircraft and pilot and for opening up new spatial experiences before the war broke out. In another lithographic work, *Pilot* (Fig. 1.20), produced later in 1913, Malevich shifts from linear to conical forms.

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<sup>145</sup> John E. Bowlt, 'Beyond the Horizon', in *Kazimir Malevitsch zum 100. Geburtstag* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1978), 237.

<sup>146</sup> See Robert Wohl, 'Painters Take Flight', in *A Passion for Wings: Aviation and the Western Imagination 1908 – 1918* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994), 157-202.

<sup>147</sup> Von Hardesty, 'Early Flight in Russia', in John Greenwood, Von Hardesty and Robin Higham, eds., *Russian Aviation and Airpower in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1998), 24.

Like Figure 1.19, the centre of this work remains elusive. Robert Wohl has speculated whether, despite its title, Malevich actually sought to privilege the pilot or if he wanted to synthesise the man and the aircraft. Wohl argued that the pilot in this work 'is portrayed in conical sections as a piece of machinery, no different from the fuselage of the aircraft'.<sup>148</sup>

This same division of boundaries was also explored in *Victory over the Sun*, in which flight was a central theme. Once the pilot had successfully overcome nature and captured the sun, a deafening sound could be heard when his aircraft crash-landed as he returned to earth. Following this great audible commotion, none of which was visible to the audience except for a broken fragment of an aircraft wing, the pilot stumbled on and declared 'ha ha ha ha, I'm alive! I'm alive and only the wings are a bit worn out!'<sup>149</sup> The radically innovative achievement of the pilot is juxtaposed with the catastrophic crash, which alluded to a belief that man's desire to strive upwards endured – and can be achieved – in spite of the inadequacies of the aircraft itself. This inverted view of nature, technology and familiar spatial realities is echoed in a photograph (1913) (Fig. 1.21) of the three creators of the opera, as the men sit in front of a backdrop of an upturned piano, bookcase and vase. This photograph suggests a rejection of regular expressions of music and language, and signals a shared commitment to overcome the forces of gravity in the pursuit of new formal and spatial structures.

With the advent of war, man's ascent into the skies took on a new and often catastrophic meaning, a fate already imagined in *Victory over the Sun*. As the theatre of war expanded into a new territory, the nascent Imperial Russian Air Service, with approximately 250 aircraft, was confronted with its first major test.<sup>150</sup> Tasked with reconnaissance and, later, aerial bombing, it was ill-prepared for either. Most of Russia's aircraft were purchased from the French rather than built domestically, and were grounded not by the enemy but by an inability to get them into the air in the first place.<sup>151</sup> For the pilots who did become airborne, flight often meant death, as their aircraft plummeted back to earth. Such was the fate of pilot Lieutenant Dmitri Podkhuyko, whose destroyed aircraft was photographed in 1915 in pieces on the ground (Fig. 1.22). The

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<sup>148</sup> Wohl, *A Passion for Wings*, 166-167.

<sup>149</sup> See 'Victory over the Sun', in Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds*, 35-47; and Rosamund Bartlett and Sarah Dadswell, eds., *Victory over the Sun: The World's First Futurist Opera* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2015).

<sup>150</sup> Von Hardesty, 'Early Flight in Russia', in Greenwood, Hardesty and Higham, *Russian Aviation and Airpower in the Twentieth Century*, 24.

<sup>151</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

national fascination with aviation existed before 1914 and had inspired numerous images of success and catastrophe alike. One such example is the case of Captain Petr Nesterov, who died when he deliberately rammed a German aircraft. This story provoked a flood of visual responses, such as the 1914 image *The Great European War. A Heroic Feat and Death of the Famous Pilot Staff Captain P. N. Nesterov* (Fig. 1.23).

Following the outbreak of war and the militarisation of aviation, the meaning of flight shifted in Malevich's art practice. This evolution is most evident in *The Aviator* (Fig. 1.24), which Malevich painted in autumn 1914. *The Aviator* is formally and conceptually a very complex work. The protagonist is portrayed not in an aviator's suit but in neutral grey clothing, shoes and bowler hat, which suggests that this person is a civilian. A saw, positioned vertically at the centre of the painting, enters from beyond the upper edge of the canvas surface, as though dividing the work into two halves, leaving the aviator positioned completely on the left-hand side. His right hand is absent while the left hand holds a playing card. A bomb, on a trajectory that begins behind the figure, appears to be travelling through the aviator's head and is depicted at such a moment that it obscures the right eye, for both the aviator and the observer. A red arrow points from the tail of the bomb to a zero at the centre of the aviator's hat. From this point, two yellow conical forms project outwards to a non-specific space of unidentifiable non-figurative forms that illuminate three fragments *a/pte/ka*, which make the Russian word for chemist, *apteka*.

This formal analysis highlights continuities in Malevich's practice already raised in this chapter, particularly those relating to vision, occlusion and transitions between states. Such concerns were present in his designs for *Victory over the Sun*. As Douglas has noted, one of Malevich's curtains (Fig. 1.6) has strong resemblances to vision and occlusion which were perhaps linked to the idea of solar eclipse.<sup>152</sup> While the curtain can serve as a tool which mediates vision, for Malevich the question of the field of vision does not only correspond to the eye but is linked to the brain and the skull as metaphors for the limits of perception. Indicated by the digit on the protagonist's hat, the aviator is at zero point in this exploration and is observed at the beginning of a mission to conceive of and map out a new spatial environment. Lodder believes that the aviator is positioned in a non-specific spatial environment which is 'an almost irrational or "universal" space' dislocated from the forms around him.<sup>153</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds*, 45.

<sup>153</sup> Christina Lodder, 'The Transrational in Painting: Kazimir Malevich, Alogism and *Zaum*', *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 32, no. 2 (April 1996), 131.

The bomb is a small aspect of this painting, but it is significant for the aviator's realisation of this new realm. Not employed as a weapon of destruction from the air as it was in the war (see, for instance, Fig. 1.25), the bomb metaphorically blows open the pilot's perceptual field. In doing so, it reveals the space to his left which is indicated by the semi-opaque yellow conical forms that are themselves reminiscent of beams of light from a torch. The bomb, in fact, played a crucial role in developing an analogy that Malevich used for years to come. After 1915, the artist frequently used the skull and the brain as a graphic analogy for the limits of perception, the firmament and the boundaries of infinite spaces. Being able to somehow break open the skull and penetrate the real space of the universe was an idea he considered in *Suprematism: 34 Drawings* in 1920. From this new cosmic position, Malevich said he would 'give an account of what he sees in the infinite space of the human skull'.<sup>154</sup>

*The Aviator* symbolises an important shift in Malevich's practice in 1914. This painting demonstrates how the wartime engagement with flight stimulated Malevich's creative thinking to conceive of vision as something that can unfold in the mind rather than simply in front of the individual. It makes evident a new and intensified engagement with the perception of interior space and exterior environments and with how such spaces might be produced pictorially. *The Aviator* does not depict forms viewed from space, rather it introduces a new orientation of the world in which usual representation is wholly inadequate. Given the role of aviation in war, Malevich's interest in flight and the inevitability of conscription, it is possible that he associated himself with the aviator in this painting and that this work was another self-portrait. In the context of war, it is similarly possible that Malevich began to contemplate flight as a metaphor for his own bodily freedom, just as he was on the cusp of privileging the liberated abstracted forms already present in his work. The aviator, in fact, can only articulate what he sees through new fully abstracted painterly forms. It is very likely that *The Aviator* was a catalyst on the path to the abstraction that would define Suprematism.

Malevich's reconceptualisation of flight can also be linked with the nineteenth-century tradition of Russian Cosmism, which drew from various strains of Eastern and Western philosophies and religions and

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<sup>154</sup> K. Malevich, *Suprematism: 34 risunka* [Suprematism: 34 Drawings] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), 127.

was concerned with mankind's future relationship with the cosmos.<sup>155</sup> As Richard Stites has written, this philosophical tradition can be associated with the twentieth-century 'fascination for aeronautics' and an impulse for flight more broadly.<sup>156</sup> Stites believes that there existed 'a kind of fear of not flying, of remaining earthbound and immobile' which stimulated an upwards aspiration.<sup>157</sup> Malevich's ideas have been linked with Cosmism's principal figure, Nikolai Fedorov, whose literary work promoted a vision of the existence of man in space.<sup>158</sup> Another important work in this tradition that was prevalent in Russia is Alexander Bogdanov's science fiction novel *Red Star*. First published in 1908, Bogdanov explores science, technology and space travel, at the heart of which is the freedom of man in a utopian society.<sup>159</sup>

Although Malevich's exploration of flight in *The Aviator* was certainly grounded in a cultural tradition, the possibility of his own demise galvanised him to view flight as a metaphor for liberation, which represented an upwards thrust, the pursuit of new forms and the creation of a new life in art. *The Aviator* must be understood as a response to the wartime context and a movement towards a greater cosmic orientation of his art, one that would later define Suprematism.

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Malevich's practice was long defined by his embrace formal and theoretical experimentation. His output after the outbreak of war features an additional and more complex dimension, in which the pressures and uncertainties associated with Malevich's probable engagement can also be detected. The eventual transition to Suprematism, which followed the works discussed so far in this chapter, occurred neither suddenly nor consciously. Rather, the movement emerged as part of a long process of creative thinking, professional ambition and a desire to articulate something new in art – all of which had become entangled in the implications of the First World War.

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<sup>155</sup> Asif A. Siddiqi, 'Imagining the Cosmos: Utopians, Mystics, and the Popular Culture of Spaceflight in Revolutionary Russia', *Osiris* 23, no. 1 (2008): 260-288.

<sup>156</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 170.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>158</sup> See, for example, N. F. Federov, *What Was Man Created For? The Philosophy of the Common Task*, ed. and trans. Elisabeth Koutaissoff and Marilyn Minto (London: Honeyglen Publishing Limited, 2008); and Lodder, 'Living in Space: Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist Architecture and the Philosophy of Nikolai Fedorov', in Douglas and Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich*, 172-202.

<sup>159</sup> Alexander Bogdanov, *Red Star*, trans. Charles Rougle (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

With these observations in mind, in these final paragraphs it is useful to return to the question posed at the top of this chapter. What exactly did Malevich paint in the late spring and early summer of 1915?

In *Suprematist Composition: Aeroplane Flying* (1915) (Fig. 1.26), Malevich painted a collection of yellow, black, red and blue geometric forms against a white background. There is no representation of an aeroplane or obvious sense of flight, despite its name. Reading this work is, indisputably, a difficult task. John Milner has suggested that *Aeroplane Flying*, like all Suprematist paintings, depicts ‘space with no horizon, which meant that there was no sky and no earth, no up no down’.<sup>160</sup> Similarly, Bowlt has suggested that the formal idiom seems to ‘render form as though seen from above’, thus implying Malevich was stimulated by the new medium of aerial photography.<sup>161</sup> Certainly, images of the earth taken from aeroplanes had become prolific in the printed press in Tsarist Russia. Lodder has developed the discussion of the importance of aerial photography in Malevich’s thinking and has written that with Suprematism he created ‘a new reality, the perception of which is only made possible by the new technology of the aeroplane’.<sup>162</sup> Certainly, the red forms in this painting may imply the distant horizon line, as the higher and smaller red line denotes the final marker on the ground as the aeroplane moves further from the earth. These two red forms also evoke the markings on the pilot’s altimeter conveying the increasing altitude of the aeroplane, and therefore Suprematism, as it makes its ascent upwards and away from the earth. Alternatively, the larger red form could be interpreted as a propeller, assuming that in some way the lower elements represent the fuselage and engines of the aeroplane.

While these stimuli associated with flight cannot be disputed, it is important to reiterate that they had long formed part of Malevich’s creative thinking. For Malevich, flight was not an achievement of the aeroplane but a metaphorical exercise in which questions of ascension were intensified by the war and interpretation, in any representational sense, was far from the point. In the context of wartime aviation, flight intensified the idea of ascension and descent, which may account for such readings. Malevich certainly held no belief that liberation in any sense could be achieved through war, munitions or the aeroplane.

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<sup>160</sup> John Milner, *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 190.

<sup>161</sup> Bowlt, ‘Beyond the Horizon’, in *Kazimir Malevitsch zum 100*, 244.

<sup>162</sup> Christina Lodder, ‘Transfiguring Reality: Suprematism and the Aerial View’, in Mark Dorrian and Frederic Pousin, eds., *Seeing from Above: The Aerial View in Visual Culture* (London and New York: I. B. Tauris, 2013), 97.

Rather, the war seems to have sharpened Malevich's view that ascent could be realised pictorially. By 1915, there is every reason to position Malevich's artistic preoccupation with ascension within not only a rich cultural environment but also the national context which had begun to accelerate upwards as quickly as it came hurtling downwards. In this sense, *Aeroplane Flying* represents a reorientation of Malevich's thinking towards a metaphysical rather than a physical notion of ascent which sought to overcome the idea of a mechanical form of descent.

*Aeroplane Flying*, along with his other paintings from the late spring and early summer of 1915, must be recognised, at least in the first instance, as exploratory works in which Malevich attempted to organise his many creative ideas in art. The paintings that Kliun witnessed in Kuntsevo were an indication of the formal ideas Malevich valued in art as much as they reveal what he sought to discard.

The idea of revision, process and reorientation in Malevich's art is supported by Irina Vakar's examination of X-rays of *The Black Square* (Fig. 1.27), which reveal the existence of the two paintings underneath its surface. Vakar has appealed for consensus about the process of Malevich's creative thinking and written, 'let's call it Proto-Suprematist', as the two paintings are neither Alogist nor Cubo-Futurist.<sup>163</sup> The act of overpainting indicates that Malevich was prepared to dispose of earlier ideas as he came to privilege new formulations. As Alexander Bouras has written, '*The Black Square* is a symbol of the creative process'.<sup>164</sup> Certainly, the craquelure on this X-ray image alone reveals that Malevich's creative process was linear and defined by experimentation rather than a unique moment of birth.

One aspect of this process involved a rejection of the tangible and outward gesture of materials Malevich had observed in Vladimir Tatlin's work. Works such as *Corner Counter-Relief* (1914) (Fig. 1.28) focused on the expressive nature of materials and their forms and combinations in actual space. Lodder has suggested, in fact, that Tatlin's rejection of the term 'Painterly Relief' and his adoption of the term 'counter' to add to the term 'relief', as in the title *Corner Counter-Relief*, may itself have been stimulated by the events and the language of the war.<sup>165</sup> Malevich's first Suprematist canvases are symbolic, not of a fully

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<sup>163</sup> Irina Vakar, 'New Information Concerning *The Black Square*', in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 18.

<sup>164</sup> Alexander Bouras, 'The Path of Empirical Criticism in Russia or "The Milky Way of Inventors"', in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 104.

<sup>165</sup> Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 16.

formed theoretical basis, but of a disposition which aspired to a metaphysical sense of liberation, even if he could not explain this in words yet.

The implications of the war for Malevich cannot be separated from the complexity of his evolving creative process. For men of Malevich's age who had still somehow managed to escape conscription, conditions had unquestionably become more alarming. The Tsar found himself having to manage an extremely fragile set of affairs, as discontent and disorder had become the norm at home and at the front.<sup>166</sup> On 21 May 1915, the Kadet politician, Prince Mansyrev attempted to communicate the severity of the moment to the Tsar.

Events are developing more quickly than you might think. [...] Everyone knows we don't have enough guns, enough bullets, or enough shells that we're sacrificing hundreds of thousands of people... everyone sees and knows this, both the soldiers themselves and the civilian population; they know in the cities and in the villages. They even know who is to blame for this lack of preparedness, and therefore dissatisfaction is growing not by the day but by the hour.<sup>167</sup>

As Prince Mansyrev's words suggest, there is every reason to assume that Malevich would have been fully aware of the horrors awaiting him. Conscription had not slowed; domestic unrest was increasing, hundreds of thousands of men had already been killed and many more returned home dreadfully wounded. It would have been impossible for Malevich not to notice.

Clearly, there were many stimuli for Malevich as he made his first Suprematist paintings. He was certainly inspired by a rich cultural and intellectual environment, but by the late spring of 1915 Malevich's life and his work were recast by the prospect of his inevitable conscription. The anticipation of his involvement in the war means that the personal implications of the conflict must also be understood as part of this creative development. A rejection of the object was integral to what Malevich had achieved in his painting in the late spring and early summer of 1915, even if the idea of objectlessness had not yet been

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<sup>166</sup> See, for instance, Norman Stone, 'The Retreat', in *The Eastern Front, 1914-1917* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1975), 165-193; and David R. Stone, 'The Great Retreat 1915', in *The Russian Army in the Great War: The Eastern Front, 1914-1917* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2015), 146-177.

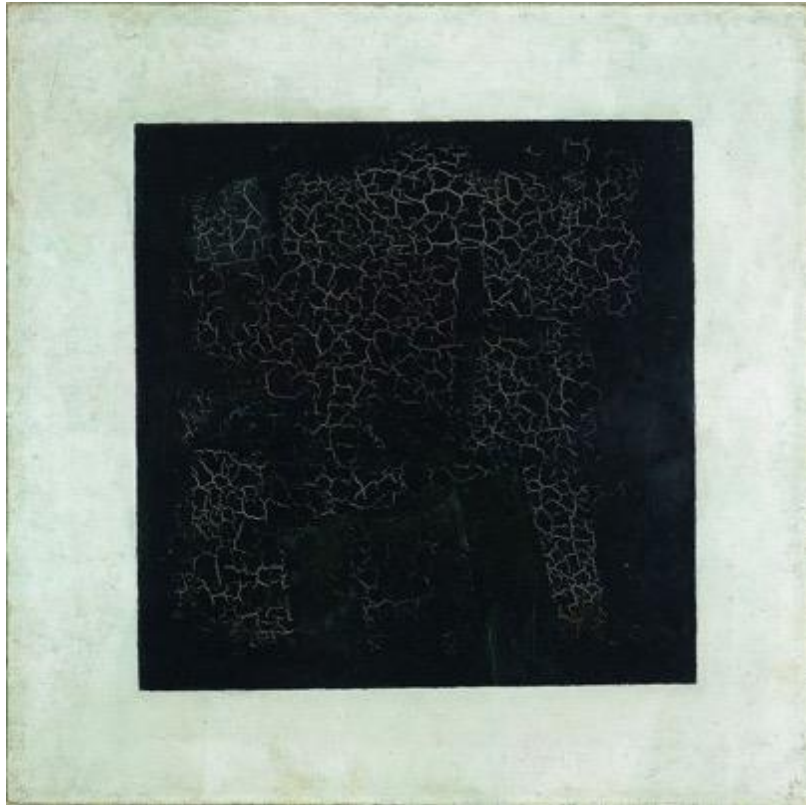
<sup>167</sup> Diary entry of I. S. Kliuzhev relating to conversation with Prince Mansyrev, 21 May 1915; quoted in Sanborn, *Imperial Apocalypse*, 93.

formulated in words. Malevich's geometric planes of colour indicate a turn towards a new pictorial logic. This shift emerged under the pressures of the war, when he no longer regarded traditional relations between form, space and perception as adequate to his creative practice.

The late spring and early summer of 1915 was not 'time for pictures', but a time in which Malevich aspired towards transcendence, emancipation and a new truth in art.<sup>168</sup> With forty of these paintings to explain, Malevich faced the task of claiming his authorship, justifying their significance and establishing his identity as the founder of this new mode of art.

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<sup>168</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [beginning of June 1915]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 66.



**Figure 1.1**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*The Black Square*

1915

Oil on canvas

79.5 x 79.5 cm

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



**Figure 1.2**

The display of Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist canvases at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0.10 (Zero-Ten)*, in Petrograd, 19 December 1915 – 19 January 1916.

Reproduced from Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden: Brill, 2019)



**Figure 1.3**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Knifegrinder*

1912-13

Oil on canvas

79.53 x 79.53 cm

Yale University Art Gallery



**Figure 1.4**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Cow and Violin*

1913

Oil on wood

48.8 x 25.8 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



**Figure 1.5**

**Kazimir Malevich**

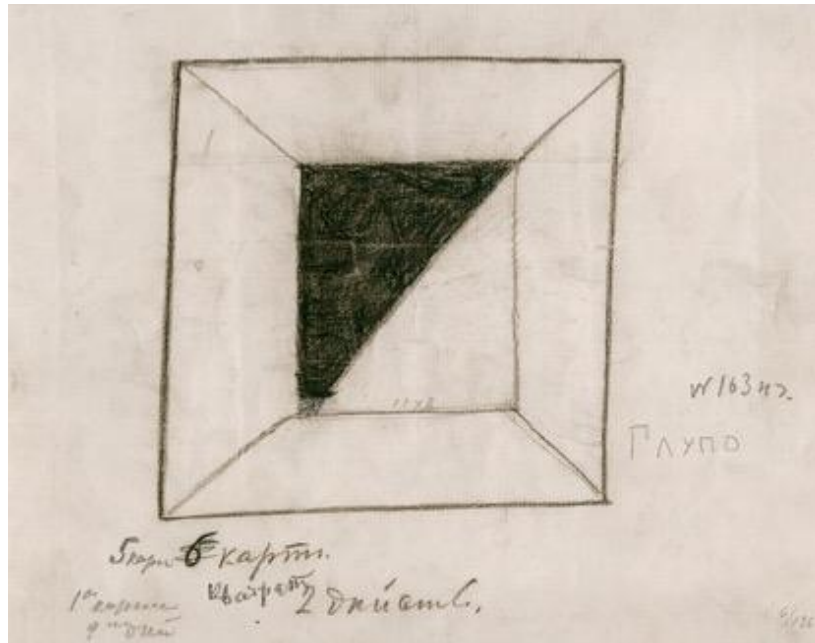
*Portrait of Ivan Kliun*

1913

Oil on canvas

112 x 70 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



**Figure 1.6**

**Kazimir Malevich**

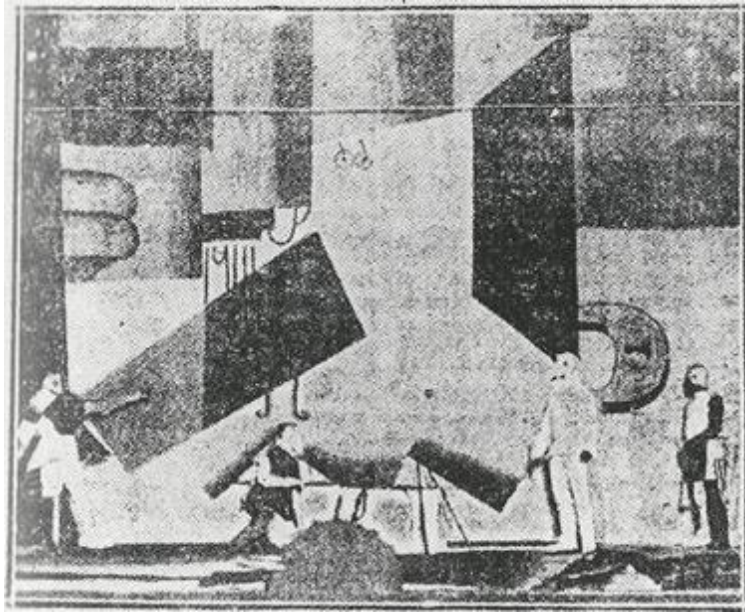
*Design for a Backcloth for the First Scene of the Second Act of the opera Victory over the Sun*

1913

Pencil on paper

21 x 27 cm

State Museum of Theatre and Music, St. Petersburg



**Figure 1.7**

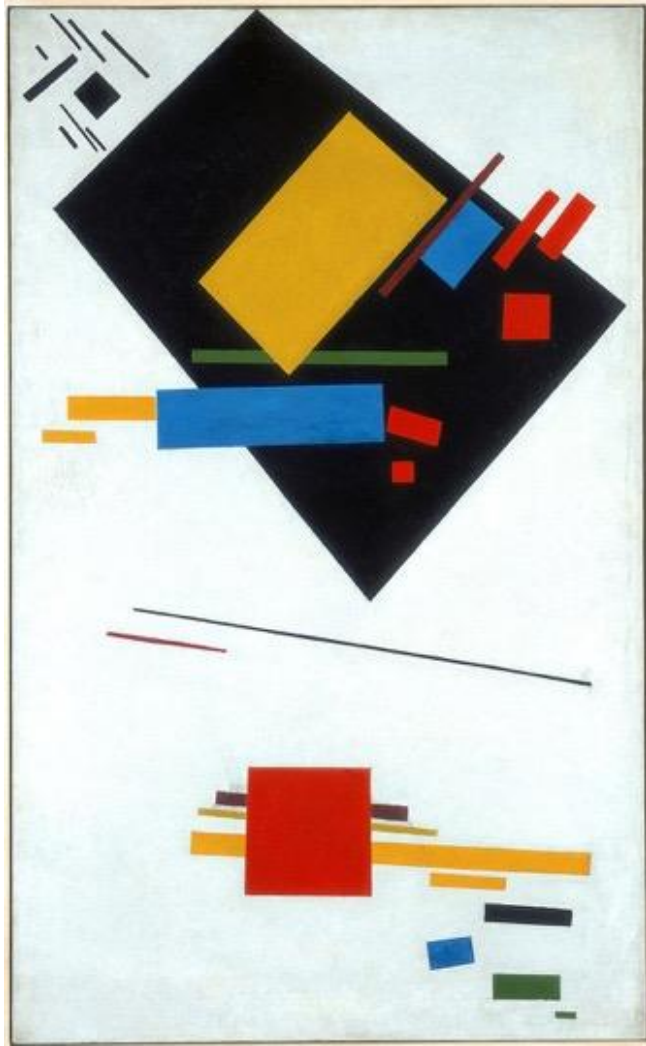
**Kazimir Malevich**

*Beginning of Scene One of the opera Victory over the Sun*

St. Petersburg, 3 and 5 December 1913

*Ranee Utro*, 12 December 1913





**Figure 1.9**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Suprematist Composition*

1915

Oil on canvas

101.5 x 62 cm

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



**Figure 1.10**

**Wassily Kandinsky**

*Improvisation no. 30 (Cannons)*

1911-13

Oil on canvas

113 x 113.3 cm

The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago



**Figure 1.11**

**Natalia Goncharova**

*The Christian Host*

1914

Lithograph

32.7 x 24 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Figure 1.12**

**Natalia Goncharova**

*Angles and Airplanes*

1914

Lithograph

32.7 x 24 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Figure 1.13**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Look, The Vistula Isn't Far Now*

1914

Chromolithograph

55.5 x 38.5 cm

Reproduced from Andréi Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, trans. Michael Taylor with Helen Knox (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2010)



Figure 1.14

Kazimir Malevich

*War*

1914

Pencil on paper

9.8 x 9.7 cm

The Khardzhiev-Chaga Collection, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



**Figure 1.15**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*An Englishman in Moscow*

1914

Oil on canvas

88 x 57 cm

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



**Figure 1.16**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Reservist of the First Division*

1914

Oil on canvas with collage elements including postage stamp and thermometer

53.7 x 44.8 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York

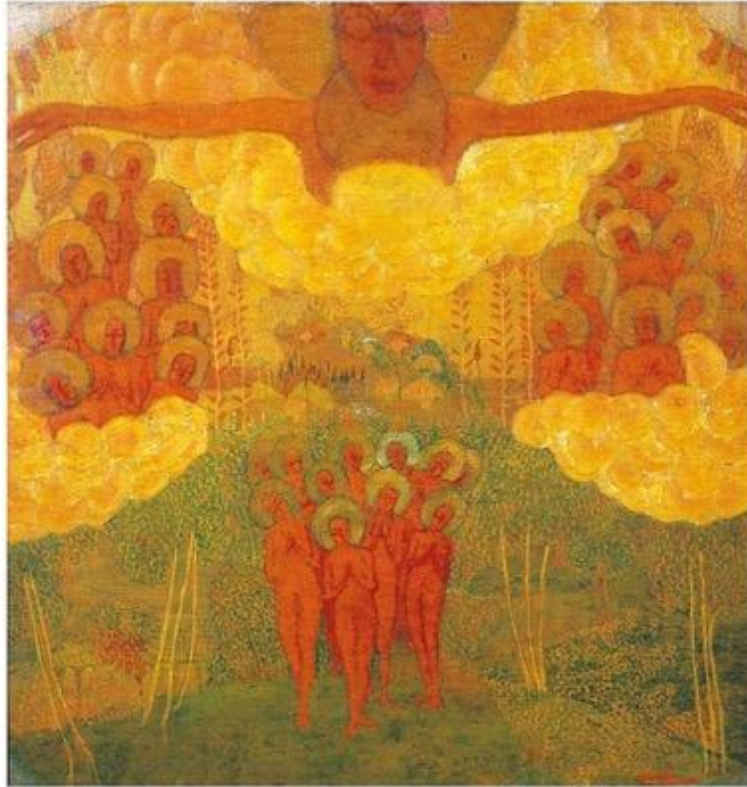


**Figure 1.17**

Photograph of reservist infantrymen

1914

Reproduced from D. A. Bushmakov, *Russkaia armiiia v Velikoi voine, 1914-1917* [*The Russian Army in the Great War, 1914-1917*]. Vol. 1 (Moscow: Krasivaia kniga, 2016)



**Figure 1.18**

**Kazimir Malevich**

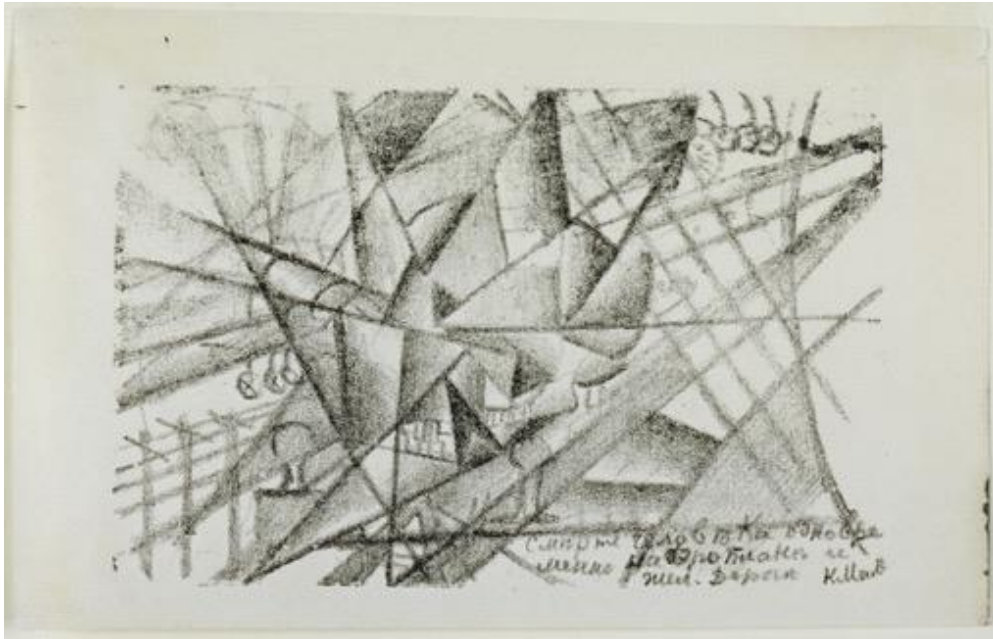
*Triumph of the Heavens (study for a fresco)*

1907

Tempera on canvas

72.5 x 27.5 cm

State Tretyakov Gallery, St. Petersburg



**Figure 1.19**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Simultaneous Death of a Man in an Aeroplane and at the Railway*

1913

Lithograph

9.1 x 14 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Figure 1.20**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Pilot*

Illustration for *Troe* (Three) by V. Khlebnikov, A. Kruchenykh and E. Guro

1913

Lithography

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



**Figure 1.21**

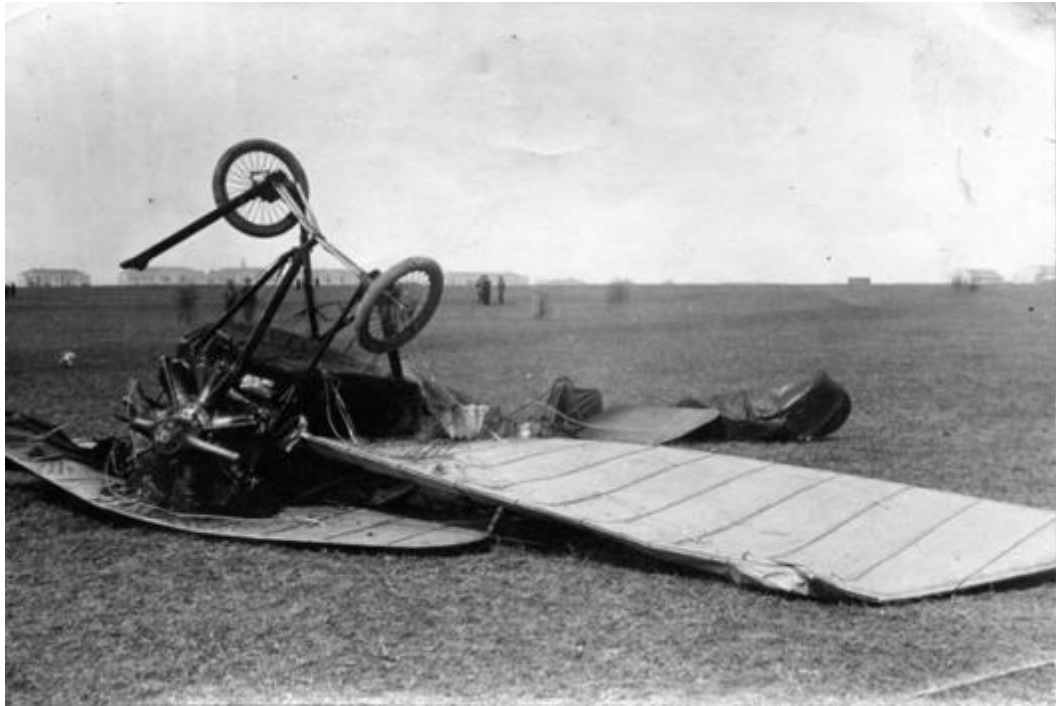
Alogical portrait of Mikhail Matiushin, Aleksei Kruchenykh and Kazimir Malevich

Uusikirkko, Finland

1913

Photograph

Reproduced from *Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1990)



**Figure 1.22**

Photograph of the destroyed aircraft of Lieutenant Dmitri Podkhuyko

23 March 1915

Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow



**Figure 1.23**

*The Great European War. A Heroic Feat and Death of the Famous Pilot Staff Captain P. N. Nesterov*

Lithographic print

A. P. Korkin & A. V. Beideman & Company Printing and Lithographic Firm

Library of Congress online catalogue



**Figure 1.24**

**Kazimir Malevich**

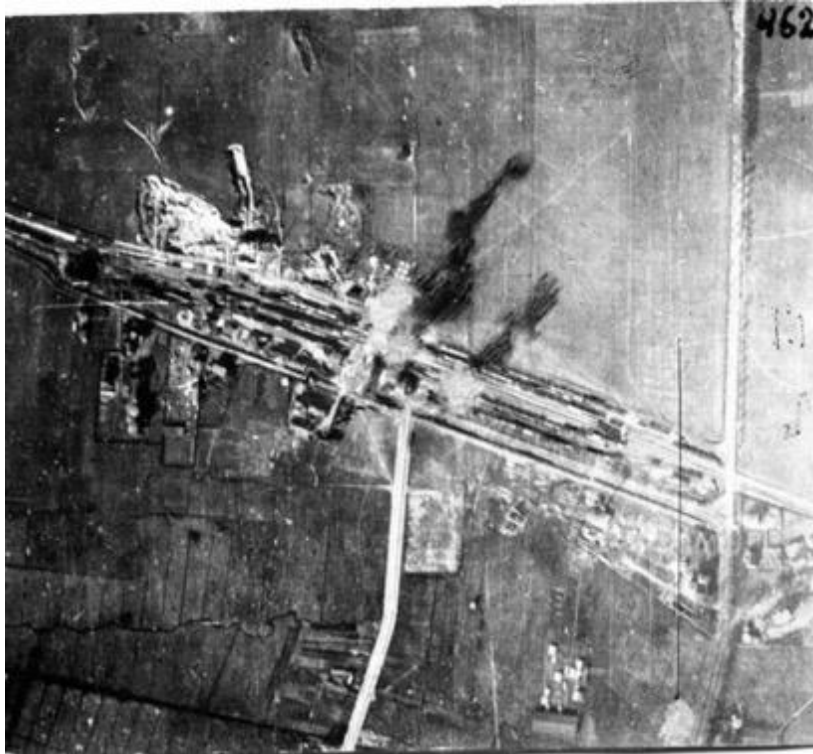
*The Aviator*

1914

Oil on canvas

125 x 65 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

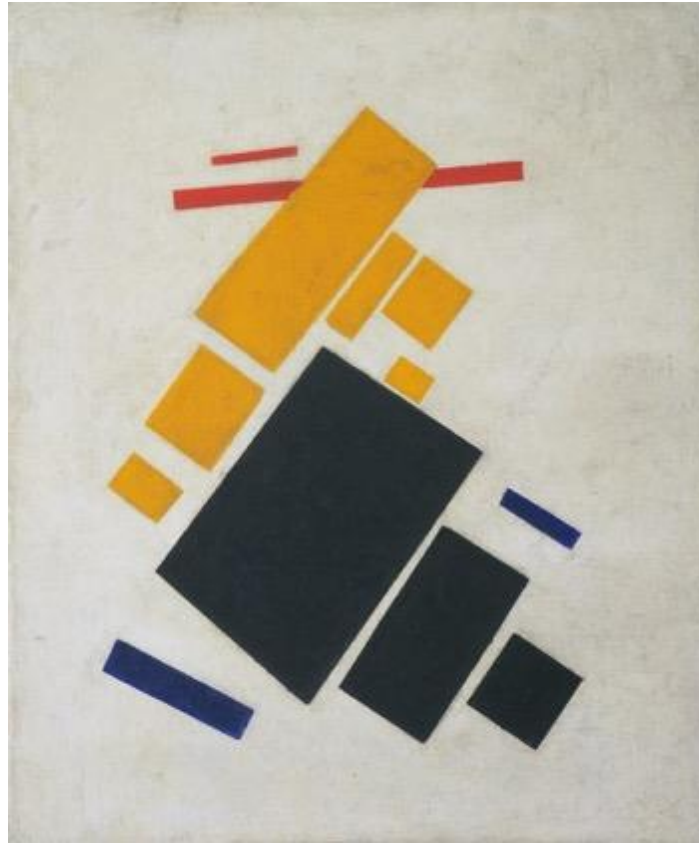


**Figure 1.25**

Aerial photograph of a bomb hitting the earth

1915

Multimedia Art Museum, Moscow



**Figure 1.26**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Suprematist Composition: Aeroplane Flying*

1915

Oil on canvas

58.1 x 48.3 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



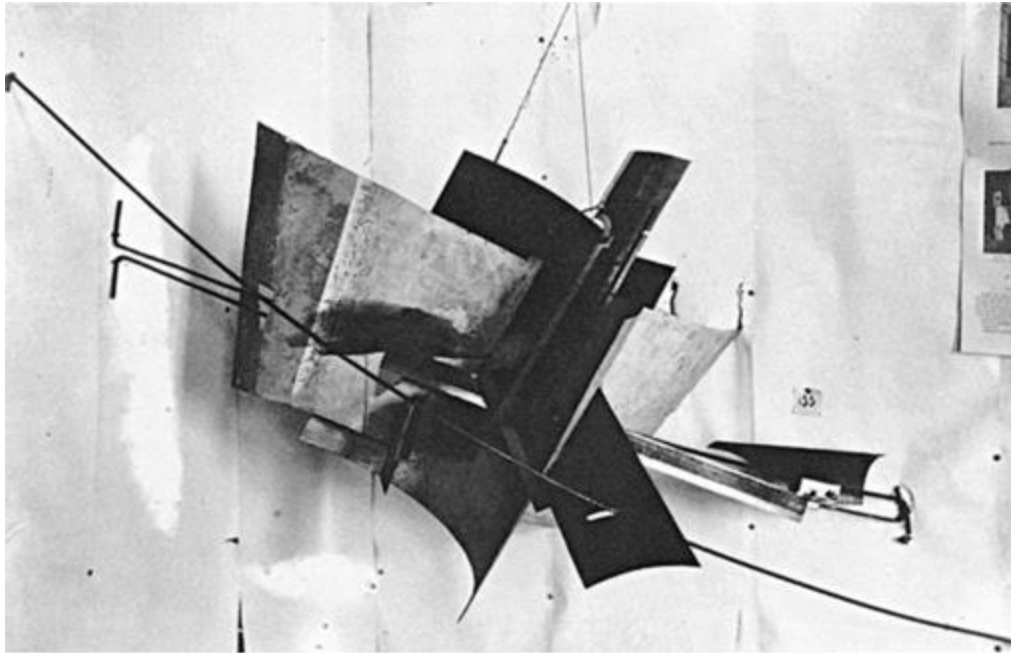
**Figure 1.27**

**Kazimir Malevich**

Radiograph image of *The Black Square*

1915

Reproduced from Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden: Brill, 2019)



**Figure 1.28**

**Vladimir Tatlin**

*Corner Counter-Relief*

1914-15

Metal, wood, glass and wire

Whereabouts unknown

Reproduced from Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden: Brill, 2019)

## Chapter Two

### *Authorship, Legacy and Conscriptio*

Malevich did his best to explain his paintings to his friend Ivan Kliun when the two men were together at Malevich's dacha in 1915.<sup>169</sup> Looking back on this moment, Malevich later stated: 'I could not sleep or eat for a week, I wanted to understand what I had done but I could not do that'.<sup>170</sup> It is possible that Malevich felt overwhelmed, but it would be safe to state that he initially felt confused about what he had painted. Over the following weeks and months, a number of priorities emerged for Malevich: he needed to settle on a name for this new aesthetic language and find a way to articulate what exactly these paintings meant. In the process of doing so, Malevich knew that he had to introduce his work to his closest colleagues, Aleksei Kruchenykh and Mikhail Matiushin, after which he had to present his art to his wider circle of avant-garde colleagues and, eventually, to the public. More ambitious plans emerged as the year progressed. Over the summer of 1915, Malevich expressed the need to write a supporting theoretical text, launch a journal and establish a group of followers around his new art. Malevich felt that if he could realise these ambitions, he might be able to establish this new mode of painting at the apex of the avant-garde and secure a similar position for himself within it. Time, however, was not something he could be sure he had. Malevich responded to these tasks with frenetic energy as he became increasingly anxious about his involvement and possible death in the First World War.

Malevich's first ambition seems to have been to persuade Matiushin to feature this new idea in print. In a series of letters, written in May and June 1915, Malevich confided in Matiushin and hinted that he had achieved something new in art rather than directly explaining the works themselves. Indeed, at this point there was little that Malevich could say about these new paintings with any sort of specificity or clarity. Malevich had not even settled on the name – Suprematism – until the autumn of 1915.<sup>171</sup> Still, Malevich

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<sup>169</sup> I. V. Kliun, *Moi put' v iskusstve. Vospominaniia, stat'i, dnevikhi* [My path in art. Reminiscences, articles, diaries] (Moscow: RA, 1999), 93, quoted in Irina Vakar, 'The Black Square', in Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2019), 27.

<sup>170</sup> Anna Leporskaia, quoted in Oleg Pokrovsky, 'Alarm and Flames: Memoirs of Pavel Nikolaevich Filonov', English translation in Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), II: 374.

<sup>171</sup> Kazimir Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 24 September 1915; *ibid.*, I: 68.

requested that one particular image be included in a book Matiushin planned to publish on *Victory over the Sun*. Matiushin's publication was, after all, the reason Malevich returned to these sketches.

I would be very grateful if you would include one drawing of the backdrop in the act in which the victory takes place. I found one draft here at my place and I think it should really be included. [...] This drawing will have great significance in painting. What was done unconsciously is now bearing extraordinary fruits.<sup>172</sup>

By saying that he 'found' a draft image from 1913, Malevich sought to establish an historical narrative that Suprematism originated in 1913.<sup>173</sup> This would constitute, he hoped, a permissible rewriting of history. Irina Vakar describes Malevich's effort to 'deceive Matiushin and everyone else, including us, by stating that he was sending "old" drawings, and thus implying that he had already conceived *The Black Square* back in 1913' as a 'riddle'.<sup>174</sup> Vakar suggests that this was because Malevich had an inherent commitment to perfectionism.<sup>175</sup> Malevich's fictitious dating also illustrates his competitive nature and ensures that his work would precede Vladimir Tatlin's *Corner Counter-Reliefs* (Fig. 1.28), which dated from 1914. This dating suggests that Malevich did not want to allow anyone to speculate that the formulation of his paintings or ideas may have been, to any degree whatsoever, stimulated by Tatlin. If Malevich were able to have the date of 1913 recorded as a fact in Matiushin's publication, it would have gone some way to establishing his copyright over this new aesthetic language.

In a subsequent letter, Malevich was bolder in his phrasing to Matiushin. 'I'm sending you three drawings in the form in which they were done in 1913', he asserted.<sup>176</sup> 'Three backdrops', he added, 'the first backdrop is the black square which has served me in many ways, generating a mass of material, so please, do place it either on the cover or on the inside cover'.<sup>177</sup> These words again suggest that Malevich

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<sup>172</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 27 May 1915; *ibid.*, I: 65.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>174</sup> Irina Vakar, 'New Information Concerning *The Black Square*', in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 27.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>176</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [early June 1915]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 65-66.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

had accomplished something new in art that had its roots in 1913. A few days later, Malevich added to his narrative and spoke about the creative possibilities of his achievement.

I'm sending you three drawings of the first drafts that I was not able to complete for your opera, due to the production manager's ignorance. [...] The third backdrop for Act I depicts a square, the embryo of all possibilities, acquiring terrible power as it grows, it is the progenitor of the cube and the sphere, its disintegrations bring remarkable culture into painting.<sup>178</sup>

There may or may not be some truth in this anecdote involving the production manager, but it appears that Malevich hoped that this story would offer a convincing justification for why Matiushin had not seen these works in 1913. As in his previous letter, Malevich ended in a sober and urgent tone. 'The impending alarm of war is forcing me to work intensively, since the days are numbered and the second-class [soldiers] will be leaving'.<sup>179</sup> While the requests in these letters to Matiushin were clearly motivated by artistic ambition, the urgency in Malevich's tone was evidently informed by the pressure of his imminent conscription.

Despite his anxieties, Kruchenykh was intermittently by Malevich's side in Kuntsevo during this period and, with his support, ideas emerged quickly.<sup>180</sup> 'We are undertaking to put out a magazine', Malevich told Matiushin, 'and are beginning to discuss how and what, and since we're planning to reduce everything to zero, we've decided to call it Zero [*Ну*], after which, we'll eventually move beyond zero ourselves'.<sup>181</sup> The use of 'we,' rather than 'I', was likely very deliberate and employed to convince Matiushin that Malevich had already acquired the collegiate backing of their mutual friend Kruchenykh. Feeling positive, Malevich encouraged Matiushin to join the two in Kuntsevo, a reunion that would have been reminiscent of the work the three men did on *Victory over the Sun* two years earlier. Malevich offered Matiushin his own room, a peaceful working environment and even managed to joke about the little food they had: 'lunches consist of birches, lilies of the valley and aerial soufflé'.<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [early June 1915]; *ibid.*, I: 66.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>180</sup> As his letters reveal, Kruchenykh spent time with Malevich in Kuntsevo in May and June 1915. See Aleksei Kruchenykh, letters to Andrei Shemshurin, [21 May 1915 and 27 June 1915]; Aleksei Kruchenykh, *Pis'ma A. Shemshurinu i M. Matiushinu* (Moscow: Gileia, 2012), 26; and Kruchenykh, letters to Matiushin, [May 1915 and June 1915]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 54-66.

<sup>181</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 29 May 1915; *ibid.*, I: 65.

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

Although he hoped to bring Matiushin and Kruchenykh into the fold immediately, Malevich was desperate, and at times almost hysterical, in his efforts to keep his new art secret from those he trusted less. Writing to Matiushin in late September 1915, Malevich fretted:

I've landed in a pickle. I was sitting and working with my paintings hung all around me, and suddenly the door opens and [Ivan] Puni walks in. Now we've got to publish a small booklet about my works at all costs and to baptise it in order to secure my copyright. I'm waiting impatiently for your advice. The exhibition opens on 1 December. Please help. I'm off to war soon and this is my last public appearance.<sup>183</sup>

That Puni walked into Malevich's studio was the reason for the dilemma, but the desperation and level of urgency Malevich felt to address the problem were, as he said himself, attributed to the pressure of his imminent conscription. An interesting postscript written on the side of the letter reads 'tear this letter up'.<sup>184</sup> As close as Malevich was to Matiushin, this addendum suggests that Malevich did not want anyone to become aware of just how anxious he felt about securing his authorship and establishing his copyright over his work. It is interesting to note that Tatlin felt just as competitive. As the artist Vera Pestel recalled: 'the blinds are down, and Tatlin won't even raise them because he's afraid Malevich might come along Griboedov Lane and look in the window'.<sup>185</sup>

It is clear that, in the second half of 1915, Malevich developed a deep concern for his copyright. It is fascinating to link these ambitions with the legal status of creative rights within the Russian Empire at this time, even if Malevich's actions did not make use of these legal mechanisms. Although at the turn of the century creative activity remained bound by the 1828 Statute of Censorship, from 1911 the Russian government ratified a set of copyright laws, called the Relations of Copyright, which brought the Empire into alignment with Europe.<sup>186</sup> From 1886, many Western countries had embraced an international framework known as the Berne Convention, which aimed to provide basic rights for authors of original

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<sup>183</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 25 September 1915; *ibid.*, I: 68.

<sup>184</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>185</sup> Vera Pestel, quoted in Evgenii Kovtun, 'The Beginning of Suprematism', in *Von Der Fläche Zum Raum / From Surface to Space: Russland / Russia 1916–24*, trans. John E. Bowlit (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1979), 42.

<sup>186</sup> Mark Boguslavsky, *The USSR and International Copyright Protection* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1979), 86.

creative works.<sup>187</sup> The Russian Empire's 1911 act was a radical shift which meant that authors were able to assert copyright over their works without fear of censorship. This act meant that there were practical steps Malevich could have taken to protect his intellectual property, if indeed Suprematism could attain legal status and if he went about it in the legally required manner. This window of opportunity, however, was a narrow one. Creative rights in Russia became more oppressive after 1917, as this work goes on to discuss.

Despite Malevich's ambition to secure his individual copyright, he felt a need to find a group of recruits to engage in objectless painting without being outdone by them. When Malevich did finally reveal Suprematism to his friends and allies beyond Kruchenykh and Matiushin, he was at pains over how to introduce it and just how much to give away. The linguist Roman Jakobson visited Malevich in the summer of 1915 and observed this anxiety first-hand. Recording his encounter, Jakobson wrote, almost bemused, 'I went to see Malevich – with Kruchenykh – at Malevich's invitation. We ate, and a scene occurred which surprised me. Malevich was terribly frightened that people would find out what he was doing new. He told me a lot about it but couldn't bring himself to show me his new works'.<sup>188</sup> Varvara Stepanova made a similar record in her diary. 'Malevich discovers Suprematism but keeps mum until the exhibit opens', she wrote in September 1915.<sup>189</sup> It seems that Malevich wanted to sow the seeds of his great 'discovery' in the minds of his colleagues without elaborating on its formal appearance or its meaning. 'Everyone knows the name already. But no one knows the content. Let it be a secret', he reflected as late as 25 November 1915.<sup>190</sup> Malevich wanted to assert himself as the leader of the new movement of Suprematism without appearing to do so explicitly and without giving away too much of its content, that is, if he could even articulate that content to himself.

By the time Malevich revealed Suprematism to his colleagues, there were just weeks to go before *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0.10 (Zero-Ten)* [*Poslednaia futuristicheskaia vystavka kartin, 0,10 (nol' desiat')*] (Fig. 1.2). Varvara Stepanova recorded this much-anticipated moment. Precisely because of all of the suspense Malevich had built up, the atmosphere was pregnant with theatrical drama.

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<sup>187</sup> Berne Convention for the Protection of Literary and Artistic Works, Paris Act of 24 July 1971, as amended on 28 September 1979, art. 6bis, in *WIPO Lex*, World Intellectual Property Organization, 7, <https://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/text/283693>.

<sup>188</sup> Roman Jakobson, quoted in Charlotte Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994), 22.

<sup>189</sup> Varvara Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit' bez chuda. Pis'ma. Poeticheskie opyty. Zapiski khudozhnitsy*, ed. O. V. Melnikov (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Sfera, 1994), 60; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 173.

<sup>190</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 25 November 1915; *ibid.*, I: 74.

With Malevich the atmosphere thickens, and one senses he has found something, but he is silent. They are making every effort to find out what he will call his things. [...] The gathering at [Alexandra] Exter's (an elegant hotel room, her bric-a-brac, herself eccentric, smoking constantly, fruits, pastries) – [Nadezhda] Udaltsova, [Liubov] Popova, Malevich, and Kliun – time 12 midnight, we were able to learn nothing. [...] Kliun squeaks something, Malevich is silent. Udaltsova is pale. [...] Malevich utters: 'I have discovered Suprematism,' then he explains it.<sup>191</sup>

Stepanova did not record how Malevich introduced Suprematism, but one has to wonder what exactly he explained and how he articulated its content.

In considering this question of content in Suprematism, it is useful to look at an interaction Malevich had with the composer and childhood friend Nikolai Roslavets.

The views that I expressed [to Roslavets] about music and the decorative and theatrical arts were received with bewilderment and rejection, since my form doesn't express anything. I committed a terrible blunder in pointing out to Roslavets that modern music must move towards expressing musical layers and must have the length and thickness of a moving musical mass in time, and what's more that the dynamism of musical masses should be replaced by stasis, that is, by delaying the musical mass in time. When they asked me where I got my musical degree from, I simply resigned my place on the committee then and there.<sup>192</sup>

Clearly, this encounter did not go as Malevich would have hoped it might. A few words in defence of Malevich would be fair here. As Charlotte Douglas has pointed out, 'from the very beginning, Malevich thought of these objectless compositions as a fundamentally new way of visualising the world'.<sup>193</sup> Malevich believed that with his achievement in painting, he had identified the foundations of a movement that was

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<sup>191</sup> Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit' bez chuda*, 60.

<sup>192</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 19 October 1915; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 69.

<sup>193</sup> Charlotte Douglas, 'Defining Suprematism: The Year of Discovery', in Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2019), 29.

relevant across the arts. It was with this conviction that he attempted to recruit the composer. The familiarity the two men enjoyed may have been the reason Malevich took the spirited decision to approach Roslavets as much as it might also account for the humorous reply the Suprematist received. Even so, this encounter, and the humility with which Malevich recorded it, suggests that he was unable to articulate how a movement based on painterly geometric forms could be relevant to music, even by the autumn of 1915. Malevich was unable to explain what Suprematism meant even with regard to painting itself at this moment. In spite of his unquestionable sincerity, it is also likely that the threat of conscription motivated Malevich to take a chance with Roslavets before he was really ready.

Embarrassment may well have been Malevich's lasting impression of the encounter with Roslavets, but the exchange reaffirmed the need to produce a written explanation of Suprematism. In his letters to Matiushin from May 1915 onwards, Malevich pleaded for help to produce a supporting theory. Presumably, this need to produce a theory was the principal reason Malevich hoped Matiushin would make the trip to Kuntsevo. 'I need a person with whom I can speak frankly and who could help me posit a theory based on the origins of painting', Malevich wrote as early as June 1915.<sup>194</sup> His need 'to publish a small booklet about my works at all costs and to baptise it in order to secure my copyright' only became more urgent after Puni viewed his canvases, and as the exhibition approached.<sup>195</sup> Indeed, by admitting the embarrassment he experienced before Roslavets, it is possible that Malevich sought to engender sympathy or even pity from Matiushin.

Towards the end of 1915, Malevich was desperate. His correspondence with Matiushin is saturated with apprehension and anxiety about the personal implications of the war:

In view of the alarming times in which the war is bringing upon us, I am being forced to work terribly intensively, and am painting pictures, (they are not exactly paintings, the time for paintings has passed) and writing down various thoughts, and there's no time at all to develop them. But when I've been sent off to war, all my free time will be taken up with letters to you.<sup>196</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [early June 1915]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 66.

<sup>195</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 25 September 1915; *ibid.*, I: 68.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

The process of writing this theoretical justification was a difficult and anxiety-inducing experience. Two months before Suprematism was exhibited in Petrograd, Malevich agonised about what he had managed to write in order to secure his copyright:

Something has to be added... it's missing the main thing, Suprematism. So now I'm thinking that it's more sensible to not publish it and to publish something on Suprematism instead... I would just like my article to be published because in it I make a certain analysis and reach a milestone on the road to Suprematism and documents my work so no one steals my rights from me. ...I cannot imagine. ... My idea is essentially only indicated at the end ... I apologise for these troubles, and I am again thinking of not publishing.<sup>197</sup>

What rights, exactly, Malevich believed were under threat is not apparent.

In spite of his struggles and vacillations, a text was eventually printed in November 1915 and entitled *From Cubism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism*.<sup>198</sup> This text was made available at 0.10, which opened at the Dobychna Gallery in Petrograd on 19 December 1915. Malevich presented his paintings as existing in either the second or the fourth dimension, as if hoping to position Suprematism in relation to elusive and higher spatial dimensions.<sup>199</sup> Along with the thirty-eight other Suprematist works exhibited here, *The Black Square* (1915) was displayed across the top corner of the gallery, in the position normally occupied by an icon in a Russian Orthodox home. As Malevich's own heritage was Catholic rather than Orthodox, it is possible that he felt free to do this. Whatever his motivation, Malevich's invocation of the icon simultaneously provoked Russian Orthodoxy as much as it borrowed from its traditions and charged Suprematism with distinct metaphysical implications. Maria Taroutina has suggested that this gesture 'affirmed [for Malevich] his own position as the "originator" or "source" of all geometric abstraction. *The Black Square* thus simultaneously symbolised the end of an old representational tradition and the beginning

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<sup>197</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [end of October 1915]; *ibid.*, I: 70-71.

<sup>198</sup> K. Malevich, *Ot Kubizma k suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm* [*From Cubism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism*] (Petrograd: L. Ia. Ginsburg, 1916); English translation in Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Press, 1980), 107-110.

<sup>199</sup> See '0,10 Exhibition Catalogue, 1915', in Matthew Drutt, ed., *In Search of 0,10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings* (Basel: Fondation Beyeler / Hatje Cantz, 2015), 228.

of a new one'.<sup>200</sup> In addition to exploiting the religious traditions of Orthodox culture, Malevich's appropriation of the corner challenged the credibility and value of formalised religion. This gesture, however, reflected a trajectory that was emerging within the avant-garde. Malevich's positioning of *The Black Square* was surely also in opposition to Tatlin's overtly material *Corner Counter-Reliefs* (see for instance Fig. 1.28), which likewise used the corner of the gallery space.

In pursuing an understanding of what Malevich actually sought to copyright, it is important to look at the text of *From Cubism to Suprematism*, which was available at 0.10. In the first of what were eventually three editions, Malevich used his opening sentence to express the historical significance of Suprematism:

All former and contemporary painting before Suprematism, and sculpture, the word, and music were enslaved by the form of nature, and they await their liberation in order to speak in their own tongue and not depend on the intellect, sense, logic, philosophy, psychology, the various laws of causality and the technical changes in life.<sup>201</sup>

The text also mounted a charge against Futurism, even if it adopted its literary style to do so. Malevich wrote that 'the new iron, machine life, the roar of automobiles, the flash of searchlights, the growl of propellers, awakened the soul which was snoring in its cellar of innumerable mistakes'.<sup>202</sup> The charge against Futurism was that, even if it had awoken the soul, it possessed no true wherewithal to liberate it. Futurism 'moves towards dynamism in painting', and 'Cubism, via the annihilation of the thing, moves towards pure painting,' both, however, 'must be given up for the sake of pure creation in painting of new creative forms'.<sup>203</sup>

Originality is a key concept in copyright and, although Malevich did his best to distinguish his work as something new, there was a problem with what followed. Unfortunately, Malevich had not been able to overcome the worries he expressed to Matiushin, namely that his idea was 'only indicated at the end'.<sup>204</sup> In

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<sup>200</sup> Maria Taroutina, *The Icon and the Square: Russian Modernism and the Russo-Byzantine Revival* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2018), 205.

<sup>201</sup> Malevich, 'Cubism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism', in Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds*, 107.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>204</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [end of October 1915]; *ibid.*, I: 70-71.

place of substantiating what Suprematism meant, Malevich emphasised the inadequacies of Futurism and Cubism at length. It was only implied that Suprematism was the natural and inevitable result of Cubism and Futurism. Malevich could only manage vague indications as to what his new mode of aesthetic painting actually meant. The suggestion was that while Cubism and Futurism had only managed to dismantle and break the object, Suprematism had for the first time moved beyond it. Suprematism had achieved a ‘new realism in painting’ and, as true ‘objectless creation’, it had achieved its own liberation.<sup>205</sup> Malevich only gave an indication that Suprematism, as a system of art, had exposed a universal feature of artistic creation that was present within, and somehow relevant to, all of the arts.

Given Malevich’s view that his achievement on the canvas emphasised something that was relevant to all the arts, it cannot be overlooked that he seems to contradict his own claim of copyright by mixing different categories of original expression. Paradoxically, Malevich’s hurdle was the very nature of copyright, which is that only the expression of an original idea – rather than an idea itself – can be eligible for copyright. This is clearly ironic, given the fact that Malevich was operating under the new legislation the Russian Empire had embraced. How far Malevich actually understood copyright and the ways in which this 1911 law may have helped him will probably remain a question for art historians. The reference to baptism as something necessary to ‘secure my copyright’, however, suggests that copyright had a symbolic rather than legal meaning for Malevich.<sup>206</sup>

Regardless of these legal opportunities, in the eyes of his contemporaries Malevich still needed to account for the content of Suprematism. In probably the most famous critique of *0.10*, Alexandre Benois complained publicly that what he saw left him ‘cold and indifferent. I feel no “nature of art”. I simply get bored by them’.<sup>207</sup> For Benois, the disappearance of the object represented the disappearance of love. Boredom swelled even further for Benois when his eyes fell on the ‘cashier’s table, piled high with brochures [and] booklets’.<sup>208</sup> Although evidently weary at the very thought of being required to pick through a text in order to find justification for painting, Benois tried and in doing so remained estranged from what he saw.

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<sup>205</sup> Malevich, ‘Cubism to Suprematism, The New Painterly Realism’, in Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds*, 110.

<sup>206</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 25 September 1915; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 68.

<sup>207</sup> Alexandr Benois, ‘The Last Futurist Exhibition’, *Rech’*, 9 January 1916, 3; Drutt, ed., *In Search of 0,10*, 252.

<sup>208</sup> *Ibid.*

Malevich was well aware that his work was provocative and the criticism from someone like Benois was likely anticipated and even welcomed. In response, Malevich wrote:

I am overjoyed that the face of my square cannot blend with any particular nor with any other time. It seems to me, your rebuke that my philosophy resembles that which blows down millions of lives is mistaken. [...] My philosophy is: [...] the expulsion of nature from the realm of art, the destruction of love and sincerity in art, but it is not the killing of the living source – Man (war).<sup>209</sup>

In this clarification of his position, Malevich again distinguished Suprematism from all preceding periods of artistic expression. The reiteration of the term discovery reinforced the idea of the newness and originality of his achievement in art. This reply to Benois was an opportunity for Malevich to reassert that he was the author of something that had never before existed.

Despite Malevich's public exhibition and written statements, it is worth contemplating just how successful Malevich may have privately felt he had been with the priorities he set himself over the summer of 1915. It is important to reiterate that regardless of national legal frameworks which may have existed in relation to copyright, it is still not clear what rights Malevich was seeking. When Malevich appealed to Matiushin to help to secure his copyright, it is possible that he meant the word Suprematism, a new mode of abstraction in art or a text that described that painting.

Nonetheless, given that Malevich expressed a strong need to produce a written theory, it is useful to consider more carefully what role written language played in establishing some sense of copyright and in supporting his authorship of Suprematism. While it is true that a painting can certainly exist on its own terms without any written justification, are there certain conditions that seem to make it necessary in non-figurative art? Malevich gave many of his works abstract titles which do not recall the familiar world of objects. Neither in its title nor in its form does *Suprematism, 18th Construction* (1915) (Fig. 2.1), for example, offer the viewer any help in deciphering meaning. Anyone can stand in front of this painting, just as Benois did, and note five forms in black, yellow, green and two shades of blue in oblong formations in diagonal positions, set against a white background. But what can be said beyond this? Rosalind Krauss has written

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<sup>209</sup> Malevich, letter to Alexandr Benois, [May 1916]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 84-85.

that movements such as Suprematism may be perceived as ‘mere abstraction, abstraction uninformed by a subject, contentless abstraction’.<sup>210</sup> This particular anxiety was real for Malevich. ‘My form doesn’t express anything’, he admitted to Matiushin as late as October 1915.<sup>211</sup> The conclusion Benois came to about Suprematism was, more or less, one that might be named ‘contentlessness’, to create a Suprematist-like aphorism of Krauss’ remarks which would, in theory, void any claim to copyright.

For Benois, like many others who were not inclined towards avant-garde modes of artistic creativity, the content of art ought to be abundantly apparent from an examination of what they saw before them, not deciphered from a text. It is important to note that visual art of all kinds and the written word have a long relationship. Painting can exist without the accompaniment of literary language, but it rarely, if ever, does. W. J. T. Mitchell has written that “‘theory’ is the ‘word’ (or words) that stands in the same relation to abstract art that traditional literary forms had to representational painting’.<sup>212</sup> Indeed, even religious icons, which are almost always figurative, exist on their own terms but they are also accompanied by a supporting text which is often considered more important. Benois’s observation that Malevich’s canvases were hung like icons recalls established religious traditions that have their own texts. This clearly suggests that Malevich was not really doing something entirely new but was deliberately tapping into well-established traditions of word and image.

It is possible that Wassily Kandinsky’s *On the Spiritual in Art*, initially published in 1911, also stimulated Malevich to write a supporting text for his new objectless paintings. Interestingly, Kandinsky was generally suspicious of those who placed too much faith in theory. He felt it ought to play a limited and supportive role which should aid rather than burden the spectator. It should bridge the gap between intuitive responses and new intellectual understandings, which might lead the viewer to new realms of contemplation. Kandinsky complained that what the viewer ‘seeks in a work of art is either the pure imitation of nature, serving practical ends (such as portraiture in the normal sense of the word, and the like), or an imitation of nature that comprises a specific interpretation’.<sup>213</sup> As this implies, Kandinsky and

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<sup>210</sup> Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 237.

<sup>211</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 19 October 1915; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 69.

<sup>212</sup> W. J. T. Mitchell, “‘Ut Pictura Theoria’: Abstract Painting and the Repression of Language’, *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (1989): 355.

<sup>213</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, ‘On the Spiritual in Art’, in Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (Boston, MA: GK Hall, 1982), 129.

Malevich certainly both rejected those who craved familiarity. Kandinsky, however, also asserted that ‘there is no reason to bolster [art] with celebration and theories’ and rejected the artist’s self-aggrandisement through theory.<sup>214</sup> Kandinsky also wrote that ‘theory is never in advance of practice in art, never drags practice in its train, but vice versa’.<sup>215</sup> There is little reason to disagree with the notion that practice precedes theory, but the implication in Kandinsky’s idea is that the content of art can be located in the temporal experience between the viewer and the work of art itself.

The historian Martin Puchner has written on how literary ideas associated with non-figurative painting become established over time. While ‘the manifesto speaks from a position of weakness, it must hope’, Puchner states, for a ‘future authority’.<sup>216</sup> Considering the make-up of theory, Mitchell states that it exists as a ‘curious hybrid of mainly prose discourse compounded from aesthetics and other branches of philosophy, as well as from literary criticism, linguistics, the natural and social sciences, psychology, history, political thought and religion’.<sup>217</sup> Even if the shortcomings in *From Cubism to Suprematism* are accepted, the text is still emblematic of the very wide-ranging definition of theory that Mitchell has offered and reflective of the emerging power that Puchner identifies in the arts. If the publication of a text in order to secure copyright was Malevich’s ambition, it perhaps came at the cost of its content. Whether Malevich’s writing actually possessed theoretical or philosophical rigour mattered less to Malevich in 1915 than having a text. He felt it necessary to ‘publish a small booklet about my works at all costs and to baptise it in order to secure my copyright’.<sup>218</sup> The fact that *From Cubism to Suprematism* underwent three rewrites illustrates that ideas in Suprematism emerged from the artist’s practice and existed as a form of persistent propaganda for the movement.

There was an emphatically prosaic aspect to printed material for Malevich. Even with its limitations in regard to content, the physical document of *From Cubism to Suprematism* was a tangible item that could be held, exchanged and hopefully preserved. Having something tangible was imperative for Malevich to establish a legacy, even if the theoretical idea it contained could be critiqued. *From Cubism to Suprematism* was

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<sup>214</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>215</sup> Kandinsky, ‘On the Spiritual in Art’, in Lindsay and Vergo, *Kandinsky*, 176.

<sup>216</sup> Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 25-26.

<sup>217</sup> Mitchell, ‘Ut Pictura Theoria’, *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (1989): 355.

<sup>218</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 25 September 1915; Malevich *Letters*, I: 68.

not the only printed matter available at *0.10* that functioned to establish Malevich's legacy in Suprematism. A statement signed by Malevich, Kliun and Mikhail Menkov was also available at the exhibition (Fig. 2.2). This manifesto, like *From Cubism to Suprematism*, preserved Malevich's ideas and his legacy in a tangible form. Whether Suprematism could be identified and thought about from his canvases or his printed material did not matter to Malevich at this early stage. Should he be killed at the front, a tangible legacy of his professional ideas would outlive him one way or another. Indeed, this straightforward yet forceful and intensive approach to explanation and justification may have been what Malevich meant when he spoke of copyright.

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In contrast to the more elevated theoretical formulations of Suprematism, Malevich was also willing to adopt absurd and more performative methods when he felt it necessary to defend and promote his legacy. According to Stepanova, Malevich attended *Store*, an exhibition that was organised by Tatlin in March 1916 as a challenge to *0.10*, and 'walked around with '0.10' drawn on his forehead, [and] pasted on his back was a piece of paper with the proclamation [...] 'I am the apostle'.<sup>219</sup> This performance, Shatskikh has written, meant that the Suprematist was swiftly ejected.<sup>220</sup> This act no doubt irritated Tatlin as it distracted visitors from his work and compelled people to talk about Malevich and Suprematism all the more.

By the spring of 1916, Malevich had still not been conscripted and was able to continue his promotion and understanding of Suprematism. Malevich claimed to be captivated by the idea that with Suprematism he had found what was essentially the key that was needed to advance many ideas explored within the avant-garde. His desire to develop Suprematism remained coloured by the anxiety that the period imposed on him. In April 1916 Malevich wrote to Matiushin:

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<sup>219</sup> Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit' bez chuda*, 61.

<sup>220</sup> Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 129.

I'm painting *Supremus 51* [(1916) (Fig. 2.3)], in which I'm discovering very complicated combinations, I'm seized by terror, I feel in contact with space. [...] there lies in *Supremus* something big, possessing a direct law, or even the actual law of world creation itself. That through me passes the force, the general harmony of creative laws that guides everything.<sup>221</sup>

However, in this same letter Malevich also complained: 'I consider my square a door that has revealed to me much that was new, and it's awfully annoying that just when you think you're on the brink of any kind of huge occurrences, you can be taken and stabbed to death. [...] What a sign of man's lack of understanding war is'.<sup>222</sup> It is surely not coincidental that while Malevich was preoccupied with the idea of death and the image of his possible demise, his thinking during this period remained fixed on a creative notion of ascent.

By the spring of 1916, Malevich sensed that his fate was imminent. In June, he seemed all but certain it was about to become a reality.

Again, dark clouds are approaching my window, but I am making every effort to work. [...] the fact my body will fertilise an arshin [71cm] of earth [...] The fall will come and I will have to leave my work and get ready to learn to kill. [...] The war was over a long time ago already, now terror, nightmare has got its claws into cheery reason, what is being done now doesn't resemble war, it's a madness of the human brain. The brain tears itself out of its own skulls meat and having lost its wits, runs away into the ground.<sup>223</sup>

Writing to Kruchenykh, Malevich struggled to accept his fate and hoped there was an outside chance he could serve in a kitchen rather than be sent to the front lines:

They've dug a mine under me, and I don't know where it will end up, apparently without me the Germans can't be defeated. Might you need a draughtsman over there, or a cook, I'm a good cook.

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<sup>221</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 4 April 1916; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 79.

<sup>222</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>223</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 23 June 1916; *ibid.*, I: 91.

[...] Kliun is going too. [Aleksandr] Zakrzhevsky died, Matiushin buried him. If you need a cook, write to me.<sup>224</sup>

Staring at his own mortality, Malevich must have thought Kruchenykh to be relatively fortunate as he was working as a draughtsman in Kars Province.

In July 1916, Malevich was finally conscripted into the Tsarist army and joined the 56th Reserve Infantry Regiment. In a letter to Matiushin, written in August, Malevich explained: 'I arrived in Krivichi, and from there I will go on to happier places', a sarcastic and macabre reference to the front.<sup>225</sup> Malevich's writings featured a new journalistic tone. 'The iron in the sky he is thriving, running to the earth. [...] There is so much Suprematism, but I was waiting for Futurism', Malevich sarcastically wrote, alluding not only to the guns, the munitions and the aeroplanes he observed in the skies, but to an outmoded experience of the world.<sup>226</sup> A few weeks later, he said, 'I'm sitting here like a frog on a lily pad. Nothing around save grass and mud. [...] I'm sitting here croaking away in my swamp'.<sup>227</sup>

Enlistment, however, did not prevent Malevich from pursuing his still unrealised ambition to establish a journal, which he now named '*Supremus*'. In the month before he departed, he fretted:

We [Supremus] don't have a book yet, do we, but we need one, we must have one, the book is a small history of our art. The New Testament in art, the book is the sum of our days, the key that locked out thoughts within us. Like Christ who locked himself into this book of millennia, without this book, the gate of heaven would have been locked. But we are unlocking something else, we will open up on the earth that which cannot be opened in heaven.<sup>228</sup>

These analogies between Suprematism and established religion are indicative of the metaphysical significance Malevich attached to the movement. Now desperately close to the front and in an almost helpless position, Malevich saw Suprematism not as a straightforward aesthetic project but as an entire

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<sup>224</sup> Malevich, letter to Kruchenykh, 5 July 1916; *ibid.*, I: 94.

<sup>225</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 3 August 1916; *ibid.*, I: 96.

<sup>226</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>227</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 6 September 1916; *ibid.*, I: 96.

<sup>228</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 23 June 1916; *ibid.*, I: 91.

worldview, as a source of meaning and something that could endure beyond his lifetime. This letter also suggests that he hoped ‘*Supremus*’ might acquire protection much as the bible did: recognised as sacred property over time.

In a third edition of *From Cubism to Suprematism*, which Malevich published during a period of leave in November 1916, the artist named those who would participate in his journal.<sup>229</sup> In addition to himself, the group of Suprematists Malevich stated included ‘I. Puni, M[iikhail] Menkov, I. Kliun, K[senia] Boguslavskaja and Rozanova’.<sup>230</sup> Malevich wrote to Matiushin giving more names of those he claimed would feature as ‘monthly participants’.<sup>231</sup> It is possible that Malevich felt as close to realising ‘*Supremus*’ as he felt close to death and that he needed to publish the fact that he had achieved some collegiate backing for Suprematism before the journal appeared in print. In November 1916, Malevich finally received his orders to go to the front at Smolensk:

I’m going to say my goodbyes this time, and I am writing to you that my hour has come, fate has cast the little balls and my number has come up, everyone under 38 is being taken from the organisations and only those over 39 can stay. I haven’t grown up enough yet, and so I will go under the whistling shards. My soul is casting out in all directions and its movement is greater than the terror of the shards. My spirit is fighting and there is no separation. [...] I don’t know what awaits me, perhaps the thunderstorm of iron will pass over me. But it is hard, and much worse is the fact that my soul has already sensed something wrong. But it has come. I’ve received my order to appear in the next few days.<sup>232</sup>

When Malevich finally received his orders to report to the front, he surely would have reflected on his legacy in that moment and wondered if it was sufficiently established. Matiushin seems to have thought that the Suprematist had done enough. In what must have been a deeply depressing letter to read, it appears

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<sup>229</sup> K. Malevich, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k Suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm* [From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism] (Moscow: Obshchestvennaya pol’za, 1916); English translation in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), I: 19-42.

<sup>230</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>231</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [mid-October 1916]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 97.

<sup>232</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 24 November 1916; *ibid.*, I: 99-100.

that Matiushin wrote to Malevich to put his mind at peace and to reassure him that he had in fact achieved his mission. In his reply, Malevich wrote ‘I’ve grown awfully tired in these months, at the front, the aeroplanes really get to you. Although you wrote that I’m allowed to die, I don’t want to’.<sup>233</sup>

Unfortunately, Malevich did not write about the specific details of his military experiences. However, it is worth noting the conditions within the Tsarist army and infantry battalions such as Malevich’s by the time the artist was called to the front. The year 1916 had been a slaughter. The Lake Narach offensive, in modern-day Belarus, had been an expensive catastrophe. The following Brusilov offensive of the summer was counted as a success but was even more costly for the Tsar’s armies. By October 1916, when Malevich arrived, the soldiers were suffering from shortages of food and ammunition and had lost their sense of purpose and identity, as historian Nick Lloyd has recently discussed.<sup>234</sup> Major General Boris Gerua, quartermaster-general of the Special Army, even began to notice revolutionary leaflets and anti-war propaganda from October 1916.<sup>235</sup> In Gerua’s view, ‘the soldiers were no longer the same as they used to be’.<sup>236</sup> Malevich’s arrival happened, in comparative terms, at a relatively less dangerous moment and, in what seems to have been a surprise for the Suprematist, he was not killed in the winter of 1916-1917.

After Malevich had spent six months with his regiment, he found himself on another period of leave in Moscow. Udaltsova began to worry about him when the two met in person. ‘How I’d like Malevich to stay in Moscow, the poor man’, she wrote anxiously in January 1917.<sup>237</sup> ‘He’s lost a lot of weight’.<sup>238</sup> It appears that Malevich had begun to suffer the consequences of the government’s inability to feed its troops on the front lines.<sup>239</sup> It is possible that Malevich had started to fear that if munitions did not kill him then starvation would, as perhaps he contemplated in his sketch *War* (1914) (Fig. 1.14).<sup>240</sup> In fact, as Udaltsova hoped, Malevich remained in Moscow. His leave, initially temporary, was protracted as the army and the

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<sup>233</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [beginning of October 1916]; *ibid.*, I: 97.

<sup>234</sup> Nick Lloyd, ‘The Falkenhayn is here!’, in *The Eastern Front: A History of the First World War* (London: Penguin, 2025), 290-307.

<sup>235</sup> Major General Boris Gerua, Quartermaster-General, quoted in *ibid.*, 290.

<sup>236</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>237</sup> N. Udaltsova, diary entry, 13 February 1917, in *Zhizn’ russkoi kubistki. Dnevnik, stat’i, vospominaniia*, eds., E. A. Drevina and V. I. Rakitin (Moscow: RA, 1994), 35; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 134.

<sup>238</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>239</sup> See R. W. Davies, Mark Harrison, and S. G. Wheatcroft, eds., *The Economic Transformation of the Soviet Union, 1913-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); and Mauricio Borrero, *Hungry Moscow: Scarcity and Urban Society in the Russian Civil War, 1917-1921* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 13.

<sup>240</sup> A. A. Brusilov, for instance, recorded in his diary how the food supply grew steadily worse for soldiers on the eastern front over the winter of 1916-17. See A. A. Brusilov, *A Soldier’s Note-Book 1914-1918* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1971), 281-282.

country descended into chaos. As the war continued in Europe, and as Malevich was on leave in Moscow, Russia approached a pivotal moment in its history. It was during this brief visit to Moscow that the country slipped into revolution.

By early 1917, life for ordinary citizens in Russia was becoming increasingly difficult. The food question became a great issue. A bad harvest, a freezing winter and a failing transport system prevented food and fuel from being delivered to the capital. Matters were not helped by the government's decision to privilege its export commitments ahead of its duty to its own citizens.<sup>241</sup> Work was scarce for the few men who were not enlisted. Alcoholism soared and rents rose.<sup>242</sup> Many ordinary Russians found themselves on the streets and ended up queuing for hours for bread. In this environment of scarcity, suspicions grew about the loyalties of the German-born Tsarina. Russians voiced their anger at the government and protests turned into violent clashes with the army. Men brought knives and anything else they could use as tools to fight government forces who had been tasked with preventing hungry Russians from taking food from well-stocked businesses.

These circumstances prompted the President of the Duma, Mikhail Rodzianko, to send a telegram to Tsar Nicholas II.

Anarchy rules in the capital. The government is paralysed. The transportation of food and fuel is completely disorganised. Social unrest is mounting. The streets are the scene of disorderly shooting. Military units are firing on one another. It is necessary to appoint someone who enjoys the nation's confidence to form a new government. Any delay is out of the question; it would mean death.<sup>243</sup>

Nikolai Punin, who was in Petrograd on 24 February, recorded in his diary: 'the mood is extremely tense. [...] By evening, rumours of strikes spread across the whole city; the running of the trams was disrupted. People are stocking up on kerosene, candles, water. There really is very little bread'.<sup>244</sup> Just days later, the

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<sup>241</sup> See Davies et al., *The Economic Transformation of the Soviet Union, 1913-1945*; and Borrero, 'Scarcity, Revolution, Civil War', in *Hungry Moscow*, 11-35.

<sup>242</sup> Tsuyoshi Hasegawa, *The February Revolution: Petrograd, 1917* (Seattle: The University of Washington Press, 1981), 201.

<sup>243</sup> Mikhail Rodzianko, quoted in Mikhail Heller and Aleksander Nekrich, *Utopia in Power: The History of the Soviet Union From 1917 to the Present* (London: Hutchinson, 1986), 26.

<sup>244</sup> Nikolai Punin, quoted in *The Diaries of Nikolay Punin: 1904-1953*, eds., Sidney Monas and Jennifer Greene Krupala, trans. Jennifer Greene Krupala (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999), 48.

situation reached a tipping point. The military began to fragment and side with the protesters and on 27 February 1917, the Tsar abdicated. Duma leaders formed a provisional government and over 300 years of Romanov rule came to an end.

In his text, 'What Happened in February and March 1917', in what was essentially a caricature of the February Revolution, Malevich wrote that 'the Suprematists went to marvel at the transformation' of the state.<sup>245</sup> The God-appointed Tsar had been replaced with a new, but equally absurd, appointment by God and that this 'updated costume' pleased Him.<sup>246</sup> This lampooning of events symbolised Malevich's view that the freedom brought about by the February Revolution may well have meant freedom from the Tsar, but it was not real freedom. It did not mean freedom from war. The Provisional Government was made up of unelected figures; their entire *raison d'être* rested on their desire to continue Russia's involvement in the conflict, and 'to bring the war to a victorious end'.<sup>247</sup> For Malevich, this political transformation from the Tsar to the Provisional Government represented continuity, not change.

The Provisional Government, just like the previous regime, was not able to maintain control at home, nor was it able to assert any authority over the army.<sup>248</sup> This historic moment transformed the conditions of Malevich's life. Neither Udaltsova nor Malevich could have known it at the time of their meeting, but Malevich's period of leave in January 1917 turned out to be permanent rather than temporary. The steadily fracturing authority of the new regime effectively ended Malevich's career as a soldier. Malevich, already in Moscow, never returned to the front.

As the threat of death appeared to dissipate, this unexpected reprieve meant that Malevich had a renewed opportunity to return to Suprematism and the objectives he pursued with such desperate energy before he was conscripted. As Shatskikh points out, 'from the very first days of his February stay, the artist took up Supremus affairs with tenfold force'.<sup>249</sup> 'If I come back alive', Malevich had written the previous year from Smolensk, 'I will grasp the new scrolls firmly in my hand and carry them onward'.<sup>250</sup> As 1917

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<sup>245</sup> Kazimir Malevich, 'Chto bylo v fevrale 1917 goda i marte' [What happened in February and March 1917], reprinted in Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, ed. A. S. Shatskikh (Moscow: Gileia, 1995), V: 72-73.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid.

<sup>247</sup> First Declaration of the Provisional Government, 20 March 1917; Frank Alfred Golder, *Documents of Russian History 1914-1917*, trans. Emanuel Aronsberg (New York: The Century Co., 1927), 311.

<sup>248</sup> See Brusilov, 'After the February Revolution', in *A Soldier's Note-Book 1914-1918*, 289-314.

<sup>249</sup> Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 166.

<sup>250</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 24 November 1916; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 100.

progressed, the cloud of death no longer hung over Malevich, but his competitive nature and his desire to see the final piece of his legacy in place remained as strong as it ever had.

In addition to his physical presence in Moscow, Malevich would have felt renewed optimism that he would see *'Supremus'* in print and thus realise this final piece of his legacy. Alongside the names he mentioned in the third edition of *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism*, Malevich managed to attract more figures. Popova, being one, was more closely aligned with Tatlin in 1915, having studied in his studio in Moscow.<sup>251</sup> Her *Painterly Architectonic with Yellow Board* (1916) (Fig. 2.4), for example, explored the constructive potentials of form and materiality as a single constructive object, which positioned her closer to Tatlin and his constructed sculpture. As Popova continued to experiment with abstraction, however, she gradually entered Suprematism's orbit. *Composition: Black Gold and Brown* (1917) (Fig. 2.5), produced a year later, evokes a new tension between stability and dynamism as the forms are suspended within the indefinite white space of the canvas, which is suggestive of the metaphysical energies of Suprematism. As Popova moved closer to Supremus, she even worked on a trapezoid design for the cover of the group's journal (1916-1917) (Fig. 2.6).

Like Popova, Udaltsova was close to Tatlin in 1915 but pulled away from him the following year. 'Apart from his tricks, I cannot be with Tatlin because of his shapes; that is over now. He operated too much on his sense of taste', Udaltsova concluded.<sup>252</sup> As she stepped away from Tatlin's sphere of influence, Udaltsova confessed in November 1916, 'unexpectedly, I am captivated by decorative drawings and Malevich'.<sup>253</sup> Indicative of her belief in the potential of Suprematism, just a few months before the Suprematist's February stay, Udaltsova wrote, 'I can say this much: if Malevich were to remain in Moscow for two months, we'd turn all of Moscow upside down'.<sup>254</sup> In Malevich's absence, Udaltsova took on a central role in the Supremus project, entrusted with overseeing all the practicalities of the journal. She, in fact, was 'the Suprematist's alter ego' during this period, Shatskikh has written.<sup>255</sup> By early 1917, Udaltsova

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<sup>251</sup> Natalia Adaskina, 'Liubov Popova and her Contemporaries', in John E. Bowlt and Matthew Drutt, eds., *Amazons of the Avant-Garde: Alexandra Exter, Natalia Goncharova, Liubov Popova, Varvara Stepanova, and Nadezhda Udaltsova* (London: Royal Academy, 1999), 187.

<sup>252</sup> Udal'tsova, 29 November 1916, in *Zhizn' russkoi kubistki*, 30.

<sup>253</sup> Udal'tsova, 4 December 1916, in *Zhizn' russkoi kubistki*, 30; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 132.

<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

<sup>255</sup> Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 164.

had committed herself to Suprematism. She later stated unequivocally that ‘the February Revolution put me in league with Malevich’.<sup>256</sup>

Alongside the group’s journal, Malevich advanced Supremus within the realm of the applied-art object. From 19 December 1917, at the *Second Modern Decorative Arts Exhibition* of the Verbovka group, Rozanova, Udaltsova, Popova and Vera Pestel exhibited embroidery works based on the language of Suprematism (Fig. 2.7). This followed Suprematism’s first appearance at an exhibition of textile designs in November 1915.<sup>257</sup> At the group’s second exhibition, as many as 400 exhibits featured, all based on Suprematism.<sup>258</sup> Interestingly, Pestel had earlier written about Malevich’s contribution to *0.10* as though it was a frivolous and decorative enterprise of colour combinations. ‘Malevich has simply drawn a square and coloured it solid pink, and another black, and then a lot more squares and triangles of different colours. [...] His room was stylish, very colourful, and it was pleasant for the eye. But this is easy! Anyone can do this! Even a child could do this!’<sup>259</sup> Nevertheless, Julia Tulovsky has suggested that it was precisely ‘through embroidery that these very same Cubist artists came to understand and embrace Suprematism over the course of the next two years’.<sup>260</sup> Pestel, it would be fair to say, was another convert to Malevich and the Supremus project.

It is, perhaps, because Rozanova appears to have arrived at objectlessness independently, and a little sooner than Popova and Udaltsova, that she recognised Suprematism’s potential.<sup>261</sup> Rozanova’s preoccupation with colour went hand in hand with her explorations within Suprematism. This interaction, which can be observed in *Non-Objective Composition (Suprematism)* (1916) (Fig. 2.8), is perhaps best explained by the text Rozanova intended for ‘*Supremus*’, entitled ‘Cubism, Futurism and Suprematism’. In this text, Rozanova stated: ‘we have chosen the plane as the transmitter of colour, since its reflective surface will transmit colour the most effectively’, the ambition of which would ‘change the essence of colour’.<sup>262</sup> As Nina Gurianova has written, Rozanova’s ambition ‘to convey in painting the immaterial essence of colour,

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<sup>256</sup> Udaltsova, *Zhizn’ russkoi kubistiki*, 13; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 132-133.

<sup>257</sup> See Charlotte Douglas, ‘Suprematist Embroidered Ornament’, *Art Journal* 54, no. 1 (1995): 42-45; and Julia Tulovsky, ‘Suprematist Textiles’, in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 221-239.

<sup>258</sup> See Tulovsky, ‘Suprematist Textiles’, in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 229.

<sup>259</sup> Vera Pestel, quoted in Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 100.

<sup>260</sup> Tulovsky, ‘Suprematist Textiles’, in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 227.

<sup>261</sup> See Nina Gurianova, ‘Olga Rozanova’, in Bowlt and Drutt, *Amazons of the Avant-Garde*, 213-240.

<sup>262</sup> Olga Rozanova, ‘Cubism Futurism and Suprematism’, *ibid.*, 329.

its inner energy and luminosity' found a natural alignment with Suprematism in this period.<sup>263</sup> Rozanova became more important to Malevich when she took over secretarial duties from Udaltsova in early 1917 and acquired the grand title 'Secretary of the Editorial staff'.<sup>264</sup>

As well as drawing figures from Tatlin's circle towards Suprematism, Malevich finally managed to attract Matiushin. It seems that it was only when writing from the front that Malevich was successful in this. 'I don't want to press you', Malevich wrote, despite doing precisely that and exploiting the fact that he was, at the time of writing, at the front.<sup>265</sup> 'You won't say no to me personally, I know that, but on the other hand, I wouldn't want to press you. If you don't feel pressured, please send them'.<sup>266</sup> His persistence worked. Matiushin agreed and provided two texts for the journal, 'On the Old and New in Music' and 'Budethyane Score'.<sup>267</sup> Malevich wrote back to Matiushin: 'I rejoice that on the pages of '*Supremus*' we shall meet again after a long separation in our common joint work', a reference to their collaboration on *Victory over the Sun* in 1913.<sup>268</sup> Kruchenykh had taken himself into self-imposed exile in the Caucasus from the end of winter in 1916 to avoid conscription and had not been in the same location as Malevich since 1915.<sup>269</sup> Even so, Kruchenykh managed to keep up communication with Malevich, Udaltsova and Rozanova, and intended to contribute the text of his sound play *Gly-Gly* to the journal along with two other texts. Even Roslavets, who earlier showed no interest in Suprematism and mocked Malevich's understanding of his own ideas, intended to contribute to '*Supremus*'.<sup>270</sup>

At one stage, the journal's appearance looked imminent. Even while he was still conscripted in October 1916, Malevich wrote optimistically that 'the materials are being collected, everything's ready at the printers'.<sup>271</sup> This positivity continued into the next year. Rozanova wrote enthusiastically to Andrei Shemshurin, a patron of the avant-garde who had long interacted with many of its leading figures, that the first issue 'was already made up'.<sup>272</sup> Through 1917, all indications were that Malevich was extremely close

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<sup>263</sup> Nina Gurianova, *Exploring Color. Olga Rozanova and the Early Russian Avant-Garde 1910-1918*, trans. Charles Rougle (Amsterdam: G and B Arts International, 2000), 118.

<sup>264</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 24 November 1916; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 100.

<sup>265</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [January 1917]; *ibid.*, I: 102.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>267</sup> Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 187.

<sup>268</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 3 May 1917; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 102.

<sup>269</sup> Kruchenykh, letter to Shemshurin, 2 March 1916; Kruchenykh, *Pis'ma*, 39-41. Most of Kruchenykh's letters from 1915-21 in this publication appear to be posted from Tbilisi or other locations in the Caucasus.

<sup>270</sup> Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 208-211.

<sup>271</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 27 October 1916; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 97.

<sup>272</sup> Rozanova, letter to Shemshurin, 6 May 1917; Gurianova, *Exploring Color*, 171.

to realising this piece of his legacy. His frenetic efforts, as he worked in the interests of the journal while fearing conscription and death, were about to pay dividends – at least so he hoped.

Despite Malevich's regained freedom in February 1917, the involvement of Matiushin, Roslavets and Kruchenykh, as well as the assistance provided by Udaltsova and Rozanova, Malevich could not make '*Supremus*' materialise, nor was he able to hold onto a committed group of artists around Suprematism. Towards the end of 1917, the *Supremus* group and its journal began to fragment. The first omen was that although a printer had been identified in late 1916, they themselves had been conscripted into the Tsarist army.<sup>273</sup> Relationships became strained too. Recalling an incident that took place in her hotel room in November 1917, Udaltsova documented a significant moment in the demise of the group. She wrote, despairingly, that:

Suprematism has been done away with scandalously. Malevich suddenly went crazy, and we quarrelled; if the journal comes out now and we get back what we invested, then it's good, but if the money is not returned, it's awful. Liubov Popova contributed 1,100 [roubles] 600 and 500 through us. There was such faith in the journal, but it got bogged down'.<sup>274</sup>

The following month, Udaltsova again met with Malevich, and thought she had found him in a calmer and more compliant frame of mind. 'Malevich has relented a bit and I had a talk with him', she recorded.<sup>275</sup> But Udaltsova's optimism was misplaced. A month later, she recorded another encounter with the Suprematist.

"I want to introduce party discipline" he said.

"Well, you can do that easily with your own people, but not with my people. We have a group."

"Then it will be merciless war."

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<sup>273</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [late November 1916]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 101.

<sup>274</sup> Udaltsova, diary entry, 22 November 1917, in *Zhizn' russkoi kubistki*, 39; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 134.

<sup>275</sup> Udaltsova, diary entry, 20 December 1917, in *Zhizn' russkoi kubistki*, 40; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 135.

“That’s ridiculous Kazimir Severinovich, I’m talking about how we can work together, how we can reach an agreement and you’re talking about war”.<sup>276</sup>

It is not immediately clear what Udaltsova’s words ‘not with my people’ were in reference to.<sup>277</sup> It is possible that these words could refer to her participation with a group led by the stage-designer Georgii Iakulov in the Café Pittoresque (Fig. 2.9), or the discussions she and Popova had had with Tatlin concerning the Knave of Diamonds.<sup>278</sup> It is also possible that Udaltsova’s words were deliberately provocative, intended to point Malevich to the collegial nature of Supremus which should, by definition, preclude any notion of party discipline. Malevich had always spoken of Supremus using the word *we*. The very fact that Udaltsova said that she was part of another group was perhaps revealing of her own feelings of frustration towards Malevich’s impulse for control.

It is also important to note that there had always been artistic differences within the Supremus group. In early 1917, Udaltsova, for example, had wished to ‘get rid of Kliun and Menkov’.<sup>279</sup> Shatskikh has noted how the names ‘Puni and Boguslavskaia vanished from the list of Supremus members’, pushed out, she suggests, by the newer affiliates.<sup>280</sup> For all of Popova’s experimentation with Suprematism, she never declared herself a Suprematist and had no desire to be bound exclusively to the Suprematist banner. Magdalena Dabrowski has argued that although Popova saw value in Suprematism, a ‘strong structural quality results from her extensive use of well-anchored, overlapping geometric shapes’ ultimately remains dominant.<sup>281</sup> Popova’s ambition to evoke the ‘weight of colour planes’ meant that she eventually had to dispense with Suprematism’s spiritual ambitions to invoke a ‘stable, monumentalising aspect’.<sup>282</sup> There was simply little willingness on Popova’s part to be brought into the Suprematist fold any more than she felt was necessary for her own artistic experimentation.

Similarly, Kruchenykh’s *Gly-Gly*, a trans-rational play of word sounds, was never conceived of as a Suprematist work as such. The suggestion to publish it in ‘*Supremus*’ was one of convenience for the author,

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid.

<sup>279</sup> Udaltsova, diary entry, 29 November 1916, in *Zhizn’ russkoi kubistki*, 30; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 132.

<sup>280</sup> Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 167.

<sup>281</sup> Magdalena Dabrowski, *Liubov Popova* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 17.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 19.

who had considered other options. Shatskikh acknowledged that Kruchenykh ‘dreamed of publishing *Gly-Gly* as a separate edition with lithographs by Rozanova using Shemshurin’s money’ but could not make it happen in the upheavals of 1917.<sup>283</sup> Kruchenykh was certainly coaxed into the fold by Malevich and most likely felt compelled to participate due to the conditions created by the political circumstances. The poet’s feature in ‘*Supremus*’ would have strengthened the project and given it some credibility, as far as Malevich was concerned, but the poet was by no means an enthusiastic champion of Suprematism.

Distance played a part in frustrating the project. Although Malevich, Udaltsova and Rozanova were in contact with Kruchenykh by post, the Suprematist felt this absence acutely. Malevich wrote: ‘it is a great pity that you [Matiushin] are not nearby at this important moment, and the same for Roslavets’.<sup>284</sup> One is reminded of the achievement of *Victory over the Sun*, which was completed in 1913 when Matiushin, Kruchenykh and Malevich all worked in close company.

Roslavets’ absence can be credited to a rather dramatic story. Malevich had no idea at the time, but after the February Revolution Roslavets joined the local Social-Revolutionary Party and was sent to Elets, where he initially began organising cultural events.<sup>285</sup> His commitment to revolutionary activity within the arts very quickly shifted towards political action. Years later Roslavets wrote:

During the October Revolution – against the policy of the party – [I] fought the Menshevik SRs who controlled the Soviet. Together with revolutionary workers, we organised the Red Guard, and in December, threw out the Mensheviks, and assumed “Bolshevik” power of the Soviet, and I was elected as its Chairman.<sup>286</sup>

Reflecting on his political engagement, Roslavets later stated:

Comrades, I am no appeased intellectual, nor am I without sentiment, when necessary I have laid down my pen and taken up arms in defence of the proletarian revolution [...]. With the same hands

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<sup>283</sup> Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 233.

<sup>284</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 29 September 1917; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 107.

<sup>285</sup> Tassie Gregor, *The Three Apostles of Russian Music: The Soviet Avant-Garde* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2022), 57.

<sup>286</sup> Nikolai Roslavets, quoted in *ibid.*, 57.

which have written symphonies, I have signed the death warrants for White Guards and Counter-revolutionaries.<sup>287</sup>

While Rozanova may have received a text from Roslavets, the revolutionary struggle wholly preoccupied the composer. It would be reasonable to assume that he gave the *Supremus* project little thought by the end of 1917.

Like several other important figures in Malevich's circle, Rozanova did not initially live in Moscow and had little contact with the Suprematist during 1916. This changed after the February Revolution, when she secured employment as a clerk at the Union of Cities out of financial necessity.<sup>288</sup> Living under these marginally improved conditions in Moscow, Rozanova was able to help Malevich and, from March 1917, she took over the secretarial duties.<sup>289</sup> In this first month of her involvement in the project, Rozanova stated cheerily that 'the idea of this journal and the new-born *Supremus* society is a sheer delight for me'.<sup>290</sup> She quickly lost enthusiasm, however, and felt burdened by her involvement. Only weeks later, in April 1917, Rozanova wrote to Shemshurin: 'on Friday we're having a [*Supremus*] meeting, so that day I won't be able to think or speak soberly: I'm chronically tired'.<sup>291</sup> On 9 June 1917, 'the journal may come out in August and then FREEDOM'.<sup>292</sup> Even before fatigue set in, the project seemed to drain Rozanova's energy rather than invigorate her. When budget cuts affected her employment, Rozanova lost her job and was forced to leave Moscow and return to her family. Udaltsova was compelled to pick up these administrative duties, but her involvement in the project by this stage was due to the absence of Rozanova and Malevich more than it reflected any commitment to or belief in Suprematism.<sup>293</sup>

The exchange that Udaltsova recorded in December 1917, loaded with emotive language of division, partisanship and bitterness: 'party discipline', 'your people', 'my people' and 'merciless war', must be understood as a product of the frustrations that had built up for Malevich by this moment.<sup>294</sup> The tone

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<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>288</sup> Ol'ga Rozanova, letter to A. V. Rozanova, [March 1917]; *Ol'ga Rozanova, Lefanta chiol . . .*, eds., A. Sarab'ianov and V. Terekhina (Moscow: RA; Palace Editions, 2002), 247-248.

<sup>289</sup> Shatskikh believes this was no earlier than March 1917. Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 171.

<sup>290</sup> Rozanova, *Lefanta chiol . . .*, 279.

<sup>291</sup> Gurianova, *Exploring Color*, 118.

<sup>292</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>293</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>294</sup> Udalt'sova, diary entry, 22 November 1917, in *Zbizn' russkoi kubistki*, 39; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 134.

of the encounter was fatal. This short exchange stands in sharp contrast to the more collegial and determined nature that seemed to define the project in late 1916 and early 1917. Reading between the lines, Udaltsova's description of her meeting with Malevich in December 1917 suggests that a degree of pragmatism was necessary if '*Supremus*' was ever going to materialise. Malevich's declaration of 'merciless war' was essentially a fit of pique, as he realised that he was not going to establish this final aspect of his legacy to which he had clung since mid-1915.

There is another factor that helps to explain why Udaltsova had so clearly incensed Malevich. He wished to appear as an equal member of the Supremus group of artists, while at the same time exercising control without being seen to do so. As Andréi Nakov pointed out, in all the documentation of this period, Malevich refers to himself as a member, as opposed to the leader, of Supremus.<sup>295</sup> The idea of Malevich's identity as a member, however, was a fabrication. Imposing a contrived narrative was difficult enough when Malevich attempted to frame his own work, but it was practically impossible when he sought to orchestrate the activities and ambitions of others under the banner of Suprematism. There is a clear parallel between the pragmatism that led many artists to become involved in '*Supremus*' and the pragmatism that led Malevich to secure his copyright over Suprematism, not in a Suprematist journal per se, but in Matiushin's publication of *Victory over the Sun*. Malevich was certainly capable of pragmatism when he felt he had no other option.

The artistic plurality that existed within Supremus meant that the contributors should more accurately be characterised as Suprematist associates than as true Suprematists. As Vasiliï Rakitin succinctly wrote, no one in this group 'had any desire, as Malevich wished they did, to develop specifically Suprematist principles further'.<sup>296</sup> That Malevich described Rozanova as 'the only true Suprematist' alludes to the scale of the differences within the group as much as it indicates Malevich's lack of faith in the other contributors' grasp of Suprematism.<sup>297</sup>

Even if so much progress had been made to bring '*Supremus*' to completion, Malevich seemed, in the end, unable to locate the necessary pragmatism in 1917 that Udaltsova implored him to find. By early

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<sup>295</sup> Andréi Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, trans. Michael Taylor with Helen Knox (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2010), II: 242.

<sup>296</sup> Vasiliï Rakitin, 'The Artisan and the Prophet: Marginal Notes on Two Artistic Careers', trans. Todd Bludeau, in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1992), 26.

<sup>297</sup> K. Malevich, 'Vystavka professional'nogo soiuza khudozhnikov-zhivopistsev: Levaia federatsiia (molodaia fraktsiia)', [Exhibition of professional union of painters. Left federation (young faction)], *Anarkhiia*, 89 (20 June 1918); reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I: 119.

1918, all belief that the journal would materialise was finally lost. Udaltsova later wrote, despondently, ‘how awfully painful it is that our journal did not come out’.<sup>298</sup> While the First World War served as a stimulus in the initial formulation of Suprematism in painting, as the previous chapter discussed, the conflict first removed and then – relatively speaking – granted him freedom. In the end, however, it was not the war that thwarted ‘*Supremus*’, as Malevich expected, but the turbulence of 1917. Even if the end of the Romanovs meant that Malevich escaped the front, it instigated a period of upheaval and uncertainty that ultimately brought the project to a conclusive end.

In these final paragraphs of this chapter, it is important to reiterate that Malevich’s efforts to secure his copyright were not executed with exact precision. It seems that cultural status mattered to him more than legal recognition. There are no indications that Malevich explored how he might have protected his work under the 1911 Relations of Copyright. Rather, Malevich’s aspiration to secure copyright was based on a series of practical moves, which he felt would offer him the most success within the immediate cultural environment rather than the legal realm. Malevich responded to questions of authorship and copyright by keeping the secret of his painting, holding an exhibition, publishing a text and a manifesto and establishing the Supremus group and attempting to publish its journal. The Suprematist hoped that these broad and ambitious strategies would launch Suprematism and establish his individual legacy, not legally, but amongst his peers.

It is also significant to note that when Malevich was released from military service, Supremus was no longer his only focus. In addition to working towards the publication of the journal, Malevich joined the Left-Wing Federation of the Moscow Trade Union of Painters and took part in the May Day celebrations. Although ‘*Supremus*’ failed to reach the press, Malevich explained to Matiushin that there was ‘much to do in Moscow’ and any possibility of meeting would have to be delayed ‘until the journal is delivered to the printers’.<sup>299</sup> Malevich knew his colleagues were important to him and wanted to meet his old friend, but as the year pressed on he became increasingly engaged in professional opportunities created by the state, which he felt offered him the best path forward at this moment. Malevich set out these activities in a letter to Matiushin:

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<sup>298</sup> Udaltsova, diary entry, 20 March 1918, in *Zhizn’ russkoi kubistki*, 40; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 135.

<sup>299</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 15 May 1917; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 103.

I have a lot of work now, I have been chosen as the chairman of the Arts Division of the Moscow Soviet of Soldiers' Deputies. [. . .] I've painted a few things, and *Supremus* is moving along, both the magazine and the painting. [. . .] I've come up with a whole series of projects, namely to set up the 1st Moscow People's Academy of Arts. [. . .] Quite soon I will open a few small departments that will be remade on a large scale as part of the Academy. Generally, the work has been very interesting. There's an awareness that I'll be able to leave a memory of my days.<sup>300</sup>

It is likely that Malevich was beginning to feel somewhat stretched and perhaps even exhausted, which might account for his short fuse when he spoke to Udaltsova at the end of 1917. More importantly, although Malevich remained intent on establishing '*Supremus*' as part of his legacy, the journal represented just one aspect of what were several institutional avenues that had opened for him. The line, 'there's an awareness that I'll be able to leave a memory of my days', is a clear reference to the broader opportunities that had presented themselves.<sup>301</sup> One way or another, Malevich felt cautiously optimistic that he would secure a legacy with which he was content. This optimism, however, depended largely on the freedom the Bolsheviks might permit him.

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<sup>300</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 8 September 1917; *ibid.*, I: 106.

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.*



**Figure 2.1**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Suprematism, 18<sup>th</sup> Construction*

1915

Oil on canvas

53.3 x 53.3 cm

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam

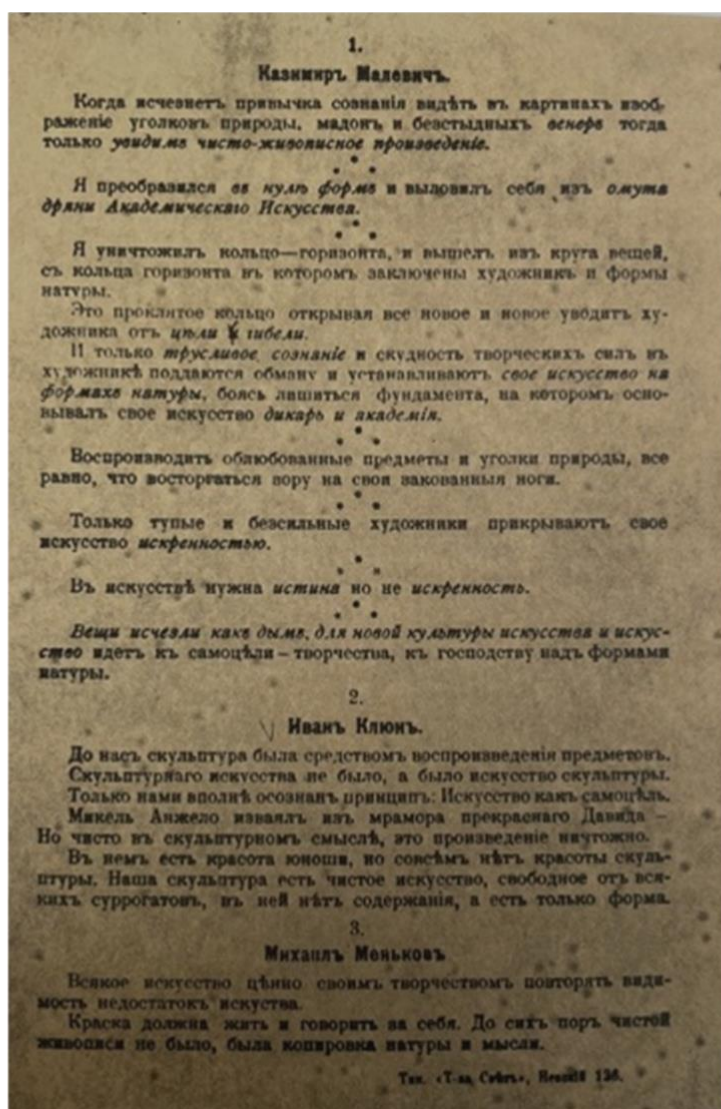


Figure 2.2

Manifesto signed by Kazimir Malevich, Ivan Kliun and Mikhail Menkov, distributed at 0.10

December 1915

Reproduced from Matthew Drutt, ed., *In Search of 0,10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings* (Basel: Fondation Beyeler/Hatje Cantz, 2015)



**Figure 2.3**

**Kazimir Malevich**

Photograph of *Supremus 51*

1916

Oil on canvas

Whereabouts unknown

Reproduced from Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans.

Marian Schwartz (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012)



**Figure 2.4**

**Liubov Popova**

*Painterly Architectonic with Yellow Board*

1916

Oil on canvas

80 x 98 cm

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



**Figure 2.5**

**Liubov Popova**

*Composition: Black Gold and Brown*

1917

Oil on canvas

34.5 x 27.7 cm

Contemporary Art Museum, Lisbon



**Figure 2.6**

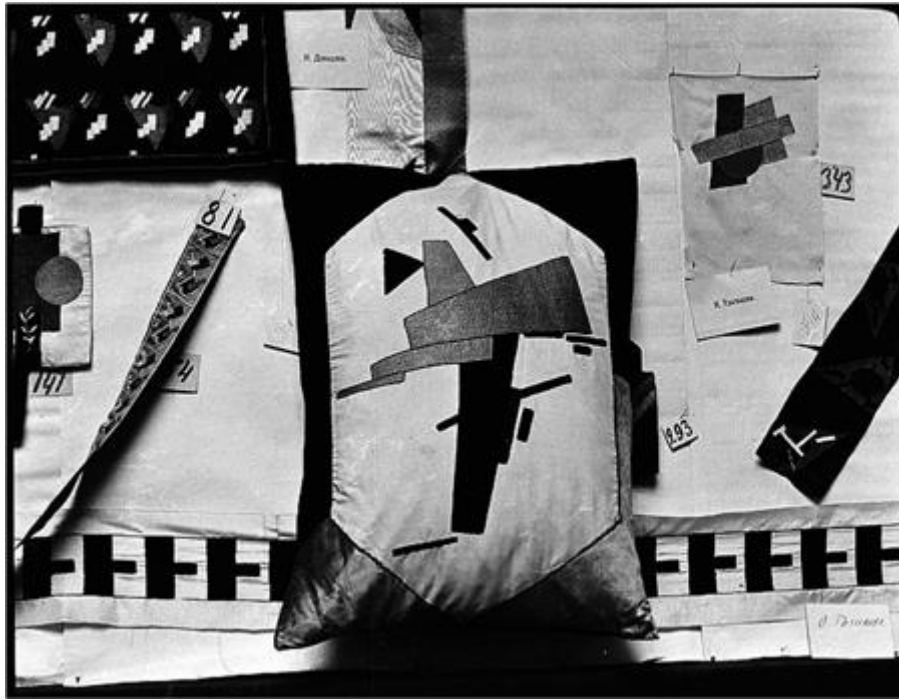
**Liubov Popova**

*Cover Design for 'Supremus'*

1916-17

Ink on paper

Reproduced from Magdalena Dabrowski, *Liubov Popova* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1991)



**Figure 2.7**

Photograph of the second Verbovka exhibition, showing a cushion produced in the style of Suprematism

1917

Reproduced from Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012)



**Figure 2.8**

**Olga Rozanova**

*Non-Objective Composition (Suprematism)*

1916

Oil on canvas

102 x 94 cm

Museum of Visual Arts, Ekaterinburg



**Figure 2.9**

**Georgii Iakulov**

General view of the stage of the Café Pittoresque

1917-18

Reproduced from Andréi Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, trans. Michael Taylor with Helen Knox  
(Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2010)

## Chapter Three

### *Suprematism: Between Revolution and Exile*

The fact that *Supremus* did not appear in print must be attributed to a multitude of factors that arose during the revolutionary era. In this turbulent political environment, avant-garde figures were forced to make practical rather than idealistic decisions. In most instances, pragmatism dictated involvement and participation did not necessarily equate to an endorsement of Suprematism. Although it may have seemed as though the journal was going to be a success, at certain points throughout this volatile period, its eclecticism proved, paradoxically, to be one of its weaknesses. As the political pieces settled, avant-garde figures became preoccupied with how they could most effectively exploit this new political landscape and assert the importance of their work within it. The question that artists were beginning to contemplate was how they could most effectively contribute to the new, and as yet unknown, communist order.

Despite the end of *Supremus*, the potential of Suprematism had not been categorically discounted. The eclectic nature of the group, and the apathy that existed around its demise, symbolised a need to preserve a level of artistic independence far more than it exposed any outright rejection of Suprematism. After the Bolsheviks took power, and as the materialisation of the journal began to seem more and more improbable, Malevich did not have to restart or re-energise Suprematism. The *Supremus* project served as an important promotional tool for Malevich which instilled an awareness of Suprematism throughout the avant-garde. Every letter that was sent and every discussion that was had towards realising the journal in print functioned as a form of promotion. The *Supremus* group did not stand as a failed venture, and the journal did not need to appear in print for it to be a success.

Malevich, just like other avant-garde artists around him, had to capitalise on what he had achieved so far in this environment of upheaval. Malevich was unquestionably frustrated by what ultimately transpired with *Supremus*, but forging a path for Suprematism and establishing an individual legacy for himself were still tasks that remained every bit in his hands.

An important starting point in assessing how Malevich advanced Suprematism in the early revolutionary period, beyond the professional activities cited in the previous chapter, is to explore how he sought to define the nature of artistic practice itself. In more than twenty texts that Malevich contributed

to the weekly newspaper *Anarchy* (*Anarkhiia*), published by the Moscow Federation of Anarchist Groups, the Suprematist set out his position.<sup>302</sup> Malevich argued that each artist ought to be governed by nothing but freedom and an independence that was absolute. In language that cleverly alludes to Suprematism as well as the freedoms associated with the revolution, Malevich stated in March 1918 that ‘above all we acknowledge our ‘ego supreme’.<sup>303</sup> In underlining the importance of the individual, Malevich declared that ‘the ensign of anarchy is the ensign of our ego, and our spirit, like a free wind, will make our creative work flutter in the broad spaces of the soul’.<sup>304</sup> This emphasis on independence was necessary, to Malevich’s mind, as the ‘enormous task’ that lay before artists was ‘to raise art in the soul of the people, [...] to create a whole free state of artists’.<sup>305</sup> The core of Malevich’s argument was that Suprematism was fundamentally in alignment with the freedoms promised in this new era. The cynicism with which Malevich had earlier written of the February Revolution had vanished from his writing, which suggests that, by early 1918, the artist had become stimulated by the revolutionary spirit.<sup>306</sup>

That Malevich began publishing so many of his articles in *Anarchy* from March 1918 symbolises his acceptance that the idea of a Supremus group of artists, at least as he had initially conceived of it, was over. This realisation is noted in his first contribution to *Anarchy*, in which Malevich introduced himself as ‘I, as a member of the *Suprematist* group of artists’.<sup>307</sup> Deciding not to present himself as a member of Supremus, or in the more grandiose language of the ‘discoverer’ of Suprematism, Malevich pragmatically attempted to find new allies on new open terms in the months after the Bolshevik coup. Just as many participants in ‘*Supremus*’ may not have fully endorsed the principles of its chief organiser, Malevich saw a definite utility, or more likely a necessity, in participating in this anarchist publication.

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<sup>302</sup> Published in Moscow from September 1917 until July 1918 by Aba and Zeen Grodin. See Nina Gurianova, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy: Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 220 ff. All of these articles are reprinted in Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, ed. A. S. Shatskikh (Moscow: Gileia, 2004), I: 61-126. Some English translations appear in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968).

<sup>303</sup> K. Malevich, ‘Otvét’ [Reply], *Anarkhiia*, 29 (28 March 1918): 4; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I: 65; English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 54.

<sup>304</sup> K. Malevich, ‘K novoi grani’ [To the New Limit], *Anarkhiia*, 31 (30 March 1918): 4; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I: 66; English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 55.

<sup>305</sup> K. Malevich, ‘Mertvaya palochka’ [A little dead stick], *Anarkhiia*, 33 (1 April 1918): 4; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I: 67; English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 56.

<sup>306</sup> Kazimir Malevich, ‘Chto bylo v fevrale 1917 goda i marte’ [What happened in February and March 1917]; Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, V: 72-73.

<sup>307</sup> K. Malevich, ‘Otvét’ [Reply], *Anarkhiia*, 29 (28 March 1918): 4; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I: 65; English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 53.

As this newspaper was not endorsed by the Bolsheviks, Malevich stood alongside the anarchists and essentially tested the limits of the new governing authority. This gamble did not last too long. *Anarchy* temporarily stopped printing in April 1918 following raids on its offices before it was closed permanently in July that year.<sup>308</sup> Despite the short life of this newspaper, Malevich's participation in this publication indicates his belief that he could advance Suprematism by arguing for its revolutionary potentials on its pages.

Malevich achieved some success in his ambition that artists might re-enter his orbit and work alongside him on more collegiate terms. The Suprematist made an ally of sorts of Aleksei Gan, the editor of the 'Art' (*Iskusstvo*) section of *Anarchy*, who wrote in defence of Malevich. Gan proclaimed that 'we, anarchist artists, bravely penetrate this wretched many-headed snake of belated educators, and together with the Futurists and Suprematists, destroy these new prisons of rotten ideas'.<sup>309</sup> Although far from an outright champion of Suprematism, Gan was a fitting ally for Malevich in that he was against conservative tendencies in art. Interestingly, Christina Lodder has pointed out that, despite his anarchist allegiances, Gan also appeared to support the Bolsheviks. 'Like many creative and intellectual figures, whose primary loyalty seems to have been anarchism at this point, he [Gan] did not seem to experience any problem in combining allegiances'.<sup>310</sup> A similar observation could be made about Malevich, not only in respect of his participation in *Anarchy* but in Suprematism's further espousal of the revolutionary spirit.

Perhaps the greatest indicator that Malevich had become stimulated by the revolutionary environment is found in a development that occurred in his paintings at this moment. From 1917, the planes of colour that dominated the white canvas space now fragmented into the void which surrounded them. Possibly the most well-known of these works is *Yellow Plane in Dissolution* (1917-18) (Fig. 3.1). At over a metre in height, this work is roughly twice the size of Malevich's first paintings, which appeared at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0.10 (Zero-Ten)* [*Poslednaia futuristicheskaia vystavka kartin, 0,10 (nol' desiat')*] (Fig. 1.2). The single yellow form with three defined edges dissolves into the white space of the painting's

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<sup>308</sup> Catherine Cooke, 'Sources of a radical mission in the early Soviet profession: Alexei Gan and the Moscow Anarchists', in *Architecture and Revolution*, ed. Neil Leach (London: Routledge, 1999), 29.

<sup>309</sup> Aleksei Gan, quoted in Gurianova, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy*, 224.

<sup>310</sup> Christina Lodder, 'Aleksei Gan: A Pivotal Figure in Russian Constructivism', in Aleksei Gan, *Constructivism*, ed. and trans. Christina Lodder (Barcelona: Tenov, 2013), XXI.

surface as though it is under the influence of a powerful force or energy present within the white canvas space. The effect seems to imply a connection between the earth and some higher spatial realm.

For Malevich this painting represented not a disintegration of form but a dissolution *into* the white space of the canvas. ‘We are at the highest point in the race for contemporary life’, Malevich wrote in April 1918.<sup>311</sup> ‘We tear ourselves from the earthbound shackles, our motors daily enter the chasm of space. We represent striving, [...] Down with the cupolas and heavenly vaults which with a little lid blocks the way for gusts of steam; let wedges cut into the bosom of space’.<sup>312</sup> The metaphors in these words allude to an energy inherent in Suprematist planes of colour, which had ascended further, penetrated the white field of the canvas and arrived in the infinite. As if watching a spacecraft depart the earth’s surface, Malevich captured the yellow plane at the very moment it pierces the blue firmament and enters the infinite ‘bosom of space’.<sup>313</sup>

It is interesting to note that Malevich chose yellow to depict this new Suprematist flight. As well as the colour’s inherent spiritual and celestial associations, the choice of yellow in Malevich’s paintings recalls the spiritual ascent he explored ten years earlier in his Symbolist paintings such as *Triumph of the Heavens* (1907) (Fig. 1.18) and, perhaps more importantly in his Alogist canvas, *The Aviator* of 1914 (Fig. 1.24), in which yellow rays of light illuminate the pilot’s new spatial environment. There is possibly even a political dimension to this new idea of flight. Another 1917 work, *Dissolution of a Plane* (Fig. 3.2), depicts this same idea of flight in a reddish-brown colour, which may well have been stimulated by the new communist era and may allude to the flags of left-wing ideologies.

In ‘The Declaration of the Suprematists’, published in *Anarchy* in June 1918, Malevich seems to reference this new style of painting and allow ambiguity to exist in his language. His words in this essay could allude to this new style of painting as easily as they might be interpreted in relation to the contemporary political environment around him.

We Suprematists raise the flags of colour, like the fire of time, and transgress the borders of new outlines. [...] The culture of our conscious past flies to its death, while consciousness itself throws

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<sup>311</sup> K. Malevich, ‘Arkhitektura kak poshchekina betona-zhelezu’ [Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete], *Anarkhiia*, 37 (6 April 1918): 4; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I: 69; English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 64.

<sup>312</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.*

off the dried-out shell of past days. From the fathomless depths of darkness arises the brilliance of the new flame of the new culture.<sup>314</sup>

Similarly, a note written on the side of a sketch of this aesthetic idea of dissolution (Fig. 3.3) reads: ‘a Suprematist element, the moment of dissolution of the objectless sensation, 1917’.<sup>315</sup> Malevich’s words here do not entirely account for his evolution in painting. Rather, it is possible that they reflect a retrospective attempt to account for a shift in his theory and practice and assert a connection between this new formal idea of ascent and the liberating ideals of the revolutionary environment.

This evolution in Suprematist painting, symbolic of liberation and the upwards trajectory of colour, seems to have instigated another development in Malevich’s thinking, which occurred consecutively, if not concurrently. In 1918, the upwards flight of the plane became total for Malevich as colour disappeared altogether from the Suprematist canvas. In 1918, Malevich painted *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (Fig. 3.4), in which a white square is observed on a background which was painted in a different tone of white. This work is one of a series of ‘white on white’ paintings in which Malevich dispensed with colour but held onto Suprematism’s aesthetic language. The infinite space, in which form earlier existed, itself became defined and was given a formal value of its own. Although ‘The Declaration of the Suprematists’ predominantly alludes to *Yellow Plane in Dissolution*, the text’s concluding words seem to refer to this new white period of Suprematism. ‘We Suprematists raise the banners of colours and like the fire of time we go beyond the bounds of the new outlines. Bear your featureless faces as you fuse with the banners of colours in order to touch the new world of a colourless system’.<sup>316</sup> By 1918, Malevich had reaffirmed Suprematism’s metaphysical aspiration and suggested its further detachment from the material world.

This removal of colour is explained in a following text, entitled ‘The Second Declaration of the Suprematists’, in which Malevich asserts: ‘we Suprematists have hurled a new law into the space of

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<sup>314</sup> Kazimir Malevich, ‘Deklaratsiia supremistov’ [The Declaration of the Suprematists], 15 June 1918; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, V: 101; English translation in Patricia Railing, ed., *Malevich Writes: A Theory of Creativity: Cubism to Suprematism* (Forest Row: Artists Bookworks, 2014), 103.

<sup>315</sup> Andréi Nakov, *Kazimir Malevich: Catalogue Raisonné* (Paris: Adam Biro, 2002), 286; see Kazimir Malevich, *Plane in Dissolution*, pencil on paper, 1917, 19 x 12.7 cm [Fig. 3.3].

<sup>316</sup> Malevich, ‘Deklaratsiia supremistov’ [The Declaration of the Suprematists], 15 June 1918; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, V: 102; English translation in Railing, *Malevich Writes*, 106.

constructions'.<sup>317</sup> This was a 'resilient system of new Suprematist constructions', he continued, 'crowned with the consciousness of new intuitive sections, we move towards new signs of real phenomena [...] divided by space, the world of matter disappears. The world we preach will be decorated in colourlessness'.<sup>318</sup> Questions pertaining to flight, liberation and upwards ascent were ideas that already existed on the Suprematist canvas. Stimulated by broad revolutionary impulses, Malevich re-engaged with the foundational principles of Suprematism, which he suggested had a new relevance in the transformed socio-political landscape around him.

In identifying the origins of these new ideas, it is worth noting that although the threat of conscription had long since passed, any lingering anxiety Malevich may have felt about re-entering the conflict would have evaporated with the signing of the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk in March 1918. With Russia's involvement in the First World War formally over, it is possible that Malevich felt a renewed sense of liberation as his personal freedom was essentially formalised. Escaping death brought a profound sense of liberation for Malevich. His personal and artistic freedoms merged through 1918 and Suprematism and the revolutionary spirit became increasingly intertwined. As Richard Stites has vividly written, 'the removal of the Tsar, the linchpin of the Russian authoritarian tradition, made an aperture through which a torrent of ideas and dreams, accumulated like lava through the ages, poured forth and burst over the landscape of revolutionary Russia'.<sup>319</sup>

It was the norm during the early revolutionary period that projects were either short-lived, or like '*Supremus*', struggled to appear at all. Malevich complained, for example, that 'the latest attempt to form an art council on democratic principles was brought to nothing'.<sup>320</sup> After Brest-Litovsk, the Bolsheviks lost their tolerance for the Anarchists' activities. In April 1918, the state's secret police, the Cheka (Chrezvychainaia komissiiia – Extraordinary Commission) stormed the anarchist centres in Moscow. Forty members of the group were killed or wounded and five hundred were taken prisoner.<sup>321</sup>

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<sup>317</sup> Kazimir Malevich, '2-ia deklaratsiia supremistov' [The Second Declaration of the Suprematists], 19 June 1918; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, V: 104; English translation in Railing, *Malevich Writes*, 108.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.; English translation in *ibid.*, 108-109.

<sup>319</sup> Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 38.

<sup>320</sup> K. Malevich, 'Mertvaya palochka' [A little dead stick], *Anarkhiia*, 33 (1 April 1918): 4; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I: 67; English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 57.

<sup>321</sup> Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 184-185.

Although the closure of *Anarchy* was symbolic of the Bolshevik ambition to take control of the mass revolution, it was precisely when the state began to formalise its control over cultural activity that Malevich found his greatest opportunities. Under the leadership of Anatolii Lunacharskii, a Department of Fine Arts (Otdel izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv – IZO) was formed within the People's Commissariat of Education (Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia – Narkompros).<sup>322</sup> The State Free Art Studios (Svobodnye gosudarstvennye khudozhestvennye masterskie – SVOMAS) were also established in Moscow on 11 and 13 December 1918 through an amalgamation and renaming of two pre-revolutionary art schools in Moscow, the Stroganov School and the School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. Their establishment was of great importance to Malevich as it gave him the opportunity to advance Suprematism within a pedagogical setting.

As Lodder has explained, the broad ambition of the State Free Art Studios was to provide 'complete artistic freedom in the development of the individuals' artistic abilities'.<sup>323</sup> All artistic styles and approaches were embraced, admission was free and the students were able to elect their teachers from a list of potential professors that was drawn up by the Department of Fine Arts.<sup>324</sup> In September 1918, Malevich was voted in by a student body to the position of professor of painting at the Second State Free Art Studios in Moscow.<sup>325</sup> This election meant that Malevich was able to advance Suprematism in an educational setting, as he had envisioned in 1917 with the People's Academy of Arts.<sup>326</sup> Unlike his approach with Nadezhda Udaltsova and Supremus, Malevich's agility in this period of turbulence paid dividends.

By the time this appointment was underway, Malevich had become exceedingly busy with his work and had established significant ties with the state. In response to a request from Narkompros, Malevich wrote to confirm his many positions.

In response to announcement No. 5663 of 6 December 1918 I report the following:

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<sup>322</sup> Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 109-112.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

<sup>325</sup> 'List of candidates for supervisor positions at the [Second] State Free Art Studios indicating the number of votes they received', [between 16 and 19 September 1918]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 440.

<sup>326</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 8 September 1917; *ibid.*, I: 106.

Length of Service: 1917, Head of Art Division of the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies.

Member of the Commission on the Protection of Monuments of the Past formed in December 1917 and 1918.

Member of the Collegium of the Visual Arts Division under the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment.

Head of the Construction Arts Subdivision of the Visual Arts Division.

Chief Supervisor, professor at the State Free Art Studio in Moscow and Petrograd.

K. Malevich.<sup>327</sup>

While this letter illustrates the connection that had emerged between the artist and the state, it is essential to note that there was a power imbalance that underpinned this close interaction. Immediately after taking power, the Bolsheviks' 1917 Decree on the Press, although ostensibly intended to serve the people, effectively granted the government full control over all creative work.<sup>328</sup> This meant that Malevich's activities were defined by the institutional opportunities and constraints that the Bolsheviks afforded to artists in his position. Malevich's freedoms were not absolute but had to be continually negotiated within the world around him.

Pamela Kachurin has noted that artists like Malevich, who were employed by the state, received additional support from the government, including triple rations and exemption from certain taxes.<sup>329</sup> However, because of the turbulent economic conditions, it is very difficult to quantify with any certainty what these benefits would have meant for Malevich in practical terms. It is also important that Malevich's official positions are not exaggerated. He was employed by the state, but this does not necessarily mean that either one endorsed the other. It is, however, appropriate to say that Malevich's employment at the Second State Free Art Studios, and having a group of students, meant that he enjoyed a degree of recognition.

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<sup>327</sup> Malevich, 'To the Plenipotentiary of the State Free Art Studios', 7 December 1918; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 447.

<sup>328</sup> 'Decree on the Press, Issued by the Council of People's Commissars', 9 November 1917, in *First Decrees of Soviet Power* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1970), 29-30.

<sup>329</sup> Pamela Kachurin, *Making Modernism Soviet: The Russian Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era 1918-1928* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 4.

Although not cited in his letter confirming his many activities, Malevich expended an immense amount of energy in the field of agitational art. Like many other avant-garde figures, Malevich was essentially engaged by the state in the defence of the revolution and sought to articulate a visual language appropriate for the new era. In this revolutionary period, Malevich won a competition for the decorations for the Congress of the Committees on Rural Poverty and produced cover designs for the delegates' document folders (Figs. 3.5-3.7). Larissa Zhadova argued that Suprematism's decorative and painterly forms were appropriated by the state and, as a decorative style, 'supplied one of the main strands in the agit-art of that period'.<sup>330</sup> Zhadova discussed how the forms and colours of Suprematism came to be seen across Russia by 1918, such as the Suprematist-inspired decorations that were hung on Znamenskaya Ploshchad in Petrograd (Fig. 3.8).<sup>331</sup> Natan Altman's radical transformation of Petrograd's Winter Palace and its Palace Square in 1918 (Figs. 3.9-3.10), which have much in common with the designs on Znamenskaya Ploshchad, seems to support Zhadova's observation. Altman's designs, which aspired to visually redefine the neoclassical Winter Palace, suggest that there was a closeness in creative activity in the immediate revolutionary period as the avant-garde sought to entirely redefine space in post-revolutionary Russia. During this process, the state did not directly commission Suprematist forms, rather it appropriated creative activity in practice rather than through decree.

Despite the fact that Suprematism's freedoms were relative to those the state afforded it, all indications suggest that by the latter half of 1918 Malevich would have been relatively content in his professional life. He was actively working in art and was involved with a variety of people. Malevich had received a degree of official recognition and had achieved some standing throughout the avant-garde. As Evgenii Kovtun wrote, 'the revolution signified a total and complete renewal of life's establishments', and it was this very renewal in which Malevich was taking direct part.<sup>332</sup> By the end of 1918, Malevich had begun to participate in laying the foundations of the new world as he saw it according to Suprematism. As this suggests, there is every reason to believe that any feelings of disappointment Malevich may have had about *Supremus* and its journal would have quickly been forgotten towards the end of 1918. The art critic Nikolai

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<sup>330</sup> Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910–1930*, trans. Alexander Lieven (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 77-78.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>332</sup> Evgenii Kovtun, *Russian Avant-Garde* (New York: Parkstone International, 2007), 11.

Punin acknowledged in 1919 that ‘Suprematism has blossomed out in splendid colour all over Moscow. Posters, exhibitions, cafes – all is Suprematism. And this is extraordinarily significant’.<sup>333</sup> Suprematism appeared to be firmly on the ascendancy and, even by early 1919, Suprematism remained one of the most prolific and important movements in Moscow, even if the state exerted a degree of control and ownership over Malevich’s practice.

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The extensive and successful work that Malevich had accomplished outside the avant-garde, however, meant little if he could not secure Suprematism’s place within it. The struggle to establish Suprematism as the leading artistic movement in revolutionary Russia remained ongoing and required a certain amount of collegiate backing. Worryingly, and perhaps to Malevich’s surprise, by early 1919 his place amongst his peers became rather abruptly less secure.

At a meeting held in Alexandra Exter’s hotel room on 8 January 1919, the artist Varvara Stepanova recorded a hostile atmosphere. The room ‘smells of mysticism’, Stepanova complained in her diary, as though Malevich’s very presence filled the room with an unwelcome aroma.<sup>334</sup> ‘He proposes that we unite, propagandise Suprematism. Become the new objectless artists’.<sup>335</sup> According to Stepanova, Malevich spoke as if he were unable to read the room and contemplated that perhaps it was ‘no longer necessary to paint, but only to preach’.<sup>336</sup> In response to this apparently misjudged reflection, Stepanova wrote in her diary that Aleksandr Rodchenko threw ‘cold water on Malevich’s mysticism’.<sup>337</sup> Showing no interest in Malevich’s vision for the arts, Rodchenko ‘calls for the real’, Stepanova adds, ‘and shatters Malevich’s fantasies’.<sup>338</sup> In this same month, Rodchenko, Stepanova, Aleksandr Drevin, Udaltsova and Aleksandr Vesnin identified themselves as the Association of Extreme Innovators (Askranov – Assotsiatsiia krainikh novatorov) and planned to hold an exhibition on the basis that there had been ‘a sudden death of Suprebez [Suprematism

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<sup>333</sup> Nikolai Punin, ‘O novykh gruppirovkakh’ [About new art groupings], *Iskusstvo kommuni*, 10, 9 February 1919; English translation in Zhadova, *Malevich*, 322.

<sup>334</sup> Varvara Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit’ bez chuda. Pis’ma. Poeticheskie opyty. Zapiski khudozhnitsy*, ed. O. V. Melnikov (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Sfera, 1994), 62.

<sup>335</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>336</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>337</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.*

and objectlessness]'.<sup>339</sup> Suprematism was over, for Malevich's opponents, and its 'vitality' had poured into a group which sought a new mode of innovation.<sup>340</sup>

Udaltsova may have wanted to work with Malevich in December 1917 to realise '*Supremus*', but now, just over a year later, the Suprematist and his approach to art were emphatically rejected. The mood in Exter's hotel room that evening, according to Stepanova, seems to be a long way from the apathy and ambivalence that was felt in the final months of the *Supremus* group. Evidently, Malevich still felt it necessary to assemble a group of artists around Suprematism, but January 1919 was even less the moment for it than December 1917. Such was the hostility felt towards Suprematism that Stepanova described the atmosphere in the hotel room that night as one of 'don't fall under Malevich's influence'.<sup>341</sup> From January 1919, Malevich could no longer rely on the support of those whom he had considered colleagues.

This group of artists was not alone in positioning themselves against Suprematism. Although the article by Punin, cited above, opened by recognising just how prolific Suprematism had become, it went on to make a damaging set of statements against Malevich. Punin, who had become the editor of *Art of the Commune* [*Iskusstvo kommuny*], predicted that 'one can confidently assert that the day of Suprematism is nigh, and that on that very day Suprematism must lose its significance in creative terms'.<sup>342</sup> '[Vladimir] Tatlin, one of the most powerful and certainly the purest among our artists,' Punin wrote, 'has defined Suprematism simply as a sum of past errors'.<sup>343</sup> He continued that 'Suprematism has sucked from the world history of art every drop of the painting that was in it and organised it in accordance with its elements', the result, for Punin, meant that Suprematism was 'by no means art'.<sup>344</sup> Explaining his rationale, Punin added, 'it is not *grand art*, that is why it is so easy to apply in textiles, in the decoration of a café, in fashion drawings and so forth'.<sup>345</sup> Punin saw in Suprematism merely a 'closed concentric formation, where all the roads of the world's painting have met in order to peter out'.<sup>346</sup> There was simply 'no way out of Suprematism', Punin stated conclusively.<sup>347</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> German Karginov, *Rodchenko*, trans. Elizabeth Hoch (London: Thames and Hudson, 1979), 60.

<sup>340</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>341</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>342</sup> Nikolai Punin, 'O novykh gruppirovkakh' [About new art groupings], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, 10, 9 February 1919; English translation in Zhadova, *Malevich*, 322.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>344</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>346</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*

Perhaps the most infuriating aspect of this article for Malevich, more than its emphatic rejection of Suprematism, was Punin's celebration of Tatlin. 'I regard Tatlin as the only creative force capable of taking art out of the trenches of fixed positions,' Punin declared.<sup>348</sup> Mythologising the artist, he continued: '[Tatlin] is a master from head to foot, from the most conditioned reflex to the most conscious act. An astonishing, completely unique mastery'.<sup>349</sup> Punin celebrated what he called the 'raised type of relief' of Tatlin's works, and added, 'I am seized by uncontrollable emotion at the thought of the day when artists come to grasp the whole significance of this form and at last understand that there is no other way ahead'.<sup>350</sup> Malevich may well have felt particularly aggrieved, as Tatlin's raised reliefs (Fig. 3.11) were no newer than Suprematism. Punin was an eminent figure at this moment and held multiple roles. He was head of the Petrograd section of IZO, commissar of the Hermitage and the Russian Museums in Petrograd and lectured about art at the Petrograd State Free Art Studios.<sup>351</sup>

When *The Tenth State Exhibition: Objectless Creation and Suprematism* opened in Moscow on 27 April 1919, the occasion merely confirmed the schism that occurred in January. The fact of the split is noted in the exhibition's very title, which implies a division in approaches to objectless painting. Works were displayed by nine contributors at this exhibition. In addition to the already mentioned Malevich, Rodchenko, and Stepanova, works by Natalya Davydova, Ivan Kliun, Mikhail Menkov, Liubov Popova, Vesnin and, posthumously, Olga Rozanova featured.<sup>352</sup> Almost certainly, a number of Malevich's *White on White* paintings were displayed at this exhibition and were challenged by the Extreme Innovators.

Rodchenko's *Non-Objective Painting no. 80 (Black on Black)* (Fig. 3.12) is one of a series of black paintings he completed in 1918 and is perhaps the most well-known contribution made by the Extreme Innovators. Here, Rodchenko depicted a circular formal dynamism in black and charcoal grey paint, as if his brush had rotated around a cog or axle. The result emphasises a very precise painterly action as well as the materials themselves. Rodchenko's canvas is a functional support, yet the structure has effectively become part of the work itself. This painting is symbolic of what Rodchenko later stated was an ambition

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<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

<sup>349</sup> Ibid.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Natalia Murray, *The Unsung Hero of the Russian Avant-Garde: The Life and Times of Nikolay Punin* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2012), 1-2.

<sup>352</sup> Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 139.

to produce a ‘new existence of a new form in space’.<sup>353</sup> In his statement for the exhibition catalogue, Rodchenko was unambiguous about his understanding of the role of art and, implicitly, his view of Suprematism:

Rodchenko’s system.

The collapse of all the “ism” of painting has given the go-ahead for my ascent.

At the sounding of the knell for colour painting, as it accompanies the last “ism” into eternal peace, the last hope and the last love are dashed, while I throw dead truths out of the house.

Not synthesis, but invention, (analysis) is the motive force.<sup>354</sup>

In this not-so-subtle mockery, Rodchenko sought to make it clear that he had nothing to do with the ism of Suprematism, which is framed here as an historical, romantic and dead enterprise. In her catalogue entry, Popova expressed a similar sentiment to Rodchenko and severed her links with Suprematism and the Supremus project. Her catalogue entry stresses a constructive, architectonic approach to form:

Construction in painting = the sum of the energy of its parts.

Surface is fixed but forms are volumetrical.

Line as colour and as the vestige of a transverse plane participates in, and directs the forces of, construction.

Colour participates in energies by its weight [...]

Images of “painterly” and not “figurative” values are the aim of the present painting.<sup>355</sup>

Popova had come to privilege formal evaluation and analysis with a vision towards a total painterly construction. Popova’s *Painterly Architectonic* (1918) (Fig. 3.13) embodies the ideas in her statement. This work explores the interaction of plane forms and their structural potential and overlooks completely the

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<sup>353</sup> Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings*, ed. Alexander N. Lavrentiev, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 98.

<sup>354</sup> Aleksandr Rodchenko, ‘Statement by Rodchenko for the Catalogue of the 10<sup>th</sup> State Exhibition’, quoted in S. O. Khan Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work*, trans. Huw Evans (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), 287.

<sup>355</sup> Liubov Popova, in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 147.

metaphysical implications she may have been contemplating when she produced the cover of *'Supremus'* (1916-17) (Fig. 2.6).

Even Kliun, Malevich's old friend, found reason to pull himself away from Suprematism. It seems that it was Malevich's removal of colour that did it for Kliun.

The corpse of painterly art, the art of daubed nature, has been laid in its coffin, sealed with The Black Square of Suprematism, and its sarcophagus is now exhibited for public view in the new cemetery of art – the Museum of Painterly Culture.

But if the art of painting, the art of expressing nature has died then colour paint, as the basic elements of this art, have not died. Liberated from the centuries-old bond of nature, they have begun to live their own life, to develop freely, and to display themselves in the New Art of Colour – and our colour compositions are subject only to the laws of colour and not the laws of nature.

In Colour Art, the coloured area lives and moves, affording colour the utmost force of intensity. And the congealed motionless forms of Suprematism do not display a new art but reveal the face of a corpse with its eyes fixed and dead.<sup>356</sup>

Kliun's statement is fascinating. Like Rodchenko's words, which use the language of 'collapse' and 'eternal peace', Kliun talks about Suprematism in the language of death. For the Extreme Innovators, Suprematism was nothing to do with liberation. In fact, freedom could only be found by dispensing with the deadweight that Suprematism had become.

By the spring of 1919 the charge against Suprematism was overt rather than oblique. The intuitive approach that defined Suprematism was explicitly eliminated in favour of an analytical and deliberate approach to pictorial creation. Conscious of what was an increasingly formalised opposition, Malevich used his catalogue entry to clarify his ideas on the creative process and the principle of objectlessness. In a tone that is almost defensive, Malevich wrote that 'in mentioning objectlessness, I only wanted to point out clearly that in Suprematism things, objects, etc., are not treated – and that's all; objectlessness, in general,

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<sup>356</sup> Ivan Kliun, 'Iskusstvo tsveta' [Colour art], English translation in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 143.

has nothing to do with it. Suprematism is a definite system'.<sup>357</sup> Suprematism was 'a system, hard, cold and unsmilingly set into motion by philosophical thought', he argued.<sup>358</sup> Malevich criticised his opponents by stating that their painterly masses 'will be confined inside the walls of aesthetic plane instead of philosophical penetration'.<sup>359</sup> The crux of the disagreement between the two factions did not lie in the idea of non-figurative painting itself, but in its function and its purpose. For the Suprematist, objectlessness was the fundamental principle that underpinned a philosophical mode of thinking. As he explained in his catalogue entry, 'Suprematism is a colour semaphore in its infinite abyss'.<sup>360</sup> The Extreme Innovators were, in Malevich's eyes, mere formalists whose work amounted to nothing beyond the physical application of painterly materials.

It is significant to note that Punin's criticism, written a few months before the *Tenth State Exhibition*, was directed at what he felt were the formal inadequacies of Suprematism, while the Extreme Innovators objected to what they perceived to be Suprematism's metaphysical and mystical tendencies. This disparity mattered little. Hostility was still hostility, however it presented itself. Even before the winter of 1918-19 was over, Malevich found himself essentially isolated from the avant-garde. Suprematism was considered not to be what was required for this moment. If avant-garde figures were reluctant to make any allegiance or assert any bold position at the end of 1917, a little more than a year later a general sense of direction was beginning to emerge. The direction was one that did not include Suprematism.

It was within the span of a single week that Rodchenko reversed his position entirely. Just as Malevich had enjoyed positive relationships with many of the artists involved in the Supremus group, the connection he had with Rodchenko was, at one point, a long way from hostile. According to Rodchenko, he was courted by the Suprematist in 1916. At the *Store* exhibition, Malevich apparently said to Rodchenko, 'you are unique here, but do you know what you are doing? [...]. Everything the others are doing is old and done with. Something new is being born here, something that is ours. [...] come and see me, you have already sensed something'.<sup>361</sup> Malevich's intention was surely every bit flattering towards Rodchenko's

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<sup>357</sup> K. Malevich, 'Suprematizm' [Suprematism], *Katalog desiatoi Gosudarstvennoi vystavki. Bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo i suprematizm* (Moscow, 1919); English translation, 'Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism', in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 120.

<sup>358</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>359</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>360</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>361</sup> Malevich, quoted in Rodchenko, 'About Tatlin', in Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future*, 76.

talent. In March 1918, Rodchenko wrote in *Anarchy*, ‘the present belongs to artists who are anarchists of art’.<sup>362</sup> In June that year, Rodchenko named Malevich as ‘one of our true creators’.<sup>363</sup> Even in the final week of 1918, Rodchenko appeared to admire the Suprematist. ‘Malevich paints without form and colour. The ultimate abstracted painting. This is forcing everyone to think long and hard. It’s difficult to surpass Malevich’.<sup>364</sup> Remarkably, given the encounter in Exter’s hotel room on 8 January, Rodchenko recorded on 1 January: ‘Malevich and I have decided to write and publish as much literature as possible’.<sup>365</sup>

In attempting to identify why the avant-garde suddenly shifted away from Malevich, the worsening conditions in Moscow must be recognised as a significant factor. Although the Bolsheviks had taken power in 1917, forces in opposition to them began to organise quickly. What began as scattered fighting turned into a full-scale Civil War, which intensified significantly in the spring of 1918. The government’s imposition of war communism in June, intended to ensure that the communists won the war, had a major impact within Bolshevik-controlled territories and began to take a severe toll by the winter of 1918-19.<sup>366</sup>

Fundamentally an economic and political policy, war communism meant that foreign trade was banned; the government asserted full control over the workforce, the transport system and rationed any excess grain. This instigated hardships that were totally overwhelming on almost every human level. Although a national policy, war communism had the greatest impact on those living in Moscow, which had been re-established as the country’s capital earlier in the year. Petrograd’s location on the Baltic Sea meant it was vulnerable to attack, whereas Moscow’s inland location offered more safety. This may have meant that the revolution could be protected, but the relocation came at the Muscovites’ expense. Moscow had grown to just over two million people by 1917 but much of the skilled workforce began to leave the capital in search of food in the countryside. Following a steady exodus, the population dropped to just one million by August 1920.<sup>367</sup> Less demand on resources did not alleviate pressures. The retreat, in fact, forced the city

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<sup>362</sup> Aleksandr Rodchenko, ‘Tovarishcham anarkhistam’, [To Comrade anarchists], *Anarkhiia*, 29 (28 March 1918): 4; English translation in Margarita Tupitsyn, *Russian Dada 1914–1924* (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2018), 232.

<sup>363</sup> Aleksandr Rodchenko, ‘To “original” critics and the newspaper Ponedelnik’; reprinted in Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future*, 83.

<sup>364</sup> Rodchenko, 25 December 1918, in Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future*, 88.

<sup>365</sup> Rodchenko, 1 January 1919, *ibid.*

<sup>366</sup> Silvana Malle, *The Economic Organization of War Communism 1918–1921*, Cambridge Russian, Soviet and Post-Soviet Studies, no. 47 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985).

<sup>367</sup> Mauricio Borrero, *Moscow: Scarcity and Urban Society in the Russian Civil War, 1917-1921* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 66.

to contract and thus exacerbated the situation for those who remained. The city's infrastructure approached the point of total collapse, food storage capacities halved, and the problems of food distribution began to seem insurmountable.<sup>368</sup>

The French war correspondent Ludovic Naudeau, who travelled through Moscow on his way out of the country, made a ruthless assessment of the capital at the start of 1919 and the Bolshevik command over it.

There is no more commerce in Moscow. Thousands of salesmen and saleswomen are without work. [...] Red Guards arrive, bearing or not, as the case may be, a greasy document; they announce to the proprietor that his business has been nationalised, and that he has forty-eight hours to depart and carry away his belongings. But depart whither, to what refuge or with what means? The question is not asked. The community does not inflict on those whom it deprives of their possessions the humiliation of granting them an indemnity. It simply sends them to die elsewhere. The mere contemplation of the streets of Moscow aids the attentive observer to understand the frightful constraint suffered by those who might be tempted to resist the usurpers. Look about you, but be silent! Famine and epidemic ravage the town; in all houses there are dead and dying.<sup>369</sup>

There was no sense of escape for anyone who remained in Moscow. The sculptor Antoine Pevsner recorded circumstances in Moscow in similarly frank language to Naudeau. 'In 1919, anarchy, poverty and hunger became constant. It was the most terrible winter. The streets of Moscow, overflowing with mountains of snow, were full of the corpses of horses and other animals, which were eaten by starving dogs'.<sup>370</sup> This powerful account is every bit as reminiscent of Ivan Vladimirov's *Famine* (1919) (Fig. 3.14), which portrays the sheer desperation that the Muscovites were experiencing. While flags of the revolution were being waved in the background, normal citizens were forced to live like animals. Martin Hammer and Christina Lodder, in their joint work on Naum Gabo, have written that, even 'by summer 1918, daily life was

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<sup>368</sup> See 'Administering Shortages', *ibid.*, 35-64.

<sup>369</sup> Ludovic Naudeau, 'Moscow at the Beginning of 1919', *Current History* 10, no. 3, part II (September 1919), 505-509.

<sup>370</sup> Antoine Pevsner, 'Rencontre avec Kazimir Malévitch dans la Russie d'après 1917', *Aujourd'hui. Art et Architecture*, December 1957, 4.

becoming increasingly difficult'.<sup>371</sup> Quoting Gabo, Hammer and Lodder have emphasised the harsh reality that defined the brothers' lives: 'The main character of our life was deteriorating from day-to-day. We were hungry, we were freezing, there was disorder...'.<sup>372</sup> Udaltsova did her best to remain optimistic about her work, but she could not look beyond the severity of her situation. 'Some amazing things are happening, and were it not for the exhaustion and living on the verge of death, it would be quite nice'.<sup>373</sup> Tragically, Rozanova contracted diphtheria and died on 7 November 1918 at the age of just 32.<sup>374</sup>

The conditions in Moscow in the early part of the Civil War were so severe that to treat them as a backdrop to the professional practices of the avant-garde would be to misunderstand the artists' motivations. The ambition for every avant-garde artist who remained in the capital, beyond hoping to avoid Rozanova's fate, was to articulate an appropriate response so that they could move forward. In his diary, Rodchenko recorded his personal struggles during this period. 'I've been busy with the apartment because they're moving us out, I'm looking for another one. I'm packing. I get tired, and by the evening I'm really sick. I'm so tired of this commotion and this constant looking for food. [...] I'm often angry and irritable from the nervous strain'.<sup>375</sup> These frustrations in Rodchenko's personal life were recorded within weeks of writing his catalogue statement for the *Tenth State Exhibition*, in which he identified the tasks for his professional life. 'My task is to create new things from painting, so look at my work in reality'.<sup>376</sup> In what might be described as a rational and lucid approach to his art practice, Rodchenko may well have sought order from within the disorder and severe personal suffering he had to endure.

Similarly, Punin, who looked to Tatlin as the only way ahead, must be understood in relation to the conditions of this moment. In the context of the suffering being endured in the Civil War, his words that there is 'no way out of Suprematism' and 'no other way ahead' take on an acute meaning.<sup>377</sup> For Punin, it was precisely because Tatlin's work symbolised an 'escape beyond the confines of painting as such', into actual space rather than some metaphysical conception of space, and because Tatlin represented 'a cloud

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<sup>371</sup> Martin Hammer and Christina Lodder, *Constructing Modernity: The Art and Career of Naum Gabo* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000), 55.

<sup>372</sup> Naum Gabo, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>373</sup> Udaltsova, diary entry, 23 February 1919; Malevich, *Letters*, II: 135.

<sup>374</sup> M. N. Yablonskaya and Anthony Parton, *Women Artists of Russia's New Age, 1900-1935* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 97.

<sup>375</sup> Rodchenko, diary entry, 1 December 1918, in Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future*, 87.

<sup>376</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>377</sup> Nikolai Punin, 'O novykh gruppirovkakh' [About the new art groupings], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, 10, 9 February 1919; English translation in Zhadova, *Malevich*, 322.

of arrows flying into the future, without a backward look', that Punin placed his belief in the future Constructivist.<sup>378</sup>

Revolutionary moments naturally divide those who experience them. There is one group of people who are practical, innovative and are intent on action, while another dreams and contemplates. Both strands of thought can be identified in Russia, yet the latter group has a particular tradition with which even Lenin can be associated. In his 1902 work, *What is to Be Done?*, Lenin cited the article 'Blunders of Immature Thinking', by Dimitrii Pisarev, who wrote 'if man were completely deprived of the ability to dream in this way, if he could not from time to time run ahead and mentally conceive, in an entire and completed picture, the product to which his hands are only just beginning to lend shape'.<sup>379</sup> In response to this quote, Lenin wrote 'of this kind of dreaming there is unfortunately too little in our movement'.<sup>380</sup> The importance of holding onto an idea and a vision of the future was particularly necessary during the austere period of war communism in Moscow. Nikolai Bukharin's *The ABC of Communism*, written during this period, emphasised the importance of holding onto a belief in the coming order.<sup>381</sup> The argument in this book was that there must be a belief in optimism and an effort to hold on to hope in suffering. It was itself a form of preaching. Suprematism, of course, falls into this category. With Suprematism, Malevich wrote in early 1919, 'I have conquered the lining of the coloured sky, I have plucked the colours, put them in the bag I have made and tied it with a knot. Sail on! The white free depths, eternity is beyond you!'<sup>382</sup> Malevich had already made his commitment to Suprematism and, regardless of what defined the landscape in front of him, even the conditions of war communism, he was not about to compromise.

Given that objections to Suprematism hinged on what was deemed necessary and required for this particular moment, it is reasonable to think that amid constant hunger and daily hardship, many artists would have viewed Malevich and his desire to preach as somewhat mad. For many avant-garde artists, the path forward was not one that lay 'across space', nor did it have anything to do with the free depths of white.<sup>383</sup> Any spiritual energy that could be mustered needed to be directed towards solutions to improve

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<sup>378</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>379</sup> Dimitrii Pisarev, in Vladimir I. Lenin, *Collected Works* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1961), 5: 509-510.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 510.

<sup>381</sup> Nikolai I. Bukharin and Yevgeni A. Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism*, trans. Patrick Lavin (Detroit, MI: Marxian Educational Society, 1921).

<sup>382</sup> Malevich, 'Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism', in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 145.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

reality. Rodchenko wrote at this moment that ‘invention (analysis) is the motive force. Painting is the body, the creation, the spirit’.<sup>384</sup> The aspiration towards new material creation, in other words, towards the creation of a thing in reality, was the necessary and only way to expend his limited energy. A spiritual energy was required for Rodchenko, but it was to be guided towards the ‘body’ – to the *thing* that could be of use in reality. As Shatskikh has rightly written, with his ‘spiritual idealism and breakthroughs into the universe, Malevich became for the materialist non-objectivists an ideologically hostile opponent’.<sup>385</sup> In Moscow in 1919, in the face of constant starvation and suffering, Suprematism had come to mean little to anyone but Malevich himself.

If Malevich believed he was going to find a way forward through preaching, he may have felt that he had formulated a significant new idea in Suprematism when he wrote *On New Systems in Art* (Fig. 3.15).<sup>386</sup> Although printed in November 1919 at the Vitebsk People’s Art School (Vitebskoe narodnoe khudozhestvennoe uchilishche) (Fig. 4.1) where it very quickly assumed great importance, the text is dated 15 July 1919. *On New Systems in Art* is different in its style, content and complexity of idea to Malevich’s earlier writings. The most significant shift in this text is that Malevich reconciles Suprematism with earlier movements and incorporates it into this cultural heritage, rather than situating it against past achievements in art. In 1919, Malevich declared that throughout this endless cycle, ‘one culture after another bursts and there will never be any peace’.<sup>387</sup> With Suprematism, a ‘conclusion’ to this problem had finally been achieved which would lead artists to ‘new systems beyond the muddle of objectless art, to a purely energetic power of movement’.<sup>388</sup> Suprematism was not merely the latest in this series of movements. It represented a new – supreme – culture that was final.

Another main thrust of *On New Systems in Art* concerns an understanding of the term ‘economy’, which Malevich also described as ‘economic necessity’ and as the fifth dimension.<sup>389</sup> ‘No utilitarian form’, Malevich explains, ‘is created without the help of aesthetic action, which sees everything except the

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<sup>384</sup> Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future*, 98.

<sup>385</sup> Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 263.

<sup>386</sup> K. Malevich, *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve. Statika i skorost. Ustanovlenie A [On New Systems in Art. Stasis and Speed. Resolution A]* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1919); reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I: 153-184; English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 83-117.

<sup>387</sup> Malevich, ‘On New Systems in Art’, in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 107.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*

utilitarian as pictorial [...] aesthetics exists in the world, therefore we are one with it'.<sup>390</sup> Malevich articulated his belief that a 'world energy is moving towards economy and every step it takes towards the infinite is expressed in the new economic culture'.<sup>391</sup> Economic action, he argued, dictates aesthetic action which is 'in perpetual motion and takes part in the construction of new forms'.<sup>392</sup> What is aesthetic for Malevich is merely the result of this energy which 'takes part in the construction of the whole world'.<sup>393</sup> In what marked an entirely new idea in Suprematism, it is extremely likely that Malevich was drawing together language relating to national economic policy and artistic creativity in what was a revised explanation of Suprematism.

In many ways, *On New Systems in Art* was the fully substantiated theoretical treatise that Malevich could not manage to write in 1915. This text, however, deepened the creative divide between Suprematism and its artistic opposition. As Lodder has written, for the Constructivists, 'Suprematism seemed too much concerned with art itself, rather than concentrating on reconstructing the external world. It seemed to ignore communist ideology, and the demands of industry, engineering, science, and technology in favour of aesthetics'.<sup>394</sup> Lodder has also noted that 'for Malevich, pure conceptual creativity was in, and of, itself utilitarian'.<sup>395</sup> In the final paragraphs of *On New Systems in Art*, Malevich expressed what he believed to be the work of the individual artist. He concluded:

We are living in a special time: perhaps there has never been such a time. [...] a new economic order is being brought about to smooth ruts in our creative brain, in order to carry further its plan for moving forward into the infinite: this is where the philosophy of contemporaneity lies, the philosophy our creative days must follow.<sup>396</sup>

For Malevich, Suprematism existed in its own right. It was not to be inserted into reality, as Rodchenko viewed his creative activity. Suprematism was reality as far as Malevich was concerned. Even if he had reconciled Suprematism with the trajectory of Modernism, this new theoretical principle of economy

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<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>391</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>394</sup> Christina Lodder, 'Conflicting Approaches to Creativity?', in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 260.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>396</sup> Malevich, 'On New Systems in Art', in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 117.

defined the foundation of all art, 'on which the forms of all the creative conditions for inventions and the arts should develop' in Malevich's view.<sup>397</sup>

*On New Systems in Art* may well be self-reverent, but it just as much represents a clear-minded and determined attempt to explain Suprematism in the face of increasing isolation. Surely, in the face of what was now organised opposition, Malevich would have felt a strong desire to be understood. A frustration at the political expectation of art was not left out of this text. 'Even the most cultured socialists,' Malevich complained, 'make the same demands of art as a merchant asking a painter to make him a signboard showing in a comprehensible manner the goods available in his shop'.<sup>398</sup> Malevich may have felt annoyed at what, in his view, were the short-sighted artistic inclinations of officials, but the primary motivation that underpinned this comparatively clear and comprehensive explanation of Suprematism must be linked to the threat of artistic isolation.

Acutely aware of the hostility he faced, Malevich moved to establish his studios and enlist a new set of followers. In his teaching programme, which Malevich submitted to the council for the Second Free State Art Studios, he set out his approach to pedagogy. His programme opened with the statement: 'the general direction of the studio: Cubism, Futurism and Suprematism (as the new painterly worldview)'.<sup>399</sup> By working through studies in Cezanne, Cubism and Futurism, students would be able to make their way to the ultimate goal of 'building forms according to the Suprematist System'.<sup>400</sup> This investigation of earlier artistic movements would lead each artist to Suprematism, making them capable and equipped to establish the new 'painterly worldview'.<sup>401</sup>

In the process of establishing his studio at the Moscow SVOMAS and implementing his teaching programme in late 1918, Malevich wrote to the Plenipotentiary of the State Free Art Studios and requested a long list of items which is important to state in full here.

My Studio requires:

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<sup>397</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>399</sup> Malevich, 'Program of Studies for the Studio in 1919-1920 Academic Year', 15 September 1919; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 450.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid., 451.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid., 450.

Male plaster figure  
20 metal sheets  
20 large plywood boards  
20 lbs carpenter glue  
1 pack dry whitewash  
6 large drafting rulers and angles  
Complete set of carpentry tools  
1 pack cardboard in two sizes, thick and thin.  
Wooden beams, 1 vershok [4.4 cm] square of 1.5 vershoks  
20lbs nails of various sizes  
10 sheets of glass of various format  
20 pots of various sizes  
2 pieces of vershok [4.4 cm] board  
10 pieces of 1 archin [71 cm] board  
2 archins [142 cm] of wire net  
Turpentine  
Kerosene, lacquer, palettes to equip the colour and volume studio.<sup>402</sup>

In addition to these materials, Malevich requested ‘150,000 roubles for the immediate equipping of the art and sculpture studios with the necessary teaching inventory’.<sup>403</sup> Anticipating the arrival of these materials, Malevich published an announcement in *Iskusstvo* and called for ‘comrade textile workers’ and ‘comrade metalworkers’ to join him.<sup>404</sup>

A couple of months later, it appears that Malevich had not received his requested items. Subsequent letters he wrote took on a new tone of urgency and desperation. Imploring the department into action,

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<sup>402</sup> Malevich, ‘Request for Supplies’, 25 November 1918; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 446-447.

<sup>403</sup> Malevich, ‘Letter to the finance subdivision of the Visual Arts Division of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment’, 16 December 1918, *ibid.*, I: 447.

<sup>404</sup> Malevich, ‘Notification by Kazimir Malevich’, 5 January 1919, *ibid.*, I: 448.

Malevich pleaded, ‘please rush the delivery of at least some things from my list of supplies for equipping the studio. I urgently need right away; a cupboard or drawer or shelves, hammer, small nails, cardboard, plywood, carpenter’s glue. After that, please gradually supply the rest’.<sup>405</sup> Months later, in September 1919, when Malevich submitted his pedagogical programme for the coming year, he wrote that his studio ‘must be equipped with the necessary materials. Wood, boards, plywood, cardboard, sheet metal, linoleum, tar paper. Workbench and necessary tools’.<sup>406</sup> He was clearly desperate to get his hands on anything that would help. Space was also a requirement. ‘I ask the council to give me a larger studio or to combine the present studio with the one next door to it by putting a door in the wall, I believe there was one there that was boarded up. Given the number of working groups, I must have three rooms’.<sup>407</sup> These repeated requests seem to have gone without any satisfactory response and this effectively stalled Malevich’s teaching ambitions in Moscow.

Conditions in Moscow over the winter of 1918-19 were severe, as this chapter has explored, and there was no reason to think the following winter would be any less horrific. Pevsner, an assistant in Malevich’s studio, recalled how difficult life was for teachers at the end of 1919.

For artists, especially the professors at the School of Fine Arts, life became unbearable. [...] It was no longer possible to fully immerse oneself in art. Moreover, there could be no question of visiting artists’ studios, which were not heated and became iced over, and there was such a shortage of firewood that furniture and anything else that could be burned was fed to the stove.<sup>408</sup>

Moscow was, in a literal sense, consuming itself just to stay alive. That houses were demolished for fuel indicates just how desperate people had become (Fig. 3.16).

Money, even if any of it existed, was of no use. Naudeau wrote that the issue was ‘the enormous amount of it issued. Already in numerous villages the peasants, in payment for their wheat, have preferred old overcoats, boots, or other second-hand objects to those rolls of rouble notes, with which they can buy

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<sup>405</sup> Malevich, ‘Note to Valentin Turkin’, [January – February 1919]; *ibid.*, I: 448.

<sup>406</sup> Malevich, ‘Letter to the Council of the Second State Art Free Studios’, 15 September 1919; *ibid.*, I: 450-451.

<sup>407</sup> Malevich, ‘Program of Studies for the Studio in 1919-1920 Academic Year’, 15 September 1919; *ibid.*, I: 450.

<sup>408</sup> Pevsner, ‘Rencontre avec Kazimir Malévitch dans la Russie d’après 1917’, *Aujourd’hui*, 4.

nothing'.<sup>409</sup> It makes sense then that Popova, even with her family wealth, did not anticipate being able to survive in the capital. Malevich would have been aware that, in the summer of 1919, Popova had rolled the dice and decided to escape Moscow with her husband and son to Rostov-on-Don.<sup>410</sup> There were no indications that the material shortages at the Moscow studios were about to get any easier. As Sheila Fitzpatrick reminded us, 'the arts were, of course, a secondary problem for Narkompros. [...] The urgency of the task was dictated by the circumstances of the war and revolution which put them under constant threat of destruction'.<sup>411</sup> By the autumn, Malevich surely had very limited optimism that he would be able to situate Suprematism as a leading creative force if he remained in Moscow.

It was at this impasse, in the autumn of 1919, that Malevich met the artist and architectural engineer El Lissitzky, who had travelled to Moscow to request supplies for the Vitebsk studios. Facing the same struggle for materials, Lissitzky invited Malevich to relocate to Vitebsk. Lissitzky's offer to Malevich at this moment represented something well beyond a simple change of location. Vitebsk was certainly not a major centre of avant-garde activity, but it was attractive for both professional and practical reasons.

Malevich's contact with Lissitzky had, in fact, already been established before the two men met in person. In August 1919, the Suprematist received a letter in which Lissitzky advocated the importance of the printed book. Unbeknownst to Lissitzky, he was offering Malevich options to advance his ongoing ambition to consolidate his legacy. Lissitzky wrote:

The book is now everything. In our time it has become what the cathedral with its frescoes and stained glass (coloured windows) used to be, what the palaces and museums, where people went to look and learn, used to be. The book has become the monument of the present, but in contrast to the old monumental art, it itself goes to the people, and does not stand like a cathedral in one place, waiting for someone to approach. The book now expects the contemporary artist to use it so as to make this monument of the future.<sup>412</sup>

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<sup>409</sup> Naudeau, 'Moscow at the Beginning of 1919', 507.

<sup>410</sup> Natalia Adaskina, 'Liubov Popova and her Contemporaries', in John E. Bowlt and Matthew Drutt, eds., *Amazons of the Avant-Garde: Alexandra Exter, Natalia Goncharova, Liubov Popova, Varvara Stepanova, and Nadezhda Udaltsova* (London: Royal Academy, 1999), 185-190.

<sup>411</sup> Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissar of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 112-113.

<sup>412</sup> El Lissitzky, letter to Kazimir Malevich, 12 September 1919, in Elena V. Basner et al., eds., *In Malevich's Circle: Confederates, Students, Followers in Russia 1920s-1950s* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2000), 52.

Lissitzky had authority in printing. In addition to running the architectural and graphic arts in Vitebsk, he also led the school's printing workshops.<sup>413</sup> It is almost certain that this would have piqued Malevich's professional interest before the two men met in person. Given that Malevich had recently completed *On New Systems in Art*, the Suprematist would certainly have been interested in the possibilities of printing in Vitebsk. Malevich had recently published his writing in *Art of the Commune* and *Anarchy* and the earlier frustrations he had with 'Supremus' were probably not quite a distant memory. Lissitzky's invitation meant that Malevich would be able to produce printed materials in his own name on his own terms. Surely, Malevich envisioned a new opportunity to promote Suprematism and continue to establish his legacy.

Faced with worsening conditions in Moscow, the prospect of Vitebsk would have been an attractive if unexpected option for Malevich. The city was by no means overflowing with material comfort, but Malevich would have anticipated that the requirements of his pedagogical programme would, more than likely, be met in Vitebsk. The city was within safe territory, held by the Bolsheviks, where no fighting had been taking place. As well as promising to be better provisioned with materials and food, Malevich would have had a flat in the school building. In Moscow, Malevich had a long commute from his dacha in Nemchinovka to his studios, which would surely have been a major factor in his decision.<sup>414</sup> Vitebsk was small, as was the school, and there was only Marc Chagall to deal with.

Frustrated, on 29 October 1919, Malevich wrote to the Council of the Second State Free Art Studios and submitted a letter of resignation.

Despite my desire to work at the Studios, without having either an apartment (I am living at a cold dacha), firewood or light, I am forced to accept the invitation of the Vitebsk studios, which are providing me with all of the conditions for living and working, and leave my work in Moscow.

K Malevich

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<sup>413</sup> Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art*, trans. Katherine Foshko Tsan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 28.

<sup>414</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, 7 November 1919; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 111.

P.S. I ask the Council to pay me in full, both my salary and the difference, the latter to be sent to Vitebsk.<sup>415</sup>

Malevich did not wait around for a reply and left for Vitebsk only days later.<sup>416</sup> By the end of 1919, questions of survival and artistic legacy had once again converged for the Suprematist. While this may have been a familiar pattern for Malevich, there is no reason to think that he anticipated that Suprematism was about to enter an entirely new phase of creative activity.

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<sup>415</sup> Malevich, 'Announcement to the Council of Second State Free Art Studios', 29 October 1919; *ibid.*, I: 451.

<sup>416</sup> Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 67.



**Figure 3.1**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Yellow Plane in Dissolution*

1917-18

Oil on canvas

106 x 70.5 cm

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



**Figure 3.2**

**Kazimir Malevich**

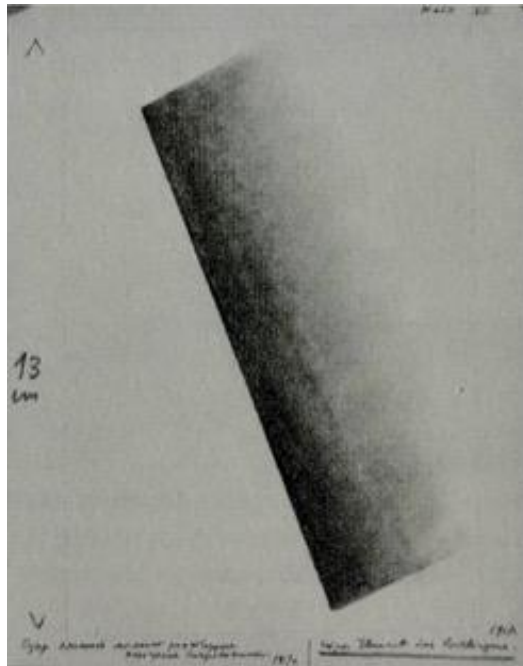
*Dissolution of a Plane*

1917

Oil on canvas

133 x 78 cm

Galerie Gmurzynska, Zurich



**Figure 3.3**

**Kazimir Malevich**

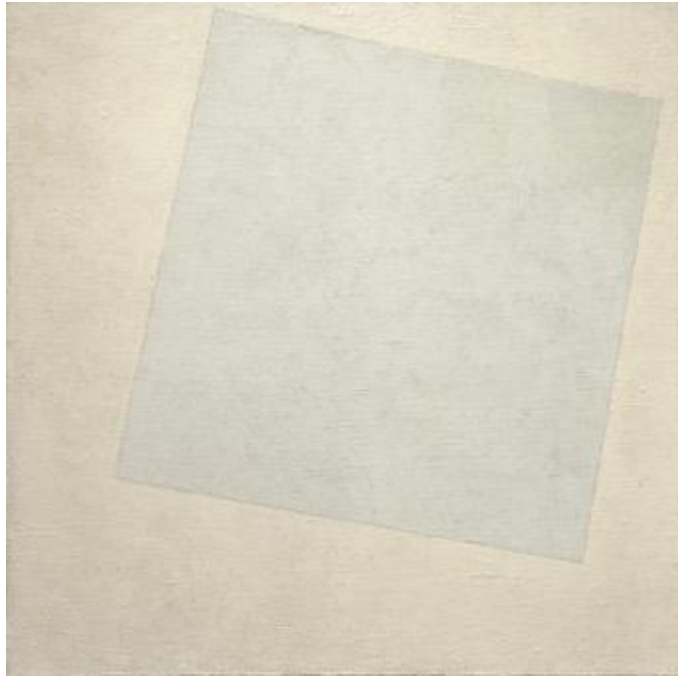
*Plane in Dissolution*

1917

Pencil on paper

19 x 12.7 cm

Kupferstichkabinet, Basel



**Figure 3.4**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Suprematist Composition: White on White*

1918

Oil on canvas

79.4 x 79.4 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Figure 3.5**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Cover for the document folder for the Congress on Committees on Rural Poverty*

1918

Lithograph

42.2 x 64 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



**Figure 3.6**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Study for cover for the document folder for the Congress of Committees on Rural Poverty*

1918

Gouache, India ink, and watercolour on paper

32.7 x 41.3 cm

Pushkin House, St. Petersburg



**Figure 3.7**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Study for cover for the document folder for the Congress of Committees on Rural Poverty*

1918

Gouache, India ink, and watercolour on paper

28.9 x 29 cm

Pushkin House, St. Petersburg



**Figure 3.8**

Photograph of the decoration of Znamenskaya Ploshchad

Petrograd

November 1918

Centre Pompidou, Paris



**Figure 3.9**

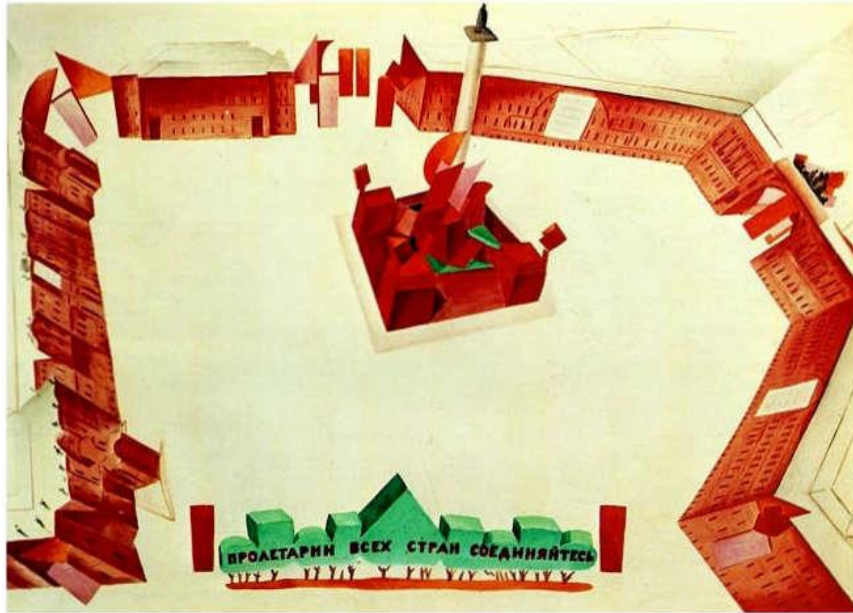
**Natan Altman**

Photograph of the decoration for the Winter Palace

Petrograd

1918

Centre Pompidou, Paris



**Figure 3.10**

**Natan Altman**

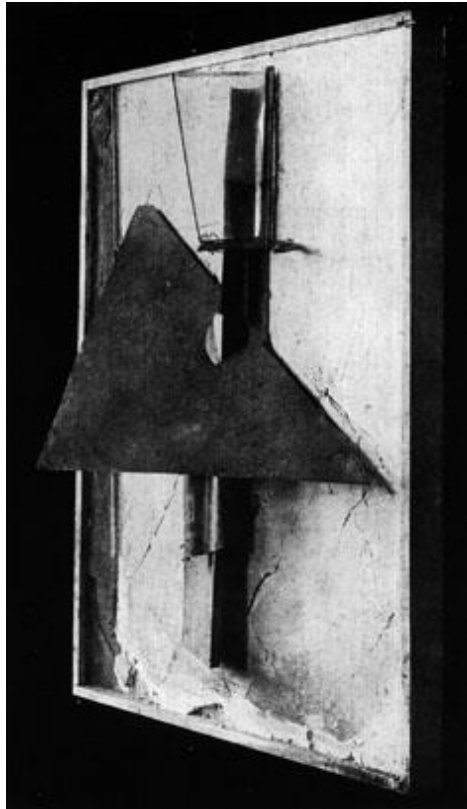
*Design for the Decoration of Uritsky Square in Petrograd on the First Anniversary of the October Revolution*

1920

Plywood and oil

60.5 x 84.1 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



**Figure 3.11**

**Vladimir Tatlin**

1914

Selection of Materials: Iron, Stucco, Glass, Asphalt

Whereabouts unknown

Reproduced from Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983)



**Figure 3.12**

**Aleksandr Rodchenko**

*Non-Objective Painting No. 80 (Black on Black)*

1918

Oil and bitumen on glass

81.9 x 79.4 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Figure 3.13**

**Liubov Popova**

*Painterly Architectonic*

1918

Oil on canvas

105 x 80 cm

Slobodskoy Museum and Exhibition Centre, Slobodskoy



**Figure 3.14**

**Ivan Vladimirov**

*Famine*

1919

Watercolour

29.2 x 39.4 cm

Hoover Institution Library and Archives

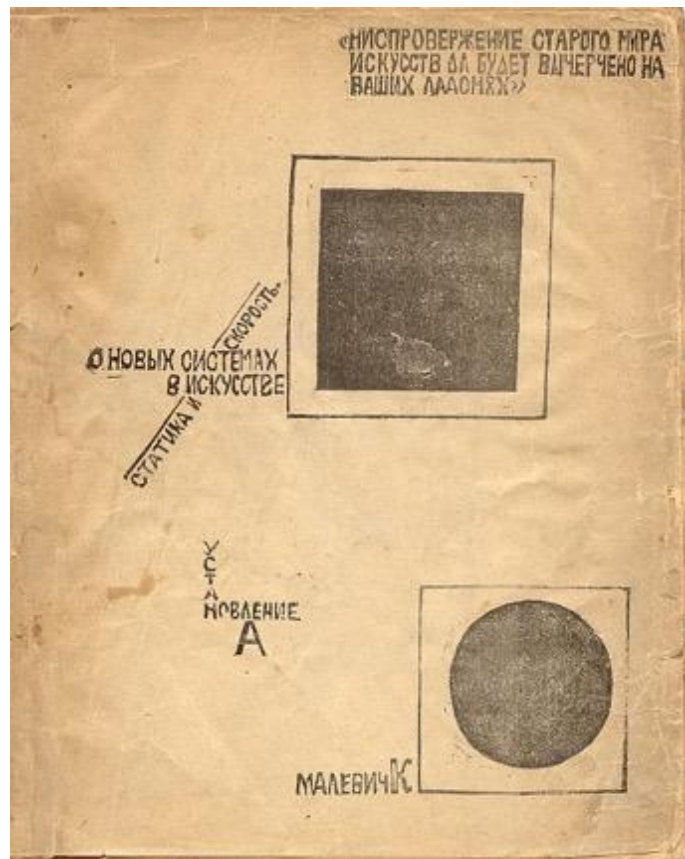


Figure 3.15

Kazimir Malevich

Cover for *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve. Statika i skorost. Ustanovlenie A* [On New Systems in Art. Stasis and Speed. Resolution A] (Vitebsk, Unovis, 1919)

Reproduced from The Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Figure 3.16**

Photograph of wooden house being disassembled for firewood

Moscow

c. 1919

Hoover Institution Library and Archives

## Chapter Four

### Vitebsk: A Suprematist Coup and a New Architectural Front

‘If you only knew what route we had to travel ... we gathered firewood for the steam-engine, we spent the night in Smolensk, in the inspection yard, and so on. You really have to have energy to endure this horror’.<sup>417</sup> The road to Vitebsk was surely a tremendous ordeal for Malevich and his pregnant wife. The couple reached Smolensk, still 150 kilometres from Vitebsk, after they had travelled for three days and three nights.<sup>418</sup> Eventually, after four full days of travel, Malevich arrived at the Vitebsk People’s Art School (Vitebskoe narodnoe khudozhestvennoe uchilishche) (Fig. 4.1) on 5 November 1919.<sup>419</sup>

The assurance that the Vitebsk school would provide the Suprematist ‘with all of the conditions for living and working’ was met.<sup>420</sup> Malevich and his wife were accommodated in the school and the Suprematist was no longer forced to waste time and energy on a lengthy commute. Almost incredulously, Malevich wrote that his ‘usual daily 30-verst foot race [12-mile walk] around Moscow has now narrowed down to such a point that it’s funny’.<sup>421</sup> ‘All my activity’, he added, ‘is now concentrated in a single building where I live, have my room, light, warmth and other amenities’.<sup>422</sup>

The relocation, however, was regarded only as a short-term measure and Malevich swiftly made plans for his departure. ‘I am living in Vitebsk where it is possible to work quietly’, Malevich informed his old friend and colleague, Mikhail Matiushin, ‘but of course, this is all temporary. I have decided to settle in Petrograd’, still in his first winter in Vitebsk.<sup>423</sup> Alongside Moscow, Petrograd was Russia’s other main centre of cultural activity and Malevich knew he needed to situate himself amongst creative people if he were to succeed rather than merely survive.

For all intents and purposes, the move to Vitebsk was conceived as an exercise in coming up for air for the Suprematist and his pregnant wife, who gave birth to their child Una in April 1920 (Fig. 4.2).

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<sup>417</sup> Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Gershenzon, 7 November 1919; English translation in Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), I: 111.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid.

<sup>419</sup> Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art*, trans. Katherine Foshko Tsan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), 67.

<sup>420</sup> Malevich, announcement to the council of Second State Free Art Studios, 29 October 1919; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 451.

<sup>421</sup> Malevich, letter to Gershenzon, 7 November 1919; *ibid.*, I: 111.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

<sup>423</sup> Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin, 21 January 1920; *ibid.*, I: 123.

Vitebsk allowed Malevich to devote time and energy to his wife, new child and Suprematism in a way that had not been possible in Moscow. If he did not fall victim to the Civil War, Malevich hoped at the very least that he might be able to use the school's printing workshop to push out some literature and breathe new life into Suprematism. Only a week after he left Moscow, Malevich resolved: 'all my energy can be given to writing brochures, now I will work industriously in my Vitebsk exile. My brushes are moving further and further away'.<sup>424</sup> However, as Malevich set about this task, nothing suggests he anticipated that Vitebsk would be the sort of creative environment he believed only existed in the major cities. Nor is there any indication that he anticipated Suprematism's move into the field of architecture.

To understand the origin of Suprematism's architectural front in Vitebsk, it is important to first understand how Malevich installed himself in the city. To account for these developments, it is necessary to say a few words about Marc Chagall, the Jewish artist and native of the city who was responsible for establishing the school within the network of the State Free Art Studios (Svobodnye gosudarstvennye khudozhestvennye masterskie – SVOMAS). In September 1918, a decree by the Department of Fine Arts within the People's Commissariat of Education (Otdel izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv, Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia – IZO Narkompros) appointed Chagall as the 'authorised representative in artistic affairs of the Vitebsk Province'.<sup>425</sup> This office gave the artist 'the right to organise art schools, museums, exhibitions, courses and lectures on art and any other artistic enterprise, in the city and city region'.<sup>426</sup> Chagall attempted to take full advantage of his authority and swiftly moved to establish a school that would, just like the others in the network, be egalitarian and inclusive in nature. On 11 November 1918, the school opened at 10 Bukharin Street.<sup>427</sup> Chagall invited Nina Kogan, Vera Ermolaeva, Ivan Puni and his wife, Ksenia Boguslavskaia, and El Lissitzky to join him.<sup>428</sup> By the start of 1919, as many as 120 students had enrolled.<sup>429</sup>

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<sup>424</sup> Ibid.

<sup>425</sup> Benjamin Harshav, *Marc Chagall and his Times: A Documentary Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 252; Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 22.

<sup>426</sup> Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 22.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>428</sup> 'Instructors and the Studios', *ibid.*, 30-56.

<sup>429</sup> Tatiana Goriacheva, 'UNOVIS: 'We Will Be Like Fire and Will Give the Force of the New'', in Elena V. Basner et al., eds., *In Malevich's Circle: Confederates, Students, Followers in Russia 1920s-1950s* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2000), 13.

Chagall's ability to establish the school was facilitated by some favourable conditions. Although situated in the poverty-stricken and oppressed territory known until 1917 as the Pale of Settlement, Vitebsk was largely unaffected by the First World War. The same can be said of the upheaval of the revolutionary period and the subsequent Civil War, which caused so much suffering in Russia's major cities and countryside. As the Civil War gripped Moscow, Vitebsk remained comparatively well-stocked and well-provisioned. The school enjoyed a degree of security that did not exist in the country's capital. Indicative of the contrast between Vitebsk and Moscow, Chagall wrote to Alexandre Benois in 1918 and expressed concern for the welfare of this old adversary of Malevich. 'How are you? You are hungry, perhaps things are a little easier here. Come to our district and eat your fill'.<sup>430</sup> Benois, however, remained in Moscow.

The material conditions that Chagall suggested Benois would find in Vitebsk seem to have been unchanged when Malevich arrived. Malevich anticipated that life would be, at least comparatively, less uncomfortable, but the Suprematist was genuinely taken aback by what he found in Vitebsk. From the moment he arrived, Malevich observed life in a manner entirely different from the one he left behind in Moscow. In a letter he wrote to Maria Gershenzon, the wife of Mikhail, Malevich could barely contain his disbelief. 'As soon as I arrived in Vitebsk, I saw that bread and all other kinds of goods such as cereals were overflowing in every store, and apart from this, there were sausages hanging and all sorts of meats. I was amazed and immediately purchased two fresh loaves'.<sup>431</sup> Vitebsk was flooded, he went on, 'with anything one might desire, and we are gnawing on it here'.<sup>432</sup> Only too aware of the hardships being endured in Moscow, and possibly realising the insensitivity of his words, Malevich tried to post a loaf of bread to Maria and Mikhail.

A photograph of the members of the People's Creative Committee (Fig. 4.3) illustrates the dynamic that existed between Chagall and Malevich in the weeks after the Suprematist arrived. In this photograph, Chagall is sat at the centre of this image and appears proud to be surrounded by his colleagues, his students and his artworks, all of which attest to Chagall's prominence in the school at this moment. Malevich is seated at the table and is on the front row, but he is not central. Unlike Chagall, the Suprematist is peripheral

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<sup>430</sup> Marc Chagall, letter to Alexandre Benois, [Early 1918], in Christophe Vitali, *Marc Chagall: The Russian Years 1906-1922*, trans. Jerry Payne (Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle, 1991), 150.

<sup>431</sup> Malevich, letter to Maria Gershenzon, 28 December 1919; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 122.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*

and wears an almost humble expression on his face. This photograph illustrates the simple fact that, by accepting an offer from Lissitzky, Malevich had stepped into the domain of Chagall.

Malevich may appear humble in this image, but he was by no means deferential in the Vitebsk school. Within days of his arrival, the Suprematist participated in the very fittingly named *First State Exhibition by Local and Moscow Artists* (8 November – 22 December 1919).<sup>433</sup> Little is known about this exhibition, but it is possible that for many of the students at the school this was the first encounter with Suprematist painting. Supplementing this introduction to his artworks, *On New Systems in Art* was printed in the lithographic workshop a few weeks after Malevich arrived with a new conclusion, Statute A [*Ustanovlenie A*].<sup>434</sup> Malevich boasted that as many as 1000 copies of this work were produced.<sup>435</sup> Whether this sizable figure was true or not, this statement indicates a belief in the importance of the text and alludes to the abundance of printing materials available in Vitebsk. Optimistically, given the situation in Moscow, Malevich wrote to Varvara Stepanova and Olga Matiushina, Matiushin's wife, to say that he had allocated three hundred copies for Moscow. The dissemination and the promotion of Suprematism were important to Malevich but, priced at forty roubles, he also hoped that the publication would provide him with some much-needed cash. Forty roubles may have been a nominal figure in late 1919, but in the context of Moscow's hyperinflation, where it was a struggle to source basic food supplies, the capacity to purchase this publication must be measured against the far more pressing need to obtain basic food items.

Suprematism very quickly advanced beyond the walls of the school and into the streets of Vitebsk. Having agreed to produce the decorative programme for the second anniversary of the revolution for the Vitebsk Committee to Combat Unemployment, Malevich and Lissitzky worked on a curtain design for the stage of the Vitebsk City Theatre (Fig. 4.4). With the school's students, Malevich produced panels in Suprematist forms which adorned the White Barracks (Fig. 4.5). Suprematism also decorated book covers and trams (Fig. 4.6) for the anniversary of the revolution. Lissitzky produced the propaganda board *The Factory Work Benches Await You* (1919) (Fig. 4.7), which was photographed in Vitebsk. Suprematist imagery

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<sup>433</sup> Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 69-72.

<sup>434</sup> K. Malevich, 'Ustanovlenie A v iskusstve' [Resolution A in Art], in *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve. Statika i skorost'. Ustanovlenie A* [On New Systems in Art: Stasis and Speed: Resolution A] (Vitebsk, 1919); reprinted in Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, ed. A. S. Shatskikh (Moscow: Gileia, 1995), I: 184; English translation in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), 119.

<sup>435</sup> Malevich, letter to Varvara Stepanova, [December 1919]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 120.

could also be seen above the city's branch of the Russian Telegraph Agency (ROSTA) (Fig. 4.8). Before the end of 1919, the aesthetic language of Suprematism was ubiquitous within the school and throughout Vitebsk at large. As this makes apparent, in great comparison to Moscow at this moment, Vitebsk facilitated the exploration of Suprematism on a more expansive scale.

The enthusiasm that was felt for Suprematism within the school grew rapidly in the new year. In February 1920, the school restaged the 1913 opera, *Victory over the Sun*, and, on the same night, a Suprematist ballet was produced and performed by Kogan with the support of students. Also in February 1920, Malevich realised an aspiration he had expressed to Matiushin in the summer of 1915. A creative group emerged around Suprematism and was named Unovis (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva – Champions of the New Art). On 15 February, the very day after Unovis was formalised, *The Second Exhibition of Student Work* opened at which three hundred and fifty works were displayed.<sup>436</sup> Unsurprisingly, the school's activities across the city had generated a great deal of interest and apparently three thousand visitors attended this exhibition.<sup>437</sup> No doubt, the public were hoping to understand what was going on within this hive of artistic activity. The emergence of a unified collective creative group, together with the public visibility it generated, realised a long-held ambition for Malevich.

At the end of May 1920, Unovis published the typewritten almanac *Unovis No. 1* (Fig. 4.9).<sup>438</sup> This document included texts by Malevich, Lissitzky, Kogan, Lazar Zuperman, Ermolaeva, Ivan Gavris and L Kliatskina. The almanac also featured Aleksei Kruchenykh and Matiushin as honorary members. *Unovis No. 1* appeared in print a little more than six months after Malevich arrived at the school. It is difficult not to contrast the achievement of this publication with the near three-year struggle that defined the Supremus group and its journal. The formation of Unovis and the realisation of the group's almanac, however, were in no sense a replication or an overdue substitution for '*Supremus*'. With the exception of the contributions by Kruchenykh and Matiushin, which do not engage with Suprematism directly, the almanac is a focused and cohesive body of work that champions Suprematism far more than the eclectic '*Supremus*' ever would

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<sup>436</sup> Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 207.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid.

<sup>438</sup> *Unovis No. 1*. (Vitebsk. 1920), reprinted in *Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Faksimil'noe izdanie*, ed. Tat'iana Goriacheva (Moscow: State Tretyakov Gallery / Izdatel'stvo Skanrus, 2003).

have. A rich compilation of theory, declarations, statements and drawings, *Unovis No. 1* emphatically endorsed Suprematism and its pages proudly described the group's activities.

In Vitebsk, Malevich was able to implement the educational ideas that he had desperately tried to introduce at the Second State Free Art Studios in Moscow. The group's almanac states that there were four departments.<sup>439</sup> Led by Kogan, the first stage of education was a preparatory course which focused on the fundamental principles of abstract painting. The second stage of the programme introduced the young student group to studies in Cezanne and Cubism. The third stage further explored Cubism alongside Van Gogh and Futurism. In the fourth stage, the students encountered the domains of theatre, Suprematism and architecture. This programme symbolises Malevich's belief in how art has to develop and is based upon his view that Suprematism represents the answer for the future. His incorporation of Cezanne and Cubism emphasises that Suprematism's break from the past was justified by what had come before – an idea that allowed for new developments but would also lead to significant tensions.

Shatskikh has observed that Malevich's innovative approach to teaching also 'came to life in lectures, reports and discussions'.<sup>440</sup> In this sense, Unovis' visit to Malevich's first solo exhibition, *The Sixteenth State Exhibition*, which opened in Moscow on 25 March 1920, should just as well be viewed as part of the group's pedagogical programme. Little is known about the reception of this exhibition but, according to Shatskikh, it remained open into the summer.<sup>441</sup> In one no doubt choreographed photograph (Fig. 4.10), Malevich is positioned as though he is now at the centre of their world. Boarding a train for the capital, the Unovis students may well have been excited to see their teacher in his own environment of Moscow, but there is no reason to think that the journey itself would have been anything other than the agonising ordeal which defined Malevich's initial move to Vitebsk a few months earlier.

The architect and one-time Vitebsk student Moisei Lerman, who spoke to Shatskikh in 1991, explained that Malevich guided his students around the exhibition, through his studies in Impressionism, Cezanne, Cubism and Cubo-Futurism to 'colour Suprematism, the black square and then there were empty

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<sup>439</sup> 'Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Prilozhenie', 93.

<sup>440</sup> Shatskikh, 'Teach Write, Experiment: Malevich in Vitebsk. 1919–22', in Angela Lampe, ed. *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk 1918–1922* (Paris: Centre Pompidou; Munich: Prestel Verlag, 2018), 120.

<sup>441</sup> Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 70.

frames'.<sup>442</sup> Malevich apparently joked that they had come to 'the end of art'.<sup>443</sup> Lerman, who wore a black square when he was in the capital, also told Shatskikh that 'when we came to Moscow on a tour, we suffered from hunger'.<sup>444</sup> Life was still very hard in the capital in 1920, but with this conceptual end of painting, something must surely follow it.

This shift took place at the institutional level, as Malevich quickly eclipsed Chagall. If one were to visualise a line graph depicting the ascendancy of Malevich and Suprematism at the Vitebsk school, it would be mirrored by an inverted line symbolising the demise of Chagall. Without question, Chagall was of fundamental importance in establishing the school and attracting its student population, but, even when the photograph of the People's Creative Committee was taken at the end of 1919 (Fig. 4.3), the shift had already begun to take place. As Malevich introduced his Suprematism and his system of education, he also attracted much of the existing teaching staff as well as its student body. In the end, it seems that Chagall felt that he was usurped by his staff in a somewhat underhand way. Many of the students who had enrolled under his tutelage defected along with their teachers, in Chagall's absence, to Malevich. Chagall later despondently wrote:

One day, when I was away, as usual, getting bread, paints and money for them, all of those professors rebelled and drew my pupils into their rebellion. May God forgive them! The very people to whom I had given housing, reassured them of bread and employment, they posted a notice that expelled me from the school within twenty-four hours.<sup>445</sup>

It is easy to feel for Chagall. Sadly, he never again returned to his native city and seems to have resented the decision of his colleagues and his students for the rest of his life.

Chagall's departure highlights that the Vitebsk school was a relatively small provincial institution without much status. Certainly, Malevich never felt any need to fit in. The student body was young and receptive. Contrary to what was beginning to happen in Moscow and Petrograd, the students who signed

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<sup>442</sup> Moisei Lerman, quoted in Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 186.

<sup>443</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>444</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>445</sup> Marc Chagall, *Ma Vie* (Paris: Stock, 1983), 202.

up to Unovis were not already in the process of forming allegiances with other avant-garde artists or associating themselves with other major artistic trends.

Following Chagall's departure, the Vitebsk school became Malevich's territory and was defined by Suprematism. Malevich sought to evidence this in photography. In another highly choreographed image, Malevich is captured, chalk in hand, having supposedly just drawn a Suprematist design for his students who are sat around him as if busy interpreting Malevich's ideas (Fig. 4.11). In this image, Nikolai Suetin is seen in the foreground displaying a black square on his cuff, and Malevich, in profile, appears as though he is somehow at one with the two-dimensional image on the chalkboard. The choreography of this image clearly aims to suggest that the distinction between daily life and the more elusive objectless dimension that defined Suprematism was disappearing, as if Malevich's ideas were beginning to define space itself.

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Malevich and his teaching programme were not the only reasons that Suprematism began to thrive in Vitebsk. Malevich was certainly a captivating figure, as Shatskikh believes, but the initial success that Suprematism enjoyed in Vitebsk cannot be attributed to Malevich alone.<sup>446</sup> Although Malevich was essential in the introduction of Suprematism in the school, for the movement to gain momentum Malevich needed the participation of others – not only for Suprematism's survival, but for its continued development.

Theatre was one of the most important arenas of collaborative practice at the school in relation to the emergence of new ideas in architecture. As discussed in the introduction, however, the realm of theatre represents an under-researched area of scholarship. This is surprising given that in 1922, when he reflected on his time in Vitebsk, Lissitzky confirmed that there was a powerful connection between theatre and architecture in the minds of Unovis. He wrote that 'a great store of creative energy had accumulated, which could not be realised in architecture because there was no building. This energy found its release in the theatre'.<sup>447</sup> Lissitzky also stated that in Vitebsk, for a 'factory festival, Malevich and I painted fifteen hundred

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<sup>446</sup> Shatskikh, 'Teach Write, Experiment: Malevich in Vitebsk. 1919–22', in Lampe, ed., *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich*, 120.

<sup>447</sup> Lissitzky, 'New Russian Art – A Lecture Given in 1922', in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. Helene Aldwinckle (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 343.

square metres of canvas'.<sup>448</sup> Recalling the struggles Malevich had in Moscow, this access to canvas would have been wholly unimaginable a year earlier. Lissitzky's statement suggests that theatre offered adequate materials and a setting for the exploration of architecture. As Unovis member Lazar Zuperman succinctly wrote in his almanac text, 'the role of sculpture and architecture is colossal in theatre'.<sup>449</sup> These remarks underscore how theatre functioned as a sort of gateway to architecture for Unovis.

In Malevich's pedagogical programme in Vitebsk, theatre featured as a component of the fourth workshop, ahead of Suprematism and architecture. Theatre also featured as part of a separate decorative workshop alongside the main teaching programme which enabled students to experiment in theatre before they reached the fourth stage. Given Malevich's justification, as expressed in this teaching programme and in *On New Systems in Art*, that Suprematism was able to define the future based on preceding cultural activity, it is interesting at the outset of this discussion regarding theatre to consider where exactly the attribution for these new ideas may lie.

Perhaps because of the fact that retrospection was an inherent feature of Malevich's practice, it naturally became a feature of his pedagogy. As mentioned at earlier stages of this work, Malevich's participation in the 1913 opera, *Victory over the Sun*, served as a major impetus in the development of Suprematist painting. Malevich's re-examination of his curtain designs for the opera seems to have represented the final stimulus for the emergence of Suprematism's visual language.<sup>450</sup> Malevich, therefore, arrived in Vitebsk with the experience that the curtain could be a powerful instrument, which could allude to new possibilities within three-dimensional settings and evoke new, higher and more elusive spatial realities. Regarding Malevich's early curtain designs, such as Act One Scene Four (Fig. 4.12), Charlotte Douglas has written that 'the centre back plane seems, from the sketches, to open to infinity, which greatly elongated the axis of depth'.<sup>451</sup> This reading is corroborated by Malevich's own words. In the text 'Theatre' ('Teatr'), written a few years later and intended for publication in '*Supremus*', Malevich explained that in 1913, 'the curtain ripped, exploding the cry of the old brain's consciousness and at the same time, revealing

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<sup>448</sup> Ibid., 338.

<sup>449</sup> Zuperman, 'Teatr'; 'Unovis No. 1. Prilozhenie', 80.

<sup>450</sup> See Malevich's letters to Matiushin, [late May and early June 1915]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 65-66.

<sup>451</sup> Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia* (Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press, 1980), 44.

new roads, which lay before the ground and in the sky'.<sup>452</sup> In the original performance of *Victory over the Sun*, Malevich used the curtain to blur the spatial certainty of the stage space for the viewer.

There is every reason to believe that Malevich envisioned the *Sketch of a Curtain for a Meeting of the Committee to Combat Unemployment* (1919) (Fig. 4.4) as possessing many of the same qualities he explored in 1913. This design for a curtain seems to be a depiction of a stage and its spatial setting. Formally, this joint work by Malevich and Lissitzky used a different approach to curtain design than had been adopted for *Victory over the Sun*. The upper left and upper right corners of this work are each dominated by flat, red, two-dimensional planes of colour while grey forms dominate along its lower edge. The two-dimensionality that defines the periphery of this work gives way at the centre where a number of smaller forms are observed in white space. In this work there is an interaction between the representational stage and the illustration of abstraction itself. The distinction between the two is deliberately ambiguous. At the outer edges of this design, one is perhaps initially most confident about making a distinction. The two-dimensional red forms at the upper left and right corners of this work appear to represent traditional grand drapes of a theatre stage. Similarly, the lower grey forms at the base of this design also seem to be representational.

Although not truly three-dimensional, the grey forms are staggered as if indicating a set of stage steps that lead the viewer to the stage and the centre of this design where a play of Suprematist forms takes place. This white space is not a void but emblematic of a powerful energy in Suprematism which alludes to a conception of infinite space. It may seem that at the centre of the work are the abstracted Suprematist forms, but no single observation of this work can be made with absolute surety. It is not clear, for example, whether the large pink plane at the upper centre of this work features as part of the stage set or if it is an abstract form. It is possible that this form is in the process of breaking free of the set and about to enter the white infinite Suprematist space at the centre of this canvas. The two black squares, observed at the outer edges of this work, seem to be part of the representational stage set, yet these particular forms allude to a very obvious metaphysical value in Suprematism. There also seems to be an interaction between the small blue square at the bottom right and the larger grey form above it. It is impossible to determine whether one form is overlapping the other. Malevich's experimentation in bringing together abstraction and representation within one work is a formal device which precedes Suprematism, as Chapter One

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<sup>452</sup> K. Malevich, 'Teatr' (unpublished, 1917); reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, V: 79.

highlighted. This idea is seen most vividly in works such as *Reservist of the First Division* (1914) (Fig. 1.16) and *The Aviator* (1914) (Fig. 1.24).

The commission, corresponding with a committee to overcome unemployment, is important in readings of this design. The almanac refers to this curtain as a work of Unovis and, as if deliberately alluding to the room of the political meeting that the design was produced for, states that this wall hanging ‘entered the huge grey room as a bright new world’.<sup>453</sup> This curtain was never intended for a theatrical setting. For the two artists, the political meeting that was due to take place before this curtain was merely a short-lived activity positioned between the old days of the Tsar and the new Suprematist world. Implicit in this is the suggestion that Suprematism, rather than Bolshevism, was the stage upon which absolute freedom from the burden of unemployment could be realised.

The reproduction of *Victory over the Sun*, which took place at the school in February 1920, is integral to understanding the relationship between theatre and Suprematism’s new architectural thinking. In 1913, Malevich used innovative backdrops to challenge the viewer’s spatial perceptions. Curtains, however, were just one element that Malevich employed in conjunction with a number of other devices to subvert the spectator’s sense of space. In 1913, the stage sets, the lighting and the abstracted forms of the performers’ costumes interplayed to create a sort of new and unfamiliar spatial rhetoric. Benedikt Livshits, who attended one of the two 1913 performances, wrote in his memoirs that he felt Malevich aspired to create a ‘painterly stereometry’ within the confines of a scenic box, as if Malevich had somehow attempted to transpose the laws that govern painterly planes into the three-dimensional theatre space.<sup>454</sup> In ‘Theatre’, Malevich essentially validates Livshits’ interpretation by stating that ‘each shape and sound with regard to itself, he or she fuses the whole scene into a single body, not randomly, but as a living entity’.<sup>455</sup> Malevich does not suggest that a stage space has intrinsic value but instead argues that it is defined by the interaction of the given artistic elements.

When Malevich worked with Vladimir Mayakovsky on the 1918 revolutionary play *Mystery Bouffe*, the Suprematist again took a painterly approach to the production of stage space. Speaking to the theatre historian Aleksandr Fevralsky, the Suprematist was more specific about his approach and underlined the

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<sup>453</sup> ‘Unovis I ego obshchestvennoe tvorchestvo’; ‘Unovis No. 1. Prilozhenie’, 86.

<sup>454</sup> Benedikt Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer* (Moscow: Palace Editions, 2004), 164.

<sup>455</sup> Malevich, ‘Teatr’; Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, V: 77.

importance of Cubism. ‘My approach to the production was Cubist, I saw the box-stage as the frame of a picture and the actors as contrasting elements’.<sup>456</sup> This approach played a major role in Vitebsk, not only in the realm of theatre but in the pedagogical programme in preparation for the students’ encounter with Suprematism and architecture. In a recent text, Aleksandr Lisov has explored the significance of Cubism in Malevich’s pedagogical system and pointed out that for the Suprematist, ‘Cubism was the foundation for mastering art’ in Vitebsk.<sup>457</sup> Illustrating this point, Lisov quotes Ermolaeva, who ran Malevich’s Cubist workshop and supervised the restaging of the opera. ‘Cubism is the creative representation of a pictorially perceived world; Cubism is a system of pictorial textures. Through the system of Cubism, a person attains a purified perception of the world [as seen] through art’.<sup>458</sup> Looking back to the Cubist foundation of making space in new formulations was evidently an integral key for new activity in Suprematism.

Ermolaeva’s woodcut illustrations of the production in Vitebsk (1920) (Figs. 4.13 and 4.14) suggest that the students aspired to transgress the boundaries of the traditional stage sets towards, as Malevich described, the ‘creation of a new reality’ in theatre.<sup>459</sup> Although, in Figure 4.14, the protagonist is standing in the foreground in front of a yellow form, he or she also seems to recede into the spatial depths of the stage set. For Ermolaeva and the actors taking part in this performance, their costumes and the stage curtains may have interacted as if instigating a new sort of spatial ambiguity. It is plausible that this encounter with pre-Suprematist thinking in 1920 merged with established Suprematist ideas and, in doing so, instigated new experiences of space. Ermolaeva’s approach, in which she engaged existing ideas as a way of forging new ones, was inherently justified in the Suprematist tradition that Malevich established.

There were other approaches to engaging new forms of Suprematist space in Vitebsk in 1920. Kogan’s Suprematist Ballet is an important work which engages with earlier ideas in its ambition to forge new areas of creative practice. Performed on the same night and immediately after the restaging of *Victory over the Sun*, this scheduling seems to imply that the Suprematist Ballet was a natural heir to the Futurist opera, as though Kogan’s ballet was a development of earlier spatial ideas. Kogan wrote a text and produced

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<sup>456</sup> Kazimir Malevich, quoted in Edward Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre* (London: Methuen Drama, 1988), 157.

<sup>457</sup> Aleksandr Lisov, ‘Cezanne and Cubism at the Vitebsk State Free Art Studios’, in Christina Lodder and Maria Kokkori, eds., *Experiment 29 Paul Cezanne and Modernism in Russia* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2023), 129.

<sup>458</sup> V. Ermolaeva, ‘Ob izuchenii kubizma’; ‘Unovis No. 1. Prilozhenie’, 83; English translation in Lisov, ‘Cezanne and Cubism at the Vitebsk State Free Art Studios’, in Lodder and Kokkori, *Experiment 29*, 130.

<sup>459</sup> Malevich, quoted in Braun, *Meyerhold: A Revolution in Theatre*, 157.

a diagrammatical representation of her ballet, both of which were printed in the Unovis almanac (Figs. 4.15 and 4.16). Surely not coincidentally, Kogan's illustration of the stage space incorporates representational elements at its outer edges and white space at the centre, all of which recall *Suprematism: Sketch of a Curtain for a Meeting of the Committee to Combat Unemployment* (Fig. 4.4). 'The main idea of the ballet', Kogan wrote, 'was to show the order of the unfolding of the very movement of forms'.<sup>460</sup> The ballet 'was supposed to be a phenomenon of the main forms – the elements of the movement of its unfolding and blossoming from the centre in order of contrast of the following of many figures'.<sup>461</sup> Kogan is very specific about the choreography in her text. '(1) first the line, (2) turns into a cross, (3) turns along the diagonal, turns into a star, (4) turns into a circle, (5) the circle becomes a square'.<sup>462</sup> Similarly, her diagrammatic representation in the almanac (Fig. 4.16) illustrates these precise spatial movements.

The above analysis, however, exposes the reality that authorship in Suprematism had become a fraught issue, as creative figures such as Kogan experimented within its parameters. Kogan's ballet was not conceived through the process of her own 'intuitive reason', as Malevich claimed had defined his painting.<sup>463</sup> Rather than advancing into new areas of activity, the spatial specificity of Kogan's ballet only replicated Malevich's earlier achievements on the canvas. The black square at the base of the illustration and the small triangle above it suggest that this movement originated and moved out of the black square, as though transitioning from one Suprematist state to another. The bodily movement in Kogan's ballet into the white space at the centre, which gives form to the white space, recalls a transition Malevich explored in painting. Retrospection was essential for Kogan, but there is a fraught, almost irreconcilable, tension between Suprematism's principle of creation through intuition and Kogan's ambition to forge new phases of activity, all without compromising or moving too far away from Malevich's ideas.

Even though this tension existed, it is just as apparent that Kogan viewed Suprematism's painterly form as a sort of stylistic origin that could be transposed into three-dimensional space which could articulate a new spatial language. The Italian architectural historian, Bruno Zevi, wrote of the importance of

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<sup>460</sup> Nina Kogan, 'O suprematicheskome balete'; 'Unovis No. 1. Prilozhenie', 78.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid.

<sup>463</sup> K. Malevich, *Ot kubizma i futurizma k Suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm* [From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism] (Moscow: Obshchestvennaya pol'za, 1916); English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 38.

establishing a language in modern architecture, and argued that it runs the risk of becoming regressive, should it not be ‘structured into a language’.<sup>464</sup> There is an interesting paradox in the restaging of *Victory over the Sun* and Kogan’s Ballet in relation to a new language and new ideas. Suprematism had an ambition to produce new modes of expression through intuitive creation, and it suggested it possessed inherent liberating ideals, but Unovis seemed bound by Malevich’s pedagogical system and his earlier ideas. Kogan’s diagrammatical illustration of the ballet (Fig. 4.16) indicates the position of each performer and seems to illustrate this controlled and re-enacted dynamism of the plane. Zuperman wrote about how this was achieved within theatre, which might reflect the inelasticity of Kogan’s thinking.<sup>465</sup> ‘The aspects of fine art can be brought to an extraordinary strength and expressiveness in the new theatre when the image is capable of freeing itself from the enslaved place on the canvas’.<sup>466</sup> If theatre had the potential to liberate Suprematism’s painterly planes and to reimagine their dynamism within a new spatial setting, it was a very specific and very limited sense of freedom.

In close relation to their investigations into space within theatre, Unovis explored other ways to transpose Suprematism’s painterly language into three dimensions. A series of untitled and unattributed designs for interior walls for particular rooms (Figs. 4.17-4.24), produced in Vitebsk in 1920, indicates a transition from the surface to a concern for everyday space. The conceptual basis for these works, however, can be traced back to Malevich’s earlier achievements. As Christina Lodder has observed, the position of the canvases at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10 (Zero-Ten)*, [*Poslednaia futuristicheskaia vystavka kartin, 0,10 (nol’-desiat’)*] effectively ‘surrounded the viewer creating a completely Suprematist space, while accentuating the surfaces and the movements of these flat forms’, as though producing a Suprematist mural or room.<sup>467</sup> Three years later, in 1918, Malevich reiterated this idea and wrote that ‘the walls are surfaces on which it is essential to place works in the same order as the composition of the forms on the surface’.<sup>468</sup> This particular idea may well have been directly embraced by Kogan when she interpreted Malevich’s aesthetic language as a new spatial rhetoric in 1920.

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<sup>464</sup> Bruno Zevi, *The Modern Language of Architecture*, trans. Ronald Storm and William A. Packer (North Vancouver, BC: University of Washington Press, 1978), 3.

<sup>465</sup> Lazar Zuperman, ‘Teatr’; ‘Unovis No. 1. Prilozhenie’, 79-81.

<sup>466</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>467</sup> Christina Lodder, ‘Malevich as Exhibition Maker’, in Achim Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Kazimir Malevich* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 94.

<sup>468</sup> K. Malevich, ‘Os’ tsveta i obema’, in *Izobrazitel’noe iskusstvo*, no. 1, Moscow (1919), 30; reprinted in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii*, I: 141.

Notes that Malevich made on a design he named *Principle for a Wall Painting* (1920) (Fig. 4.25) are a useful point of reference for understanding Figures 4.17-4.24. At the foot of this design, Malevich explains that this principle is ‘to be applied for painting a wall, a surface or the whole of a room or an entire apartment in accordance with the system of Suprematism’.<sup>469</sup> The concern here was for the ‘general effect’ created by colour relationships.<sup>470</sup> He further added:

When the colouring of the walls of a room or a complete set proceeds in line with colour contrast, let us say one paints the window-frame in one or two colours, the door in another, the ceiling in one and the walls in yet another again, one then gets the general effect that all sides could be painted in different colours, that each different standpoint could offer another colour to the eye. This table of colours represents the proportions among the colours and their relation to the introduction of the dynamic element.<sup>471</sup>

Lissitzky seems to have become influenced by this idea and later stated that ‘the new room neither needs nor desires pictures – it is not in fact a picture if it is transposed onto flat surfaces. This explains the hostility of the picture-painters toward us: we are destroying the wall as a resting-place for their pictures’.<sup>472</sup> *Principle for a Wall Painting*, and the untitled and unattributed designs for interior walls, confirm that the psychological perception of architectural space had become a central concern in Vitebsk.

This consideration of interior space was not confined to Vitebsk alone. It is possible that the artist Ivan Kudriashev may have been directly stimulated by developments within Vitebsk when he produced *Suprematism: General Plan for the Decoration of the First Soviet Theatre in Orenburg – Composition for the Auditorium* (1920) (Fig. 4.26). Kudriashev was enrolled at the Second State Free Art Studios in Moscow, where he studied under Malevich, before he was sent to Orenburg.<sup>473</sup> The two men remained in close contact and, as Lisov has discussed, Kudriashev was involved in setting up an Unovis branch in Orenburg.<sup>474</sup>

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<sup>469</sup> Malevich, quoted in Zhadova, *Malevich*, 317.

<sup>470</sup> Ibid.

<sup>471</sup> Ibid.

<sup>472</sup> El Lissitzky, ‘Proun Room, a Great Berlin Art Exhibition’, in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, 365.

<sup>473</sup> Alexander Lisov, ‘Branches of Unovis in Smolensk and Orenburg’, in Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 126-143.

<sup>474</sup> Ibid.

Demonstrative of the connection that remained between the two men, Kudriashev's soviet theatre in Orenburg appears to develop ideas being explored in Vitebsk concerning the ways in which elaboration of surface can define spatial experience. No individual form observed within the three-dimensional framework of Kudriashev's auditorium seems truly enmeshed within its architectural scaffold. Instead, each form appears to hover, implying a sense of transition from the more definite and concrete three-dimensional space of the auditorium to higher spatial realities. This elusive elaboration of the surface is underlined by the three-dimensional framework of the auditorium and the single point perspective draw the viewer's eye to the red square, black triangle and other Suprematist forms at the centre of this design. It is practically impossible to judge where exactly these forms are located, nor is it possible to determine their scale.

In words that echo Malevich's statement in his *Principle for a Wall Painting*, Kudriashev wrote: 'painting ceases to be an abstract colour-formal construction and becomes a realistic expression of the modern perception of space. [...] space, volume density and light – material reality – is essentially the new thing that spatial painting is establishing today'.<sup>475</sup> What Kudriashev articulates here are ideas that were central in Vitebsk in which the elaboration of surface could generate a new experience of reality altogether.

This question of a relationship between the pictorial surface and three-dimensional space appears to have moved beyond the confines of teaching theatre and the Vitebsk school itself. An unpublished Unovis manuscript, without title, date or author, explains that the transition to Suprematist space had a particular artistic justification which could be understood as 'a logical exit from Cubism'.<sup>476</sup> It continues:

As a plan in its objectlessness, Suprematism moves onto the construction of a worldwide space – an already realised organism including the highest economy and endless movement of its construction and system. This worldwide space, where we shall transfer the whole organism of the plan and the system of our drawing, should be as pure as a sheet of paper on which we draw the new forms of the world known as Suprematism.<sup>477</sup>

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<sup>475</sup> Ivan Kudriashev, quoted in Basner et al., *In Malevich's Circle*, 96.

<sup>476</sup> Unovis manuscript, [no date, title or author cited]; reprinted in *ibid.*, 28.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*

It is not known whether Malevich or another member of Unovis wrote this text but given the rich use of Suprematist terminology, it seems very likely that the author was Malevich himself. This text is a strong piece of propaganda for Suprematism. It suggests that within the movement there existed a fully formed system that only needed to be embraced, rather than used as a means for pursuing further achievements beyond it.

The pioneer of cinema, Sergei Eisenstein, witnessed Vitebsk at this moment in time and observed this aspiration towards new, worldwide space as defined by Suprematism. Eisenstein wrote:

A single provincial town. Built like so many of the towns in the west of the country, of red brick. Begrimed with soot and depressing. But there is something very odd about this town. In the main streets the red bricks are painted white. And over this white background there are green circles everywhere. Orange squares. Blue rectangles. This is Vitebsk in the year 1920. The brush of Kazimir Malevich has gone over the brick walls. [...] You see orange circles before your eyes, red squares and green trapeziums. [...] Suprematist confetti strewn about the streets of an astonishing town.<sup>478</sup>

It is far from an overstatement to claim that the Vitebsk cityscape was being redefined by Suprematism. Eisenstein's observation suggests that Suprematism had established a new and dynamic urban reality. Eisenstein's formulation, however, 'the brush of Kazimir Malevich', collapses what was in practice a collective effort into a single authorial hand.<sup>479</sup> To move through the Suprematist-defined streets of Vitebsk as Eisenstein described them recalls the spatial engagement Kogan proposed in her ballet, only with a freedom she had not quite managed to embrace.

It is important to remember, as discussed above, that the radical transformation of public space had begun relatively quickly after the revolution. An early example of this is Natan Altman's design for Petrograd's Palace Square (Figs. 3.9 and 3.10). If Altman created what Catherine Cooke has described as 'a genuinely new abstract architecture on an urban scale', it must be said that Unovis was achieving something

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<sup>478</sup> S. Eisenstein, quoted in *El Lissitzky, Architect, Painter, Photographer, Typographer* (Eindhoven: Stedelijk van Abbe Museum, 1990), 41.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*

in Vitebsk that unfolded on a city scale and had a global aspiration.<sup>480</sup>In Vitebsk in 1920 there emerged a new sort of life in the round in which the boundaries between the active actor and passive spectator had begun to be dismantled. At this moment, the citizen became the active participant in the Suprematist milieu, a Suprematist stage – or world – defined by Suprematism.

There was a specific political context for this elaboration of the walls of Vitebsk that aligns with Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda, which dates to September 1918.<sup>481</sup> According to Anatolii Lunacharskii, this plan was directly stimulated by Tommaso Campanella's utopian novel *City of the Sun*. Citing Lenin, Lunacharskii wrote that 'Campanella in his City of the Sun says that the walls of his fantastic city are covered with frescoes which, serving the youth as a graphic lesson in natural science and history, arouse civil feelings, and, in a word, participate in the business of raising and educating the new generation'.<sup>482</sup> Suprematism's elaboration of the city streets could well have been stimulated by this same idea. Following a Unovis conference in November 1920, Malevich 'instructed the Smolensk Creative Committee to publish a wall journal in order to acquaint the broad masses with the movement in art', which certainly suggests he took his inspiration from Lenin.<sup>483</sup>

Unovis's elaboration of the surface that Eisenstein witnessed had an architectural and educational property which articulated a reimagining of the future world. There was a great paradox in what was unfolding within Unovis. On the one hand, the students were registered at the Vitebsk school and enrolled to study art, yet it seems that Malevich encouraged them to embrace Suprematism as a fully formed system. It is possible that they may have begun to wonder where and how their opportunity for independent creative thinking could be realised. Although Suprematism claimed to liberate the entire world, the relationship between its architectural experimentation and the instructional demands of the pedagogical programme in Vitebsk merged in such a way that the members of Unovis were denied even their own autonomy.

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<sup>480</sup> Catherine Cooke, *Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture and the City* (London: Academy Editions, 1995), 22.

<sup>481</sup> Christina Lodder, 'Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda', in Matthew Coller and Brandon Taylor, eds., *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture in a One-Party State, 1917-1992* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 16-32.

<sup>482</sup> Anatolii Lunacharskii citing Lenin, in Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 53.

<sup>483</sup> I. T. Gavris, 'Rost Unovisa (khronika)', *Unovis. Listok Vitebskogo Tvorkoma*, 1 (20 November 1920); English translation, 'The Growth of Unovis', in Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930*, trans. Alexander Lieven (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 303.

This tension between ambition and restraint in architecture is epitomised by the text produced by Unovis in May 1920 entitled ‘We Want’ [*My khotim*].<sup>484</sup> The anonymous author issues a set of demands concerning what should come to define the aesthetics of the new world:

Our energy should go into creating new forms of our own.

The face of modernity should become our face. We are the young, we are those who bear the reflection of the world’s infinite youth. [...]

We do not want to be like our fathers and scrape their likeness from our face, if indeed anyone still retains it and even if their faces are beautiful and majestic a thousand-fold, we will not let their meaning live in their palaces. We will not put on togas and chitons, we will build a new and create not in the manner of our fathers, but in our own, because we will be the young. We will not be the carriers of the arts of Greece and Rome and others, we will not squat as antiquarians behind counters.

We bring new cities.

We bring the world new things. We give them other names.

The innovators of the youth of economic life have carried the banners of the revolution, killing the old men and liberating the young, and those who are already free must unite without delay under the flag of the new art and build the world. [...]

Then we will create a new garb and meaning for the world, such as there has never been. [...]

Our workshops no longer paint pictures, they construct the forms of life, and projects – not pictures – will become living beings.<sup>485</sup>

With this text, Unovis engaged with an idea that was felt nationally, even though they continued to speak of it in global terms. Lunacharskii, for instance, noted: ‘if there is truly a proletarian concept, it is the word “we”’<sup>486</sup> Goriacheva has discussed what was a strong cultural awareness of a new collective identity at this

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<sup>484</sup> *Ot Unovisa – My khotim* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation, ‘From Unovis – We Want’, in Zhadova, *Malevich*, 297-298.

<sup>485</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>486</sup> Lunacharskii, quoted in Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Vision and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 190.

moment. She has astutely noted that Malevich's 'statements often possess a certain resemblance to revolutionary ideology, although their actual meaning is frequently in opposition to that ideology'.<sup>487</sup> This observation can just as readily be made of the text 'We Want', which typifies the belief amongst Unovis that Suprematism, ahead of Bolshevism, had a utopian potential to redesign life which could instigate the ultimate freedom for the new society. This text expresses a powerful linguistic outburst as if emblematic of the group's energy and aspirations to redefine the world.

'We Want' also illustrates a contradiction within Unovis. The ambition expressed in the text remained, even if Unovis was constrained by Malevich and his pedagogical programme. The stated goal in this text could not be squared with the individual concept of authorship to which Malevich was deeply attached. Suprematism's freedoms were shaped by the opportunities the Bolsheviks afforded it as the state reorganised and appropriated cultural activity, but Unovis was doubly constrained. Under the eye of Malevich and the state, the members of Unovis had an uphill struggle when it came to asserting creative autonomy.

The sentiments of ambition and frustration in 'We Want' recall the eruption of forms in Ermolaeva's *Sketch for Vitebsk Festival Decorations: Suprematist Composition* (1920) (Fig. 4.27). This work exemplifies the power Unovis recognised in Suprematism to transcend the boundary of the theatrical and the decorative and erupt into the realm of architecture. This great energy and explosion of Suprematist forms in Ermolaeva's festival decorations occurs within a grey classical architectural setting which could itself be a theatrical backdrop. The eye, however, is drawn to the static black form at the base of this image, as if it alludes to Malevich and Suprematist painting as the spark which ignites creative possibilities that others within Unovis might accomplish in architecture. The exploding energy which defines the drab architectural space in this work might just as easily be connected with something inherent within the collective of Unovis rather than Malevich alone.

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<sup>487</sup> Goriacheva, 'In our time, when it became We' A Previously Unknown Essay by Kazimir Malevich', in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 187-196.

To better understand how this collective energy expanded within Unovis in relation to questions of authorship over new ideas in Suprematism, it is necessary to look specifically at Lissitzky, who was central, not only to Malevich's presence in Vitebsk, but also to the emergence of Suprematism's new front in architecture.

Before Lissitzky arrived in Vitebsk, he trained at the Darmstadt Technische Hochschule from 1909 and then enrolled at the Riga Polytechnic. When this Latvian institution relocated to Moscow, away from the front lines, Lissitzky followed it and completed his studies, qualifying as an 'artist-engineer' in 1918.<sup>488</sup> Chagall invited Lissitzky to the Vitebsk school, where he took up residence in May 1919 and began teaching in the architecture, graphic arts and printing workshops.<sup>489</sup>

An article, entitled 'Studios of Graphic Arts, Printing and Architecture', appeared in *Izvestiia* in July 1919 and indicated the principles that would underpin Lissitzky's workshop. 'In the architecture studio, the students will have the opportunity to become acquainted with architecture's fundamental methods and systems, learning (by work with models) graphic and plaster expressions of spatial designs'.<sup>490</sup> While this statement implies Malevich's architectural models, known as his *Arkhitektomy Experiments* (Figs. 5.5-5.9 and 7.1-7.3), it is important to state that there is no evidence that any of these models were produced in Vitebsk. Nonetheless, it is clear that even before Malevich arrived, Lissitzky sought to identify the basic principles of architecture rather than pursue construction itself. Of course, the national picture was defined by the Civil War and a climate of material austerity, meaning that construction was out of the question. Lissitzky's statement in *Izvestiia* and his commitment to architectural designs on paper were, therefore, shaped by an artistic vision for the future as much as they were bound by practical restraints.

In a second article from August 1919, entitled 'The New Culture', Lissitzky expanded on how he hoped this architectural teaching might take shape in practice.

We must now find a completely new path of artistic education. It must be found in a studio where the master and his apprentices, in close contact and persistent teamwork, want one and the same

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<sup>488</sup> Lissitzky-Küppers, 'Life and Letters', in *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, 16-19.

<sup>489</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>490</sup> Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 64.

thing: absolutely free effort, called forth by nothing but the pressure of creative intuition, to find the form for self-imposed tasks. To be fruitful, this work must have a definite system.<sup>491</sup>

Curiously, Lissitzky's preference for a more collegiate approach over the traditional master-apprentice model aligns with the collective ambitions that Unovis would shortly advocate, even if this pedagogical ideal conflicted with the leadership position that Malevich covertly but gradually sought to assert.

A broad awareness of Malevich's earlier practice and statements very likely stimulated Lissitzky, but *On New Systems in Art* almost certainly represented a specific catalyst in his thinking. Of course, it is important to remember that Lissitzky would almost certainly have been able to study this text before Malevich arrived in Vitebsk and, perhaps unsurprisingly, a number of specific parallels can be made between *On New Systems in Art* and Lissitzky's evolving ideas in architecture. In this 1919 text, Malevich wrote:

For us the world did not exist from below, from above, from the side or from behind. [...] we began to regard the world differently and discovered its many-sided movement, and were thus faced with the problem with how to convey it fully: hence arose systems and laws contemporary to our comprehension. There came to art a pure comprehension of the value of texture as such, without any need for the linear building of houses. The painterly textural content was built on the plane of the canvas. [...]

Man is an organism of energy, a grain striving to form a single centre. All the rest is simply pretence. Villages are small organisational centres of energy which in turn form new centres with a more complex and powerful form of energy; for the villages and the towns are the major centres and they in their turn single out power for the central towns of the country as a whole; here the power of the whole people is concentrated. Yet energetic power knows neither people's nor states, not nationalities, and is therefore constantly striving for the highest degree of centralisation. Man's various pretences that spring from economic and political material affairs hinder forward movement. But all pretences give way before the intuitive universal movement of energetic forces:

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<sup>491</sup> El Lissitzky, 'The New Culture', [*Novaia Kul'tura*], trans. Peter Nisbet, in *Experiment/Eksperiment* 1 (1995), 260-261.

a supreme town will be formed as a product of the force of whole peoples: by this time the latter will have formed into a single moving force.<sup>492</sup>

In the 1920 essay, 'Suprematism in World Reconstruction', Lissitzky wrote that he had found what he was looking for.

For us, SUPREMATISM did not signify the recognition of an absolute form which was part of an already universal completed system. On the contrary. Here stood, revealed for the first time, in all its purity a clear sign and plan for a definite new world never before experienced – a world which issues forth from our inner being and which is only now in the first stages of its formation.

Dynamic architecture provides us with the new theatre of life and because we are capable of grasping the idea of a whole town at any moment with any plan the task of architecture – the rhythmic arrangement of space and time – is perfectly and simply fulfilled for the new town will not be as chaotically laid out as the modern towns of North and South America, but clearly and logically like a beehive.<sup>493</sup>

This retrospective statement suggests that Lissitzky's ambition to find a new pedagogical system and a new approach to the fundamentals of architecture was addressed with Malevich's arrival. There is, however, a very clear contradiction in this statement between the idea that Suprematism is a 'pure', 'completed system' and the claim that it is only in 'the first stages of its formation'.<sup>494</sup> 'Suprematism in World Reconstruction' shows that Lissitzky had absorbed Suprematism's theory and, in language which seems to have been influenced by theatre, had begun to contemplate how a new spatial order might be found in architecture.

In attempting to understand how Lissitzky engaged with Suprematism as a completed system in practice, and how he also looked to take it beyond the first stages of its formation, it is useful to examine a brochure cover design he produced for the Committee for the Struggle Against Unemployment (1919) (Fig. 4.28). While this work is visually very different from the curtain he designed for this event with Malevich

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<sup>492</sup> Malevich, 'On New Systems in Art', in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 116.

<sup>493</sup> Lissitzky, 'Suprematism in World Reconstruction', in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, 332.

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid.*

(Fig. 4.4), a number of parallels between the two works can be identified. Like the curtain, this design makes no effort to embrace established structural precedents that would usually define illustrations of architectural elements. While this work is one of Lissitzky's earliest attempts at volumetric Suprematism, it is difficult to make the distinction between two-dimensionality and the representation of three-dimensional space. The use of lettering and the long flat forms point the viewer to the flatness of the lithographic print itself, but this is juxtaposed with a number of three-dimensional forms which are produced from an axonometric perspective. The three-dimensional forms appear to gravitate towards the black square, roughly at the centre of this work, and organise space at right angles. The large triangular form appears as though it is in front of the circle but the elements within the triangle seem to suggest a sort of spatial depth that transcends the position of the red semi-circular form. There is a relationship between the design and the committee the work was produced for, suggesting that, like the curtain, the constructive elements of this work possessed a social significance. There is also a suggestion that these volumetric forms were at an early stage of locating a new synthesis or construction which could respond to new questions that were being asked nationally at this moment.

With the development of the Proun, an acronym that stood for *Proekt utverzhdeniia novogo* – Project for the Affirmation of the New, Lissitzky moved Suprematism into a new stage of its development. In *Proun 23 No. 6* (1919) (Fig. 4.29), four three-dimensional forms are positioned at the centre of this work against a red and beige background. Because of their ambiguous spatial location, the forms in this work raise questions about the space they occupy and the relationship each has with the next. The two red semi-ellipses seem to be drawn towards one another from somewhere beyond the limits of the canvas surface. The forms in this work, however, refuse to conform to a single stabilising axis; instead, they are governed by different energies which operate along multiple axes.

More than any other work, *Proun 1E (City)* (1919) (Fig. 4.30) marks a decisive new stage in Suprematism through its exploration of volumetric form. In *Proun 1E (City)*, multiple three-dimensional elements organise around a black square and attempt to integrate as a whole, as though forming a new unified structure. It is important to note, as Yve-Alain Bois has written, that Lissitzky 'wanted to destroy

the spectator's certainty and the usual viewing position: facing the painting, facing the horizon'.<sup>495</sup> Certainly, *Proun 1E (City)* is an example of this observation.

Perhaps more than any other work discussed so far in this chapter, Lissitzky's *Proun* seems to represent a new stage in Suprematism without being overly bound by Malevich's past achievements. However, in attempting to assess the scale of Lissitzky's contribution to Suprematism, it is essential to recall that at *0.10* Malevich exhibited a version of volumetric Suprematism (Fig. 4.31). In the photograph of the *0.10* exhibition one particular canvas depicts a cube and an elongated cuboid form against a large two-dimensional square form. This inclusion of a three-dimensional version of Suprematism at the 1915 exhibition may seem to be a sort of unexplained outlier for Malevich, but it is important to remember that he was experimenting with different forms and thinking about dimensions in space. The inclusion of such a work in 1915 was probably nothing more than incidental. More intriguing than its appearance at *0.10* is that a version of this painting was published in the spring of 1919 in the journal *Puti tvorchestva* (Fig. 4.32).

It is also important to bear in mind that prior to the publication of this volumetric version of Suprematism, Malevich had written the text, 'Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete' the previous year. Malevich criticised the persistence of neoclassical and Russian eclecticism in new building, and directly objected to Aleksei Shchusev's Kazan Railway Station (Figs. 4.33 and 4.34) and Moscow's treasury building, by V. A. Pokrovsky (Fig. 4.35).<sup>496</sup> Malevich produced a comedic analogy to illustrate the incongruous presence he felt this architecture had with the contemporary world around it: 'now Lazarus, resurrected, walks on the concrete and asphalt, hurts his head on the conductor wires and, wonders at the motor cars and asks to go back to the grave'.<sup>497</sup> Instead of pursuing Beaux-Arts traditions, in this 1918 text Malevich appealed to architects to produce 'new buildings on the square fields of the revolution'.<sup>498</sup> It is possible that when Malevich wrote 'Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete' he was prompted to think back to his volumetric Suprematist design and published the idea in 1919 as though pre-empting Suprematism's architectural phase and the constructive potential of his painterly language. Lissitzky's

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<sup>495</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, 'Radical Reversibility: El Lissitzky', *Art in America*, vol. 76, no. 4 (April 1988): 176.

<sup>496</sup> K. Malevich, 'Arkhitektura kak poshchechina betona-zhelezu' [Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete], *Anarkhiia*, 37 (6 April 1918): 4; English translation, 'Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete', in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 63.

<sup>497</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>498</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

Proun, however, took Malevich's single volumetric conception and accepted the challenges Malevich set for architects in 'Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete', and in doing so forged a new area of creative activity in Suprematism.

In his 1922 text, 'Proun – Not World Visions but World Reality', Lissitzky reflected on his Proun and expressed words which suggest he closely incorporated Malevich's idea in *On New Systems in Art* when he stated:

We saw that the surface of the Proun ceases to be a picture and turns into a structure around which we must circle, looking at it from all sides, peering down from above, investigating from below. The result is that the one axis of the picture which stood at right angles to the horizontal is destroyed. Circling around it, we screw ourselves into space.... We have set the Proun into motion so we obtain a number of axes of projection.<sup>499</sup>

While there are a number of possible axes in *Proun 23 No. 6*, in *Proun 1E (City)* and even in the brochure cover for the Committee for the Struggle Against Unemployment, the volumetric elements appear to strive towards organisation around the square. *Proun 1E (City)* in particular, with its systematic and structured approach to establishing new volumetric form, translates into practice the logic that Malevich identified in *On New Systems in Art*, as Lissitzky sought to forge a new area of practice within Suprematism.

While the Proun can be associated with earlier achievements in Suprematism, Lissitzky introduced new theoretical ideas to the movement that brought it closer to the field of architecture. Lissitzky's embrace of the concept of tectonics represents one of these areas. Lodder has pointed out that the term tectonics was in fact new to the avant-garde, even when Aleksei Gan wrote of the term in *Constructivism*, two years later.<sup>500</sup> Gan explained that 'the word "tectonics" is taken from geology, where it is used to define the eruptions coming from the Earth's core: just as a volcano could suddenly destroy its existing surroundings and transform them completely, so tectonics could revolutionise reality'.<sup>501</sup> Kristin Romberg has argued

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<sup>499</sup> Lissitzky, 'Proun – Not World Visions but World Reality', in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, 343.

<sup>500</sup> Christina Lodder, 'Conflicting Approaches to Creativity?', in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 274.

<sup>501</sup> Aleksei Gan, *Constructivism*, ed. and trans. Christina Lodder (Barcelona: Tenov, 2013), 61.

that Gan revised the idea of tectonics from Alexander Bogdanov, who viewed the term as having a philosophical basis. For Romberg, Gan attempted to ‘change the terms of an existing debate’ and reframe its philosophical idea as a ‘jumbled aggregate of references’ applicable to the contemporary moment, which was itself up in the air.<sup>502</sup> To some extent, when Lissitzky explained that ‘tectonics (the art of bringing order, expediency, and rhythm to chaos) serves as the foundation of all the arts’, he was bringing order to a term which, at that moment, remained conceptually unstable.<sup>503</sup> The arrangement of the forms in Lissitzky’s Proun paintings constituted new forms, or tectonics, in space, which were supported by a new theoretical basis. By incorporating and revising external ideas, Lissitzky was, in fact, operating within a well-established Suprematist tradition as discussed from the outset of this thesis.

As well as contributing to Suprematist discourse, Lissitzky’s investigations into the volume from 1919 seem to have influenced Malevich’s pedagogical programme. Shatskikh has pointed out that while volumetric Suprematism did feature in the Moscow programme, it existed only in relation to the department of sculpture.<sup>504</sup> In the Moscow programme, submitted on 15 September 1919, architecture does not feature at all.<sup>505</sup> This contrasts with the programme in Vitebsk, published in the almanac in May 1920, which sees volumetric Suprematism alongside architecture and construction. Shatskikh has also noted that the Vitebsk curriculum ‘allots more than half the instruction time to continuous work in three dimensions’.<sup>506</sup> It seems that Lissitzky’s engagement with Suprematism had prompted Malevich to modify his educational system in Vitebsk and give architecture a more central role. In other words, Lissitzky’s contribution to Suprematism, along with that of others in Vitebsk, influenced Malevich’s vision of the movement’s future.

It is important to note here that Lissitzky’s students were influenced by their teacher’s interest in Suprematism. Lazar Khidekel, a student in Lissitzky’s workshop before Malevich arrived, produced *Design for a Cosmic Habit* (1920) (Fig. 4.36), which, as the title makes apparent, is a visionary mode of spatial architecture. The title of Ilia Chashnik’s *Cosmos: Red Circle on Black Surface* (1920) (Fig. 4.37), perhaps deliberately overlooks the spatial construction that is observed at the foot of this work, thereby making its

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<sup>502</sup> Kristin Romberg, *Gan’s Constructivism: Aesthetic Theory for an Embedded Modernism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 78-80.

<sup>503</sup> El Lissitzky, ‘The New Culture’, [*Novaia Kul’tura*], trans. Peter Nisbet, in *Experiment/ Eksperiment* 1 (1995), 260-261.

<sup>504</sup> Shatskikh, ‘Leaders of UNOVIS’, in Basner et al., *In Malevich’s Circle*, 49.

<sup>505</sup> Malevich, ‘Program of Studies for the Studio in 1919-1920 Academic Year’, 15 September 1919; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 450.

<sup>506</sup> Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 137.

presence all the more apparent. David Yakerson, although employed to teach the sculptural class, produced paintings such as *Suprematist Composition* (1920) (Fig. 4.38) which explore three-dimensional abstracted forms in a cosmic setting. While these works are not all a development of the Suprematist volume, they are conceived within a cosmic idea of space and imply that the elements were under the influence of the earlier period of Suprematism. Regarding the ‘rigid cross-like composition’ of Khidekel, Selim O. Khan-Magomedov has written that ‘those new pictorial compositions, emerging in Vitebsk in the works of Malevich’s pupils, can be seen as a sort of stage in the compositional and structural preparation of planar Suprematism for its breakthrough into volume’.<sup>507</sup> Certainly, Malevich was aware of these students’ cosmic interpretations of Suprematism as he thought about his amended pedagogical programme in Vitebsk.

Lissitzky’s belief in Suprematism and its role in shaping the coming world reached an apex by the summer of 1920. He wrote emphatically: ‘THUS, THE OLD TESTAMENT WAS FOLLOWED BY THE NEW, THE NEW WAS FOLLOWED BY THE COMMUNIST, AND THE COMMUNIST IS FINALLY FOLLOWED BY THE TESTAMENT OF SUPREMATISM’.<sup>508</sup> *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1919) (Fig. 4.39), perhaps Lissitzky’s most famous work, is strikingly emblematic of this idea as this illustration of the red form of Suprematism pierces the old white world linked with the Romanovs. Lissitzky had come to recognise Suprematism as a stylistic basis for a new language in architecture and as a pedagogical framework for shaping the coming world. By 1920, the wedge of Suprematism had taken on a new architectural potential for Lissitzky that would penetrate not only the old white space, linked to both the Romanovs and the white canvas of Suprematism, but would drive new forces in the coming Suprematist future. Suprematism would ‘liberate all those engaged in creative activity and make the world into a true model of perfection. This is the model we await from Kazimir Malevich’, Lissitzky wrote.<sup>509</sup> Weeks after writing this endorsement of the Suprematist, Lissitzky resigned from the Vitebsk school and left his architecture studio vacant.<sup>510</sup>

Despite his departure from Vitebsk, there is every reason to think that Lissitzky still admired Malevich and Suprematism by late 1920. Lissitzky’s embrace of a collegiate mode of pedagogy had made

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<sup>507</sup> S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Lazar’ Khidekel* (Moscow: Russkii avangard, 2010), 38-39; English translation in Regina Khidekel, ‘Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism’, in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 162.

<sup>508</sup> Lissitzky, ‘Suprematism in World Reconstruction’, in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, 330.

<sup>509</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>510</sup> Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 16.

significant contributions to Unovis and helped to establish a new front of creative activity in Suprematism. These developments would, however, have given Malevich cause for concern. Although Lissitzky played a major role in instigating a new phase of creative activity, the question of authorship in Suprematism was not straightforward and soon became a contentious topic.

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Signed by the artist and dated to 15 December 1920, *Suprematism: 34 Drawings* (Fig. 4.40) was produced in the school's lithographic workshop and consists of a short text and 34 illustrations based on Suprematist forms. This small booklet is significant in the story of Suprematism as it contains Malevich's first – and Malevich's individual – explanation of an architectural idea emerging within the movement.

On the opening page, Malevich states that 'if every form is the expression of purely utilitarian perfection, then Suprematist form also represents, surely, the sign of a force that has been recognised – the acting force of a utilitarian perfection in a coming concrete world'.<sup>511</sup> As this implies, Suprematism's conception of architecture somehow relates to the built environment. However, as the text goes on, the idea becomes much more abstract, elusive and seems to correspond to the cosmos.

The Suprematist apparatus, if one may call it so, will be one whole, without fastenings. A bar is fused with all the elements – like the globe, in itself bearing the life of perfection – so that every Suprematist body that is built will be included in a natural organisation and form a new satellite. One only has to find the interrelationship between two bodies speeding through space: the earth and the moon; perhaps a new satellite can be built between them, equipped with all the elements, which will move in its own orbit, creating its own new path.<sup>512</sup>

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<sup>511</sup> K. Malevich, *Suprematizm: 34 risunka* [Suprematism: 34 Drawings] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 123.

<sup>512</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

This new architectural apparatus, Malevich explains, would somehow materialise, not from mechanical or industrial engineering, but from ‘the harmonious introduction of form into natural action, by means of certain magnetic relations into one form’.<sup>513</sup>

In respect of the 34 sketches, each evolves in its formal complexity in relation to the previous. In their entirety, the 34 sketches seem to summarise the developments of Suprematism’s painterly achievements. The first three images: a square, a circle and a cross (1920) (Figs. 4.41-4.43), are all familiar forms within Suprematism and can be traced back to 1915. One of the lithographic compositions (Fig. 4.44) seems to be based on *Suprematist Composition: Aeroplane Flying* (Fig. 1.26) while another (Fig. 4.45) recalls *Suprematist Painting: Eight Red Rectangles* (1915) (Fig. 4.46). All 34 illustrations are produced without captions and are explained as ‘a small number of constructions’ which represent only a ‘small part of the plan’.<sup>514</sup> Malevich references the square, which he explains ‘determined economy’ but, aside from this, no further reference to the sketches is made in the text.<sup>515</sup> The link between the two is only implied. Of course, there is nothing new about this in Suprematism. Direct linguistic explanation for Malevich’s paintings was a tradition in Suprematism that was, by 1920, well established. How exactly these ‘constructions’ represent only a ‘small part of the plan’ was not obvious to the reader.<sup>516</sup>

While the architectural conception in *34 Drawings* is itself vague and inscrutable, Malevich is entirely unambiguous about the origin of Suprematism’s new architectural enterprise: it was his individual discovery. The reader, who in the first instance is Unovis, is told that this new idea has an individual origin. Regarding the idea of a Suprematist satellite, Malevich informs the reader: ‘I made the discovery that its forms have nothing in common with the technology of the Earth’s surface’.<sup>517</sup> Later, Malevich writes, ‘in the course of my investigations I discovered [...]’.<sup>518</sup> This use of the first person continues throughout. In *34 Drawings*, Malevich wants the reader to know, unequivocally, that Suprematism’s arrival into the realm of architecture belongs to him. Even the cover (Fig. 4.40) seems to allude to Malevich’s desire to claim authorship. The larger font type ‘K. Malevich’ at the top of the cover contrasts with the much smaller ‘Unovis’ featured at

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<sup>513</sup> Ibid.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid.

<sup>517</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>518</sup> Ibid., 126.

the bottom. This clarity regarding his authorship stands in stark contrast to the vague architectural idea in *34 Drawings*.

Malevich's justification for the idea of individual authorship is based on a clear and specific chronology of Suprematism's evolution in painting, prior to his move to Vitebsk. On the opening page of *34 Drawings*, Malevich states that 'Suprematism is divided into three stages according to the number of black, red and white squares'.<sup>519</sup> All three of these stages were said to have been achieved 'between 1913 and 1918' and were built on 'purely plane development'.<sup>520</sup> If there is any association between the words and the sketches, it is in the implication of Suprematism's linear development in painting, from the square, the circle and the cross through to more complex geometric combinations in colour which eventually arrived at white. Malevich's insistence on individual authorship is supported by this retrospective – and fictional – ordering of the development of Suprematist painting, which provides the basis of the chronology in *34 Drawings*. Briony Fer has taken up this idea of a constructed narrative and suggested that *34 Drawings* 'imposes a linear sequence upon the work as a succession of images, between which we tend to assume a logical connection, and which constitutes a chain of events in time'.<sup>521</sup> Fer has argued that in *34 Drawings*, Malevich was committed to 'imposing his fictional chronology', which Malevich surely hoped Unovis would have accepted.<sup>522</sup>

The controlled narrative in *34 Drawings* of Malevich's individual authorship was also structured in numerical terms. It is interesting to speculate why Malevich settled on 34 sketches to introduce this new architectural idea, a number which seems as arbitrary as it is specific. One basis Malevich may have had for employing this specific number can be linked with the language reforms of 1918, when the Russian alphabet began to use 33 characters. It is possible that Malevich held these reforms in mind in 1920 when he presented this new Suprematist language in architecture to Unovis. By making his new architectural language 34 characters, Malevich employed the logic of *0.10* and implied that only one additional character (or one sketch) was necessary to go beyond familiar visual language and enter new realms of perception.

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<sup>519</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>520</sup> Ibid.

<sup>521</sup> Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997), 12.

<sup>522</sup> Ibid.

It is possible that Malevich was directly influenced by Lissitzky. Just before he left Vitebsk in 1920, Lissitzky wrote that a new language was necessary: ‘the constructor of the whole world must be the workshops of our art schools. When the artist leaves them, he will set to work as a master-builder, as a teacher of the new alphabet and as a promoter of a new world which indeed already exists in man but which man has not yet been able to perceive’.<sup>523</sup> Aligning with this sentiment, *34 Drawings* represents Malevich’s genuine interest in building the new world that would follow the end of the Civil War, even if the idea it contained is abstract and utopian. Even if Unovis had already begun to contemplate such ideas of language, *34 Drawings* is nevertheless symbolic of Malevich actively redefining Suprematism’s architectural language on his own terms.

A study, however, of the actual chronology helps to illuminate the possible motivations Malevich had for writing *34 Drawings*. It is not insignificant that *34 Drawings* appeared at the end of December 1920, after all of the works discussed in this chapter so far were produced. The notion of a Suprematist satellite and one sketch in particular in *34 Drawings* (Fig. 4.47) closely evokes Khidekel’s *Design for a Cosmic Habitat* (Fig. 4.36). Similarly, although the square, circle and cross can be traced back to 1915, the conceptual evolution from one form to the next closely recalls the tightly choreographed and slightly awkward spatial development of Kogan’s ballet. Malevich, however, makes no suggestion that Suprematism’s break into the architectural realm was anything to do with any of these achievements of Unovis, as has been argued throughout this chapter thus far. Malevich’s conclusion in *34 Drawings* is that he alone achieved this new architectural idea.

In an effort to identify the possible motivations behind Malevich’s decision to write *34 Drawings* in December 1920, it is necessary to look a little closer at the activities and school environment in the preceding weeks and months. A document entitled ‘The Growth of Unovis’ reveals that Malevich’s lithographic booklet shortly followed the appearance of *AERO: Articles and Projects* (1920) (Fig. 4.48), which may have been a primary catalyst for Malevich.<sup>524</sup> Conceived and produced by Khidekel and Chashnik, *AERO* is a typed and lithographic booklet featuring two short handwritten texts and illustrations of architectural conceptions. The ideas in the text draw on Suprematism’s long-standing ambition to reject the

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<sup>523</sup> Lissitzky, ‘Suprematism in World Reconstruction’, in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, 334.

<sup>524</sup> Gavris, ‘The Growth of Unovis’, in Zhadova, *Malevich*, 303.

old and identify the new, but its authors push this principle into new areas of activity. Khidekel's text states that 'our consciousness is not satisfied with the beauty and aesthetics bequeathed to us by our ancestors'.<sup>525</sup> *AERO* also embraces the language of economy that was valued by Malevich in *On New Systems in Art* as 'the fifth measure in art'.<sup>526</sup> Khidekel states in *AERO*:

Our present spirit and our realisation of a new creative phase in world-building at today's speed require supreme accomplishments: we should master the speed of world space on its way to a new world economy; like the truth, we will purge the world of its stagnation and chaos and lead it to the maximum of its dynamism.<sup>527</sup>

The drawings in this publication, such as *Linear Suprematism* (1920) (Fig. 4.49), may not be immediately practical, but they are emblematic of the pair's professional ambition in relation to this sentiment of realising 'a new creative phase in world-building'.<sup>528</sup> The aspiration seems to reflect the authors' desires for creative autonomy in relation to the limitations of Unovis.

The timing of *AERO* strongly suggests that Khidekel and Chashnik were responding directly, not just to Suprematism's theoretical idea to escape the limitations of the earth, but to Malevich's words in the almanac:

LONG LIVE THE AVIATOR MASTERING THE AEROPLANE OF MODERNITY  
LEAVING THE GRECO-ROMAN CHARIOT IN THE GRAVEYARD OF TIME.

Thus, today the sun is shining on the avant-garde of the kitchen dinner of life. Behind it marches a new army of meaning, bearing within itself the essence of modernity, the builders are moving from unreal to real, being bearing systems and plans bearing new arteries for the new shape of modernity.<sup>529</sup>

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<sup>525</sup> Khidekel, 'Polotno sluzhit...' [The Canvas Serves ...], *AERO*, unpaginated; English translation in Basner et al., *In Malevich's Circle*, 210.

<sup>526</sup> Malevich, 'On New Systems in Art', in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 117.

<sup>527</sup> Khidekel, 'Polotno sluzhit...' [The Canvas Serves ...], *AERO*, unpaginated; English translation in Basner et al., *In Malevich's Circle*, 210.

<sup>528</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>529</sup> K. Malevich, 'K chistomu diestvu'; 'Unovis No. 1. Prilozhenie', English translation as 'Towards a pure act', in Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 124.

The publication of *AERO*, with its suggestion of a totally new architectural framework, must be recognised as a response to exactly what Malevich had called for in May 1920.

What is most illuminating about *AERO*, in relation to the mood within Unovis at this moment, is what is not included on its pages. In the text, there is no mention of Unovis or Suprematism. Regina Khidekel has suggested that this may reflect ‘a desire for self-expression’ for the two authors, who did not feature in the almanac.<sup>530</sup> The void created by the departure of Lissitzky is also significant. It is probable that Khidekel, who was elected to the Unovis creative committee in the autumn of 1920, possessed a desire to claim a degree of autonomy. It is also highly likely that as the two authors were students in Lissitzky’s Studio of Architecture and Typography, they may have felt emboldened to step into the vacancy created by their instructor’s departure and pre-emptively blocked Malevich from the position. The statement in *AERO*, that ‘the creative phase in world-building at today’s speed requires supreme accomplishments’, suggests that the two authors sensed that implementation was not too far away. Similarly, there is every reason to think that Malevich was also motivated by the departure of Lissitzky, and felt he needed to write *34 Drawings* at this particular moment to assert his individual authorship over Suprematism’s architectural territory, even if it had already begun to emerge within the school.

Another internal challenge to Suprematism’s direction, and likely another catalyst for Malevich to produce *34 Drawings*, was Chashnik’s *Project for a Tribune for a Smolensk Square* (1920) (Fig. 4.50). Conceived just weeks before *34 Drawings* was printed, Chashnik’s design featured in the Vitebsk Newsletter in November 1920 (Fig. 4.51) and is very different to *AERO* and *34 Drawings*. This design for a tribune embraces contemporary structural engineering principles rather than Suprematism, despite the black square at its base. This work was rejected by Malevich and instigated arguments within Unovis.<sup>531</sup> This overt embrace of technology had far too much in common with Vladimir Tatlin’s *Model for a Monument to the Third International* (1920) (Fig. 4.52), of which the Suprematist was almost certainly aware. Like Tatlin’s famous structure, Chashnik’s tribune alludes to advancements in technology and functionality. Both projects stand as a force of explicit material energy and an embodiment of the antithesis of Suprematism which Malevich

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<sup>530</sup> Regina Khidekel, ed., *Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism* (London: Prestel Publishing, 2014), 17.

<sup>531</sup> See Sam Johnson, ‘Suprematism and/Supremacy of Architecture’, in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 144-160.

rejected in *34 Drawings*. Not coincidentally, Malevich himself produced a tribune in 1920 (Fig. 4.53). Despite its seemingly decorative appearance, Malevich deliberately fosters ambiguity. It is difficult to determine whether this design is ornamental, intended for construction or is a gesture towards a higher spatial reality.

Despite Malevich's ambition to orientate Unovis, the developments within the group aligned with broader shifts that were emerging in Moscow and the wider avant-garde. By late 1920, creative individuals in the capital were on the verge of identifying Constructivism. Lodder has pointed out that the theorists in the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture argued that 'artistic creation should be more closely related to the needs of industry, society and the realisation of a future communist collective'.<sup>532</sup> In November 1920, a Working Group of Objective Analysis held their first meeting in Moscow with this principle in mind. As Maria Gough has discussed, at this first meeting, the group intended to purge what they defined as the 'supplementary' from the 'fundamental' in a work of art.<sup>533</sup> In a text written at almost the same moment as *34 Drawings*, Tatlin explained his position in 'The Work Ahead of Us':

In this way an opportunity emerges of uniting purely artistic forms with utilitarian intentions. An example is the project for a monument to the Third International (exhibited at the Eighth Congress).

The results of this are models which stimulate us to inventions in our work of creating a new world, and which call upon the producers to exercise control over the forms encountered in our new everyday life.<sup>534</sup>

The gap between artistic culture and industry and technology was narrowing in the final months of 1920. The highly competitive Malevich would have been acutely aware of this strand of avant-garde activity. *34 Drawings* is illustrative of his need to pull Unovis away from more overtly material and functional thinking.

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<sup>532</sup> Lodder, 'Conflicting Approaches to Creativity?', in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 272.

<sup>533</sup> Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2005), 39-41.

<sup>534</sup> Vladimir Tatlin, 'The Work Ahead of Us', in Larissa Alekseenova Zhadova, ed., *Tatlin* (New York: Rizzoli, 1984), 239.

Another creative group in Moscow known as Zhivskulptarkh, an amalgamation of the abbreviations paint-skulpt-arch, began freely incorporating Suprematism into its investigations in architecture.<sup>535</sup> Although Aleksandr Rodchenko had rejected Malevich at the start of 1919, his participation in this group suggests that he still viewed Suprematist painting as a source for creative stimulus. Rodchenko's *Variant for a Newspaper Kiosk* (1919) (Fig. 4.54), produced under the auspices of Zhivskulptarkh, has a clear formal similarity to Malevich's *Supremus No. 50* (1915-16) (Fig. 4.55). Rodchenko's *Kiosk* also seems to recall Vladimir Krinskii's words when he explained that Zhivskulptarkh was not a synthesis of architecture with monumental painting or sculpture, but a 'synthesis of some new art emerging, out of the traditional arts of painting, sculpture and architecture'.<sup>536</sup> One has to conclude that, for Rodchenko, Malevich represented both competition and a creative stimulus.

The group's communal house projects of 1919 and 1920, such as those by Krinskii and Nikolai Ladovskii (Figs. 4.56 and 4.57), are perhaps most emblematic of how the group was influenced by Suprematism. In his memoirs, Krinskii acknowledged 'we looked at his [Malevich's] works with their maximum geometricism and laconism, with the dominating use of a square and rectangles with a lot of interest. They were very close to combinations of simplified architectural volumes'.<sup>537</sup> Ladovskii wrote that 'the architect must first of all assemble and compose only space, not concerning himself with material and construction... Construction enters into architecture only in so far as it determines a concept of space'.<sup>538</sup> Historian Anatole Senkevitch has written that the principles of perceptual psychology were not employed 'as determinants of a style, but as a principle for organising the design process and cultivating in the designer a dynamic three-dimensional manner of conceiving architectural form and space'.<sup>539</sup> Despite Senkevitch's claim here, the group's communal house designs and Rodchenko's *Kiosk* are entirely unrealisable.

As Catherine Cooke wrote, this group 'rejected not just the formal languages of traditional building but the very notion of stability on which they rested', an observation that may reveal most significantly the group's Suprematist influence, as much as it might explain Malevich's abstract conception of architecture

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<sup>535</sup> Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings*, ed. Alexander N. Lavrentiev, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 136.

<sup>536</sup> Krinskii, quoted in Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Nikolai Ladovskiy* (Moscow: Sergey E. Gordeev, 2011), 37.

<sup>537</sup> Vladimir Krinskii, quoted in *ibid.*, 38.

<sup>538</sup> Nikolai Ladovskii, quoted in Catherine Cooke, ed., *Architectural Drawings of the Russian Avant-Garde* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1990), 38.

<sup>539</sup> Anatole Senkevitch, 'Aspects of form in Rationalist Space', in Peter C. Doo and Alice Gray Read, eds., *Via 6: Architecture and Visual Perception* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983), 80.

in *34 Drawings*.<sup>540</sup> Certainly, Suprematism could be valued as a liberating force. It unshackled the architect from daily struggle and freed him or her from the realities of building, giving rise to fantastical conceptions of architecture in which volumes could be freely manipulated. Stimulated by Suprematism, the members of Zhivskulptarkh seem to have considered how architectural space demonstrated that art had a role in shaping social change.

Ladovskii had embraced geometricism as a way of incorporating concerns about bodily and psychological perceptions of space. V.A. Petrov's *First Year Exercise in Manifesting the Geometrical Properties of Form* (1920) (Fig. 4.58), produced in Ladovskii's studio, is emblematic of this. Senkevitch has explained the relationship between an emerging Rationalist view and geometry, which, when 'reduced to a measured complex of geometrically articulated elements, architectural form could thus be made to communicate its proportional interrelationships directly to the observer by visually rendering its elementary properties of size, shape, depth and position in space'.<sup>541</sup> This very precise conception of space recalls many of the investigations carried out by Unovis in 1920. In particular, Kogan's Suprematist ballet and Zuperman's words on theatre seem to be two striking parallels of this principle. It is, therefore, possible that this appropriation of Suprematism compromised its distinct nature and led Malevich to recognise and define the movement's own architectural potential.

The external and internal challenges to Suprematism by 1920 go some way to explaining why Malevich sought to assert self-authorship over the movement's ideas in architecture and to stabilise its trajectory. In *34 Drawings*, Malevich formulated an implicit response to a spectrum of activities and ideas that were developing within and outside of Unovis. At certain moments in the text, however, Malevich was more explicit in how he sought to position the movement.

Suprematism's attitude to materials is directly opposed to agitation which is not growing in favour of the culture of the material – a call to aesthetics. The elaboration of the surfaces of the materials is the psychosis of the contemporary artist. They worry about the beauty of the organism's feathers instead of producing the image through the utilitarian perfection of economic necessity, leaving

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<sup>540</sup> Cooke, *Architectural Drawings of the Russian Avant-Garde*, 20.

<sup>541</sup> Senkevitch, 'Aspects of Spatial Form and Perceptual Psychology in Soviet Architecture of the 1920s', in *Via* 6, 95.

behind natural transformation and concerning themselves with its elaboration where there is technical – but not aesthetic – necessity.<sup>542</sup>

Malevich seems to imply that Tatlin's work, like Chashnik's tribune, favours a superficial view of technology and engineering. In this respect, *34 Drawings* represents an effort to pull Unovis away from developments that were happening in Moscow and orientate the group towards Suprematism's more elusive conceptually driven mode of creative exploration.

In his Bauhaus book, which he began writing in 1920, Malevich points to the aircraft on the ground to highlight the Futurist as someone who is stimulated by the machine itself (Fig. 4.59). By contrast, the Suprematist is inspired by a sensation of space (Figs. 4.60 and 4.61). This new experience of space was only achieved, at least in the 1920s, by aircraft, but it seems that Malevich wanted Unovis to embrace a sort of fundamental potential that technology might offer to transcend the normal day-to-day reality rather than co-opt its crude material exterior into their projects. Malevich's motivation to produce an architectural idea that was so abstract and elusive has to be seen as an indication of his desire to steer Unovis away from questions of implementation and towards the further investigation of materials, independent of practical utility, functionality and structural considerations.

As this discussion has so far suggested, *34 Drawings* was produced with multiple functions in mind. Another possible function may have been to assert Suprematism's authority over emerging terms. The lithographic text frequently uses the term *constructions*, both to refer to Suprematist painting and to identify the coming new architecture. 'Constructions' from 1913-18, for example, 'were built on purely plane development'.<sup>543</sup> Later in the text, Malevich explains that 'Suprematism is growing as a new architectural construction'.<sup>544</sup> Tatiana Gurianova has explored these terms in more detail. She has written that Malevich conceived the idea of construction as a 'perfected, pure form'.<sup>545</sup> In respect of the notion of the utilitarian, Gurianova suggests that Suprematism 'introduced a different concept (of utility), which he defined as the

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<sup>542</sup> K. Malevich, *Suprematism: 34 risunka* [Suprematism: 34 Drawings] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 126.

<sup>543</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>545</sup> Tatiana Goriacheva, 'Suprematism and Constructivism: An Intersection of Parallels', in Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth* (London: Pindar Press, 2007), 70.

functionality of form-building independent of any considerations of practical use'.<sup>546</sup> For Goriacheva, the notion of utility in Suprematism 'effectively gained another connotation'.<sup>547</sup> This redefining of terms, and Malevich's absolute conviction about art and the work of artists, may account for why he refers to painters as architects in this text.

Suprematism's emergence into the field of architecture was the collective achievement of Unovis, despite Malevich's absolute language of discovery and individual authorship in *34 Drawings*. It must have felt like a frustrating concession for Unovis when Malevich concluded the text by saying he was placing 'the further development of architectural Suprematism in the hands of the young architects in the broad sense of the word, for in this alone, I do see an epoch with a system of new architecture'.<sup>548</sup> It already was in their hands. Right from its outset, Suprematism required a level of retrospection to justify its further formulation. In a letter written to Matiushin in 1915, for instance, Malevich stated that his black square had served him in 'generating a mass of material'.<sup>549</sup> One issue Malevich had in 1920 was that, because of the success of his pedagogical programme in Vitebsk and his engagement with creative individuals, the mass of material being produced in Suprematism was being generated by others. This compelled Malevich to explain and reposition their achievements in direct relation to his own past achievements on the canvas and to resituate himself in a leadership position. Malevich wrote: 'I myself have entered a remote and for me new realm of thought; as best I can, I shall give an account of what I see in the infinite space of the human skull. May there thrive a single system of world architecture on Earth'.<sup>550</sup> The lithographic process afforded Malevich the opportunity to literally and symbolically stamp his name on this new idea of architecture in Suprematism. By contrast, the problem Unovis had was that their activities remained tethered to Malevich's name. As the following chapters go on to discuss, struggles for authorship and questions of creative autonomy in Suprematism did not go away.

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<sup>546</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid.

<sup>548</sup> K. Malevich, *Suprematizm: 34 risunka* [Suprematism: 34 Drawings] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 128.

<sup>549</sup> Malevich, letter to Matiushin, [early June 1915]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 65-66.

<sup>550</sup> K. Malevich, *Suprematizm: 34 risunka* [Suprematism: 34 Drawings] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 128.



**Figure 4.1**

The building of the Vitebsk People's Art School (Vitebskoe narodnoe khudozhestvennoe uchilishche)  
today

Reproduced from Angela Lampe, ed., *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918-1922* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2019)



**Figure 4.2**

Kazimir Malevich and his daughter Una

Photograph

20 April 1922

Reproduced from Angela Lampe, ed., *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918-1922* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2019)



**Figure 4.3**

Members of the Creative Committee of the People's Art School, Vitebsk  
Winter 1919

Reproduced from Angela Lampe, ed., *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918-1922* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2019)



**Figure 4.4**

**El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich**

*Suprematism: Sketch of a Curtain for a Meeting of the Committee to Combat Unemployment*

1919

Gouache, watercolour pencil and ink on paper

47 x 62.5 cm

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



**Figure 4.5**

The White Barracks Building, Vitebsk

1920

Reproduced from *Unovis No. 1* (Vitebsk, 1920)



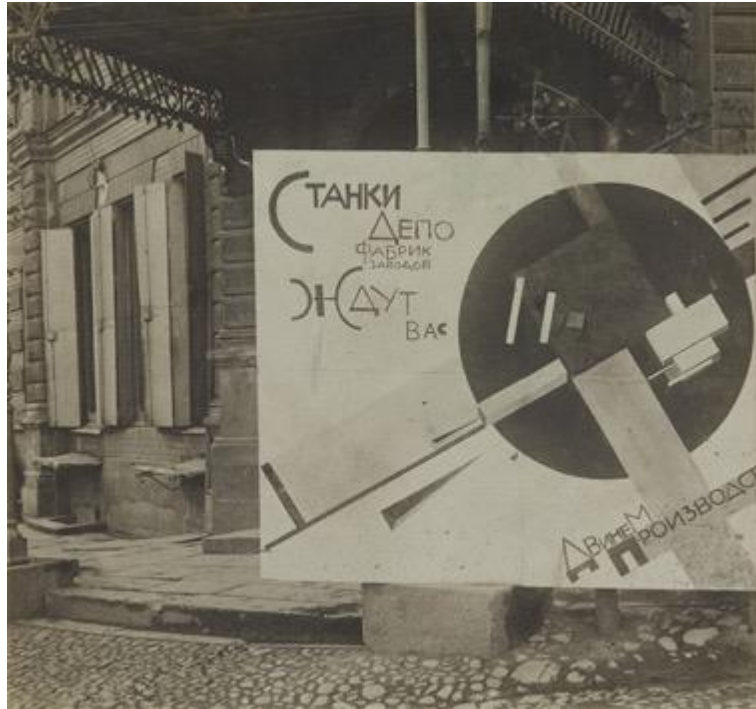
**Figure 4.6**

Decorated Tramcar

Vitebsk

c. 1919

Reproduced from Angela Lampe, ed., *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918-1922* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2019)



**Figure 4.7**

**El Lissitzky**

*The Factory Workbenches Await You*

Photograph

1919

Reproduced from Angela Lampe, ed., *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918-1922* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2019)



**Figure 4.8**

Suprematist signboard on the Vitebsk branch of ROSTA

c. 1919

Reproduced from Angela Lampe, ed., *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918-1922* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2019)



**Figure 4.9**

Front cover of *Unovis No. 1*  
(Vitebsk, 1920)



**Figure 4.10**

Photograph of Kazimir Malevich and Unovis members bound for Moscow to participate in the First All-Russian Conference of Art Teachers and Students at the Vitebsk Railway Station

5 June 1920

Reproduced from Angela Lampe, ed., *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918-1922* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2019)



**Figure 4.11**

Members of Unovis

1921

Reproduced from Angela Lampe, ed., *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918-1922* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2019)



**Figure 4.12**

**Kazimir Malevich**

Set design for *Victory over the Sun*, Act One, Scene Four

1913

Pencil on paper

16.8 x 20.6 cm

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



**Figure 4.13**

**Vera Ermolaeva**

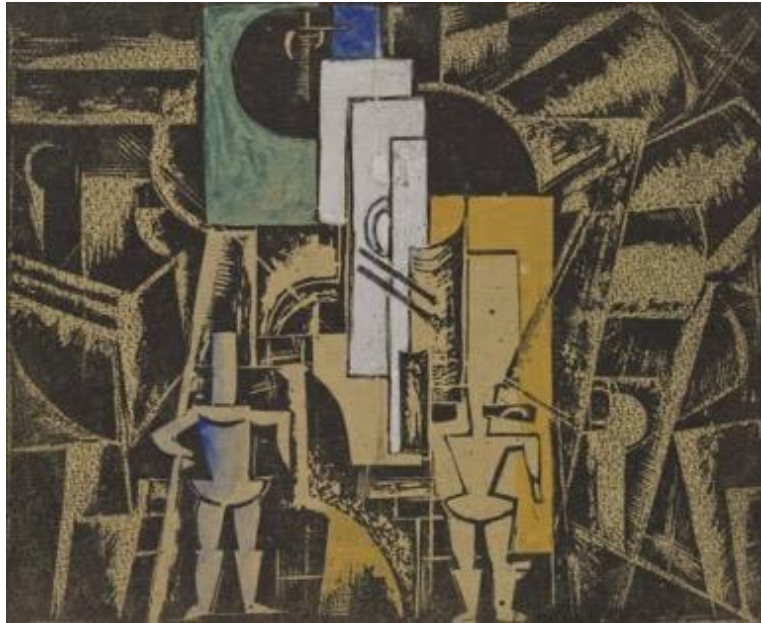
*Design for Victory over the Sun*

1920

Ink on paper

13.8 x 11.5 cm

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



**Figure 4.14**

**Vera Ermolaeva**

*Design for Victory over the Sun*

1920

Woodcut with watercolour

16 x 20 cm

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



**Figure 4.15**

**Nina Kogan**

Page spread from *Unovis No. 1*

(Vitebsk, 1920)

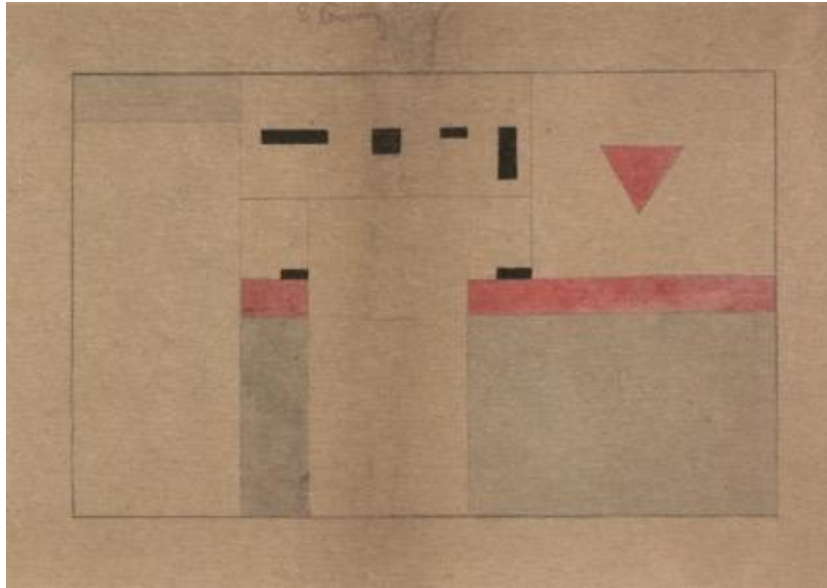


Figure 4.16

Nina Kogan

Page spread from *Unovis No. 1*

(Vitebsk, 1920)



**Figure 4.17**

*Untitled*

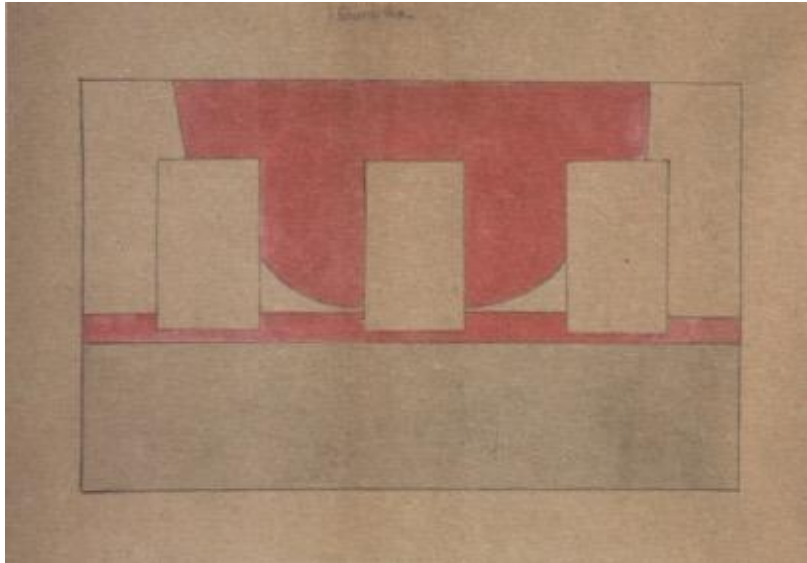
Inscription: *2nd room*

1920

Gouache and pencil on paper

37.9 x 53.6 cm

State Museum of Contemporary Art-Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki



**Figure 4.18**

*Untitled*

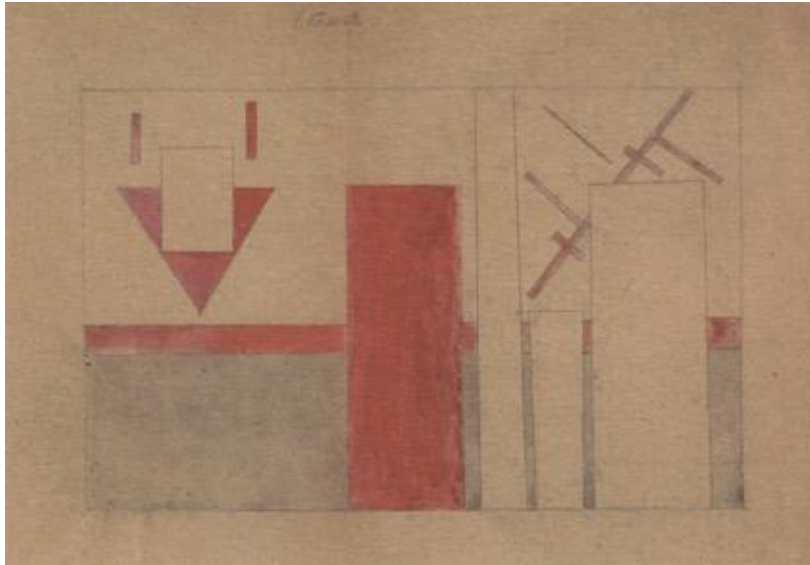
Inscription: *1st room*

1920

Watercolour and pencil on paper

37.4 x 57.7 cm

State Museum of Contemporary Art-Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki



**Figure 4.19**

*Untitled*

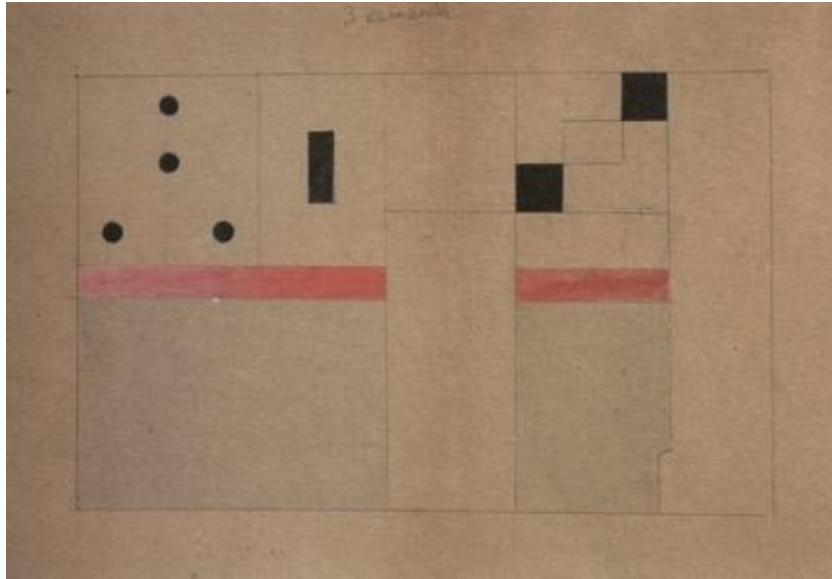
Inscription: *1st room*

1920

Watercolour and pencil on paper

37.9 x 57.6 cm

State Museum of Contemporary Art-Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki



**Figure 4.20**

*Untitled*

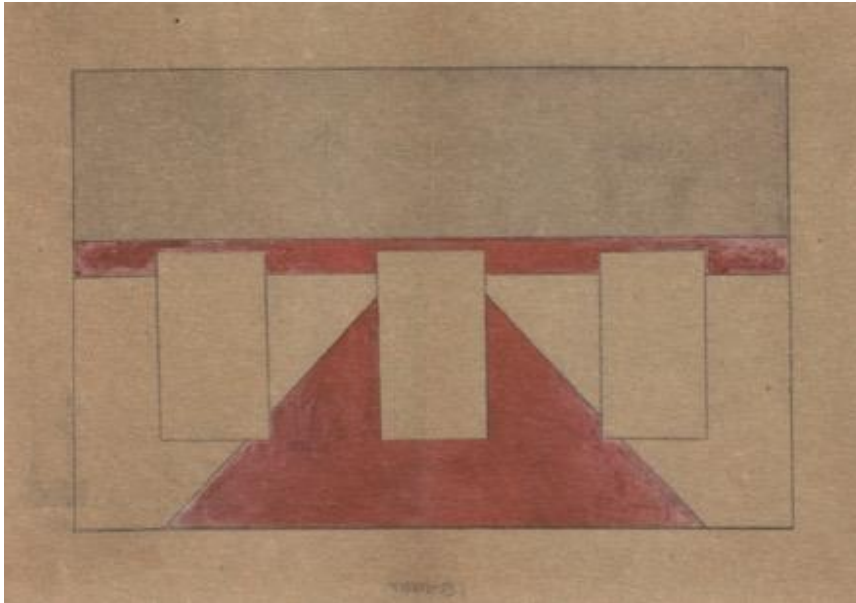
Inscription: *3rd room*

1920

Gouache and pencil on paper

37.8 x 53.6 cm

State Museum of Contemporary Art-Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki



**Figure 4.21**

*Untitled*

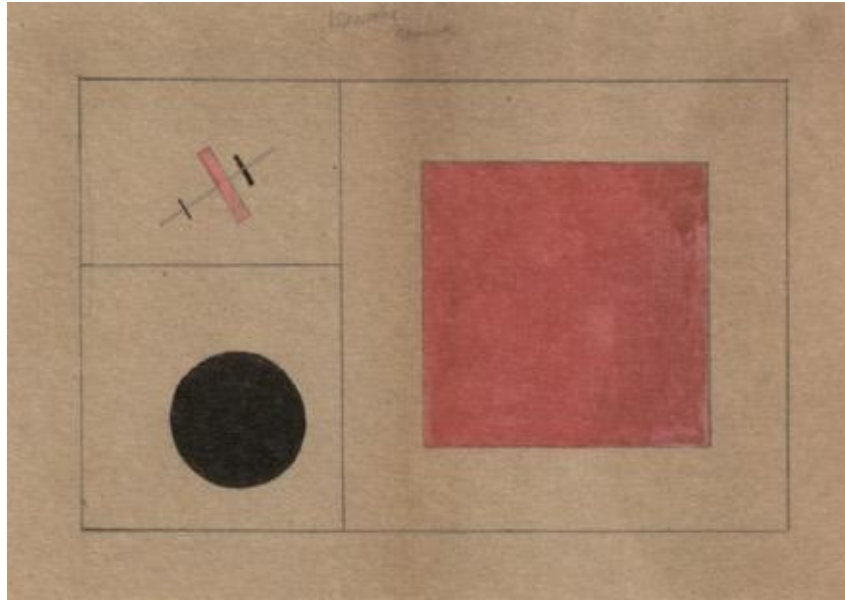
Inscription: *1st room*

1920

Watercolour and pencil on paper

37.5 x 57.6 cm

State Museum of Contemporary Art-Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki



**Figure 4.22**

*Untitled*

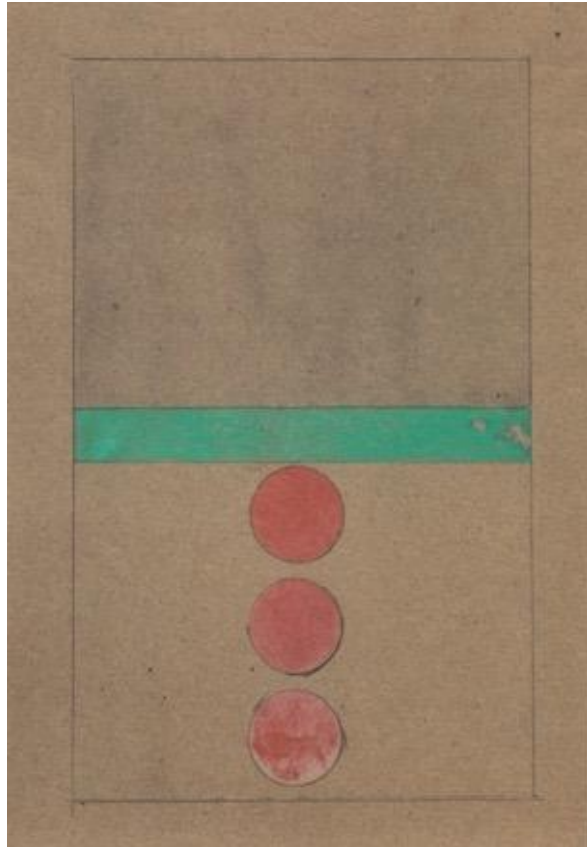
Inscription: *1st room ceiling*

1920

Watercolour and pencil on paper

37.7 x 57.8 cm

State Museum of Contemporary Art-Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki



**Figure 4.23**

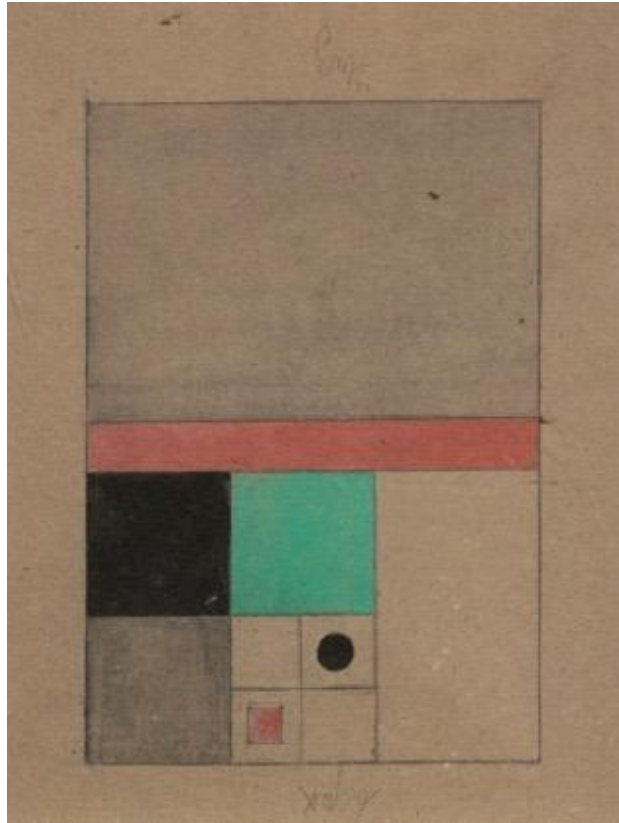
*Untitled*

1920

Gouache and pencil on paper

37.5 x 28.7 cm

State Museum of Contemporary Art-Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki



**Figure 4.24**

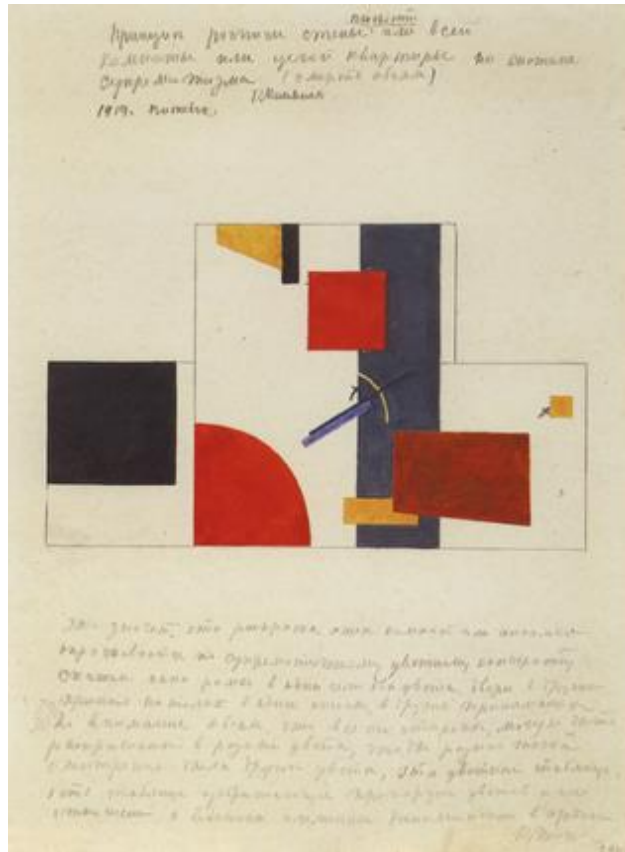
*Untitled*

1920

Gouache and pencil on paper

37.8 x 28.9 cm

State Museum of Contemporary Art-Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki



**Figure 4.25**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Principle of Painting Walls (the Plane) or an Entire Room or Complete Apartment According to the System of Suprematism (Death to Wallpaper)*

1920

Water, gouache and ink on paper

34 x 24.8 cm

Russian State Museum, St. Petersburg



**Figure 4.26**

**Ivan Kudriashev**

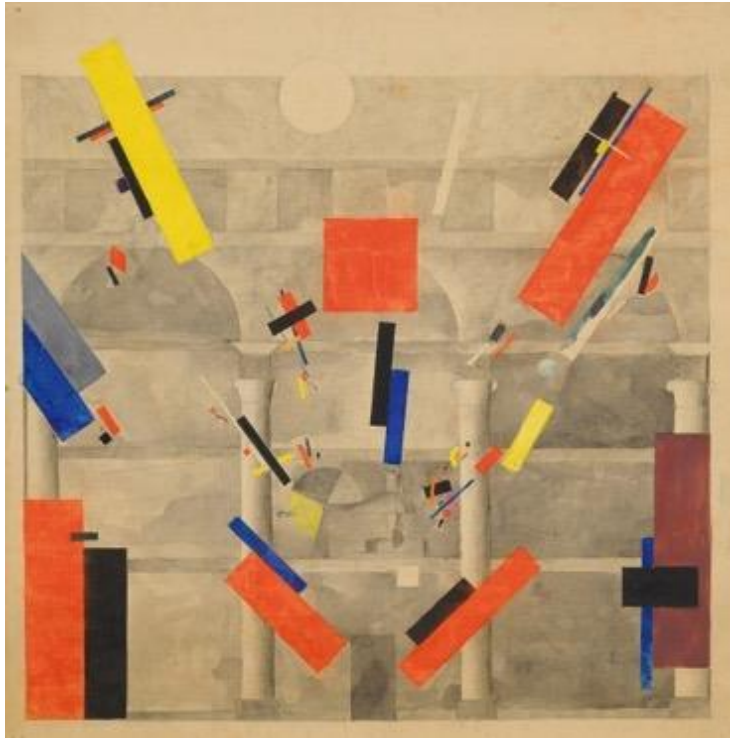
*Suprematism: General Plan for the Decoration of the First Soviet Theatre in Orenburg – Composition for the Auditorium*

1920

Mixed media on canvas

101.5 x 88 cm

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



**Figure 4.27**

**Vera Ermolaeva**

*Sketch for Vitebsk Festival Decorations: Suprematist Composition*

1920

Ink and gouache on paper

27.4 x 16.7 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



**Figure 4.28**

**El Lissitzky**

*Cover Design for the Committee for the Struggle Against Unemployment*

1919

Lithographic print

22.2 x 18.2 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Figure 4.29**

**El Lissitzky**

*Proun 23 No. 6*

1919

Tempera on canvas

62.9 x 77.5 cm

Van Abbe Museum Collection, Eindhoven



**Figure 4.30**

**El Lissitzky**

*Proun 1E (City)*

1919

Lithographic print

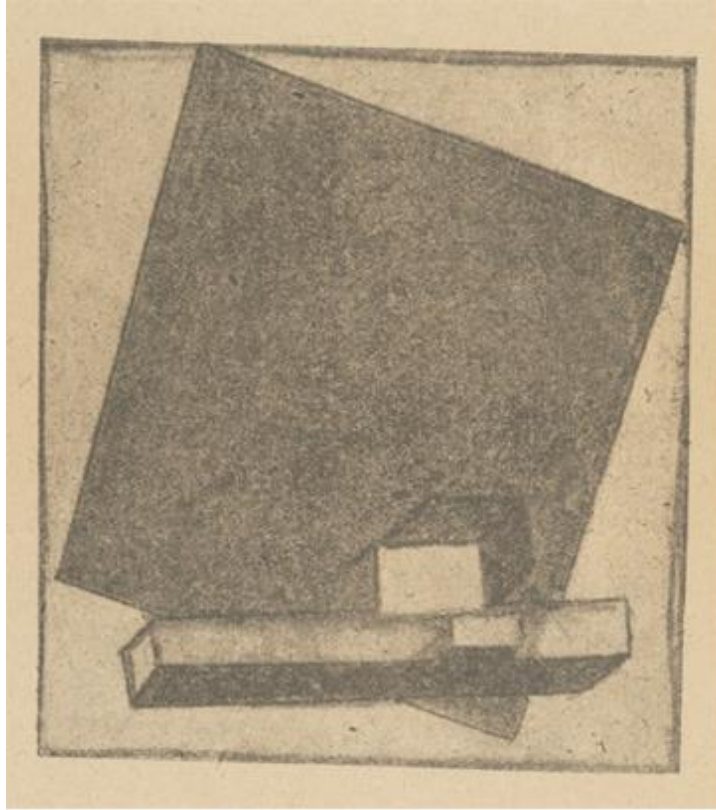
27.3 x 25.5 cm

Van Abbe Museum Collection, Eindhoven



**Figure 4.31**

Detail of the display of Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist canvases at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, 0.10 (Zero-Ten)*, in Petrograd, 19 December 1915 – 19 January 1916  
Reproduced from Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden: Brill, 2019)



**Figure 4.32**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Untitled*

Published in *Puti tvorchestva*, [The Paths of Creativity], No. 5

1919

Houghton Library, Harvard University



**Figure 4.33**

Postcard of Moscow's Kazan Railway Station

c. 1920s

Image from the author's collection



188. 10. und 11. / Kazan-Bahnhof / Moskau / Architekt: A. W. Scherwin / Eisenbahn- und Verkehrs- / Baukunst- / Zeitschrift für die / Baukunst in Russland. Die Entwicklung der russischen Architektur hat sich in der letzten Zeit / sehr / verändert.



189

**Figure 4.34**

Photograph of interior of Moscow's Kazan Railway Station

*Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst*

1929

Reproduced from <https://architecture-history.org/architects/architects/SHCHUSEV/OBJ/1913-1926,%201940,%20Kazansky%20railway%20station,%20Moscow,%20Russia.html>



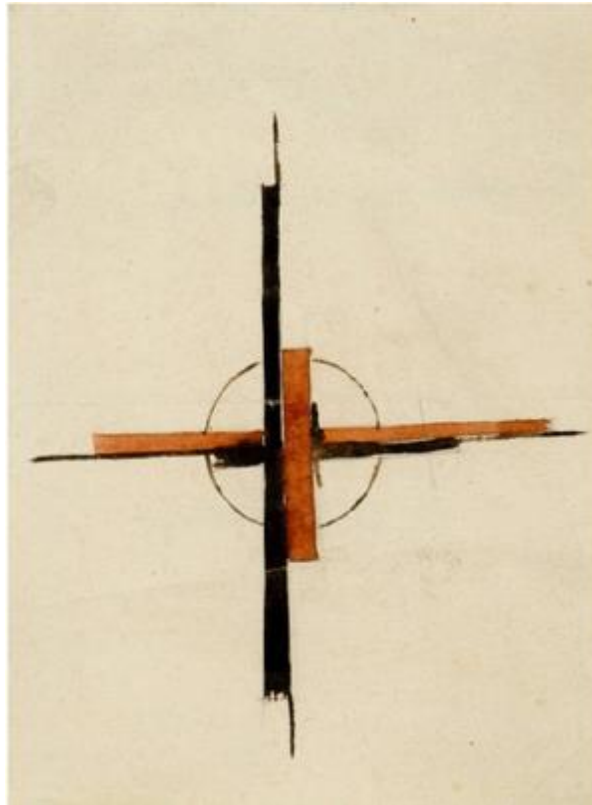
**Figure 4.35**

Loan Treasury building

1913-16

V. A. Pokrovsky

Reproduced from [https://www.rbth.com/travel/2013/02/22/moscow\\_architecture\\_sticking\\_to\\_faux-russian\\_style\\_23147.html](https://www.rbth.com/travel/2013/02/22/moscow_architecture_sticking_to_faux-russian_style_23147.html)



**Figure 4.36**

**Lazar Khidekel**

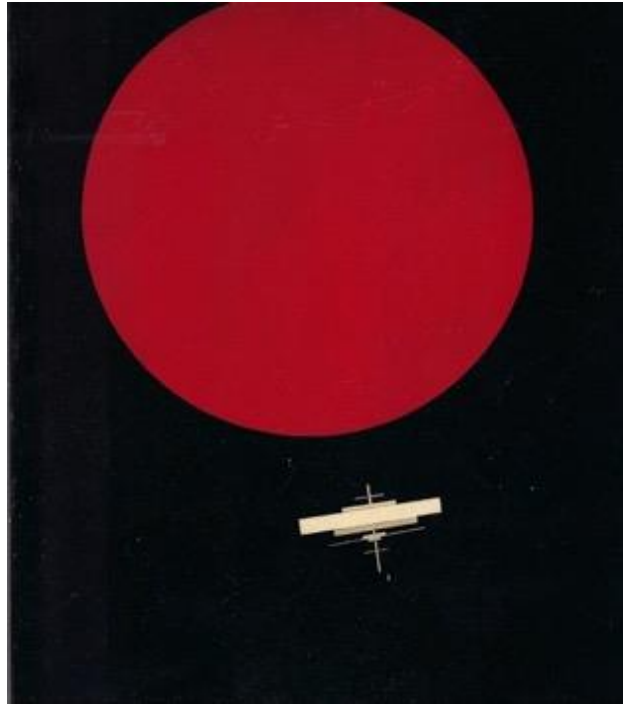
*Design for a Cosmic Habit*

1920

India ink, watercolour and pencil on paper

12.2 x 9.6 cm

Reproduced from Angela Lampe, ed., *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918-1922* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2019)



**Figure 4.37**

**Ilia Chashnik**

*Cosmos: Red Circle on Black Surface*

1920

India ink, watercolour on paper

37.2 x 32.8 cm

Leonard Hutton Galleries, New York



**Figure 4.38**

**David Yakerson**

*Suprematist Composition*

1920

Watercolour, gouache, ink and graphite on paper

23 x 17.5 cm

Vitebsk Regional Museum of Local History



**Figure 4.39**

**El Lissitzky**

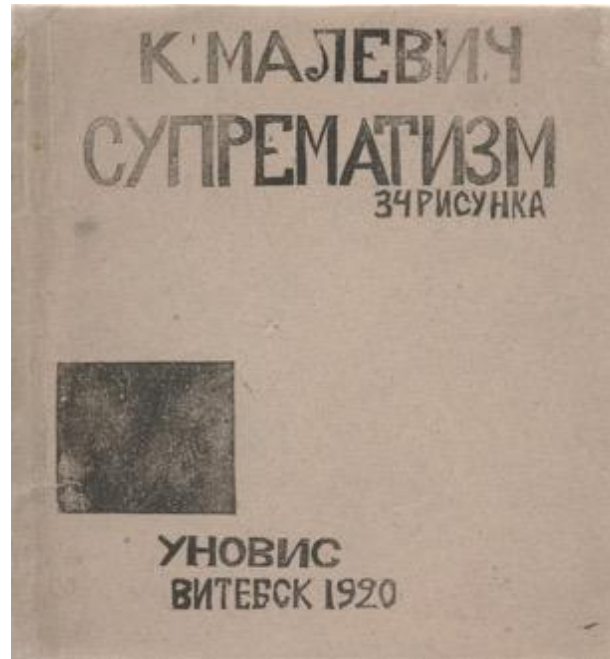
*Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*

1919

Tempera on canvas

62.9 x 77.5 cm

Van Abbe Museum Collection, Eindhoven



**Figure 4.40**

**Kazimir Malevich**

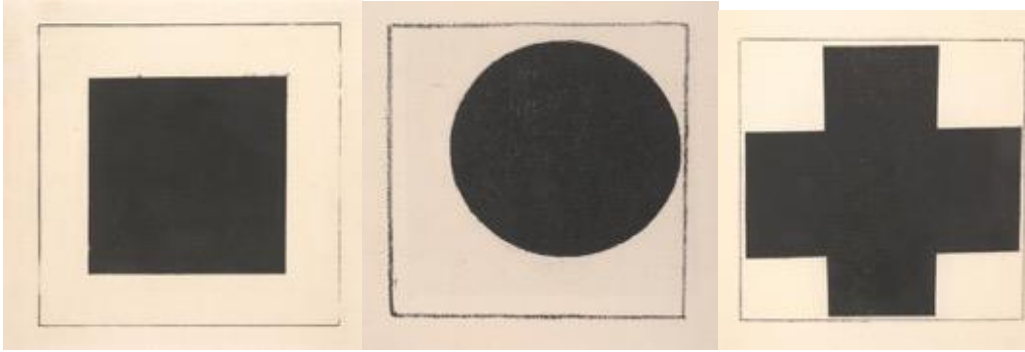
Cover design for *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*

1920

Woodcut

19.05 x 13.57 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Figures 4.41, 4.42 and 4.43**

**Kazimir Malevich**

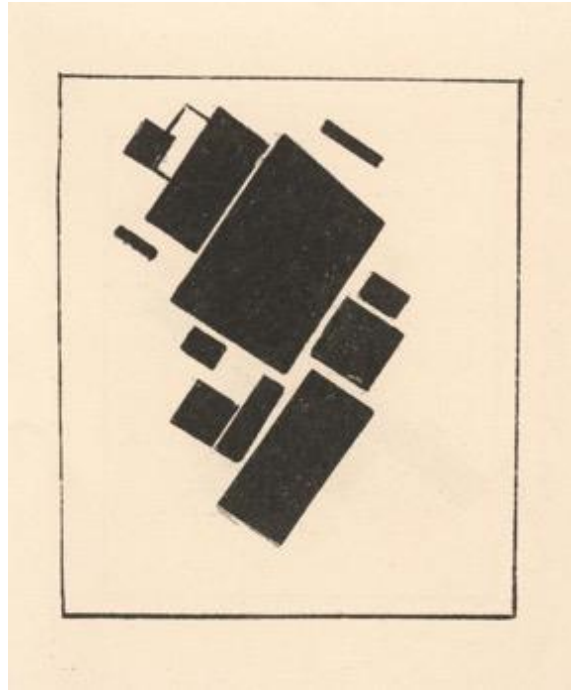
Lithographic images from *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, unpaginated

1920

Lithograph

13.6 x 13.6 cm (each image)

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Figure 4.44**

**Kazimir Malevich**

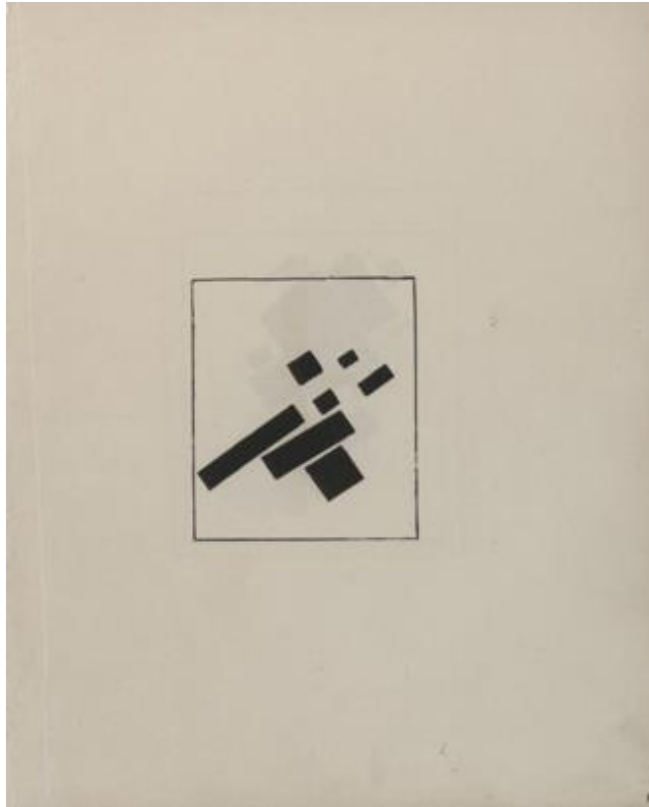
Lithographic image from *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, unpaginated

1920

Lithograph

8.26 x 9.52 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Figure 4.45**

**Kazimir Malevich**

Lithographic image from *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, unpaginated

1920

Lithograph

8.26 x 9.52 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Figure 4.46**

**Kazimir Malevich**

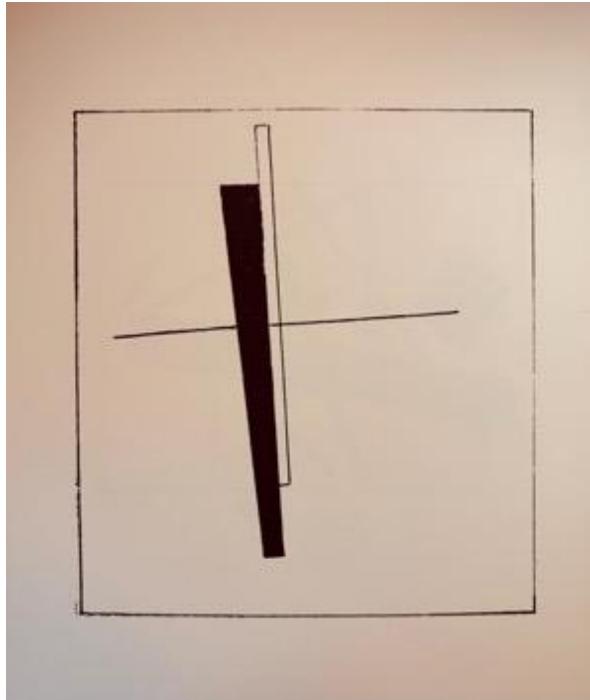
*Suprematist Composition: Eight Red Rectangles*

1915

Oil on canvas

80 x 62 cm

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



**Figure 4.47**

**Kazimir Malevich**

Lithographic image from *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, unpaginated

1920

Lithograph

8.26 x 9.52 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Figure 4.48**

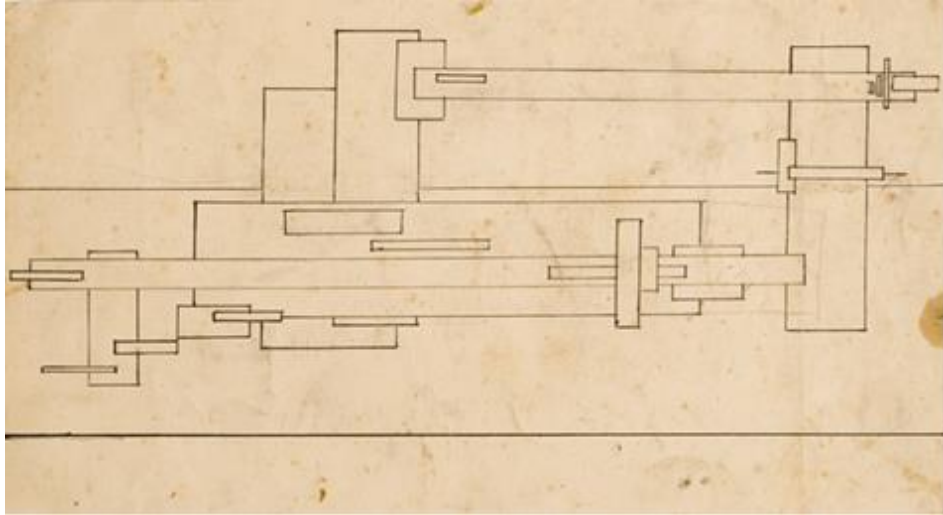
Lazar Khidekel and Ilia Chashnik

*Cover: AERO: Articles and Projects*

1920

Lithograph

Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid



**Figure 4.49**

**Lazar Khidekel**

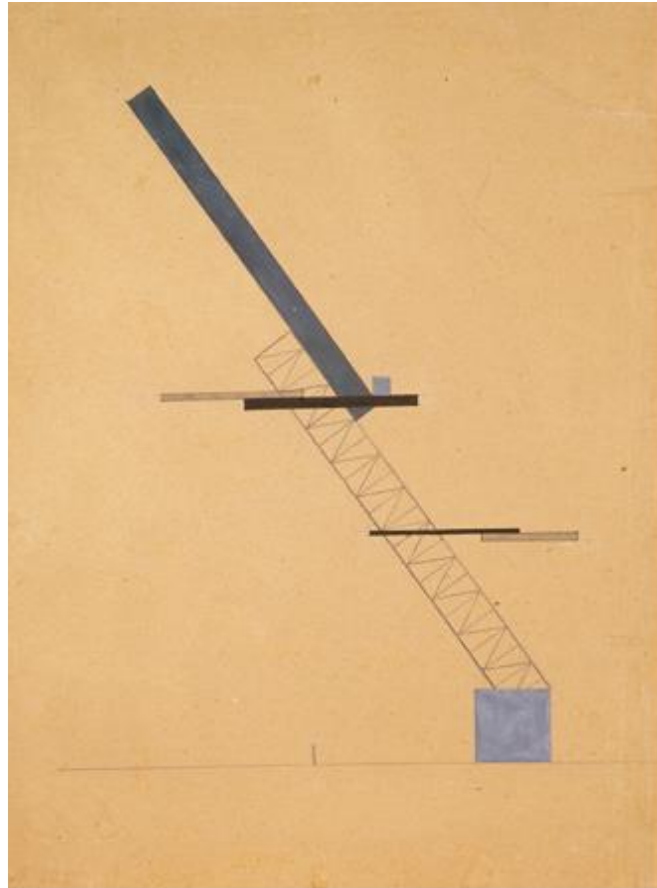
*Linear Suprematism*

1920

India ink on paper

22 x 12.1 cm

Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid



**Figure 4.50**

**Ilya Chashnik**

*Project for a Tribune for a Smolensk Square*

1920

Gouache, graphite and India ink on paper

48.2 x 37.8 cm

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



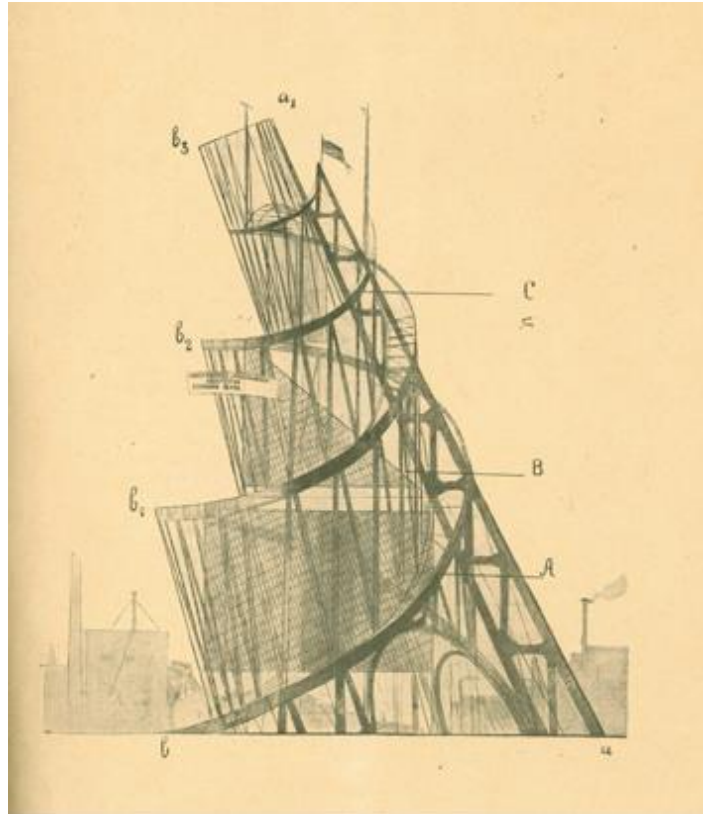
Figure 4.51

*Unovis. Listok Vitebskogo Tvorkoma, No. 1*

20 November 1920

Reproduced from Togda. 'Unovis. Listok Vitebskogo Tvorkoma no. 1'. Togda. 20 November 1920.

<https://www.togdazine.ru/article/1164>



**Figure 4.52**

**Vladimir Tatlin**

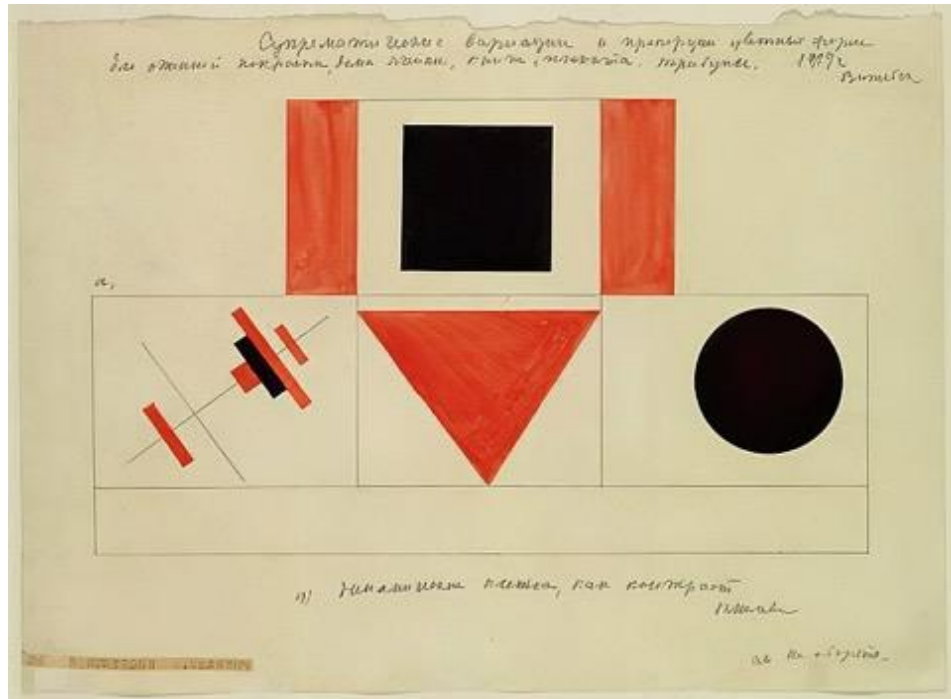
*Model for a Monument to the Third International*

1920

Wood, metal and wire, c. 5 metres high

Lost, presumed destroyed

Reproduced from Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir  
Malevich* (Leiden: Brill, 2019)



**Figure 4.53**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Design for Rostrum*

1920

Pencil on paper, black and red ink

35.5 x 25.5 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



**Figure 4.54**

**Aleksandr Rodchenko**

(Zhivskulptarkh)

*Variant for a Newspaper Kiosk*

1919

Paper, India ink, gouache

37 x 46 cm

Reproduced from S.O. Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work*, trans. Huw Evans (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986)



**Figure 4.55**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Supremus No. 50*

1915-16

Oil on canvas

97 x 66 cm

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



**Figure 4.56**

**Vladimir Krinskii**

(Zhivskulptarkh)

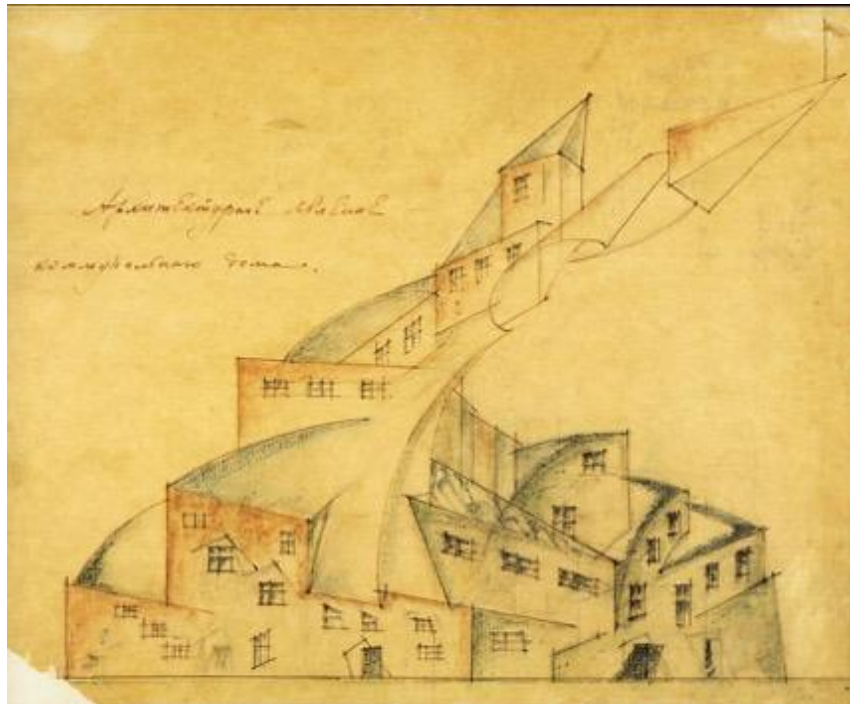
*Communal House*

1920

Ink and watercolour and pencil on paper

11 x 14 cm

A. V. Shchusev State Research Museum of Architecture, Moscow



**Figure 4.57**

**Nikolai Ladovskii**

(Zhivskulptarkh)

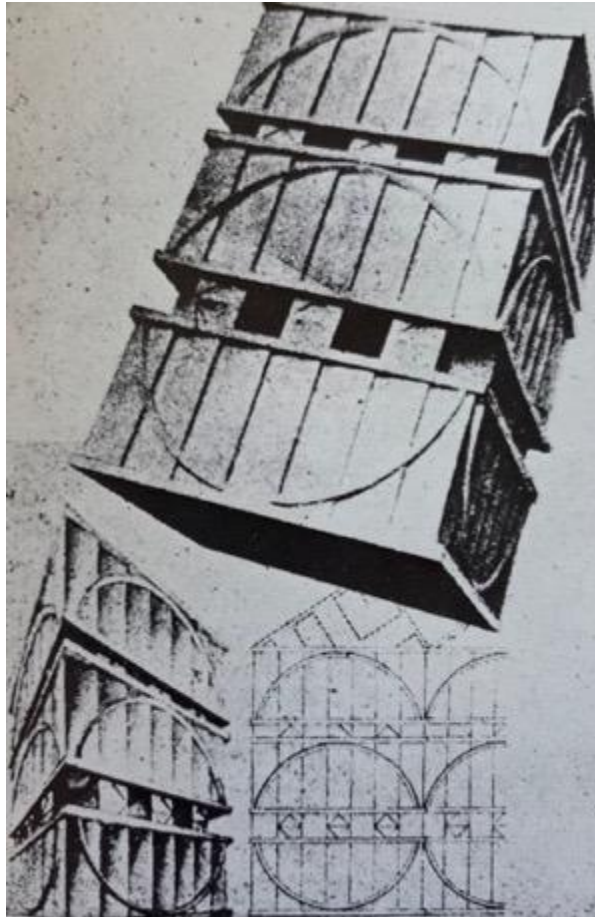
*Communal House*

1920

Pencil, coloured pencil and coloured ink on paper

40 x 31 cm

A. V. Shchusev State Research Museum of Architecture, Moscow



**Figure 4.58**

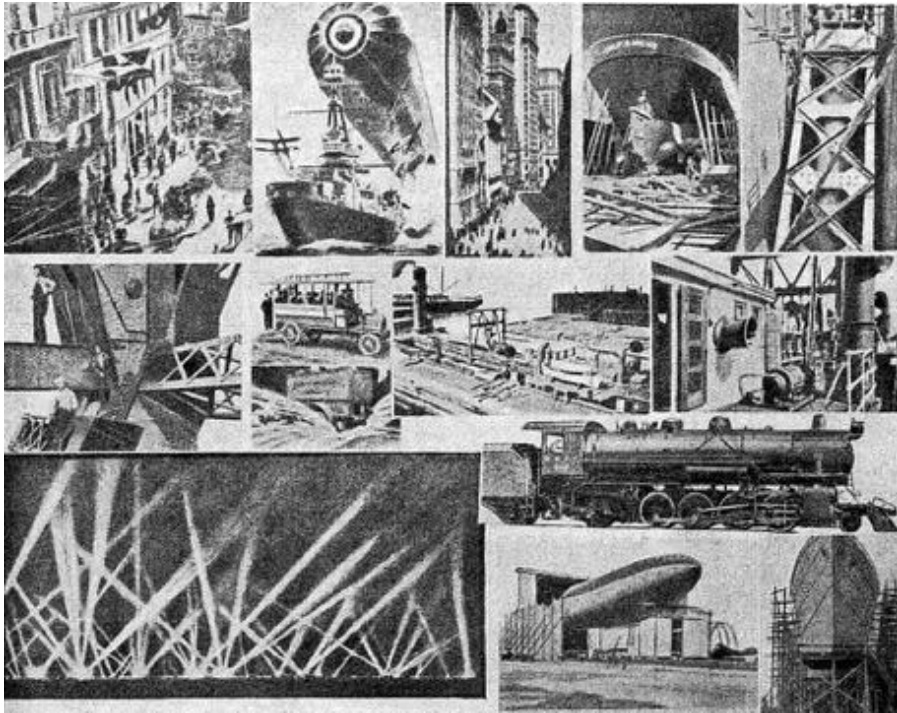
**V.A. Petrov**

*First Year Exercise in Manifesting the Geometrical Properties of Form*

1920

Reproduced from Peter C. Doo and Alice Gray Read, eds., *Via 6: Architecture and Visual Perception*

(Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983)



**Figure 4.59**

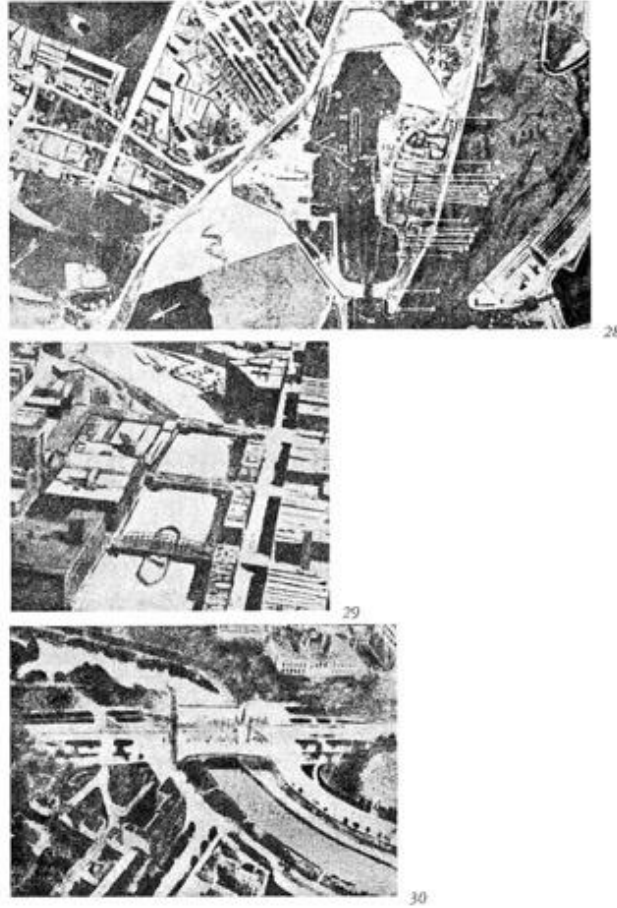
**Kazimir Malevich**

*The Environment (“Reality”) which Stimulates the Futurist*

*Die gegenstandslose Welt*

1927

Reproduced from Simon Baier and Britta Tanya Dümpelmann, eds., *Kazimir Malevich: The World as Objectlessness*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel/Hatje Cantz, 2014)



**Figure 4.60**

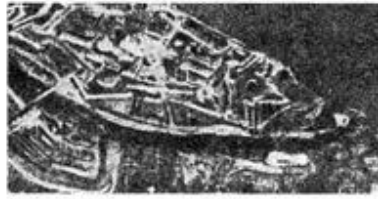
**Kazimir Malevich**

*The Environment ("Reality") which Stimulates the Suprematist*

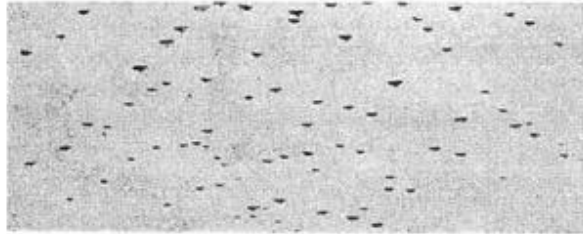
*Die gegenstandslose Welt*

1927

Reproduced from Simon Baier and Britta Tanya Dümpelmann, eds., *Kazimir Malevich: The World as Objectlessness*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel/Hatje Cantz, 2014)



31



32



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34



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**Figure 4.61**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*The Environment ("Reality") which Stimulates the Suprematist*

*Die gegenstandslose Welt*

1927

Reproduced from Simon Baier and Britta Tanya Dümpelmann, eds., *Kazimir Malevich: The World as Objectlessness*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel/Hatje Cantz, 2014)

## Chapter Five

### *Definitions of Construction and Malevich's Copyright in Architecture*

The winter of 1920-21 was an important moment for Suprematism and the avant-garde in Russia. Malevich had presented his own visionary conception of architecture; definitions of composition and construction were being reconsidered in Moscow and Constructivism proper was about to emerge. Political, social and economic life in Soviet Russia was also entering a period of transformation. By the end of 1920, the Bolsheviks felt confident they would win the Civil War. By early 1921, this outcome was apparent across the country and within the avant-garde. Lenin's implementation of the New Economic Policy (NEP) in March 1921, intended to replace war communism, reflected this emergent reality. The NEP permitted private ownership of small-scale enterprises and introduced a number of other measures designed to stimulate the economy and address the food shortages and material austerity that had come to dominate life for millions. The NEP also meant that the opportunity to realise actual buildings, urgently needed after the devastation of the Civil War, had finally become possible. With this shift on the national scene, there was a cautious sense of optimism that the avant-garde would have a major place in reconstructing the country. The forthcoming Bolshevik victory, however, meant that the communists were able to consolidate their authority and exert control over every aspect of life, including culture. By 1923, Malevich and the wider avant-garde sensed that they would have to adapt their utopianism and their idealism to ensure they could continue their professional practice. This is to say: Malevich had to adapt to ensure his survival.

A useful starting point for exploring Suprematism's continued relevance in this period is to look beyond Unovis (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva – Champions of the New Art) and the movement's formal parameters. Specifically, it is important to examine how Suprematism featured in the composition–construction debates, which took place at the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture (Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury – Inkhuk) from 1 January 1921, after the formation of the General Working Group of Objective Analysis.<sup>551</sup>

The composition–construction debates indicated a new concern in Moscow. Although Wassily Kandinsky founded Inkhuk, served as its first director and authored its initial programme, his subjective

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<sup>551</sup> Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 83.

and psychological approach to form was increasingly marginalised by the start of 1921.<sup>552</sup> The notion of construction represented an appropriate trajectory in artistic culture for the task of rebuilding. Composition, by contrast, was increasingly viewed as defined by subjective questions of taste and aesthetics, and thus redundant in the approaching era.

Christina Lodder has pointed out that in the course of these debates it soon emerged that the General Working Group of Objective Analysis ‘had differing and often conflicting conceptions of what defined composition and construction’.<sup>553</sup> Despite this fact, a general definition of construction was eventually put forward. This read:

*Construction is the effective organisation of material elements*

The indications of construction:

- i. the best use of materials
- ii. the absence of any superfluous elements.

The scheme of a construction is the combination of lines, and the planes and the forms which they define; a system of forces.

Composition is an arrangement according to a defined and conventional signification.<sup>554</sup>

Once this definition was formulated, Lodder has emphasised that ‘individual positions deviated considerably’.<sup>555</sup> There were in fact as many as four working groups at Inkhuk by the spring of 1921 and each coalesced around an even more specific set of principles.<sup>556</sup> Perhaps surprisingly, given this lack of unity, there was a consensus amongst the participants in respect of Suprematism: Suprematism represented

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<sup>552</sup> John E. Bowl, ‘Vasilii Kandinsky: The Russian Connection’, in *The Life of Vasilii Kandinsky in Russian Art: A Study of On the Spiritual in Art*, eds., John E. Bowl and Rose-Carol Washton Long (Newtonville, MA: Oriental Research Partners, 1980), 27.

<sup>553</sup> Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 83.

<sup>554</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>555</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>556</sup> See Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and 1930s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983), 69-70.

composition, not construction.<sup>557</sup> Aleksei Babichev, however, disagreed and went one step further. He stated that Suprematism was neither construction nor composition.<sup>558</sup>

Despite these unequivocal declarations, the statements and drawings the participants produced for these debates suggest that Suprematism had, in fact, infringed their definitions of construction. The architect Nikolai Ladovskii stated that ‘construction is the whole set of material elements of expression in accordance with a precise plan’.<sup>559</sup> The ‘fundamental difference with respect to composition’, Ladovskii attempted to clarify, is the ‘hierarchy [of each given element]’.<sup>560</sup> Although he stated unambiguously that there is only composition and ‘no construction in Suprematism’, an illustration Ladovskii contributed to these debates suggests that his distinction was not so clear-cut.<sup>561</sup> *Example of a Constructive Structure* (1921) (Fig. 5.1) is definitely less fantastical than the designs the architect produced with Zhivskulptarkh (see, for example, Fig. 4.57) and seems more or less realisable. Despite the title and the ‘precise plan’, to use Ladovskii’s criteria, this sketch still appears to be influenced by Suprematism.<sup>562</sup> Its cubic design is a three-dimensional elaboration of the square and a clear reference to Suprematism. The two-point perspective Ladovskii adopted thrusts upwards, as if imbued with the energy of Suprematism, while the diagonal lines imply a structural integrity which shackles the more dynamic compositional elements into a static and constructed form.

Ambiguity can also be found in Aleksandr Rodchenko’s statements. Explaining his position, Rodchenko stated: ‘I have always said construction cannot be applied to art’.<sup>563</sup> Conversely, although not in contradiction to this, he added ‘if one were to construct a locomotive aesthetically, it probably wouldn’t work’.<sup>564</sup> For Rodchenko, composition was not construction and construction was not composition. Despite this distinction, Nadezhda Udaltsova picked up on some vacillation in Rodchenko’s words. ‘First he said that technical construction was applicable on the canvas, now he says there can be nothing but aesthetical composition on the canvas’.<sup>565</sup> Although Rodchenko vociferously rejected Suprematism in 1919

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<sup>557</sup> Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work*, trans. Huw Evans (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 85-86.

<sup>558</sup> Ibid.

<sup>559</sup> Nikolai Ladovskii, quoted in *ibid.*, 83.

<sup>560</sup> Ibid.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>563</sup> Aleksandr Rodchenko, quoted in *ibid.*, 89.

<sup>564</sup> Ibid.

<sup>565</sup> Nadezhda Udaltsova, quoted in *ibid.*, 89.

when he participated in the Association of Extreme Innovators (*Askranov – Assotsiatsiia krainykh novatorov*), his position began to soften in his work with *Zhivskulptarkh*. By 1921 he had taken an even more conciliatory stance. Rodchenko conceded that Suprematism ‘conveys an aesthetic sensation of construction, but it is not constructive in itself’.<sup>566</sup> ‘Construction’, Rodchenko added, ‘is the phase in which material is organised in order to achieve a particular end’.<sup>567</sup> The idea of form had to move towards being realisable for Rodchenko; it mattered less if Suprematism played a role in that goal.

Similarly, Liubov Popova appears to have reconciled Suprematism with notions of construction. A regard for the aesthetic aspect of form remained in Popova’s work, just as Ladovskii’s work and Rodchenko’s statements imply. Popova felt that in Suprematist painting ‘the colour, flat shapes and movement are intentionally prepared’, as if suggesting that composition was not wholly defined by subjective and intuitive expression.<sup>568</sup> One of the sketches Popova made at these debates (Fig. 5.2) has a cruciform character that is strongly reminiscent of works that had already emerged from Unovis and had appeared in *34 Drawings* (Figs. 4.36 and 4.47).

There may have been a move against notions of composition, but views such as Maria Gough’s that the work that emerged from *Inkhuk* during this period ‘constitutes a direct attack on the compositional theory and practice’ of Kandinsky, the institute’s founding director, seem overstated.<sup>569</sup> Ideas associated with composition – including Suprematism – persisted in the creative thinking at *Inkhuk*.

While this was the case, the formation of the Working Group of Constructivists in March 1921 represented a move towards conceptual clarity in Moscow away from Suprematism. Comprised initially of Aleksei Gan, Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova, this group closely linked artistic culture with the Bolshevik ambition to build a new society.<sup>570</sup> Its members were unambiguous about the role of Suprematism in artistic creativity. Art itself was a thing of the past and the concept of materialism was associated with Marx and Engels’ theory of historical materialism. The opening page of *Constructivism*, written by Gan, which elaborated the group’s programme (Fig. 5.3), affirmed ‘we declare an

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<sup>566</sup> Ibid.

<sup>567</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>568</sup> Liubov Popova, quoted in *ibid.*, 87.

<sup>569</sup> Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 23.

<sup>570</sup> Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 94-98.

uncompromising war on art', and on the following page, 'long live the communist expression of material structures'.<sup>571</sup> The critical aspect of Gan's objection is his characterisation of 'abstract fetishism', as essentially emblematic of the 'individualistic society of capitalist production'.<sup>572</sup> Constructivism, on the other hand, was intrinsically associated with communism and was pursued as 'socially meaningful artistic work'.<sup>573</sup>

It is useful, at this juncture, to be clear on what the division between Suprematism and Constructivism signified in regard to abstraction. In Suprematism, form was arrived at 'by a means of economic geometricism', Malevich had written in 1920.<sup>574</sup> As Vasilii Rakitin has pointed out, the teaching programme at Vitebsk was based on a 'law of geometric economy'.<sup>575</sup> Geometry in Suprematism was formally imprecise and arrived at through a process of artistic intuition. For the emerging Constructivists, by contrast, justification for geometric form was based on precision, mathematics and new structural principles that were linked with engineering. The rivalry between Suprematism and Constructivism in 1921 was due to the similarity between the two movements, rather than because of any serious differences. It was not about the idea of abstract language, per se, but its application.

Contrary to the sharp division that the Working Group of Constructivists asserted, parallels can be identified between Suprematism and Gan's *Constructivism*. Gan's emphasis on the near, rather than the immediate, future reflects Malevich's statements within Unovis. Shedding themselves of the abstract stage of art, which they associated with capitalism, was one requirement for the Constructivists, but so too was coming to an understanding of what communism actually meant. 'For a constructivist to be able to build today, it is absolutely essential to know exactly what communism is and what it might require tomorrow', Gan conceded.<sup>576</sup> Another parallel is the necessity to develop 'a systematic plan' ahead of implementation,

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<sup>571</sup> Aleksei Gan, *Constructivism*, ed. and trans. Christina Lodder (Barcelona: Tenov, 2013), 4.

<sup>572</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>573</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>574</sup> K. Malevich, *Suprematism: 34 risunka* [Suprematism: 34 Drawings] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), 123.

<sup>575</sup> Program for Unovis Studios, Vitebsk, manuscript and typescript (1919-21), private archive, St. Petersburg, 1, quoted in Vasilii Rakitin, 'The Optimism of a Non-Objectivist', in Matthew Drutt, ed., *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2003), 66.

<sup>576</sup> Gan, *Constructivism*, 60.

which recalls Malevich's words in *On New Systems in Art*.<sup>577</sup> The requirement to identify a systematic plan was still the order of the moment for both men, even as Gan published his book in December 1922.

Gan and Malevich enjoyed a friendship and maintained a cooperative professional relationship that dated back to 1918 and lasted throughout the 1920s.<sup>578</sup> The two men had even written a text together a few years earlier and Gan had organised Malevich's 1920 exhibition in Moscow.<sup>579</sup> Lodder has identified many aspects of this enduring friendship in her introduction to her English translation of Gan's *Constructivism*, pointing out that 'Gan continued to respect and admire Malevich, acknowledging the importance of Suprematism for the genesis of Constructivism'.<sup>580</sup>

In March 1921, Malevich wrote, possibly in response to the debates in Moscow, that 'the new war on materials has been declared. Materials will be defeated by the production processes, and in the course of this war they will be transformed'.<sup>581</sup> If Malevich was not aware of the emergence of the Working Group of Constructivists or Gan's programme earlier, it is practically certain given their close relationship that the Suprematist would have come across it by the time of its publication in 1922.

When it came to starting wars with Moscow, however, battles were emerging much closer to home. Frustrations within Unovis were mounting in 1921 about the direction Unovis was taking in regard to Suprematism's ideas in architecture. Ilia Chashnik's *Project for a Tribune for a Smolensk Square* (1920) (Fig. 4.50) had been rejected by Malevich, and Chashnik was clearly frustrated at the direction Unovis was taking. In the same month as Malevich's statement about materials, Chashnik wrote to Lazar Khidekel:

I find myself in an isolated position in relation to what is happening here. Judging from your letter, the fight is just beginning. This is for the best. Although I have already formed my opinion of

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<sup>577</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>578</sup> Lodder, 'Conflicting Approaches to Creativity?', in Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 286.

<sup>579</sup> Al. Gan, A. Morgunov and K. Malevich, 'Zadachi iskusstva i rol' dushitelei iskusstva' [The Problems of Art and the Role of Its Suppressors], *Anarkhiia*, 25 (23 March 1918): 4; English translation in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 49-50.

<sup>580</sup> Lodder, 'Aleksi Gan: A Pivotal Figure in Russian Constructivism', in Lodder, *Constructivism*, XXIII.

<sup>581</sup> Kazimir Malevich, 'Unovis', *Iskusstvo*, 1 (Vitebsk, 1921): 9-10; English translation in Maria Kokkori, Alexander Bouras, and Irina Karasik, 'Kazimir Malevich, Unovis, and the Poetics of Materiality', in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 105.

[Nikolai] Suetin and [Mark] Noskov. The main thing is that you must speak out and present our position clearly.<sup>582</sup>

While Regina Khidekel has observed that *34 Drawings* ‘became a bible for his [Malevich’s] students’, in that it represented a sort of compendium of possible architectural forms, by early 1921 real tensions were emerging.<sup>583</sup> Only months after Malevich produced *34 Drawings*, there was little appetite for its abstract architectural idea even within Vitebsk.

If Malevich’s declaration of war on materials was a response to the activities in Moscow and to growing discontent within Unovis, it must also be seen as part of a much broader strategic repositioning. In 1921, the Vitebsk People’s Art School was rebranded as the Vitebsk Artistic Practical Institute and its focus was orientated towards science.<sup>584</sup> This redirection of the school happened months after pedagogical reforms took place at the Moscow Free Studios which were reorganised and renamed as the Vkhutemas (Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie – Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops).<sup>585</sup> Although Malevich had already spoken of the role of science in painting in *On New Systems in Art*, the renaming of the school should be seen as reflecting the activities of Inkhuk, whose focus was ‘science, the investigation of the analytical and the synthetic basic elements of the separate arts and of art as a whole’.<sup>586</sup>

Malevich had some success in this modification of the school’s direction and in settling the frustrations within Unovis. Maria Kokkori, Alexander Bouras and Irina Karasik have explored the potential meaning behind Malevich’s statement about the production processes of materials. The authors have underlined how Unovis made ‘tentative steps towards a future that they imagined to be inescapable: as radical gestures, the presence of which would encourage a leap forward’.<sup>587</sup> Kokkori, Bouras and Karasik also discussed how the student Lev Iudin, in particular, embraced this new focus. Iudin explored ‘the

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<sup>582</sup> Ilia Chashnik, letter to Lazar Khidekel, [March 1921], quoted in Regina Khidekel, ‘Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism’, in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 164.

<sup>583</sup> Khidekel, ‘Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism’, in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 162.

<sup>584</sup> Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art*, trans. Katherine Foshko Tsan (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), 190.

<sup>585</sup> Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 112.

<sup>586</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>587</sup> Kokkori, Bouras, and Karasik, ‘Kazimir Malevich, Unovis, and the Poetics of Materiality’, in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 106.

utopian potential of materials, diverting attention away from any immediate practical applications, in favour of a less defined, but undeniably richer range of associations'.<sup>588</sup> Malevich's reorientation of the school led Iudin to explore, as Malevich hoped the rest of the school would, 'hitherto unidentified possibilities' of materials within the framework of Suprematism.<sup>589</sup> The focus on the inherent properties of materials moved Unovis away from the Working Group of Constructivists and anything that might resemble Tatlin's Tower. In doing so, Malevich also distanced Unovis from any sort of conception of implementation in architecture.

The shifts in the Vitebsk school's direction in 1921 also demonstrate Malevich's ambition to promote what he regarded as the most appropriate approach to art education throughout Soviet Russia. Malevich's continued contact with his former student Władysław Strzemiński was important for the Suprematist in establishing an affiliate branch of Unovis in Smolensk.<sup>590</sup> Malevich also attempted to establish affiliate groups in Moscow, Saratov, Perm, Ekaterinburg, Samara and Odessa and had some success in the city of Orenburg.<sup>591</sup> Malevich hoped that art schools across Russia would investigate the potential of materials, just as Iudin had begun, and then identify Suprematist constructions – which Malevich felt were necessary for this new era. The adoption of the term 'construction' in *34 Drawings* was just as much a part of this pedagogical strategy. In April 1921, Malevich wrote that 'constructivity must be only systematic, planned, developing in its progression, any other constructivity is personal, the aesthetic variety is no good'.<sup>592</sup> 'We need more abstract constructions' he told the Creative Committee of Unovis two weeks later.<sup>593</sup> By deliberately adapting Suprematism to align with contemporary discourses and uncoupling it from notions of taste and aesthetics, Malevich not only hoped to appease Chashnik but also to position Suprematism's architectural enterprise in closer relation to the priorities of the avant-garde.

El Lissitzky gave a lecture at Inkhuk in September 1921 in which he promoted the Proun as an appropriate form for the new architecture. While many artists and architects in Moscow were involved in

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<sup>588</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>589</sup> Ibid.

<sup>590</sup> As Aleksander Lisov has discussed, this began in 1920; see Lisov, 'Branches of Unovis in Smolensk and Orenburg', in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 126-143.

<sup>591</sup> Kazimir Malevich, letters to David Shterenberg, Ivan Kudriashev, Aleksei Kruchenykh, the Unovis Creative Committee and Vera Ermolaeva, [3 January 1921 – 19 July 1921]; English translation in Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), I: 137-151.

<sup>591</sup> Malevich, letter to El Lissitzky, 4 July 1922; *ibid.*, I: 162.

<sup>592</sup> Malevich, letter to Kudriashev, 14 April 1921; *ibid.*, I: 141.

<sup>593</sup> Malevich, letter to the Unovis Creative Committee, 28 April 1921; *ibid.*, I: 144.

efforts to distinguish between definitions of composition and construction, Lissitzky did not seem to feel compelled to differentiate between the two. Still somewhat loyal to Suprematism, Lissitzky openly acknowledged its role in stimulating new architectural forms. In his lecture, however, Lissitzky suggested that Suprematist paintings seemed to have a right way and a wrong way of being hung. When viewed ‘incorrectly’, any Suprematist painting can appear ‘as if it were sideways or upside down’, he critiqued.<sup>594</sup> The Proun had resolved this inherent limitation in Suprematism and instigated a new relationship between the axis and the problem of form.

We have seen that the surface of the canvas has ceased to be a picture. It has become a construction and like a house you have to walk round it, to look at it from above, to study it from beneath. The picture’s one perpendicular axis (vis-a-vis the horizon) turns out to have been destroyed. We have made the canvas rotate. And as we rotated it, we saw that we were putting ourselves in space.<sup>595</sup>

Éva Forgács has argued that, like Malevich’s own efforts, Lissitzky characterised his Proun paintings in accordance with the ‘anti-painting stance’ that was dominant in Moscow.<sup>596</sup> Forgács has also suggested that when Lissitzky stated that ‘in creating a new form, Proun creates new material’, he essentially minimised the theoretical divisions between form and theory.<sup>597</sup> Lissitzky may have encouraged Moscow to embrace the Proun as something new, which was now beyond Suprematism, but he still recognised that Malevich’s preceding activity on the canvas had an integral role to play in producing new forms.

In December 1921, Malevich gave a lecture at Inkhuk entitled ‘The First Task’. Although the contents of this lecture are not currently known, Malevich will almost certainly have spoken against what he felt was the growing ideology of Constructivism. It is also safe to assume that the Suprematist would not have received a universal welcome. While Inkhuk sought to rid itself of Suprematism and wipe notions

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<sup>594</sup> El Lissitzky, ‘Proun: Toward the Defeat of Art’, trans. John Bowl, in *El Lissitzky* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1976), 66.

<sup>595</sup> Ibid.

<sup>596</sup> Éva Forgács, ‘Definite Space’, in Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed, eds., *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow* (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2003), 57.

<sup>597</sup> Ibid.

of aesthetics and taste from its definition of construction, Suprematism persisted in Moscow even before Malevich's appearance in person.

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Before Malevich had the opportunity to capitalise on the professional moves he had made at the start of 1921, national circumstances again had a major impact on his life. As the Bolsheviks recaptured the Western territories and victory in the Civil War seemed more certain, the city of Vitebsk became less privileged. As a result, life became very difficult for Malevich long before the Civil War was officially declared over in October 1922. The famine of 1921-22 affected Vitebsk as it did practically all of Soviet Russia. In the first days of 1921, Malevich wrote to David Shterenberg, the head of the Department of Fine Art (Otdel izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv – IZO) and complained: 'my family is not receiving anything, even food stamps. [...] The child [Una] needs milk, and the nursing mother also has to eat. [...] In the event of my family's death from starvation, the shame will be on all of IZO'.<sup>598</sup> Probably unaware that famine was gripping the country, Malevich suspected that the true reason he was not being paid by IZO was that Suprematism had fallen out of favour in Moscow. Malevich was briefly arrested in August 1921, which went no way to appease the distrust he had of IZO.<sup>599</sup>

Although it once enjoyed relative comfort, conditions in Vitebsk finally came to reflect those of the country at large. Life in Moscow, where Malevich had been since the spring of 1921, was just as harsh. In July, Malevich wrote to Unovis and complained that he had little food or money.<sup>600</sup> It is noteworthy that Malevich – the individual – wrote his letter to Unovis – the collective. In doing so, Malevich asserts his own individuality while subjugating and imbricating the individuals within the group into an audience. In writing this letter, Malevich very implicitly lifted himself above Unovis, performing his indispensability, as though his suffering could threaten the group. Malevich even recounted a story to Unovis in which he had a conversation about art on a train. In the end, he apparently had no option but to reveal his name. When

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<sup>598</sup> Malevich, letter to David Shterenberg, 3 January 1921; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 137.

<sup>599</sup> Alfred T'sshokher, telegram to the Central Committee of the Union of Art Workers, [August 1921]; *ibid.*, II: 472.

<sup>600</sup> Malevich, letter to the Creative Committee of Unovis, 19 July 1921; *ibid.*, I: 150.

he did, 'the effect was marvellous, like a firework'.<sup>601</sup> In contrast to this assertion of ego, Malevich also wrote to Lissitzky and explained: 'we're suffering terrible hunger. I'm hanging on by a thread, and [Velimir] Khlebnikov is already lying like a paralytic, broken'.<sup>602</sup> Clearly, Malevich received news of Khlebnikov's death before he posted his letter and he added a postscript: Khlebnikov 'died on 28 June tormented by hunger. [Vladimir] Tatlin and I are next in line'.<sup>603</sup> This new, but unfortunately familiar, reality meant that by the middle of 1922 Malevich could not remain in provincial Vitebsk.

Despite the professional success he enjoyed with Unovis in Vitebsk, the move to Petrograd that Malevich anticipated after the winter of 1919-20 finally happened in the summer of 1922. Even though Malevich's impulse to survive accounts for his relocation to Petrograd, his family were forced to endure conditions in the former capital that were largely similar to those they had left behind. The Suprematist may have hoped that the former capital might offer him greater professional opportunities, but Malevich did not have a stable income in Petrograd until he was appointed director of the Museum of Artistic Culture (Fig. 5.4) on a permanent basis in September 1923.<sup>604</sup> Before that time, Malevich lived in severe hardship. In his letters to Nikolai Punin, who was then director of the Arts Section of the Petrograd Porcelain Factory, Malevich expressed his financial needs in terse and frank language. 'I just do not consent to work for five billion a month'.<sup>605</sup> Illustrating the absurd scale of the recent hyperinflation, Malevich requested instead to be paid in the new commercial rouble or the new gold-backed chervonets.

By 1923, it was not only day-to-day conditions that were markedly different from those just a few years earlier. There were clues about how much the Bolsheviks would be willing to tolerate as early as 1918. As Chapter Three noted, the anarchist group, with which Malevich loosely associated himself, was violently shut down in April 1919.<sup>606</sup> Even before the end of the Civil War, the Bolsheviks had moved to consolidate their power. In 1921, a group of sailors based in the port city of Kronstadt rebelled against the state's increasing centralisation in the hope of achieving a degree of autonomy. Their demands were brutally suppressed and many of those who participated in the rebellion were killed or imprisoned.<sup>607</sup> 'The Workers'

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<sup>601</sup> Ibid.

<sup>602</sup> Malevich, letter to Lissitzky, 4 July 1922; *ibid.*, I: 162.

<sup>603</sup> Ibid.

<sup>604</sup> Irina Karasik, 'Our Contemporary Form in Art is the Research Institute', in Basner et al., eds., *In Malevich's Circle: Confederates, Students, Followers in Russia 1920s–1950s* (Moscow: Palace Editions, 2000), 103.

<sup>605</sup> Malevich, letter to Nikolai Punin, 3 August 1922; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 166.

<sup>606</sup> Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 184–185.

<sup>607</sup> Orlando Figes, *A People's Tragedy: The Russian Revolution, 1891–1924* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1996), 760–764.

Opposition, which formed in response to the Bolshevik ambition to consolidate rather than transfer power to the working classes, was forced to disband.<sup>608</sup> Debate and even organised disagreement with the party were considered treason.

By the time Malevich established himself at the Museum of Artistic Culture in 1923, the Bolsheviks had reorganised the People's Commissariat of Education (Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia – Narkompros), which meant that many avant-garde artists had already lost their positions.<sup>609</sup> As Sheila Fitzpatrick has discussed, these artists had been reliant on the state for their livelihood and were forced to look for work in art schools to support themselves.<sup>610</sup> It had become clear that the Bolsheviks would not tolerate dissent and that they would not allow the avant-garde the freedoms they anticipated. By 1923, it was obvious to Malevich that he was not free to work without constraint and that political conformity was essential.

Once in post, Malevich transformed Petrograd's Museum of Artistic Culture by introducing research laboratories and renaming it the State Institute of Artistic Culture (Gosudarstvennyi institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury – Ginkhuk).<sup>611</sup> Malevich was joined by Chashnik, Vera Ermolaeva, Khidekel, Nikolai Suetin and Iudin who became research assistants in the Suprematist's Formal and Theoretical Department.<sup>612</sup> The naming of this organisation is significant. An institute with laboratories carries clear scientific connotations, much more so than a school with academic departments could. Undoubtedly, this move was a deliberate effort to ensure that he was viewed positively by the authorities so that he might remain in gainful employment for as long as possible. Gough has emphasised this point and written that at Ginkhuk Malevich 'redefined contemporary art as a form of research, and the contemporary artist as a research worker'.<sup>613</sup> Pamela Kachurin has insightfully and more forcefully argued for Malevich's bureaucratic credentials, yet Malevich's reorganisation of Ginkhuk is not evidence that Malevich was any

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<sup>608</sup> See Barbara C. Allen, 'From the Ban on Factions through the Eleventh Party Congress, 1921–2: Former Worker Oppositionists Respond to the New Economic Policy and to Repression against Them', in *The Workers' Opposition in the Russian Communist Party: Documents, 1919-30*, ed. Barbara C. Allen, Historical Materialism Book Series, vol. 236 (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 292–641.

<sup>609</sup> For an explanation of these repressive activities by the state, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Commissar of Enlightenment: Soviet Organization of Education and the Arts under Lunacharsky, October 1917-1921* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), 236-237.

<sup>610</sup> Ibid.

<sup>611</sup> Karasik, 'Our Contemporary Form in Art is the Research Institute', in Basner et al., *In Malevich's Circle*, 103.

<sup>612</sup> Maria Kokkori and Alexander Bouras, 'Charting Modernism: Malevich's Research Tables', in Achim Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Kazimir Malevich* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 164-169.

<sup>613</sup> Maria Gough, 'Architecture as Such', in Borchardt-Hume, *Kazimir Malevich*, 162.

sort of Soviet technocrat.<sup>614</sup> Rather, it is symbolic of his acute awareness of the political climate and his determination to adapt his practice in order to survive.

Once Malevich felt he had appropriately established a foothold in Petrograd, he resumed the artistic ambitions that he had pursued in Vitebsk. From 1923, Malevich produced probably the most well-known aspect of Suprematism's architectural enterprise: a group of plaster models, known as the *Arkhitektorny Experiments* (Figs. 5.5-5.9), and a number of pencil sketches, made concurrently, known as the *Planity Series* (Figs. 5.10-5.12). Initially, there were four principal designs of architectural models which Malevich named *Alpha* (1923) (Fig. 5.5), *Beta* (1923) (Fig. 5.6), *Gota* (c. 1923) (Fig. 5.7) and *Zeta* (1923-27) (Fig. 5.8). In *Alpha* and *Beta*, a collection of volumetric forms gathers around a horizontal axis, while in *Gota* and *Zeta*, the forms assemble around a vertical axis. These four variants typify what were the most predominant arrangements, but Malevich produced other models which have their own particular variations. *Gota 2-a* (1923-27) (Fig. 5.9) is one example of this. The main contrasting feature of *Gota 2-a*, in comparison to *Gota*, is that the lower elements of this otherwise vertical form develop horizontally. The *Planity* are essentially pencil illustrations of the architectural models but were ascribed their own titles, such as *Future Planits for Earthblings* (1923-24) (Fig. 5.10), *Modern Buildings* (1923-24) (Fig. 5.11) and *Houses of the Future Leningrad: The Pilot's Planit* (1924) (Fig. 5.12).

The emergence of the three-dimensional architectural model must be recognised as a dramatic development in Suprematism. Malevich initially conceived of Suprematism as a pictorial language and always evaded three-dimensionality and overtly material expressions. The volume within Suprematism remained, until this moment, an illustration of a visual and conceptual idea rather than a tangible and constructed object. Selim O. Khan-Magomedov asked straightforwardly, 'where did the third dimension go?' and went to some length to illustrate how Malevich took an interest in the second, fourth and fifth dimensions while always evading the third.<sup>615</sup> Malevich's architectural models, therefore, represent a radical departure in Suprematism away from describing space to occupying it.

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<sup>614</sup> See Pamela Kachurin, 'Malevich as Soviet Bureaucrat: GINKhUK and the Survival of the Avant-Garde, 1923-26', in Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth* (London: The Pindar Press, 2007), 121-138; Kachurin, 'The Last Citadel: Petrograd Museum of Artistic Culture and GINKhUK 1919-1926', in *Making Modernism Soviet: The Russian Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era, 1918-1928* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2013), 7-98; and Kokkori and Bouras, 'Charting Modernism: Malevich's Research Tables', in Borhardt-Hume, *Kazimir Malevich*, 164-169.

<sup>615</sup> S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Suprematizm i arkhitektura (problemy formoobrazovaniia)* (Moscow: Arkhitektura-S, 2007), 363-366.

The depiction of a volume within Suprematism, it is important to reiterate, did not emerge in Vitebsk but can be traced back to 1915 (see Fig. 4.31). A version of this work was published in 1919 in *Puti tvorchestva* (Fig. 4.32) and its further development was explored by Lissitzky, soon after Malevich arrived in Vitebsk. In fact, Aleksandra Shatskikh believes that the ‘genealogy and the source of Malevich’s idea of Arkhitektons’ in Petrograd can be found in Lissitzky’s statement of intent for his architectural studio in Vitebsk, written before Malevich even arrived in the city.<sup>616</sup> Certainly, Lissitzky was concerned that students should become ‘acquainted with architecture’s fundamental methods and systems, learning (by working with models) graphic and plaster expressions of spatial designs’.<sup>617</sup> Shatskikh is very likely correct, but only to a limited extent.

Despite the abstract idea he first presented in 1920, it is likely that Malevich was motivated to produce models and drawings which might demonstrate the relevance of Suprematism within the emerging field of architecture. Anton Lavinskii’s *City on Springs (Sketch for a Housing Block)* (1922) (Fig. 5.13), as Lodder has discussed, was modelled on utopian ideals to create a town on springs, built of glass and asbestos, which reached for the sky.<sup>618</sup> The Vesnin brothers produced a design for a Palace of Labour competition (1923) (Fig. 5.14), announced by the Moscow City Hall. Their design incorporates steel structural components and features masts on its roof, as if ready to respond to the practical and functional requirements of the new society. The Palace of Labour was described by architect Moisei Ginzburg in *Style and Epoch* as ‘unquestionably one of the characteristic aspects of the new style, avidly accepting modernity in all its positive and negative aspects’.<sup>619</sup> These developments, and those discussed in the previous chapter, would have intensified the question for Malevich of how Suprematism might find a place for itself within the field of architecture.

It is very possible that, by late 1923, Malevich was once again moved to contemplate the possibility of death and felt it necessary to produce a tangible thing that would embody his legacy. Soon after Malevich relocated to Petrograd, it became clear to him that his wife was dying from tuberculosis. It is very possible that Malevich felt compelled to produce something with a physical permanence that might outlive him,

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<sup>616</sup> Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 64.

<sup>617</sup> Ibid.

<sup>618</sup> Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 59.

<sup>619</sup> Moisei Ginzburg, *Style and Epoch*, trans. Anatole Senkevich, Jr. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982), 102.

should he also fall ill or become the target of Soviet persecution, as indeed he had in 1921. In this context, Malevich's models and sketches are noted as possessing a very specific significance. The models, as tangible objects, serve to protect and further his individual legacy, in addition to the sketches, paintings and printed matter that were already in existence. As physical objects, Malevich's models are symbolic of his thinking in architecture but, by association, they also allude to all of Malevich's ideas that can be linked with Suprematism.

Malevich's adoption of the three-dimensional object as a means of securing his legacy and alluding to his immaterial ideas, belong to a long-established human practice. Anthropologist Daniel Miller has observed that the ancient Egyptians adopted such a strategy to establish material legacies of their own. He has written that it was because of their 'faith in the potential of monumentality to express immateriality that has created their legacy as a material presence in our own world'.<sup>620</sup> Malevich's architectural models similarly augment the pre-existing physical permanence of his paintings and published materials, and indicate his participation in this new field of cultural activity. That several plaster models survived more than 100 years, some of which were incredibly turbulent, is testament to this idea.

There is a more immediate aspect to this question of legacy which more closely relates to new building. The previous chapter suggested that one motivation Malevich had to write *34 Drawings* was to assert his individual authorship of what he felt to be his personal copyright over new ideas as Suprematism moved into the field of architecture. It is possible, given that the Soviet Union and the avant-garde were moving towards actual building, that a major impetus for Malevich in realising the tangible three-dimensional *Arkhitektomy Experiments* was a desire to secure his copyright over a new mode of architecture.

If the production of models and drawings was motivated by a desire to secure individual authorship, it is useful to consider how Malevich's practice coexisted with contemporary legal frameworks. As this thesis has already noted, although there was a brief window in Russia from 1911 until 1917 when Malevich could in principle have sought legal protection for his work, he habitually sought a more cultural form of copyright. Nonetheless, it is interesting that, during his lifetime, the international framework for copyright established a concern for architectural models which meant that Malevich's models were – arguably – eligible for protection.

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<sup>620</sup> Daniel Miller, ed., *Materiality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 16.

The 1908 expansion of the Berne Convention, known as the Berlin Act, extended legal protections to ‘illustrations, maps, plans, sketches and three-dimensional works’ provided that they are ‘relative to’ architecture.<sup>621</sup> The authors of *Copinger and Skone James on Copyright* have explored this principle as it developed in relation to the model. The Berne Convention states:

A model will be protected as a work of architecture if it is a model ‘for’ a building. It is suggested that this is deliberately different from a model ‘of’ a building. The word ‘for’ implies a purposive connection between the making of the model and the intended building. In this respect a model is, like architects’ plans and drawings, a preparatory work in the process of producing the design for the building or structure. This would exclude from a work of architecture a model made as a model (whether of an existing or imaginary building) which was not made for the purpose of showing the architectural form of the intended building or structure. Such a model would be capable of protection, if at all, as a work of artistic craftsmanship.<sup>622</sup>

Although Malevich’s architectural models do not represent models for buildings per se, they nevertheless engage questions of a new spatial organisation and structural logic. While the authors of *Copinger and Skone James* clarify that ‘the word ‘for’ implies a purposive connection between the making of the model and the intended building’, there is no obligation for the model to demonstrate that it is realisable.<sup>623</sup> Most significant, however, is the suggestion that a model might qualify for copyright protection provided that it represents a ‘work of artistic craftsmanship’.<sup>624</sup> In this respect, the presence of an artistic quality is the essential criterion.

In considering these legal precedents, and in particular this principle of an artistic quality in the model, one is prompted to take a step back and ask: what gave Malevich licence to claim copyright over anything within the field of architecture? How did Malevich, an artist in the first instance, justify his engagement in architecture, either in 1920 with *34 Drawings* or in 1923 with his sketches and models? It is

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<sup>621</sup> Nicholas Caddick, Gwilym Harbottle and Uma Suthersanen, eds., *Copinger and Skone James on Copyright*, 18th ed. (London: Sweet & Maxwell/Thomson Reuters, 2021), 2-152.

<sup>622</sup> Ibid.

<sup>623</sup> Ibid.

<sup>624</sup> Ibid.

a trite remark, but it is important nonetheless to state that, at least in a conventional sense, Malevich had no formal qualification as an architect. Traditionally, one can only qualify and practice as an architect after acquiring a very specific set of skills which have been formally assessed and deemed adequate. Malevich's identity was primarily an artist. In addition to painting, Malevich taught and wrote, but these activities themselves have never constituted a path to qualification in architecture. Anatolii Strigalev wrote that in the early twentieth century, 'it was common for a civil engineer, the owner, say, of an established architectural firm, to invite an 'architect-artist' (in most cases a promising newcomer) to decorate the facades of a project already complete in all other respects'.<sup>625</sup> This is to say that, at an earlier moment, an artist's involvement in architecture was limited to providing ornament.

Malevich, however, was not unique in turning to architecture without formal qualification. As early as 1920, the formal boundary between professional disciplines had already become blurred. Artists, for example, were in fact more prominent than architects (in the traditional sense of the profession) in the composition–construction debates in Moscow in 1921. Conditions in the Civil War favoured artistic innovation while it disadvantaged architectural innovation. Paper (and the pen, in Malevich's case) was far easier to come by than steel, bricks and mortar. Such was the gap between the artist and the architect that in discussions for a memorial to Lenin, Tatlin was described as being 'against the participation of the architects in the building'.<sup>626</sup> Instead, Tatlin favoured 'constructivist-artists' whom he claimed reflected the innovative and the revolutionary character of Lenin.<sup>627</sup>

Given that Malevich was responsible for the emergence of Suprematism, which he claimed identified a new aesthetic language in painting, he had every reason to see himself at the forefront of creative innovation and someone very well-positioned to envision new forms for the built environment. Malevich was, as much as anybody at this time, legitimately positioned to reconstruct the future. Indeed, the basis of Malevich's legitimacy to enter the field of architecture was precisely that he was an artist.

Given the legal framework for copyright over a model being based on the presence of an artistic quality, it is essential to note that when Malevich explained the origin of the volume in Suprematism he

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<sup>625</sup> Anatolii Strigalev, 'Nonarchitects in Architecture', in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1992), 665.

<sup>626</sup> Iakov Tugendkhol'd, 'On the Discussion of a Memorial to Com[rade] Lenin', reproduced in Larissa Alekseevna Zhadova, ed., *Tatlin*, trans. Colin Wright (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 250.

<sup>627</sup> *Ibid.*

pointed to the study of his earlier paintings. Specifically, Malevich claimed that a close analysis of his *White on White* paintings of 1918 (Fig. 3.4) instigated his thinking about a new three-dimensional phase of Suprematism in relation to architecture. Malevich wrote to Ivan Kudriashev, in April 1921, two years before he produced his architectural models, and explained that he was ‘discovering’ that the ‘flatness of the square will spread by six facets and this will be the six perfections of Worldbuilding’.<sup>628</sup> The sentiment in this letter has a clear link to Malevich’s 1922 text, ‘Suprematism: The World as Objectlessness or Eternal Peace’, in which he stated that the white square does not represent a ‘final limit’ of its development.<sup>629</sup> This text states that ‘the white square will be the beginning and the conclusion, that is, the poles of the movement of the white will have white on both ends of the cube. The latter could signify the symbol of six perfections’.<sup>630</sup> In fact, Malevich complained to Unovis that Moscow did not ‘see that our constructive painting in all its historical movement has reached architecture or Suprematist volume, by the way, Suprematist volume should replace the word architecture for us’.<sup>631</sup> For Malevich, the role of painting in the emergence of the model was integral.

It is important to reiterate that Malevich discussed the idea of a three-dimensional form in Suprematism before he produced any plaster models. Despite all the efforts of the avant-garde to define construction and move towards building in direct response to contemporary needs, Malevich’s statements in the first half of 1921 suggest that Suprematism’s architectural volume was, in effect, solely defined by its own historicism. This also means that the three-dimensional volume was still primarily a means of manifesting ideals inherent in Suprematism rather than a response to practical questions of utility or functionality in architecture. Malevich’s letter to Kudriashev, however, also suggests that it was not an achievement that belonged to Unovis. Nevertheless, Malevich’s insistence that his architectural models originate from painting supports the argument that they may be classified as ‘works of artistic craftsmanship’ and provides one basis for their qualification under the Berne Convention.<sup>632</sup>

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<sup>628</sup> Malevich, letter to Kudriashev, 17 March 1921; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 139.

<sup>629</sup> Kazimir Malevich, ‘Suprematism: Mir kak bespredmetnost’ ili vechnyi pokoj’ [Suprematism: The World as Objectlessness or Eternal Peace], 1922, ms; reprinted in Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, ed. A. S. Shatskikh (Moscow: Gileia, 1995), III: 245; quoted by Vasily Rakitin and Irina Vakar, Malevich, *Letters*, I: 140.

<sup>630</sup> Malevich, letter to Kudriashev, 17 March 1921; *ibid.*, I: 139.

<sup>631</sup> Malevich, letter to the Creative Committee of Unovis, [6-7 May 1921]; *ibid.*, I: 145.

<sup>632</sup> Caddick et al., *Copinger and Skone James on Copyright*, 2-155.

Of course, Malevich was a great myth maker and, following the emergence of the architectural model, he attempted to further explain its origin, or its discovery as he framed it, in closer relation to Suprematism's painterly period. Despite its title, *Table No. 1 Formula of Suprematism 1913* (Fig. 5.15) was completed in 1925 or 1926. Aligning the volumetric potentials of Suprematism with this new date, Malevich wrote on this sketch that 'the cube will be the first form'.<sup>633</sup> From this volumetric formula, supposedly originating in 1913, one can 'develop all possibilities of volumetric Suprematism', Malevich added.<sup>634</sup> In *Table No. 3 Spatial Suprematism 1916* (Fig. 5.16), produced in 1925 or 1926, Malevich developed and organised the forms of *Table No. 1* into an elongated arrangement. The caption reads 'horizontal architecton in a state of complexity thanks to intermediate forms, 1916'.<sup>635</sup> In this illustration, black and red forms appear more dominant around which smaller off-white forms create a sequence of ascending formations. Precisely because this work seems rather elongated, in comparison to his architectural models in plaster, one has the impression that the arrangement (both the plaster and the illustrations) could develop into a larger and potentially longer series of architectural volumes.

In John Milner's view, Malevich's experimentation with tangible volumetric forms led him to realise that 'the individual parts could be reduced or increased an infinite number of times'.<sup>636</sup> In other words, for Milner, the Suprematist's achievement with volume was not achieved pictorially. While this view is more than likely correct, Malevich's argument for the origin of volume in Suprematism, its potential for growth and indeed his justification for entering the field of architecture in the first place should be traced back to the movement's painterly period.

As stated above, Malevich's architectural models were produced concurrently with his *Planit* sketches, and it is essential that they are both examined as part of the same conceptual project in relation to his individual Suprematist mode of architecture. Malevich's sketches suggest a particular and unique relationship between conceptions of space, materiality and function. As discussed above, Malevich encouraged the Vitebsk school to investigate the inherent properties of materials in 1921. Lissitzky wrote

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<sup>633</sup> Kazimir Malevich, inscription on *Tablitsa No. 1. Formula Suprematizma*, 1925-1926, watercolour, gouache and pencil on paper, 36 x 54 cm., State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg (Fig. 5.15)

<sup>634</sup> Ibid.

<sup>635</sup> Kazimir Malevich, inscription on *Tablitsa No. 3. Prostranstvennyi Suprematizm*, 1925-1926, watercolour, gouache and pencil on paper, 36 x 54 cm., State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg (Fig. 5.16).

<sup>636</sup> John Milner, *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 192.

that 'this still-to-be-built world will transform the roughness of concrete, the smoothness of metal and the reflection of glass into the outer membrane of the new life. The new light will give us new colour and the solar spectrum will be perceived only in old manuals on physics'.<sup>637</sup> In Petrograd, however, Malevich made a series of notes which dramatically develop these questions of materiality towards ideas of practical use. Above the sketch entitled *Future Planits for Earthlings* (Fig. 5.10), Malevich wrote:

Currently I am thinking about material, white opaque glass, concrete, tarred felt, heating by electricity, a planit without pipes. The colouring of the residential planit is predominantly black and white. Red, black and white in exceptional circumstances, it depends on the tension of the state's powers and its weaknesses in dynamism. The planit must be universally tangible for man, inside as well as outside, who, in fine weather, may sit on its surface. The planit, thanks to its construction and system will afford the opportunity to keep it clean; it can be washed every day without the least difficulty, and thanks to its small stature, is harmless.<sup>638</sup>

Malevich had a longstanding interest in the utopian potential of materials, but this consideration of plumbing, heating systems and self-cleaning building materials seems a long way beyond anything previously considered in Suprematism.

Gough has suggested a specific impetus for this aspect of Malevich's thinking and proposed that his old colleague Khlebnikov stimulated the Suprematist to contemplate the potential of the roof.<sup>639</sup> In his publication, 'Ourselves and our buildings', Khlebnikov argued for the roof to become the main thing and an 'axis of the standing structure. The roof as a thing in itself'.<sup>640</sup> 'Our people don't believe there can be flat ceilings, roofs', Malevich stated in December 1924.<sup>641</sup> It is certainly possible that Malevich was contemplating Khlebnikov's ideas in this advancement of his architectural thinking and saw the roof as symbolic of Suprematism's inherently liberating potential. There are certainly affinities here with Russian

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<sup>637</sup> Lissitzky, 'Suprematism in World Reconstruction', in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. Helene Aldwinckle (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 332.

<sup>638</sup> Kazimir Malevich, inscription on *Future Planits for Earthlings*, 1923-1924, pencil on paper, 39 x 29.5 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (Fig. 5.10).

<sup>639</sup> Maria Gough, 'Architecture as Such', in Borchardt-Hume, *Kazimir Malevich*, 162.

<sup>640</sup> Velimir Khlebnikov, quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>641</sup> Malevich, letter to Lissitzky, 8 December 1924; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 177.

Cosmism and the ideas of Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, as Lodder has discussed.<sup>642</sup> It was surely deliberate that this *Planit* sketch is presented within an off-centre quadrilateral form, which itself sits within another quadrilateral that unmistakably recalls Malevich's *White on White* paintings of 1918 (Fig. 3.4). This was no doubt a deliberate move intended to situate architectural thinking in relation to his ideas established on the canvas, which are associated with a panoply of metaphysical ideas.

In another sketch, *Modern Buildings* (1923-24) (Fig. 5.11), Malevich is less ambiguous and seems to consider spatial engagement and function in architecture in relation to the earth. Below this sketch, Malevich wrote that this design was to be 'constructed without any specific purpose, but the earth dwellers can use it for their own purpose'.<sup>643</sup> Malevich is clearly playing with contradiction here. There is a tension between this statement, which rejects any specific functionality, and what is a dense arrangement of abstracted forms. He suggests that the forms have not been constructed with any clear function in mind, yet any function can be given to it as humans see fit. This paradox was no doubt deliberate. The statement recalls his 1924 text, 'Notes on Architecture', in which Malevich wrote: 'I understand architecture as an activity outside all utilitarianism, an objectless architecture, consequently possessing its own ideology. [...] This is how I understand all art: as an activity free from all economical, practical and religious ideologies'.<sup>644</sup> *Modern Buildings* seems emblematic of Malevich's visionary thinking in architecture. Form, for Malevich – whether it be in painting or architecture – could be achieved through a process of intuitive creation rather than specific design. In architecture, Malevich's contribution to architecture sought not to resolve practical questions but to propose a new organisation of life according to art.

Lissitzky interpreted Malevich's architectural models as somehow usurping the classical environment of Russia's former capital. 'In Petrograd, the Greco-Roman spirit of the old academy still prevails. Malevich is trying with what he calls 'blind architecture' to ventilate the atmosphere'.<sup>645</sup> It is interesting that Malevich's practice in architecture from 1923 seems to substantiate ideas he wrote in 1918. In the text, 'Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete', Malevich objected to the inadequacy of

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<sup>642</sup> Lodder, 'Living in Space: Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist Architecture and the Philosophy of Nikolai Fedorov', in Douglas and Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich*, 172-202.

<sup>643</sup> Kazimir Malevich, inscription on *Modern Buildings*, 1923-24, pencil on paper, 36 x 53.5 cm, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (Fig. 5.12).

<sup>644</sup> Kazimir Malevich, 'Zapiski ob arkhitektury' [Notes on Architecture], 1924, ms; English translation in K. S. Malevich, *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism: Unpublished Writings 1913-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Hoffmann (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1978), 102.

<sup>645</sup> Lissitzky, 'Architecture in the USSR', in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, 372.

pre-revolutionary architectural forms and stated that ‘on the square fields of the revolution there should be erected corresponding buildings’.<sup>646</sup> ‘Everything on earth should be built in the form of striving’, he added, and suggested that the ‘new architect will be he who, throwing aside Greece and Rome, speaks in the new language of architecture’.<sup>647</sup> In addition to classicism, Malevich derides other dominant architectural styles of the first decades of the twentieth century, namely Russian historicism (or Russian historical eclecticism) and Art Nouveau (or the Moderne, as it was called in Russia). The architect Aleksei Shchusev was a target for Malevich in his 1918 text. In 1924, Malevich again objected to Shchusev’s work and complained that he ‘is building a new Moscow, it’s really something, he’s costuming the proletariat in Roman sandals and the helmet of Pallas Athena; Coliseum stadiums, porticos, this is the new Moscow in the sandals of the Greeks’.<sup>648</sup> It is possible that, when Malevich produced his architectural models, he believed that he had established ‘the new language in architecture’ which he felt necessary in 1918. Malevich’s view was that his architecture was, in contrast to Shchusev’s ideas and those of many others, genuinely appropriate for this new era of reconstruction.<sup>649</sup>

Strikingly, Malevich borrowed directly from the classical framework as a way of challenging it. One aspect of this corresponds to nomenclature. With the exception of *Gota*, which seems to be an outlier, *Alpha*, *Beta* and *Zeta* are letters of the Greek alphabet. One might speculate as to why Malevich employed the name *Gota*. It is not clear what *Gota* means or what it refers to. Gamma follows Alpha and Beta as the third letter of the Greek alphabet. It is possible that Malevich intentionally evaded the third letter, just as he had, up to this moment at least, evaded the third dimension. He may have deliberately wished for people to speculate about *Gota* and allowed myths to form naturally. For example, there is no known ‘*Table No. 2*’, only *Table No. 1* (Fig. 5.15) and *Table No. 3* (Fig. 5.16).

When Malevich presented his architectural models as an established Suprematist order at the 1926 *Survey of the Work of the Institute of Artistic Culture for the Academic Year 1925-1926* held at Ginkhuk (Fig. 5.17), he developed this strategy of ambiguity and reinforced the idea of a new classicism. Malevich displayed a number of architectural models, three separate canvases depicting a square, a circle and a cross. On a large

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<sup>646</sup> K. Malevich, ‘Arkhitektura kak poshchechina betono-zhelezu’, *Anarkhiia*, 37 (6 April 1918): 4; English translation, ‘Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete’, in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 63.

<sup>647</sup> *Ibid.*, I: 64.

<sup>648</sup> Malevich, letter to Lissitzky, 17 June 1924; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 168.

<sup>649</sup> Malevich, ‘Architecture as a Slap in the Face to Ferro-Concrete’, in Malevich, *Essays*, I: 63.

curtain, positioned against the back wall between two columns, Malevich depicted a *Planit*. In this photograph, a tension is observed between the illustration of abstraction, seen most clearly in the square, circle and cross forms and the representation of a new architectural form, as viewed on the curtain and embodied in the models on display. The gallery space itself becomes an active element in this tension. The assertion of a new Suprematist order is seen in contrast – and in contest – with the classical orders on the walls of the room. Malevich’s new Suprematist order challenges the familiar notion of classicism in an effort to redefine architectural space and form. It is very reasonable to think that at this exhibition Malevich felt he had appropriately responded to Anatoli Lunacharskii’s aspiration that classicism should exist ‘as the centre of the fine arts’.<sup>650</sup> As this implies, another motive for Malevich to borrow from the existing classical vocabulary was an attempt to strategically position his work within those ideological requirements acceptable to the state.

Despite Malevich’s ambition to define Suprematism both as a unique mode of architecture and in relation to classicism, his ideas retained close affinities with strands of other avant-garde activities. Malevich’s aspiration to establish a new Suprematist order in architecture, in fact, aligned with other contemporary avant-garde aims. In Ginzburg’s Constructivist text, *Style and Epoch*, produced two years ahead of Malevich’s exhibition at Ginkhuk, Ginzburg stated that ‘the architect will then free himself, to be not a decorator of life but its organiser’.<sup>651</sup> ‘The first steps in this transformation’, Ginzburg stressed,

began with the stripping of the classical organism of all the varied richness of its artistic and historical accessories. The most varied capitals, columns, consoles and corbels; the most complex moulding of cornices and the whole treasure trove of decorative elements – all this unlimited heritage, which had meaning and significance only in its own time, when each detail had flowered logically and out of an integral whole – all this has been dropped from the modern artist’s repertory. Virtually all of us have learned to make do without this baggage, have felt ourselves estranged from this most superficial and striking manifestation of the past.<sup>652</sup>

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<sup>650</sup> Anatolii Lunacharskii, quoted in Strigalev, ‘Nonarchitects in Architecture’, *The Great Utopia*, 670.

<sup>651</sup> Ginzburg, *Style and Epoch*, 113.

<sup>652</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

The result of this shedding, Ginzburg added, was that forms were now ‘laid bare’.<sup>653</sup> ‘Cleansed of their glittering and superficial attire, [forms] appeared with all the fascination and unexpected sharpness of an artistic asceticism’.<sup>654</sup> Similarly, Ladovskii, who was head of the rationalist group Asnova (Assotsiatsiia novykh arkhitektorov – Association of New Architects) from 1923, made a statement in 1926 about form-making which also comes to mind here. ‘Architecture constructs a form’, Ladovskii wrote, ‘bringing together elements which are not technical or utilitarian ones in the normal sense of those words, and which can be looked upon as new ‘architectural motifs’.<sup>655</sup> This statement clearly recalls Malevich’s view of architecture ‘as an activity free from all economical, practical and religious ideologies’.<sup>656</sup> If Malevich was not directly stimulated by Ginzburg or Ladovskii, it must be said that there existed a significant affinity between what were ostensibly different artistic groups working towards new creative forms in architecture.

Given these affinities, it is important to explore the formal logic and theoretical basis of Malevich’s architectural models and contemplate what specific characteristics he felt defined his Suprematist order. All of Malevich’s models are formally austere without any traditional sort of detail. The models do not reveal any concern for windows, doors, moulding or ornament. Familiar architectural features and intricate detailing are overlooked for volumetric form alone. However, this does not mean that detail itself has been purged entirely. In fact, as architect Edward R. Ford has observed, such an approach to form serves to introduce a new sort of detail. In Ford’s view, ‘the detail-less building rarely if ever exists’.<sup>657</sup> ‘A building may be composed primarily but not entirely of negative elements’, Ford adds, ‘but the result will be to make the positive details, which can never be completely eliminated, all the more powerful’.<sup>658</sup> By adopting Ford’s ideas, it is clear that Malevich’s architectural models stress surface and volume. A second point to note is that, precisely because of the elimination of traditional detailing, the construction process and the structural logic of each volumetric model become foregrounded. This absence of detail and ornamentation may be one meaning that Malevich implied when he referred to his model as ‘blind architecture’.<sup>659</sup> These

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<sup>653</sup> Ibid.

<sup>654</sup> Ibid.

<sup>655</sup> Nikolai Ladovskii, ‘Osnovy postroeniia teorii arkhitektury (pod znakom ratsionalisticheskoi estetiki)’ [Foundations for Building a Theory of Architecture (Under the Banner of Rational Aesthetics)], in *Izvestiia ASNova*, no. 1 (1926): 3-6; English translation in Catherine Cooke, *Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture and the City* (London: Academy Editions, 1995), 178.

<sup>656</sup> Malevich, ‘Zapiski ob arkhitektury’; Malevich, *The Artist, Infinity, Suprematism*, 102.

<sup>657</sup> Edward R. Ford, *The Architectural Detail* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2011), 88-89.

<sup>658</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>659</sup> Lissitzky, ‘Architecture in the USSR’, in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, 372.

observations, nonetheless, further reinforce the formal connection between Malevich's architectural models and Ginzburg's ideas, in which the purging of form was a necessity.

Given the strong formal affinities between Suprematism's mode of architecture and that of the broader avant-garde, the assertion of Suprematism's unique character had to transcend questions of form. To do this, Malevich associated his models and drawings with something which he called the additional element. This idea was devised and introduced in Vitebsk before it was advanced within the teaching programme at Ginkhuk through a series of didactic charts (Figs. 5.18 and 5.19).<sup>660</sup> In a carefully orchestrated image, Malevich photographed himself in a suit gesturing towards his research charts. This image was no doubt designed to bring to mind a scientist presenting and teaching his research much more so than it does an artist teaching the formal principles of painting.

The concept of the additional element was further substantiated in the 1927 Bauhaus book, *Die gegenstandslose Welt* (The World as Objectlessness) (Fig. 5.20).<sup>661</sup> In this publication, Malevich attempted to explain this concept of the additional element and his ideas in architecture in relation to the earth. The Suprematist additional element will correspond to the emergence of a new aerial volumetric form which would have significance for built architecture:

There is an appropriate space for [the Suprematist additional element] – the air as the necessary environment for the aeroplane, the aerial dynamic structures of the planets, aerial Suprematism. The air space in which the dynamo-planets exist so that dynamo-planning earth structures will follow; this dynamo-planning may be Suprematist volume or plane structures which may fall apart into dynamic Suprematism and objectless architecture, that is, the static of the additional element of the Square.<sup>662</sup>

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<sup>660</sup> See Maria Kokkori, 'The Cezanne Effect in Malevich's Suprematism', in Christina Lodder and Maria Kokkori, eds., *Experiment 29 Paul Cezanne and Modernism in Russia* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2023), 105-125.

<sup>661</sup> First published as Kasimir Malewitsch, *Die gegenstandslose Welt*. Bauhausbücher 11 (Munich: Langen Verlag, 1927); English translation, Kazimir Malevich, 'The World as Objectlessness', in Simon Baier and Britta Tanya Dümpelmann, eds., *Kazimir Malevich: The World as Objectlessness*, trans. Antonina W. Bouis (Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel/Hatje Cantz, 2014), 145-200.

<sup>662</sup> Kazimir Malevich, 'The World as Objectlessness', in Baier and Dümpelmann, *The World as Objectlessness*, 180.

In his Bauhaus book, Malevich tried to amend his theory to imply that the Suprematist constructions, as achieved in the cosmos, should be recognised as making a parabolic journey back to the earth to establish new architectural forms on the ground. Indeed, the cosmos is necessary, Malevich argued, because the ‘dynamic elements of the new architecture could not develop in the provinces’.<sup>663</sup> *The World as Objectlessness* stresses the return of the Suprematist plane to the surface of the earth. At this moment the plane is ‘moving into another environment, that is, into real space, in which we build a material expression of the city’s central dynamic power’.<sup>664</sup>

In the final paragraphs of *The World as Objectlessness*, Malevich stated that ‘the painterly sensation of contemporary New Art indicated the form for new architecture; the new element that was called Suprematism became the architectural element’.<sup>665</sup> In other words, the additional element of Suprematism was the unique and qualifying aspect of Malevich’s ideas. It functioned not just as a theoretical idea but as an assertion of his copyright, which Malevich believed could come to represent the central forming element in new architecture for the Soviet Union and the world.

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<sup>663</sup> Ibid.

<sup>664</sup> Ibid., 184.

<sup>665</sup> Ibid., 198.



**Figure 5.1**

**Nikolai Ladovsky**

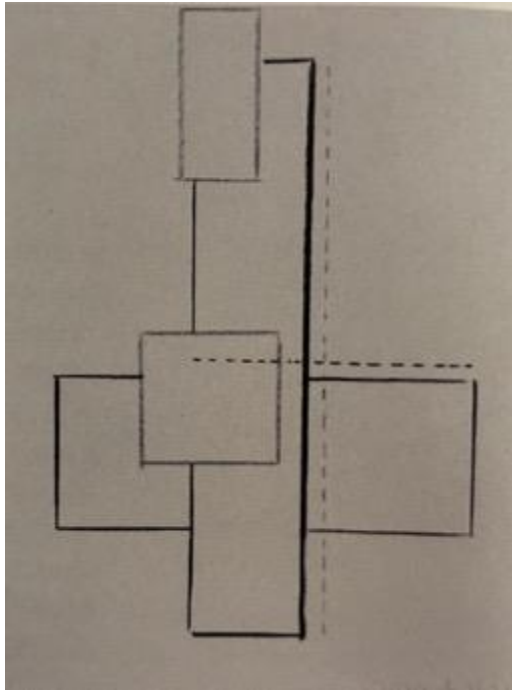
*Example of a Constructive Structure*

1921

Pencil, ink and wash on cardboard

38 x 27.3 cm

George Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki



**Figure 5.2**

**Liubov Popova**

*Untitled*

1921

Red and black crayon on paper

38 x 27.5 cm

George Costakis Collection, Thessaloniki



**Figure 5.3**

**Aleksei Gan**

*Konstruktivizm (Constructivism)*

1922

Book with letterpress cover

23.7 x 20.1 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



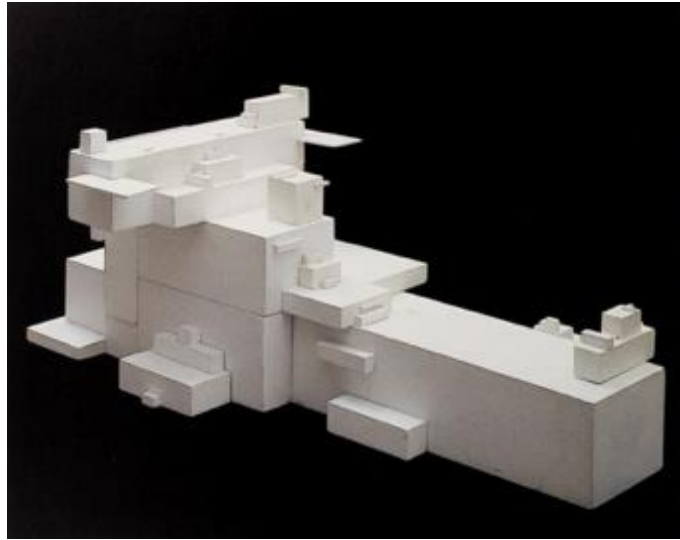
**Figure 5.4**

Myatlev House

9 St. Isaac's Square, St. Petersburg, today

Location of the former Museum of Artistic Culture and the Petrograd State Institute of Artistic Culture,  
1919-26

Reproduced from *Peter's Door* <https://dvorspb.ru/sights/architecture/palaces/myatlev-residence/>



**Figure 5.5**

**Kazimir Malevich**

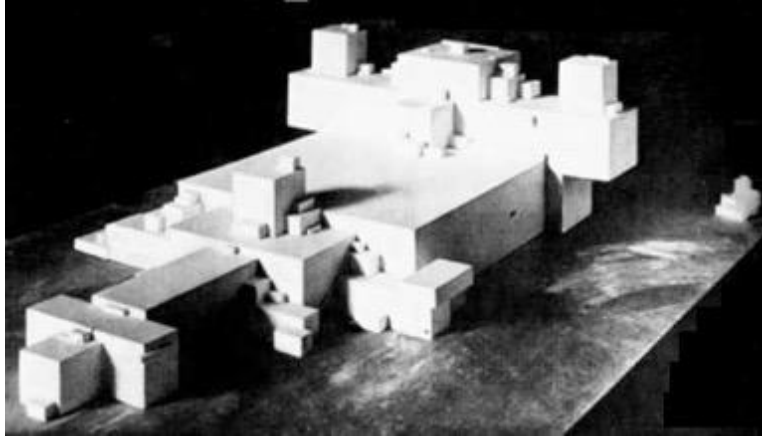
*Architecton Alpha*

1923

Plaster

33 x 37 x 84.5 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



**Figure 5.6**

**Kazimir Malevich**

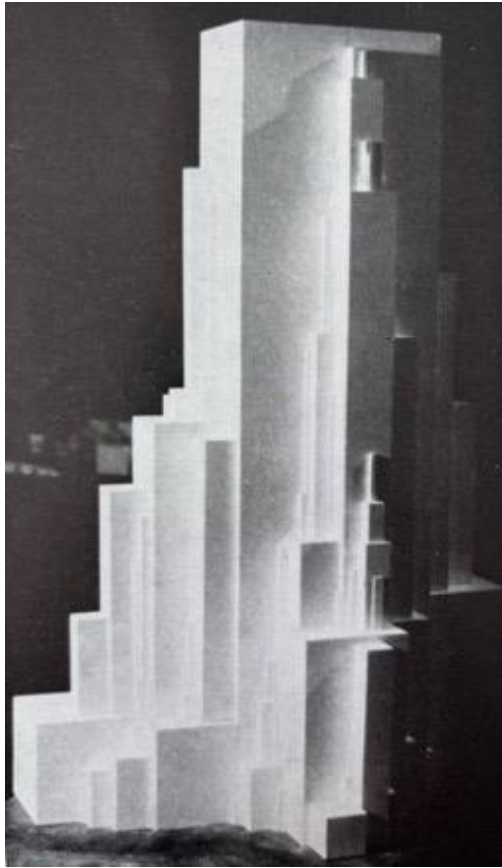
*Architecton Beta*

1923

Plaster

27.3 x 59.5 x 99.3 cm

Reproduced from Troels Andersen, *Malevich: Catalogue Raisonné of the Berlin Exhibition 1927* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970)



**Figure 5.7**

**Kazimir Malevich**

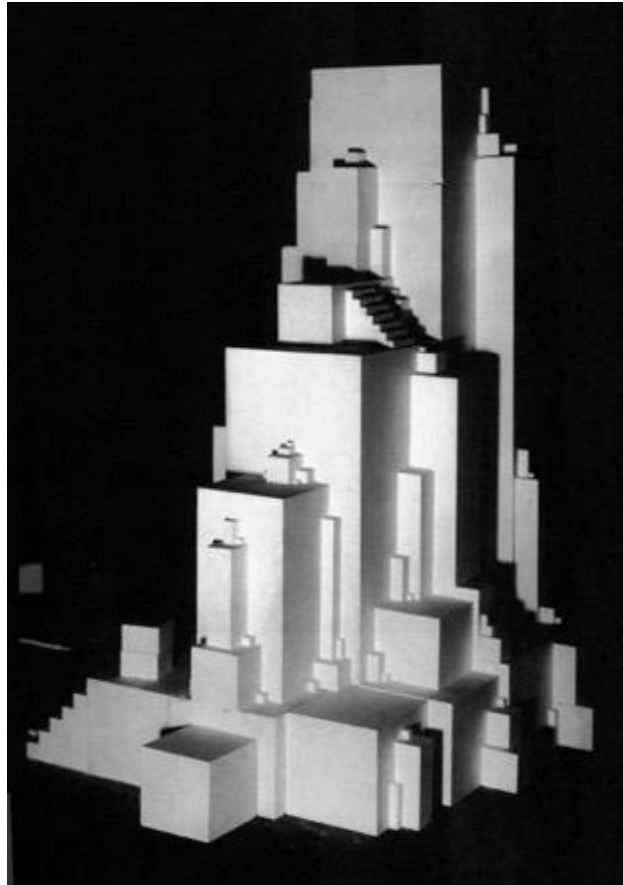
*Architecton Gota*

c. 1923

Plaster

85.2 x 48 x 58 cm

Reproduced from Troels Andersen, *Malevich: Catalogue Raisonné of the Berlin Exhibition 1927* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970)



**Figure 5.8**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Architecton Zeta*

1923-27

Plaster

79.4 x 56.7 x 71.4 cm

Reproduced from Troels Andersen, *Malevich: Catalogue Raisonné of the Berlin Exhibition 1927* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970)



**Figure 5.9**

**Kazimir Malevich**

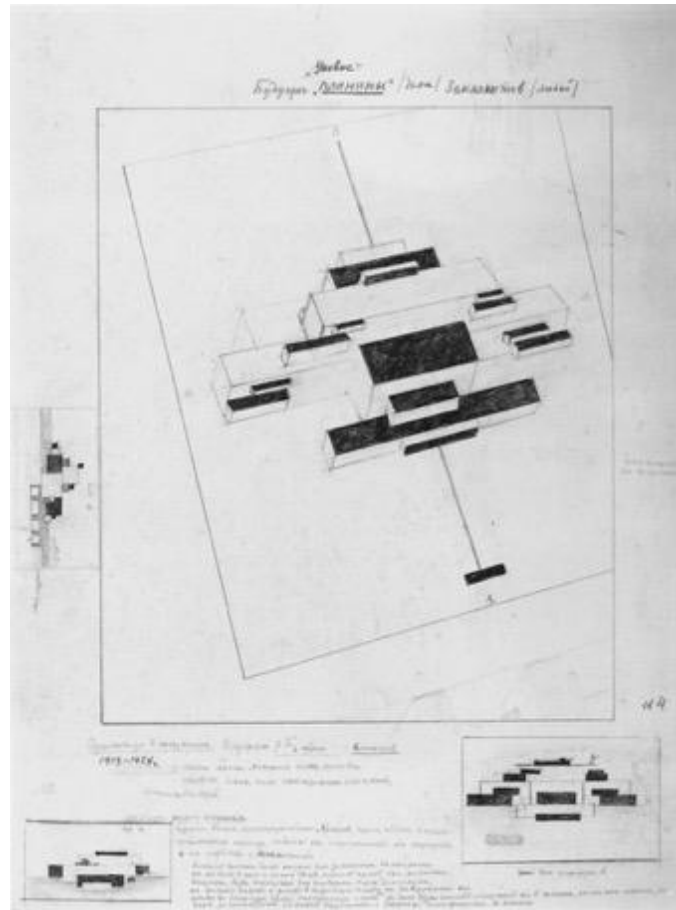
*Architecton Gota 2-a*

1929

Plaster

57 x 26 x 36 cm

Reproduced from Troels Andersen, *Malevich: Catalogue Raisonné of the Berlin Exhibition 1927* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970)



**Figure 5.10**

**Kazimir Malevich**

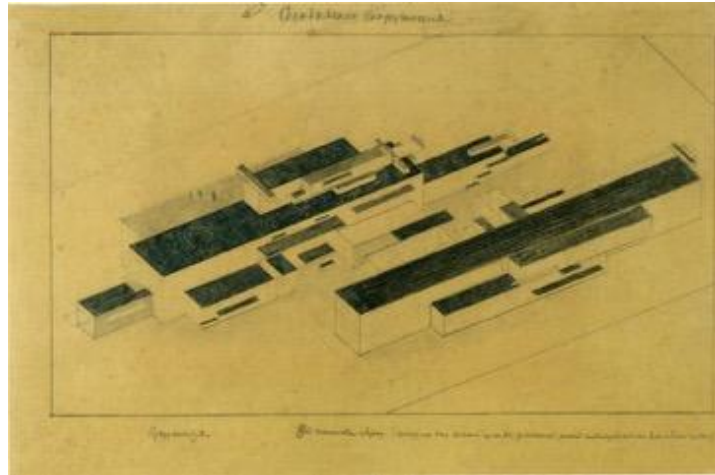
*Future Planits for Earthlings*

1923-24

Pencil on paper

39 x 29.5 cm

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



**Figure 5.11**

**Kazimir Malevich**

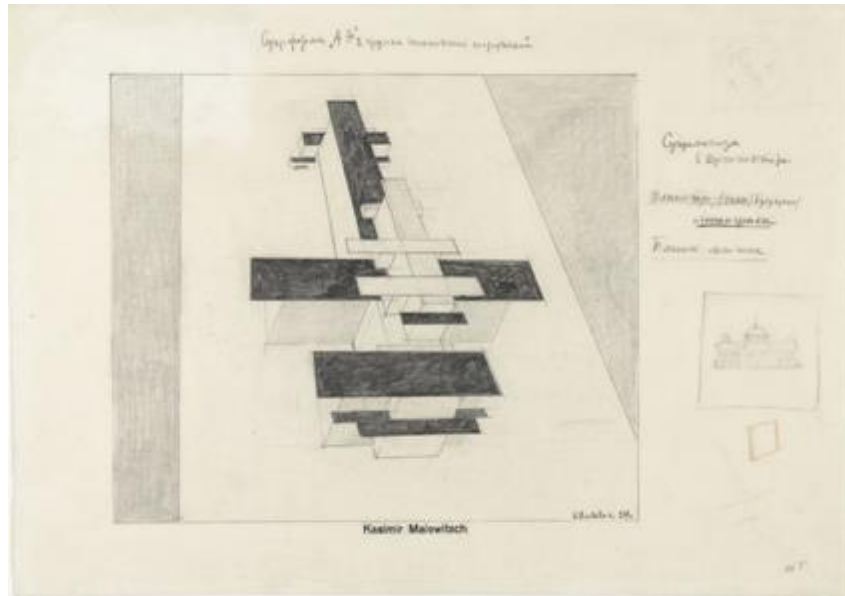
*Modern Buildings*

1923-24

Pencil on paper

36 x 53.5 cm

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



**Figure 5.12**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Houses of the Future Leningrad: The Pilot's Planit*

1923-24

Pencil on paper

31.1 x 43.9 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



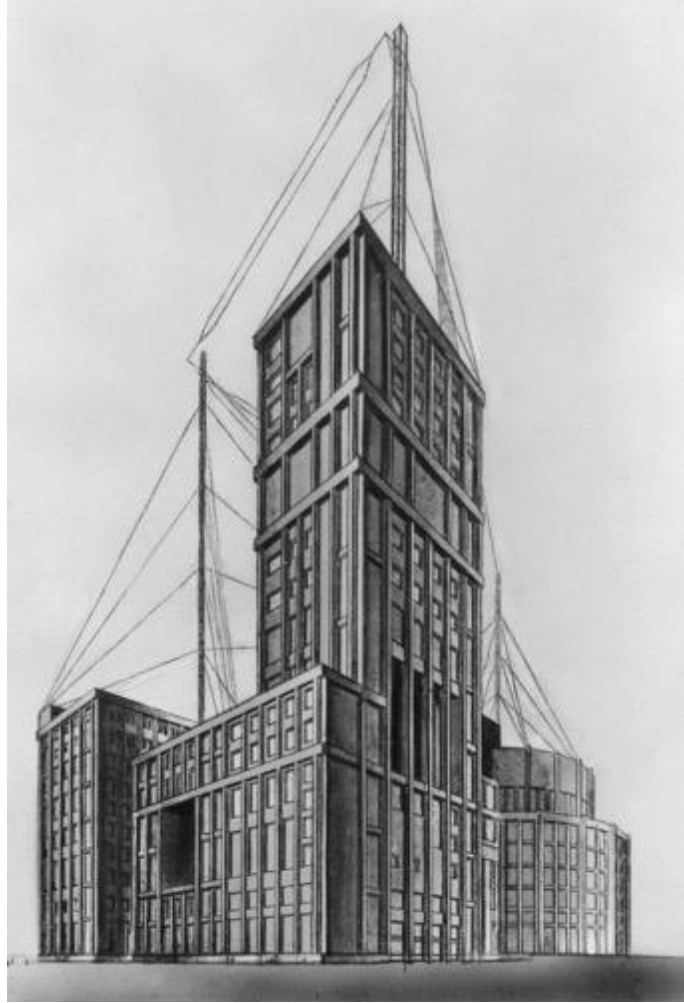
**Figure 5.13**

**Anton Lavinskii**

*City on Springs (Sketch for a Housing Block)*

1921

Reproduced from *Lef*, No. 1 (March 1923)



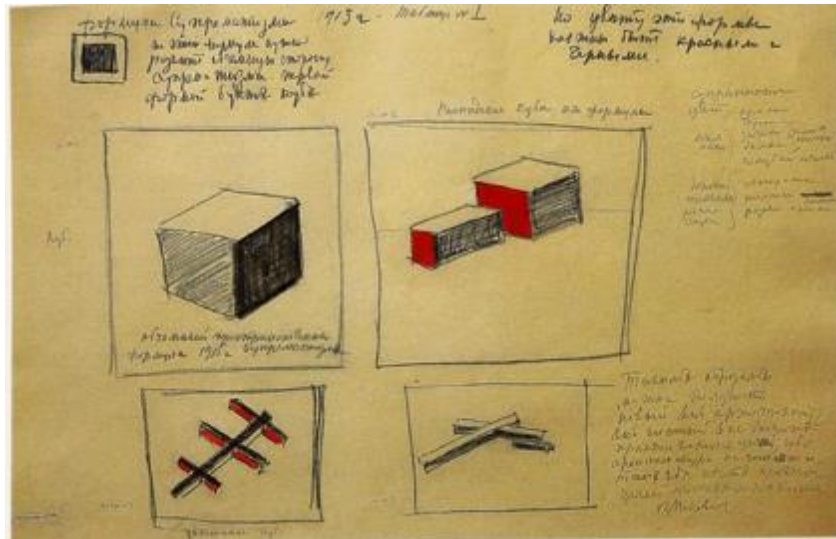
**Figure 5.14**

**The Vesnin Brothers**

*Palace of Labour*

1923

Reproduced from Catherine Cooke, *Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture and the City* (London: Academy Editions, 1995)



**Figure 5.15**

**Kazimir Malevich**

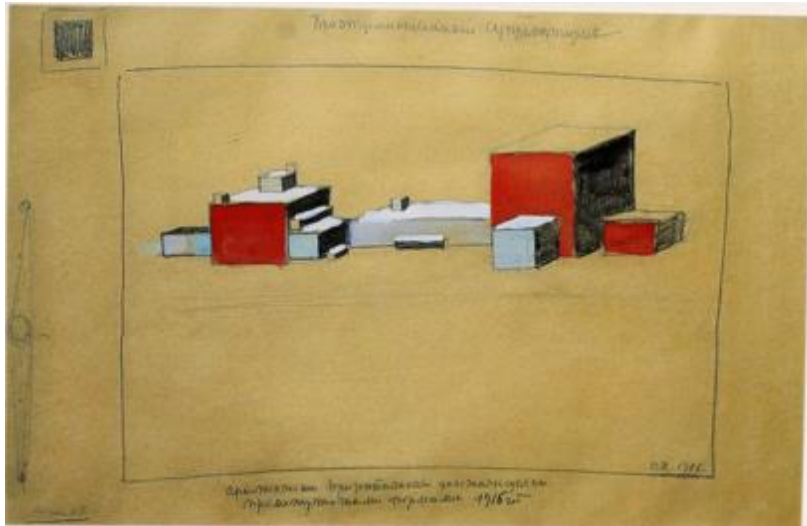
*Table No. 1, Formula of Suprematism*

c. 1925-26

Watercolour, gouache and pencil on paper

36 x 54 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



**Figure 5.16**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Table No. 3, Spatial Suprematism*

c. 1925-26

Watercolour, gouache and pencil on paper

36 x 54 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



**Figure 5.17**

**Kazimir Malevich**

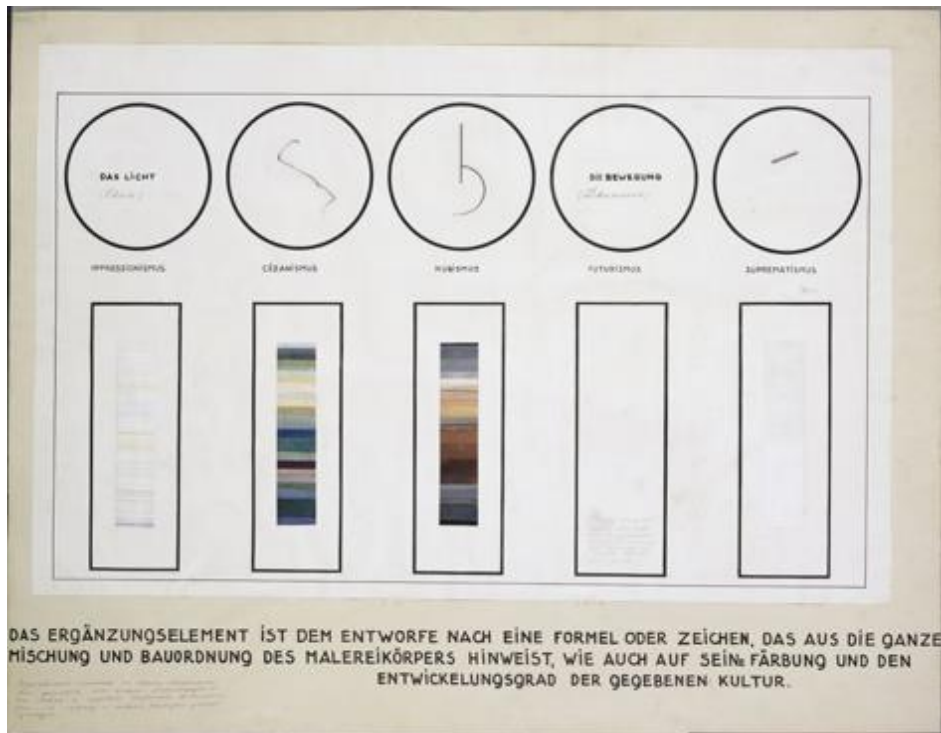
*Survey of the Work of the Institute of Artistic Culture for the Academic Year 1925-1926*

Ginkhuk

1926

Institute of Artistic Culture, Leningrad

Reproduced from Achim Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Kazimir Malevich* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014)



**Figure 5.18**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Theoretical Chart No. 4*

1926/1927

Graphite and ink on paper

72 x 98 cm

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



**Figure 5.19**

Kazimir Malevich with staff of the Formal-Theoretical Department at Ginkhuk, Leningrad  
c. 1925

Reproduced from Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015)



Figure 5.20

**Kasimir Malewitsch**

*Die gegenstandslose Welt* [The World as Objectlessness]

Bauhausbücher No. 11 (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1927)

## Chapter Six

### *From Professional Legacy in Architecture to Personal Survival*

When Suprematism entered the field of architecture it did so under the collective ethos of Unovis (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva – Champions of the New Art). Despite this reality, Malevich sought to assert his individual authorship over its ideas in architecture in *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*. Once Malevich had relocated to Petrograd, he amended Suprematism's architectural offer and made statements, produced plaster models, pencil sketches and exhibited them in such a way as to suggest that his thinking in architecture had become situated in relation to the built environment. This shift was influenced by developments in creative practice and the political context. The avant-garde had begun to take up questions in relation to architecture with more vigour, building materials appeared and the state took an increasingly authoritarian stance on all areas of life, including creative freedom. Malevich's justification for Suprematism's architectural enterprise might have shifted, but his effort to assert his individual authorship and secure his legacy persisted right from its outset. Malevich's idealism and aspiration towards being recognised as the originator of a new mode of architecture, both in the Soviet Union and beyond, now had to be set aside as questions of survival became an even more pressing concern.

The factors which led to the dissolution of Unovis are a very useful place to start in this discussion. In its early years, Unovis was defined by its radical utopian ambition to reconstruct the world according to Suprematist principles through its collective efforts. As Chapter Four discussed, in their 1920 text, 'We Want' [*My khotim*], Unovis wrote: 'we bring new cities. We bring the world new things. We give them other names. Those who are already free must unite without delay under the flag of the new art and build the world'.<sup>666</sup> Pressures associated with the Bolshevik victory in the Civil War, which culminated in Malevich's permanent departure from Vitebsk in 1922, were certainly factors in the group's demise. However, tensions concerning the attribution of artistic creativity in Unovis, which had long existed within the group's comparatively short life, seem to have undermined their earlier collective ideals and brought the group to an end in 1924.

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<sup>666</sup> *Ot Unovisa – My khotim* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation, 'From Unovis – We Want', in Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930*, trans. Alexander Lieven (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 297-298.

Cracks within Unovis emerged as early as the winter of 1920-21 following the disagreement over Ilia Chashnik's *Project for a Tribune for a Smolensk Square* (Fig. 4.50). When Unovis attempted to navigate subsequent disagreements, Malevich suggested in 1924 that members might consider 'withdrawing from Unovis' altogether if they were not content.<sup>667</sup> Ivan Chervinko, a member of Unovis who remained in Vitebsk, implored Chashnik and Nikolai Suetin to step out from under the wing of Malevich and pursue their own artistic identities in Leningrad. In a letter from March 1924, Chervinko wrote: 'we do not need any commanders in chief' and stated boldly that it was 'high time for K[azimir] S[everinovich] to take this into account'.<sup>668</sup> Vasilii Rakitin pointed out that Malevich simply 'overlooked or undervalued how rapidly his pupils had been gaining independence'.<sup>669</sup> Similarly, Samuel Johnson has rightly argued that the demise of Unovis should, in large part, be attributed to Malevich's reluctance to loosen his grip over the group and allow it to become the product of its own initiatives rather than 'being identified solely with Malevich's ideas'.<sup>670</sup> As the young students of Unovis developed in confidence, Malevich's urge to maintain his authority remained unchanged. It was perhaps an inevitability that Unovis would sooner or later fragment.

Although a certain disharmony coloured the end of Unovis, the relationships that Malevich had with many of his former students were not irreparably damaged. A photograph of the Suprematist working alongside Suetin, Chashnik and Vasilii Vorobiev at the State Institute of Artistic Culture (*Gosudarstvennyi institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury – Ginkhuk*) in 1924 illustrates this fact (Fig. 6.1). Given Malevich's individual authorship of his architectural models, and that Unovis openly associated itself with the idea of collective work which attempted to mirror the ambitions of the new state, this image is very illuminating. This photograph suggests that the production of Malevich's models was, to some degree, a collective process rather than an individual achievement. Almost certainly, these men would have proposed particular formal arrangements which Malevich would have either adopted or rejected.

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<sup>667</sup> Ilia Chashnik and Nikolai Suetin, letter to Kazimir Malevich, [October 1924], quoted in Samuel Johnson, 'Suprematism and/or Supremacy of Architecture', in Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 144.

<sup>668</sup> Ivan Chervinko, letter to Chashnik and Suetin, 23 March 1924; quoted in Vasily Rakitin, "'Five years (five centuries, old style) later'". The end or the beginning. The Petrograd crossing', in Irina Lebedeva, Andrei Sarabyanov, and Yvgenia Petrova, eds., *Nikolai Suetin (1897–1954)*, trans. Kenneth MacInnes (St. Petersburg: RA / Palace Editions, 2008), 34.

<sup>669</sup> Rakitin, "'Five years (five centuries, old style) later'". The end or the beginning. The Petrograd crossing', in Lebedeva et al., *Nikolai Suetin*, 25.

<sup>670</sup> Johnson, 'Suprematism and/or Supremacy of Architecture', in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 144.

It is not unreasonable to suggest that this image is emblematic of the fact that Malevich was always unwilling to allow Unovis to exist as a true collective or as a meritocracy of creative action. An autocracy of one was all Malevich could accept. The impulse to claim individual authorship of these architectural models in Suprematism was too great and, in all likelihood, Malevich's competitive impulse and his need to assert individual authorship played a part in the group's demise. These observations bring to mind a dilemma that had emerged earlier in Malevich's career. In 1915 he felt a necessity to secure his authorship of Suprematism, while also identifying a group of followers who would operate within his new movement.

Questions of authorship, creative autonomy and creative rights, however, were just as relevant for others operating alongside Malevich in 1915 as they were in the 1920s. In exploring questions of authorship and creative rights, particularly in relation to collaborative practice, it is important to look at El Lissitzky's further experimentation with architecture and to examine his evolving relationship with both Suprematism and Malevich. Although Lissitzky was artistically close to Malevich in 1919, the two men became estranged after Lissitzky left Vitebsk and became involved in European avant-garde activity. Before they resumed contact, Lissitzky had worked on a variety of ideas, one of which was his *Proun Room* (1923) (Figs. 6.2 and 6.3), displayed at Germany's *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung*. This project invited the viewer to participate in three-dimensional space which was defined by the Proun forms positioned on the walls of the gallery room.

The idea of using the walls to transform the role of the viewer from a spectator to an active participant was already a concern in Suprematism. This was advanced in Vitebsk in the 1920s, notably Malevich's *Principle of Painting Walls* of 1920 (Fig. 4.25) and the anonymous studies of interiors (1920) (Figs. 4.17-4.24). Perhaps more strikingly, the image of the *Proun Room* most strongly recalls Malevich's exhibition at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10 (Zero-Ten)*, [*Poslednaia futuristicheskaiia vystavka kartin, 0,10 (nol'-desiat'*)], which achieved a similar effect. In 1924 Lissitzky reworked Chashnik's 1920 design (Figs. 4.50 and 4.51) as *The Lenin Tribune* (Fig. 6.4). While Malevich rejected Chashnik's design as being too close to Tatlin's Tower, Lissitzky embraced the collective vision of Unovis in Vitebsk and produced his own interpretation of this work while in Europe. These two facts probably meant that Lissitzky felt free to rework Chashnik's idea in 1924. Indeed, as Richard Anderson has noted, Lissitzky was keen that the attribution of this design for a tribune went to the Unovis collective.<sup>671</sup> Lissitzky's ambition to attribute this work to Unovis suggests

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<sup>671</sup> Richard Anderson, *Wolkenbügel: El Lissitzky as Architect* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024), 60.

a number of possibilities. At the very least, Lissitzky seemed to recognise he was not the sole creator of this work and that others had rights to this achievement.

In November 1923, before Lissitzky returned to Russia, he was contacted by Nikolai Ladovskii who led the rationalist group in Moscow, known as Asnova (Assotsiatsiia novykh arkhitektorov – Association of New Architects), and who pragmatically sought a useful contact in Europe.<sup>672</sup> Asnova was concerned with ‘architectural rationality’, which Ladovskii explained as ‘the economy of psychic energy in the perception of the spatial and functional properties of the building’.<sup>673</sup> This principle is illustrated on the cover of the group’s first journal in 1926 (Fig. 6.5), which Lissitzky designed after he returned to Moscow. This cover features an upturned image of the Ivan Belltower alongside an upright rationalist building which was produced by Vladimir Krinskii (Fig. 6.6). Comprised of a montage of elements, this design symbolised the group’s concern to achieve a sort of topographical equilibrium between the old Moscow and the new city.

Before he returned to Russia, Lissitzky worked on a design that he named the *Wolkenbügel* (Fig. 6.7) (c. 1925). The *Wolkenbügel* combined vertical and horizontal abstract forms into new architectural structures which could be erected at a number of locations across the capital. Like Krinskii’s building design, Lissitzky strived to connect the existing Moscow with potential future requirements. This project was intended to ‘respond to the demands of the new times within the context of the old Moscow urban fabric’, Lissitzky explained.<sup>674</sup> Without taking up too much space on the ground, the elevated horizontal forms would allow for the most efficient traffic distribution while lifts would carry goods between the ground and the upper levels, which could be used for administrative functions.<sup>675</sup> This would allow for the further reconstruction which, Lissitzky pragmatically accepted, ‘will pose [its own] new demands’.<sup>676</sup>

Although *Wolkenbügel* was promoted in Russia under the aegis of Asnova, it was not, per se, a Rationalist conception. Rather, *Wolkenbügel* was conceived as a tapestry of ideas and artistic aspirations, as Anderson has vividly demonstrated in his publication of the same title.<sup>677</sup> Malevich, Suprematism and

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<sup>672</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>673</sup> Ladovskii, ‘Foundations for Building a Theory of Architecture’, English translation in Cooke, *Russian Avant-Garde*, 178.

<sup>674</sup> Lissitzky, ‘Old Cities – New Buildings’, in El Lissitzky, *Russia, An Architecture for World Revolution*, trans. Eric Dluhosch (London: Lund Humphries, 1970), 56.

<sup>675</sup> Ibid.

<sup>676</sup> Ibid.

<sup>677</sup> Anderson, *Wolkenbügel*.

Lissitzky's participation within Unovis were just some of the many stimuli which can be identified in this new architectural conception. It is interesting, for example, that the diagram for this project, which Lissitzky published in *Asnova* (Fig. 6.8), recalls Malevich's reduced visual constructions in *34 Drawings* and his conception of the additional element in that it creates its own new formal language in architecture.

When the two men resumed contact in 1924, Malevich was incensed at Lissitzky for his move away from Suprematism. Malevich did not shy away from letting his former colleague know his feelings.

You, a constructor, have become frightened by Suprematism [...] you wanted to free your personality, your ego, from what I had done, you were afraid that I would co-opt you, or that all your work would be attributed to me, and you ended up with [Aleksei] Gan, [Aleksandr] Rodchenko, you became a constructor, not even a Prounist.<sup>678</sup>

Lissitzky may have read this letter and thought that Malevich was being rather perceptive. Lissitzky had already received his education before he arrived at Vitebsk and did not need to sit under Malevich's tutelage or feel bound by Suprematism. Shortly after Lissitzky received this letter, he wrote to his partner, Sophie Küppers, to inform her that he had received 'two letters from Malevich [...] in the second there is a photograph of the new work, BLIND ARCHITECTURE. It is a Proun'.<sup>679</sup>

For Johnson, the dispute represents merely a 'tension over terminology between Lissitzky and Malevich'.<sup>680</sup> Anderson has persuasively demonstrated that Malevich's conception of blindness stimulated Lissitzky, 'through opposition', to conceive the visual dynamics of his *Wolkenbügel* in relation to the 'urban environment'.<sup>681</sup> While both of these points are certainly true, Lissitzky's statement that Malevich's architectural model is a Proun suggests that, by 1924, the two men were engaged in very similar activity. There was certainly more to the dispute than the question of terminology. One major aspect of this concerns the origin of an architectural idea. The dispute was not caused by any distance that had emerged

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<sup>678</sup> Kazimir Malevich, letter to Lissitzky, 17 June 1924; English translation in Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), I: 168.

<sup>679</sup> Lissitzky, letter to Küppers, 24 October 1924, quoted in Johnson, 'Suprematism and/or Supremacy of Architecture', in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 145.

<sup>680</sup> Ibid.

<sup>681</sup> Anderson, *Wolkenbügel*, 252.

between Lissitzky and Malevich, but by the closeness of their creative activity. Malevich also wrote, rather insistently, in this correspondence: ‘I would like a letter from you that says something like, all the technical means for the execution of suprarchitecture is possible’.<sup>682</sup> Malevich wanted to establish the idea of Suprematism in the field of new architecture as his own idea as it had emerged from Suprematism and he wanted Lissitzky’s endorsement.

Terminology, artistic egos and competitive temperaments were all central to the rift, but it appears that Malevich felt that Lissitzky had forged a path in architecture and developed his own trajectory at the expense of Malevich’s intellectual labour. For Malevich, Lissitzky had exploited and explored in his own way ‘what I [Malevich] had done’.<sup>683</sup> Of course, Lissitzky seems to have felt exactly the same way. His identification of Malevich’s architectural model as a Proun suggests that Lissitzky felt that his own intellectual property had been plagiarised. Lissitzky might well have felt that he was on solid ground here. Malevich had only produced one illustration of a three-dimensional Suprematist form before Lissitzky pioneered the Proun. Lissitzky had studied architectural engineering before he encountered Suprematism and probably considered himself more qualified than Malevich – an artist – to create new architectural forms.

It is interesting to consider Catherine Cooke’s words here when she wrote that the rich avant-garde activity from the previous decade offered innovators in the 1920s ‘a clean slate’, away from the past, on which various trends and interpretations could establish ‘new formal languages’ in architecture.<sup>684</sup> The sentiment of plurality in Cooke’s words is important here. As the 1920s progressed, Lissitzky adopted a pragmatic and dynamic approach to his ideas in architecture which had become possible through an awareness of all of the avant-garde activity of the previous decade. By the time Lissitzky joined Asnova, he had thoroughly absorbed Suprematism into his practice but had moved away from Malevich as he felt was necessary. This was not something Malevich could tolerate in 1924.

In the midst of these tensions with Lissitzky, Chashnik worked alongside his old teacher at Ginkhuk and produced architectural designs in his own name. *Study of a Suprematist Interior* (late 1920s) (Fig. 6.9) recalls Lissitzky’s *Proun Room* and indeed shares a similar lineage that can be traced back to Vitebsk.

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<sup>682</sup> Malevich, letter to Lissitzky, 8 December 1924; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 177.

<sup>683</sup> Kazimir Malevich, letter to Lissitzky, 17 June 1924; *ibid.*, I: 168.

<sup>684</sup> Cooke, *Russian Avant-Garde*, 28.

Chashnik's interior, however, seems to introduce a new conception of space, not through a direct engagement, but by encouraging the viewer to peer into this box-like three-dimensional form and imagine a new spatial reality defined by Suprematism. This idea is reminiscent of the psychological perception of space that Ladovskii and the rationalists were concerned with. The architect, Ladovskii suggested, ought to 'communicate to the viewer [...] the tone and treatment of the surfaces'.<sup>685</sup> Similarly, *Study of a Suprematist Interior* appears to reveal Chashnik's concern to communicate the totality of a potential space through the application of colour.<sup>686</sup> It is also worth noting that following the emergence of Malevich's architectural model, Chashnik had no reason to evade three-dimensionality. Its embrace in this interior symbolises the development of earlier concerns in Suprematism and Chashnik's ambition to assert his authorship within a specific area of Suprematist architecture.

Suetin also attempted to assert himself as an independent author of Suprematist architecture. Before the move to Petrograd, and before Malevich produced three-dimensional models, Suetin conceived a number of specific architectural visions within Suprematism. He listed these ideas, including: 'A power station. (2) A Suprematist theatre. (3) An airfield. (4) An urban centre and a factory settlement. (5) A city square. (6) A review platform. (7) A sea port. (8) A landing strip for aeroplanes (9) A rally platform. (10) A farming area'.<sup>687</sup> Suetin produced a model which he entitled *architecton* in 1926 (Fig. 6.10). Although he attributed no specific function to this design, it may well have been conceived in response to the above ideas which he contemplated in Vitebsk. In addition to the assertion of individual authorship, this model demonstrates Suetin's effort to shift Suprematism towards actual construction and participation in reconstructing Russia.

Lazar Khidekel, too, was central to the emergence of Suprematism's architectural front in Vitebsk. Khidekel tried to balance his loyalty to Malevich at Ginkhuk with a desire to establish his own identity. *Design for a Horizontal Architecton – Aero-Club Axonometry* (1923) (Fig. 6.11) exemplifies this aspiration. The design represents a development of the *Aero* project which Khidekel worked on with Chashnik (Figs. 4.48-4.49) in 1920, but it also indicates that Khidekel now linked Suprematism's cosmic vision with more

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<sup>685</sup> Ladovskii, 'Osnovy postroeniia teorii arkhitektury (pod znakom ratsionalisticheskoi estetiki)', [Foundations for Building a Theory of Architecture (Under the Banner of Rational Aesthetics)], in *Izvestiia ASNVA*, no. 1 (1926): 3-6; English translation in Cooke, *Russian Avant-Garde*, 178.

<sup>686</sup> Ibid.

<sup>687</sup> Nikolai Suetin, in Lebedeva et al., *Nikolai Suetin*, 39.

practical objectives. *Design for a Horizontal Architecton* appears to echo Malevich's *Alpha* and *Beta* models, while another vertical architectural volume, produced in 1924 (Fig. 6.12), is very similar to Malevich's *Gota* and *Zeta*. In both cases, Khidekel's forms appear to be positioned on the earth, in contrast to the more ambiguous abstraction of *Aero*.

Despite the positive relationship that Malevich and Khidekel seemed to maintain, the latter's work in architecture managed to become shaped by controversy. In 1927, Malevich published Khidekel's 1926 *Workers' Club* (Fig. 6.13) in the German architectural publication *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst* (Fig. 6.14) above two photographs of his own vertical architectural models, identifying himself as the architect of all of these works and crediting Khidekel as the designer. Perhaps even more intriguing than this error of attribution is the fact that Khidekel began to operate with the Constructivist group, OSA (Ob'edinenie sovremennykh arkitektorov – the Society of Contemporary Architects) without any objection from Malevich.<sup>688</sup> Founded by architect Moisei Ginzburg and the painter, designer and architect, Aleksandr Vesnin, OSA privileged the utilitarian and functional aspects of new building ahead of all other questions.<sup>689</sup> Khidekel displayed his *Workers' Club* at OSA's first exhibition in 1927 and produced the no longer extant *Sports Club* building in the same year (Fig. 6.15).

It is interesting to consider, firstly, why this error of authorship may have happened and, secondly, why Malevich would have been silent about Khidekel's involvement with OSA while Lissitzky received such intense criticism. It could well be argued that by erecting a building, Khidekel had compromised Suprematism even more so than Lissitzky had. Regina Khidekel has suggested that the error of attribution in the German journal was a genuine mistake on Malevich's part.<sup>690</sup> She is, perhaps, being too polite to the legacy of Malevich and not defensive enough of her father-in-law. In *34 Drawings*, Malevich had separated himself from 'young architects in the broad sense of the word', while he had 'entered a remote and, for me, a new realm of thought'.<sup>691</sup> As Malevich made clear by 1927, *34 Drawings* must be interpreted as an effort towards granting himself licence as a sort of chief architect – as the discoverer of Suprematism – while the

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<sup>688</sup> See Boris Kirikov and Margarita Shiglits, 'Lazar Khidekel's Architectural Practice: Conceptions of Suprematism and Architecture', in Regina Khidekel, ed., *Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism* (Munich: Prestel, 2014), 49-60.

<sup>689</sup> Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and 1930s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983), 156-193.

<sup>690</sup> Regina Khidekel, 'Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism', in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 183.

<sup>691</sup> K. Malevich, *Suprematizm: 34 risunka* [Suprematism: 34 Drawings] (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1920); English translation in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), 127-128.

other members of Unovis could exist as lower-ranking positions such as designers or project architects. In 1924, Malevich took this a step further when he rather derogatively stated to Lissitzky that 'Khidekel is a civil engineer'.<sup>692</sup> This was incorrect and entirely unfair. Khidekel was just as much involved in questions of Suprematist architecture as Malevich. It is possible that the error in *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst* was an orchestrated mistake as Malevich positioned himself as the architect of a new mode of existence.

The emergence of pragmatism, however, may help to explain the inconsistency in Malevich's approaches to Lissitzky and Khidekel. When Malevich expressed frustrations to Lissitzky in 1924, the Suprematist held a degree of professional prominence and may have hoped that his position at Ginkhuk was relatively secure. In June 1926, however, an article in *Leningradskaiia Pravda* attacked Malevich as a formalist and Ginkhuk as a 'state-sponsored monastery'.<sup>693</sup> This was a serious moment for Malevich. On 15 November 1926, Malevich was dismissed as director and the institute was closed a month later. Any sense that the state would tolerate Malevich's ideas was gone. This pressure, and the fact that by 1927 construction had begun, meant that Malevich was forced to adapt whether he wanted to or not.

It seems that once building work was underway, Malevich recognised the necessity for there to be some structures which could be discussed, in some sense, as possessing Suprematist values. Listening to Malevich speak in 1927, the Polish poet Tadeusz Peiper stated that the Suprematist 'would be happy if the builders would simply erect structures according to his sculptural models'.<sup>694</sup> With the *Sports Club*, this was effectively what Khidekel had done. The windows on the *Sports Club* are functional elements, although their appearance as black squares can be read as a nod to Suprematism. Khidekel may have employed a Suprematist language, but the design belonged to Khidekel. By 1927, Malevich was compelled to shift away from the idealism and the utopian ideas which defined his thinking in *34 Drawings* and embrace the possibility that his ideas in architecture might be absorbed into new building, one way or another.

Gan's central role at OSA, and the longstanding professional relationship he and Malevich enjoyed, were very likely key reasons that Malevich felt compelled to adopt a more pragmatic stance towards Khidekel than he had in 1924 with Lissitzky. Khidekel's involvement with OSA would have given Malevich

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<sup>692</sup> Malevich, letter to Lissitzky, 8 December 1924; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 177.

<sup>693</sup> See Grigorii Seryi, 'Monastr' na gossnabzhenii', in *Leningradskaiia Pravda*, 10 June 1926; reprinted in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 529.

<sup>694</sup> Tadeusz Peiper, 'At the Bauhaus', in Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács, eds., *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910-1930* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 629.

an opportunity to strengthen this connection with Gan, who continued to regard Suprematism favourably in relation to architecture. In OSA's journal, *Contemporary Architecture (Sovremennaia Arkhitektura)* (Fig. 6.16), Gan discussed Suprematism in favourable terms and published photographs of Malevich's *Alpha* and *Beta* architectural models (1927) (Fig. 6.17). In a text entitled 'Notes on Kazimir Malevich', Gan stated:

if the three-dimensional compositions of Suprematism do not reveal the everyday useful qualities of an object, i.e., its works have no concrete social value, without which modern architecture is not architecture at all, these works are of such great importance from the viewpoint of the abstract quest for a new form as such.<sup>695</sup>

A problem that had persisted in new building in Gan's eyes was a stubborn inability to 'make a move and abandon the old forms of architecture'.<sup>696</sup> Suprematism seemed to transcend the functionalist principles of OSA and offer a powerful impetus for architects in overcoming problems of form. 'The appearance of Suprematist works can play a role in this shift', Gan wrote plainly.<sup>697</sup> On the cover of the third edition of this journal (1927) (Fig. 6.16), a black square dominates while an elongated rectangular form is observed at the bottom right, as though Suprematist painting gives rise to new structural forms in the built environment.

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Although Malevich initially promoted his pedagogical structure and architectural thinking throughout Soviet Russia, he just as quickly recognised Suprematism's international potential. In fact, this vision originated in Vitebsk, before Unovis disbanded and more than two years before Malevich's architectural models and sketches emerged. In May 1921, Malevich wrote to the Creative Committee of Unovis and rallied its members to promote their utopian ambition worldwide. 'Comrades, gather up all your forces, we will conquer the whole West. We will make a revolution there faster than the socialists'.<sup>698</sup>

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<sup>695</sup> Aleksei Gan, 'Spravka o Kazimire Maleviche' [Note on Kazimir Malevich], *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 3 (1927): 104-106; reprinted in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 539-541.

<sup>696</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>697</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>698</sup> Malevich, letter to the Creative Committee of Unovis, [Early May 1921]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 148.

While Germany became the centre of the avant-garde in Europe in the second half of the 1920s, and therefore the focus of Malevich's attention, Holland was the first overseas location in which Malevich promoted Unovis and Suprematism's architectural ideas.

In September 1921, Malevich wrote an open letter addressed 'to the Dutch artists' and stated there was an 'indisputable link' between his work and the creative activity taking place in Holland.<sup>699</sup> While Malevich claims to have read an article that appeared in the Dutch communist newspaper *De Tribune*, it is unclear what artwork or architecture from the country he may have seen by 1921.<sup>700</sup> Nevertheless, Malevich explained in his letter that:

The whole purpose of Suprematism is to move towards the creation of a new world architectural image of spiritual and material dynamic manifestation, which essentially we understand as our single and indivisible difference from everything else, the natural organic outflow of a law that gives material a new construction.<sup>701</sup>

Unsurprisingly, given the strength of his convictions, Malevich criticised the Dutch avant-garde rather explicitly. 'Your constructions', he added, 'have no inherent system and therefore are more aesthetically dependent on colour relationships, the forms do not convey strict construction, there are no contrasting relationships, they are individual by nature'.<sup>702</sup> Malevich then pivots seamlessly, as though he hadn't just insulted his readers, and invites them to join him to form a Dutch branch of Unovis. 'The Unovis Party accepts all those as its members who wish to vote for the new', he appeals.<sup>703</sup> Malevich added, 'I think that it is essential to organise Unovis in Holland' [...] only then will the path be built that will lead us to the new worldbuilding'.<sup>704</sup> In the early 1920s, Malevich clearly viewed the international setting as a place for utopianism into which he could transpose his creative ideas.

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<sup>699</sup> Malevich, letter to the Dutch artists, 7 September 1921; *ibid.*, I: 151.

<sup>700</sup> See Tatiana Goriacheva, 'Suprematism and Constructivism: An Intersection of Parallels', in Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth* (London: The Pindar Press, 2007), 67-68; and Éva Forgács, 'Malevich and Western Modernism', in *Rethinking Malevich*, 237-253.

<sup>701</sup> Malevich, letter to the Dutch artists, 7 September 1921; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 151-155.

<sup>702</sup> *Ibid.*, 155.

<sup>703</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>704</sup> *Ibid.*

It remains unclear whether Malevich received a direct response to his letter. Certainly, no branch of Unovis formed in Holland, but Suprematism did make an impact in the country. This was in all likelihood less a result of Malevich's influence than it was a personal meeting between Lissitzky and the Dutch artist Theo van Doesburg in February 1922. Lissitzky's book, *About Two Squares: A Suprematist Tale of Two Squares in Six Constructions*, was printed in the *De Stijl* journal in 1922, indicating that there was some interest in Lissitzky's interpretation of Suprematism within Holland.<sup>705</sup> Van Doesburg seems to have been briefly taken with Suprematism and once stated that 'the square expresses everything that we and mankind are searching for today: absolute harmony and unity of all duality. And formlessness'.<sup>706</sup> This view is reflected in the feature of a black square which dominates the cover of an issue of the group's journal *De Stijl* in 1922 (Fig. 6.18). One might speculate here as to what extent this image of a black square should be understood as a reproduction of Malevich's *The Black Square*, or whether this cover has produced something entirely new. Our reading of this cover might be affected by the attribution directly beneath, but even with Malevich's name being printed, the cover, with the black square (as opposed to *The Black Square*) along with the austere black font seems to remain a powerful image in its own right.

It was certainly true that a number of parallels can be identified between Malevich and van Doesburg in regard to their professional activity.<sup>707</sup> Both men shared a belief in abstraction as a new sort of aesthetic idiom for articulating the future and as a way of responding to contemporary spiritual needs. Both seemed to have been stimulated by revolution in Russia but remained inclined towards anarchist modes of freedom rather than Bolshevik or other political ideologies.

Suprematism, however, must not be understood as having introduced something altogether new to the Dutch avant-garde, but as aligning with artistic currents that were already in motion within the Netherlands. Lissitzky's *Proun Room*, for example, which was first exhibited in Berlin, reflects existing thinking regarding interior space. As Michael White has written, this area of architecture 'is often considered the archetypal product of *De Stijl*'.<sup>708</sup> Like Chashnik's abstracted colours which define his

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<sup>705</sup> This work was published as a special of the journal *De Stijl V* nos. 10-11 (1922) and Lissitzky's designs for this feature have been reproduced in *A Legacy Regained: Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde* (Moscow: Palace Editions, 2002), 318-325.

<sup>706</sup> Evert van Straaten, *Theo van Doesburg Constructor of the New Life* (Otterlo: Kröller-Müller Museum, 1994), 24.

<sup>707</sup> Nicholas Bruno de Mesquita has identified many parallels between Malevich and van Doesburg in his essay, 'Theo van Doesburg and Russia: Utopia Thwarted', in Christina Lodder, Maria Kokkori and Maria Mileeva, eds., *Utopian Reality: Reconstructing Culture in Revolutionary Russia and Beyond* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2013), 57-78.

<sup>708</sup> Michael White, *De Stijl and Dutch Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 103.

*Suprematist Interior* (Fig. 6.9), and Gerrit Rietveld's plans for the Schröder House (Fig. 6.19), there were many overlapping concerns in architectural thinking for many artists and architects in both countries. It was, therefore, undoubtedly incidental that van Doesburg's *Design for a Fountain* (1917) (Fig. 6.20) and Robert van 't Hoff's *Banister Post* (1918) (Fig. 6.21) both predate yet closely resemble Malevich's vertical architectural models. The exchange of ideas between Holland and Russia reveals the common ground that existed rather than the introduction of new thinking from one country to another. One is reminded of Rosalind Krauss's interpretation of avant-garde activity, in which she stresses the importance of the intertwined historical context.<sup>709</sup> It is then entirely unsurprising that van Doesburg once wrote that the Russian 'artists are working in *our spirit*, that is Neoplasticism'.<sup>710</sup>

By the early 1920s, Lissitzky had become an established figure in the avant-garde in Europe and an essential contact for Malevich outside of Soviet Russia. Indeed, Lissitzky reminded Malevich that he – Lissitzky – was Suprematism's best hope internationally. Writing from Switzerland in 1924, Lissitzky stressed: 'there is much in your ideas that provokes resistance, and yet no one here except me makes an effort to promote you'.<sup>711</sup> In addition to his promotion of Suprematism in Holland, Lissitzky produced the review of contemporary art trends, *Veshch' / Gegenstand / Objet* (Fig. 6.22), in Berlin in 1922. This publication, in French, Russian and German, sought to unite the international avant-garde and presented the common themes of Russian art and the possibilities of cross-cultural exchange.

Malevich was acutely and bitterly aware of the importance of Lissitzky. Alongside simmering resentment, Malevich's letters to Lissitzky in 1924 and early 1925 include pragmatic appeals for cooperation. Malevich asked his old colleague to feature Suprematism in contemporary architectural journals and, thanks to Lissitzky, Malevich had the opportunity to read such publications before he visited the West in person.<sup>712</sup> Lissitzky sent Malevich copies of *ABC: Beiträge zum Bauen*, *Merz* and *Kunstblatt* and an image of an *architecton* was published in *ABC* in 1926, captioned as *Blinde Architektur* (Fig. 6.23). Lissitzky did oblige Malevich's request and reproduced a photograph of Malevich and Suprematist designs in *Die Kunstisten* (Fig. 6.24).<sup>713</sup>

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<sup>709</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985).

<sup>710</sup> Theo van Doesburg, quoted in Linda S. Boersma, 'Malevich, Lissitzky, Van Doesburg: Suprematism and De Stijl', in Douglas and Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich*, 227.

<sup>711</sup> Lissitzky, letter to Malevich, 1 July 1924; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 167.

<sup>712</sup> See Lissitzky, letters to Malevich, [17 June 1924 to 11 February 1925]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 167-183.

<sup>713</sup> See El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, *Die Kunstisten / Les Ismes de l'Art / The Isms of Art* (Erlenbach-Zurich, Munich and Leipzig: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925).

Of course, it was because of Lissitzky that Malevich had made the necessary contacts to publish his and Khidekel's work in *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst*. Illustrating the scale of Malevich's international ambitions in 1924, he stated to Lissitzky: 'Merz, I would rather turn into Unovis'.<sup>714</sup> Despite Malevich's aspiration for Suprematism's pre-eminence in Russia and internationally, this exchange of ideas went in both directions throughout the avant-garde. OSA's *Contemporary Architecture*, for example, in which Malevich featured, was increasingly concerned with the West.

Idealism, nevertheless, remained central to Malevich's view of the international realm. In 1924, he published an image of a perspectival drawing he entitled *Dynamic Construction* in the Polish journal *Blok* (Fig. 6.25). Two years later, this design was republished in another Polish journal, *Praesens* (Fig. 6.26), this time superimposed over a photograph of New York. Although it appeared in a Polish journal, the photomontage warrants closer examination, not only in the context of New York, but within the broader concept of Western modernity of which the city had become symbolic.

Andréi Nakov wrote that the theme of the 'Suprematist organisation of the city of New York' was, in fact, an initial exercise for Unovis in their architectural classes in Vitebsk in 1920.<sup>715</sup> Reflecting this concern, in his letter to Holland in 1921 Malevich protested against what he described as 'the manic grandiosity of Americanism'.<sup>716</sup> As Chapter Four discussed, Lissitzky wrote about the need to grasp 'the idea of a whole town' to identify a new 'rhythmic arrangement of space and time' in such a way that 'will not be as chaotically laid out as the modern towns of North and South America, but clearly and logically'.<sup>717</sup> While Unovis may have imagined that Suprematism's architectural mission was applicable to cities like New York, the emergence of the volumetric model in 1923 represented a significant advancement that enabled Malevich to develop this utopian vision.

The 1926 photomontage in *Praesens* establishes a number of tensions. New York was, of course, emblematic of modernity and the capitalist political system. Suprematism, in contrast, was apolitical, yet it possessed utopian aspirations and was increasingly defined by its ideas in architecture. This ideological

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<sup>714</sup> Malevich, letter to Lissitzky, 1 October 1924; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 174.

<sup>715</sup> Nakov, *Painting the Absolute*, III: 25. Although Nakov stated that page 21 of the *Unovis No. 1* anthology features an illustration captioned 'Suprematist transformation of Manhattan', this is not found in the facsimile edition published by Tatiana Goriacheva, *Unovis No. 1. Vitebsk. 1920. Faksimil'noe izdanie*, ed. Tat'iana Goriacheva (Moscow: State Tretyakov Gallery / Izdatel'stvo Skanrus, 2003).

<sup>716</sup> Malevich, letter to the Dutch artists, 7 September 1921; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 153.

<sup>717</sup> Lissitzky, 'Suprematism in World Reconstruction', in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, 332.

tension is emphasised in the formal arrangement of this image. Malevich's *Dynamic Construction* appears to dominate the Equitable Life Insurance Building (Fig. 6.27), completed in 1915, which is viewed directly behind Malevich's design. This 1915 building embraces contemporary steel frame construction methods, which Malevich would have observed in Russia by the 1920s, and facilitated a sort of upwards growth of the capitalist metropolis. Its facades were dominated by ornamented classical elements that Malevich rejected.

Despite the ostensible incongruity of the *Dynamic Construction* situated in Manhattan, there is an idea of cohesion and an effort towards formal reorganisation of the city. The design has been superimposed so that the *Dynamic Construction* appears to peak on the skyline, implying that it is the tallest building in the city and giving the impression that Suprematism truly belongs in this urban environment. The buildings of New York and the *Dynamic Construction* are both shown from an axonometric projection, which was no doubt a deliberate move and which suggests a visual integration. It is curious, however, that neither the vertical models *Gota* or *Zeta*, which more closely resemble the American skyscrapers, was used in this photomontage. The inherent horizontal nature of the *Dynamic Construction*, by contrast, disrupts the idea of visual integration. It could well be argued that this confirms Lissitzky's analysis, that Suprematism is only comprehensible when it is presented with a clear and specific orientation.<sup>718</sup> Admittedly, E. Ovsyannikova's view is that Malevich's vertical models possess a 'static centre, top and bottom' and 'strict structural principles' which appear 'more logical' than Malevich's horizontal models.<sup>719</sup> Ovsyannikova's view is surely one Malevich would have considered. There would, in fact, be no reason to think that a vertical design could not have been employed here. One is forced to conclude that the bold and self-referential presence of the *Dynamic Construction* was deliberate. Its incongruous form disrupts formal and logical expectations in architecture and overturns the horizontal and the capital-driven axis that had built Manhattan.

In this discussion of visual perception of abstraction and New York, one is prompted to think of Piet Mondrian's *New York City I* (1941) (Fig. 6.28), which was displayed upside down for more than seventy-five years. Mondrian's conception of New York, and the error initially by The Museum of Modern Art

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<sup>718</sup> El Lissitzky, 'Proun: Toward the Defeat of Art', trans. John Bowlt, in *El Lissitzky* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1976), 66.

<sup>719</sup> E. Ovsyannikova, 'Superarchitecture or Supergraphics?', in *The Russian Avant-Garde: Representation and Interpretation* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2001), 189.

(MoMA) and then the Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen in Düsseldorf, is beyond the scope of this current work, but this error nevertheless highlights the ambiguities inherent in the orientation of abstraction. It is a glib remark, but MoMA would not so readily have made the same mistake with a figurative painting of New York. This statement, just like MoMA's error and the tensions in Malevich's photomontage, illustrates that abstraction can be viewed from multiple perspectives and considered valid within different contexts.

The photomontage in *Praesens* must be seen as a contrast between two competing ideas: the American model of unfettered and unmoderated development of Modernity and Suprematism's architectural offering. In *Architecture and Utopia*, Manfredo Tafuri defined the capitalist metropolis as 'structured like a machine for the extraction of surplus value' and addressed the tension between the city's realities and the avant-garde's proposed intervention.<sup>720</sup> Tafuri commented that 'avant-garde movements' such as Suprematism, 'did not hesitate to set themselves up explicitly as global alternatives to political practices'.<sup>721</sup> If nothing else, Suprematism's presence in New York, as presented in *Praesens*, represents a provocation to the West and confirms that Malevich fostered utopian ideals in 1926. Publishing this in a foreign journal, however, indicates an effort to give permanence to his legacy and Suprematism's global potential in architecture.

The international promotion of Suprematism had relied heavily on Lissitzky in the early 1920s. This remained so until Malevich visited Poland and Germany in his first and only trip abroad in 1927. By the time Malevich travelled to Europe, however, his priorities were no longer solely defined by idealism and his earlier aspiration to instigate a Suprematist revolution as he hoped to do with Unovis in 1921. The Suprematist had done a lot of groundwork before he arrived in person and had cultivated an awareness of his identity in Poland through his existing contacts. Władysław Strzemiński's early involvement with Unovis was especially important in this regard. Strzemiński had relocated to Poland in 1922 and promoted the Suprematist in the journal *Switch-Points [Zwrotnica]*, as Éva Forgács has discussed.<sup>722</sup> Malevich exhibited

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<sup>720</sup> Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1976), 81.

<sup>721</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

<sup>722</sup> Éva Forgács, 'Malevich and Suprematism: A Shortcut into the Future: The Reception of Malevich by Polish and Hungarian Artists during the Inter-War Period', in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 244-250.

drawings for Planits and those of his students at the First International Exhibition of Modern Architecture held in Warsaw, from 27 February to 25 March 1926.<sup>723</sup>

Although Malevich did promote his ideas in architecture and contact Polish architects, Malevich chose not to foreground his architectural enterprise when he visited Poland in person. In 1927, Malevich sought to connect with his hosts on a personal level and, given that he had a Polish father and spoke Polish fluently, he very likely sought to exploit his Polish identity. When Malevich arrived in Warsaw, he stayed for a month and held a small exhibition of his works at the Polish Arts Club.<sup>724</sup> Photographs of this exhibition (Figs. 6.29 and 6.30) suggest that Malevich received a warm reception in Poland. Christina Lodder has suggested that Malevich's exhibition in Warsaw may have been a 'tactical move' to distance himself from the increasingly fraught political milieu that dominated the USSR.<sup>725</sup> Malevich certainly seems to have well established his cross-cultural identity internationally. Alfred H. Barr, for example, wrote in 1936 of 'the Russo-Polish painter Kasimir Malevich of Moscow'.<sup>726</sup>

Ultimately, however, Malevich received a mixed reception. In anticipation of the Suprematist's arrival, Peiper wrote that 'Polish artists are overcome with melancholy at the thought that the Pole Malevich is not here working at their side'.<sup>727</sup> Forgács, by contrast, has noted that the editors of *Blok* had 'started to criticise Malevich in harsh terms', who felt that the Suprematist had misunderstood the relationship between art and technology, even before he arrived.<sup>728</sup> Despite his Polish heritage, Malevich occupied a sort of cultural no-man's-land, as Nakov wrote.<sup>729</sup> Malevich belonged to Poland as much as he seemed to remain an outsider to it.

Malevich's onward visit to Germany represents the most famous aspect of his trip outside Russia when he visited the Bauhaus and held an exhibition within the *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung*.<sup>730</sup> In Berlin, Malevich met with Walter Gropius as well as other leading figures at the Bauhaus and published *The World*

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<sup>723</sup> Andréi Nakov, *Kazimir Malewicz*; *Catalogue Raisonné* (Paris: Adam Biro, 2002), 413.

<sup>724</sup> Andrzej Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie: rekonstrukcje i symulacje* (Cracow: Universitas, 2002).

<sup>725</sup> Lodder, 'Malevich as Exhibition Maker', in Achim Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Kazimir Malevich* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 97.

<sup>726</sup> Alfred H. Barr Jr., *Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 122.

<sup>727</sup> Tadeusz Peiper, 'Malewicz w Polsce', *Zwrotnica* no. 11 (1927); English translation in Benson and Forgács, *Between Worlds*, 664.

<sup>728</sup> Forgács, 'Malevich and Suprematism', in Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism*, 247.

<sup>729</sup> Nakov, *Painting the Absolute*, III: 194.

<sup>730</sup> Troels Andersen, *Malevich: Catalogue Raisonné of the Berlin Exhibition 1927* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970), 57.

as *Objectlessness* as the Bauhaus book, *Die gegenstandslose Welt* (Fig. 5.20).<sup>731</sup> Peiper accompanied the Suprematist in Germany and acted as interpreter for Malevich's conversations with Walter Gropius and the other Bauhaus figures. Peiper wrote that 'Malevich distinguishes between architecture and architectonics; the first has use value, the second only artistic value. Architectonics produces forms that are concerned solely with the artistic combinations of spatial forms'.<sup>732</sup> Although Malevich had some understanding of avant-garde activity in Germany before he arrived in person, Peiper seems to have been bemused by the Suprematist and suggests that Gropius was, too. 'For [Gropius]', Peiper added, 'the type of structure is closely dependent on the building's function; the essence of a building determines the technique, and the technique determines the form of the building'.<sup>733</sup>

Malevich, however, seemed to think that his trip was going well, or at least that was the impression he decided to give Russia. Aware of the importance of Germany, Malevich wrote from Berlin: 'I think that for the first time, Suprematism is outlined precisely to the final end to all Constructivism and the basis for life. I'm carrying out a big corrective job amongst the Constructivists, the representatives of the New Art, who have become totally confused. Everyone is glad that I've come'.<sup>734</sup> Although Malevich used the term constructivists to establish a gap between himself and the Bauhaus, and the German art school distanced itself from the contents of *Die gegenstandslose Welt*, a more nuanced approach can be made.

The German art school has a conflicted legacy and should not be positioned in stark opposition to Suprematism. In its early days in Weimar, the Bauhaus embraced a range of ideas that have much in common with Suprematism. Johannes Itten's preliminary course, which stressed spiritual concerns in relation to art, dominated the preliminary course until it was taken over by László Moholy-Nagy in 1923.<sup>735</sup> The Bauhaus had also encountered a radical form of abstraction from outside of Germany through its encounter with van Doesburg, whose association with the future KURI group of artists was foundational.<sup>736</sup> Perhaps the greatest parallel which can be noted between Suprematism and the Bauhaus is the fact that

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<sup>731</sup> Kasimir Malewitsch, *Die gegenstandslose Welt*. Bauhausbücher 11 (Munich: Albert Langen Verlag, 1927).

<sup>732</sup> Tadeusz Peiper, 'At the Bauhaus', in Benson and Forgács, *Between Worlds*, 629.

<sup>733</sup> Ibid.

<sup>734</sup> Malevich, letter to Konstantin Rozhdestvensky, 21 April 1927; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 196.

<sup>735</sup> Kenneth Frampton, 'The Bauhaus: Evolution of an Idea 1919-1932', in Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1980), 123-129.

<sup>736</sup> Doris Wintgens Hötte, 'Van Doesburg Tackles the Continent: Passion Drive & Calculation', in Gladys C. Fabre, Doris Wintgens Hötte, and Michael White, eds., *Van Doesburg & The International Avant-Garde: Constructing a New World* (London: Tate Publishing, 2009), 14.

neither had an architectural programme in their early years. The publication of Malevich's text, despite the schools disavowal of its contents, is demonstrative of the fact that Malevich's ideas had some value in Germany. Following Malevich's 1927 Berlin exhibition, the Hungarian critic Ernst Kállai underlined the importance of Malevich's Suprematist abstractions and the architectural imagination, which he saw as practical for new building in the West.<sup>737</sup>

Despite the similarities, and contrary to Malevich's statement that all of Berlin was pleased by his visit, Anatolii Lunacharskii commented that he 'heard that [Malevich's] writings have thrown even the Germans into a state of confusion'.<sup>738</sup> Notwithstanding Malevich's positivity about his trip to Berlin, it is very possible that it was he himself who was most pleased to have visited Europe. By the time Malevich made his trip to Europe, conditions in Russia had begun to shift. It seems that his ambition to establish connections was just, if not more, important than his promotion of Suprematism's world vision.

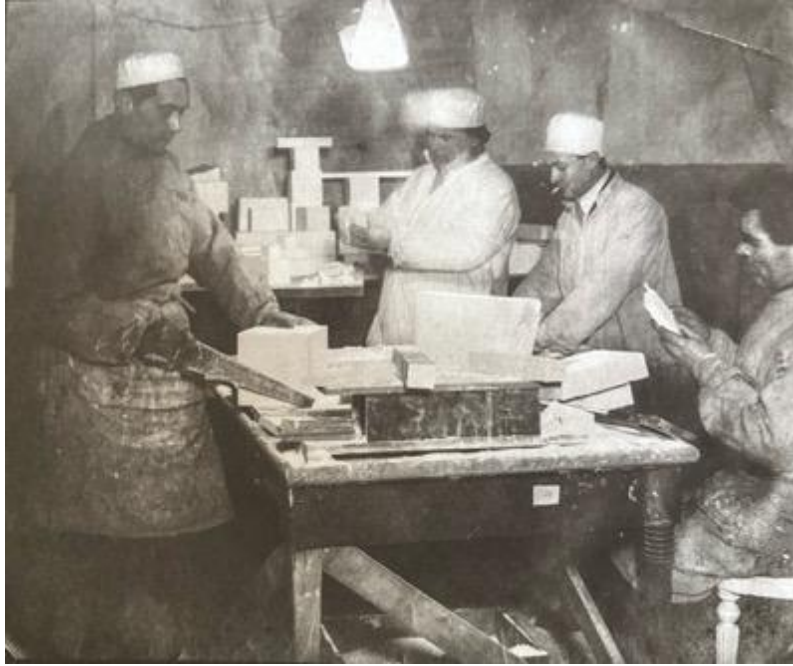
Malevich's international ambitions had clearly shifted from the ambitions that Unovis had to reconstruct the world according to Suprematism. Before he returned to the USSR, Malevich entrusted all of the paintings, drawings, models and writings that he had brought with him to Gustav von Reisen.<sup>739</sup> The Suprematist was no doubt wary of what might happen to his legacy if he left his paintings and his writings in Berlin as he feared for his work if he were to return with all of it to the USSR. Von Reisen was entrusted with more than perhaps he appreciated. As Malevich left Berlin, von Reisen was more in control of the Suprematist's legacy in the West than Malevich was himself at that moment. From 1927, as he came under direct attacks from the state, Malevich was motivated by pragmatism and personal survival. Despite the worsening domestic conditions he knew he was travelling home to, the story of Malevich's legacy was not over.

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<sup>737</sup> Ernst Kállai, 'Kazimir Malewitsch', *Das Kunstblatt* (July 1927): 264-266; reprinted in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 535-538.

<sup>738</sup> A. Lunacharskii, 'Russian Artists in Berlin', in Zhadova, *Malevich*, 328.

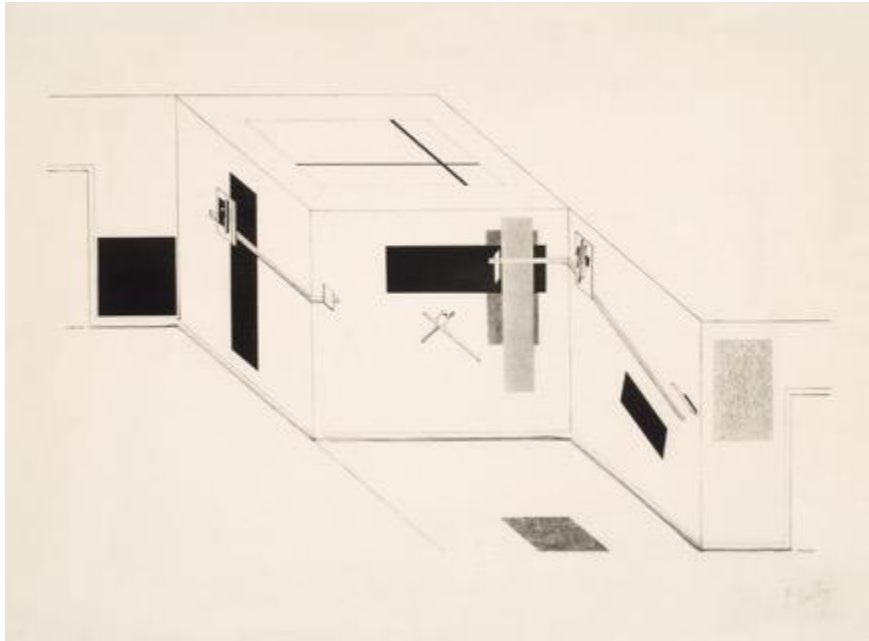
<sup>739</sup> See Aleksandra Shatskikh, 'Aspects of Malevich's Literary Legacy', in Douglas and Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich*, 318-319.



**Figure 6.1**

Photograph (from left to right) of Nikolai Suetin, Kazimir Malevich, Ilia Chashnik and Vasilii Vorobiev working on architectural models at Ginkhuk, Leningrad, 1925-26

Reproduced from Angela Lampe, ed., *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: The Russian Avant-Garde in Vitebsk, 1918-1922* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2019)



**Figure 6.2**

**El Lissitzky**

*Proun Room*

1923

Lithograph on paper

61.3 x 77.4 cm

Van Abbe Museum Collection, Eindhoven



**Figure 6.3**

**El Lissitzky**

*Proun Space*

1923 (reconstruction: Jean Leering, 1971)

320 x 363 x 364 cm

Van Abbe Museum Collection, Eindhoven



**Figure 6.4**

**El Lissitzky**

*Lenin Tribune*

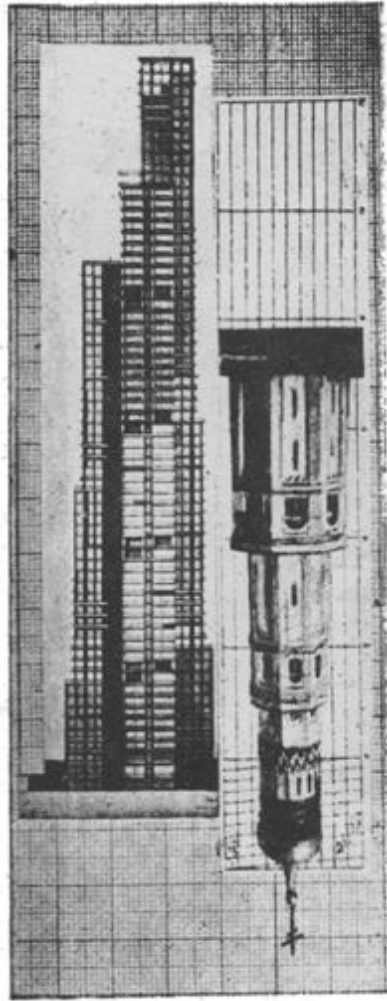
1924

Gouache, India ink and photomontage on cardboard

63.8 × 48 cm

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow





**Figure 6.6**

Detail from cover of *ASNOVA No. 1*  
1926

Gelatin silver print

Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles



**Figure 6.7**

**El Lissitzky**

*Wolkenbügel*

c. 1925

Gelatin silver print

Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles

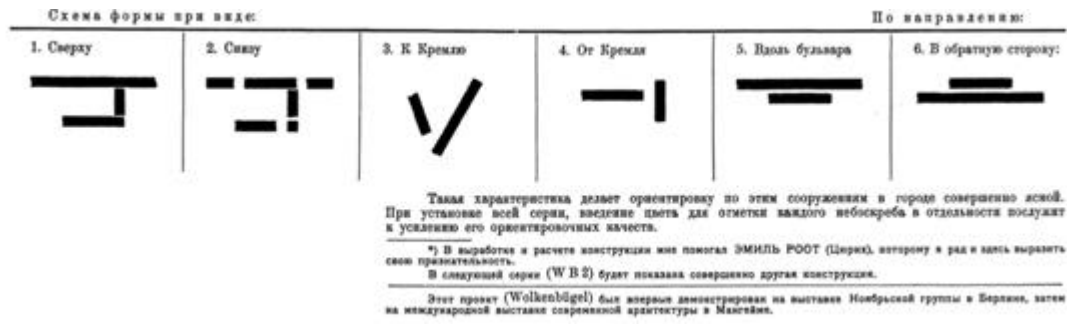


Figure 6.8

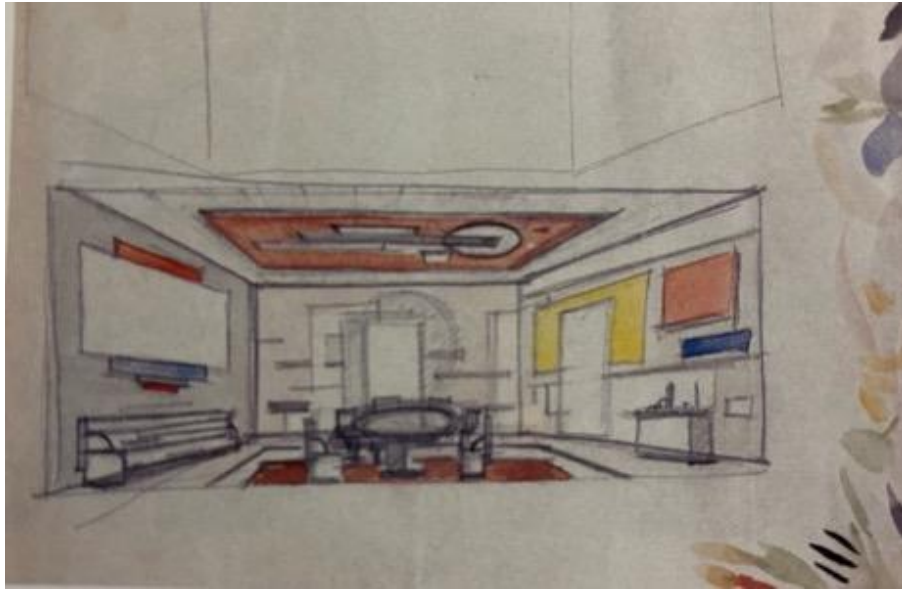
El Lissitzky

*Diagram of the Wolkenbügel from different viewpoints*

c. 1926

Gelatin silver print

Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles



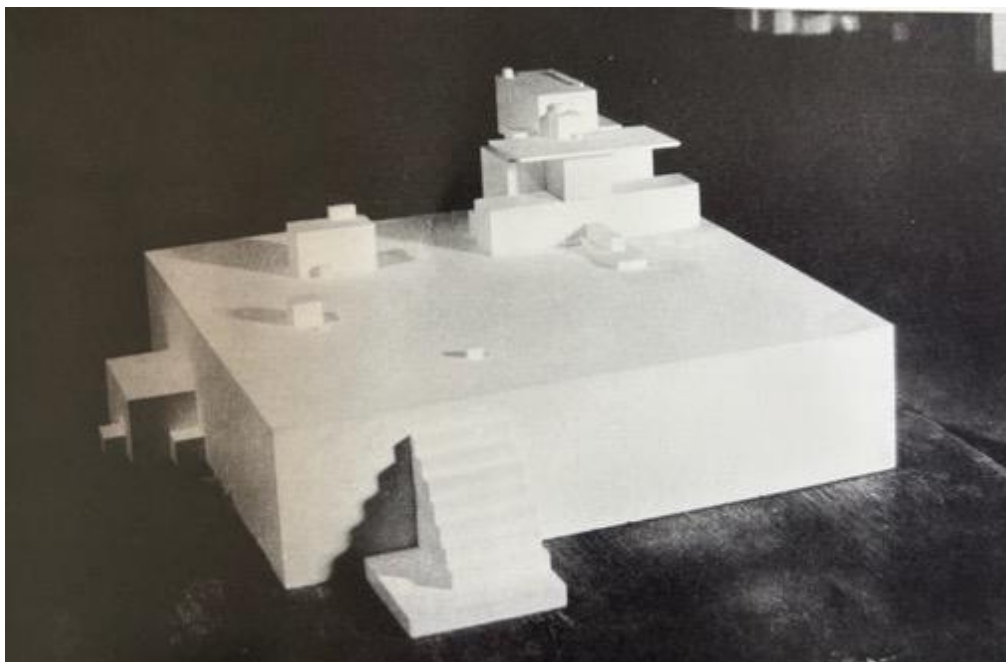
**Figure 6.9**

**Ilya Chashnik**

*Study of a Suprematist Interior*

Late 1920s

Reproduced from Elena V. Basner et al., *In Malevich's Circle: Confederates, Students, Followers in Russia, 1920s-1950s* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2000)



**Figure 6.10**

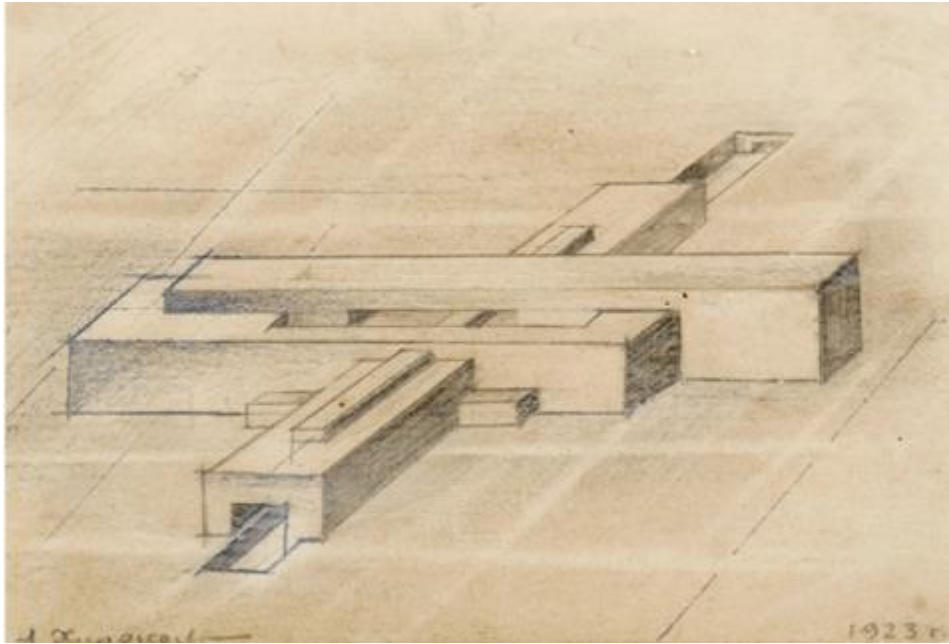
**Nikolai Suetin**

*Architecton*

1926

Plaster

Reproduced from Elena V. Basner et al., *In Malevich's Circle: Confederates, Students, Followers in Russia, 1920s-1950s* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2000)



**Figure 6.11**

**Lazar Khidekel**

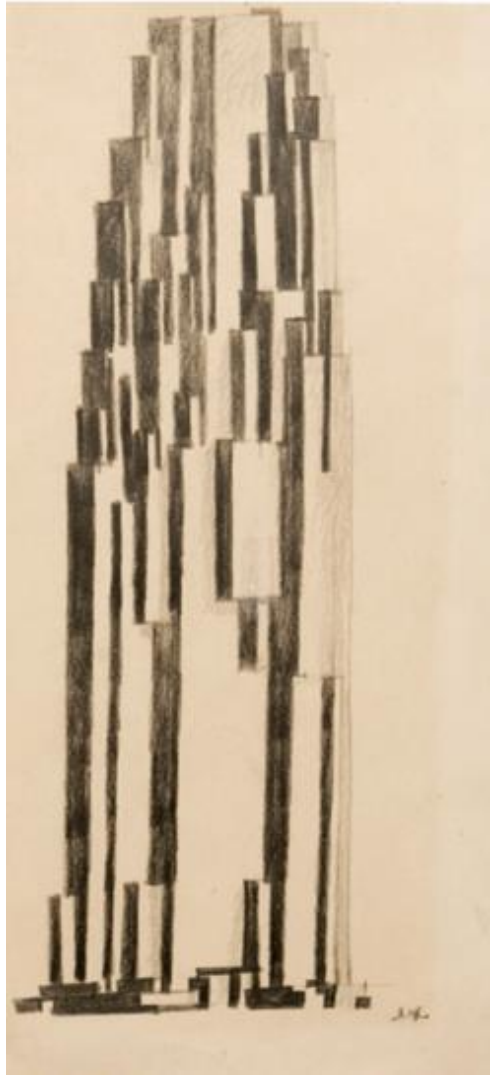
*Design for Horizontal Architecton – Aero-Club Axonometry*

1923

Pencil on paper

8.8 × 12.6 cm

Reproduced from Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden: Brill, 2019)



**Figure 6.12**

**Lazar Khidekel**

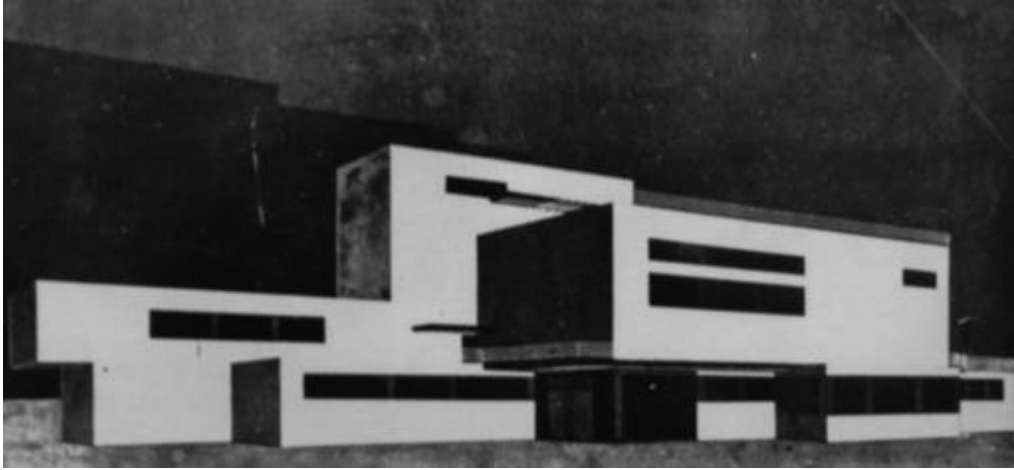
*Architecton*

1924

Pencil on paper

21 x 13 cm

Reproduced from Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden: Brill, 2019)



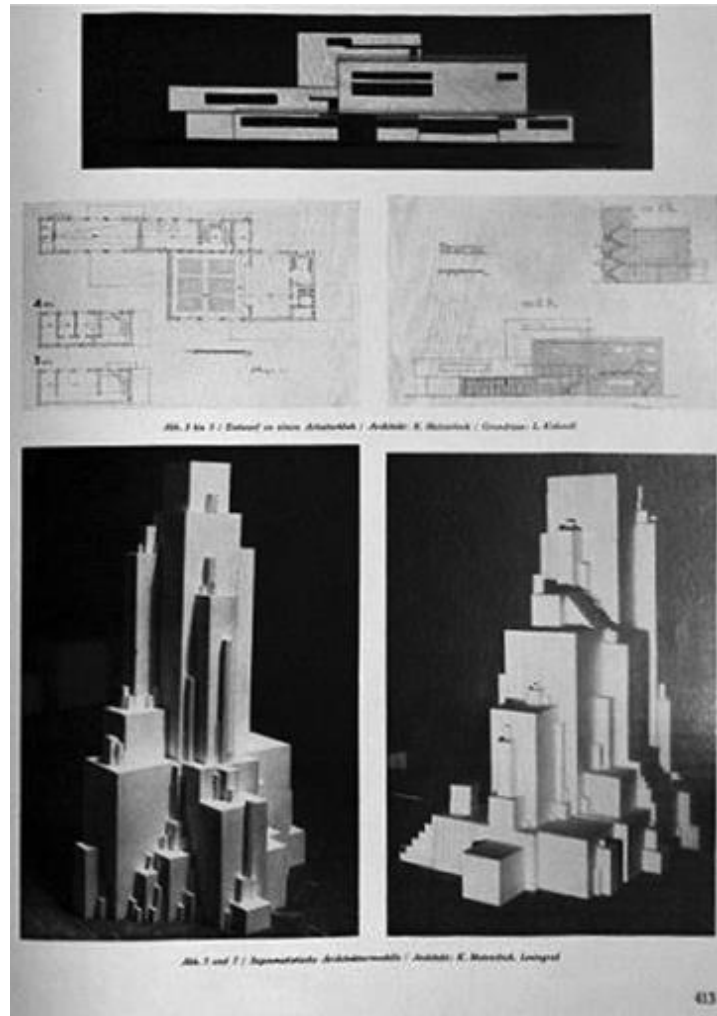
**Figure 6.13**

**Lazar Khidekel**

Design for Workers Club

1926

Reproduced from Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden: Brill, 2019)



**Figure 6.14**

Page from Malevich's article, showing reproductions, which are labelled

'Suprematistische Architektur von K. Malewitsch, Leningrad',

*Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst*, no. 10 (1927)

Reproduced from Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir*

*Malevich* (Leiden: Brill, 2019)



**Figure 6.15**  
**Lazar Khidekel**  
Sports Club  
(No longer extant)  
1927

Reproduced from Regina Khidekel, ed., *Lazar Khidekel and Suprematism* (London: Prestel Publishing, 2014)

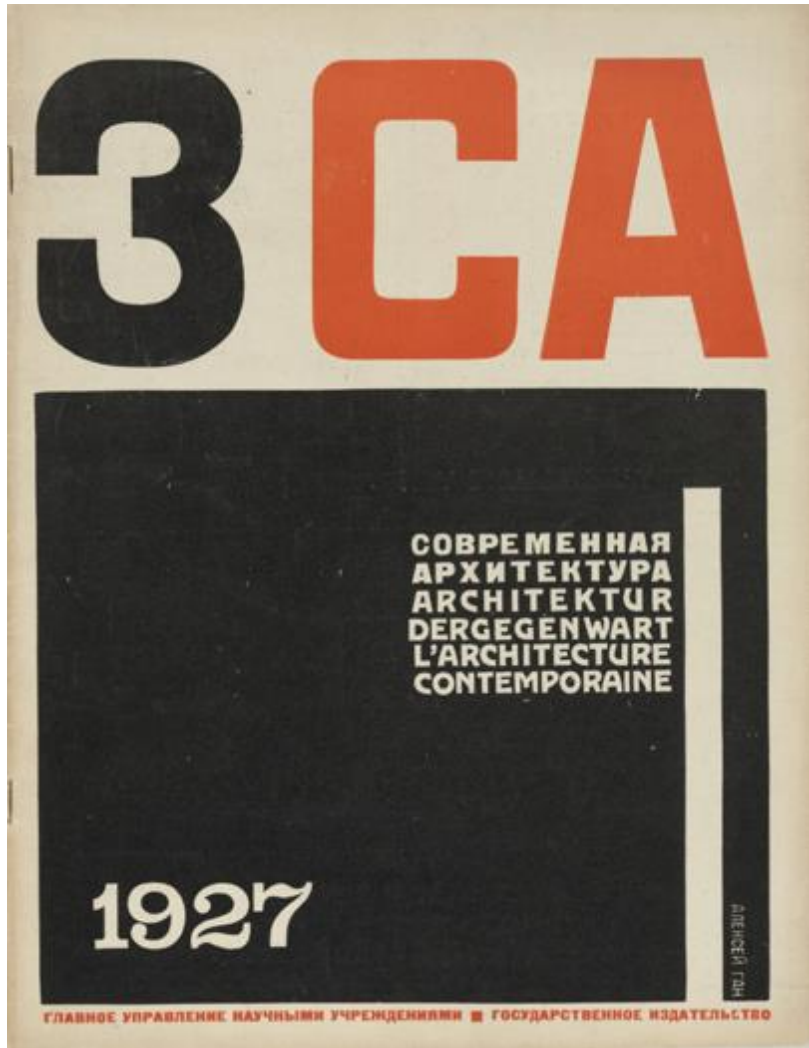


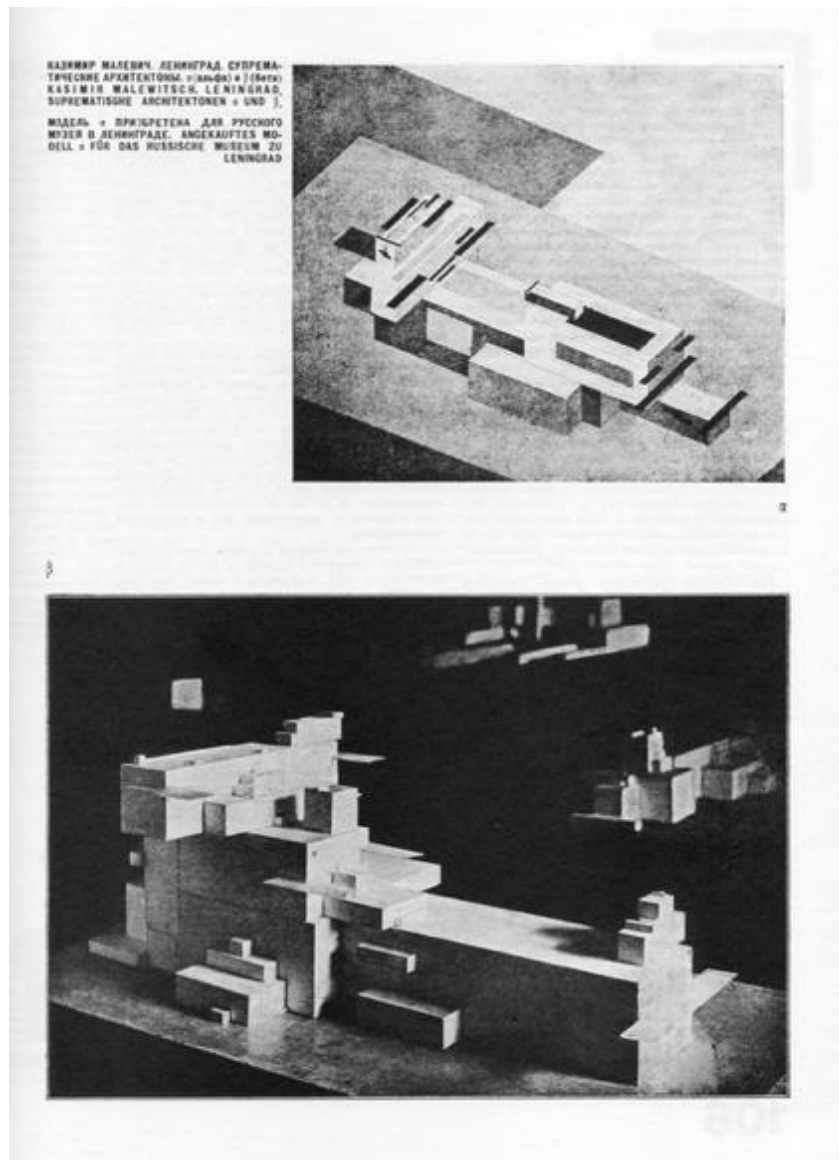
Figure 6.16

Aleksei Gan

Cover design for *Contemporary Architecture 3*

1927

Reproduced from <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/83958>



**Figure 6.17**

Page from Aleksei Gan's article 'Spravka o Kazimire Maleviche' [Note on Kazimir Malevich]; *Contemporary Architecture 3* featuring Malevich's architectural models

1927

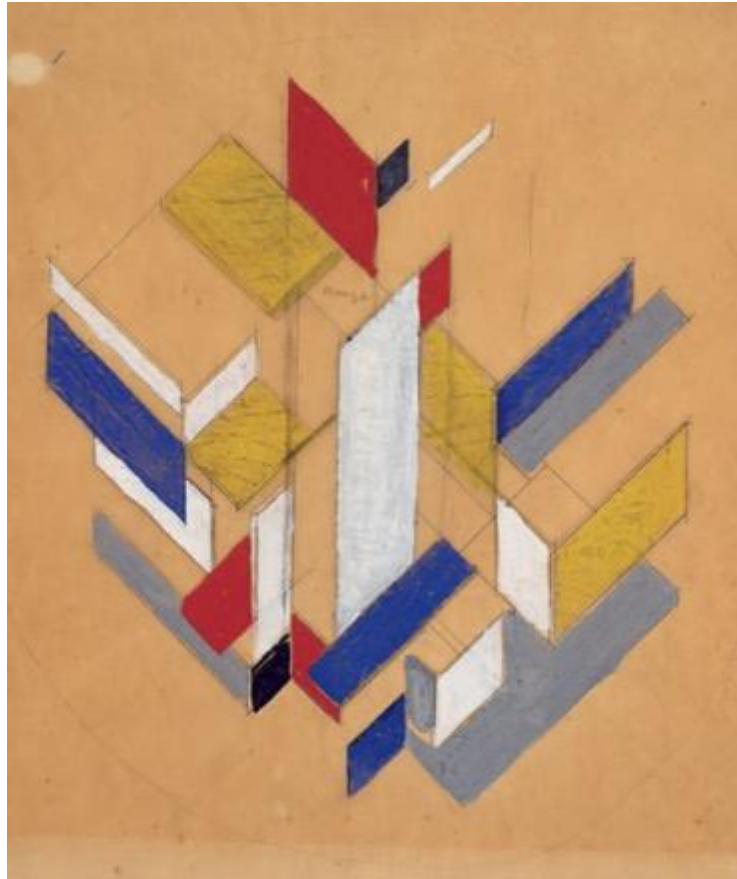
Reproduced from <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/83958>



**Figure 6.18**

Cover of *De Stijl*, vol 5, no. 9

Reproduced from Christina Lodder, Maria Kokkori and Maria Mileeva, eds., *Utopian Reality: Reconstructing Culture in Revolutionary Russia and Beyond* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2013)



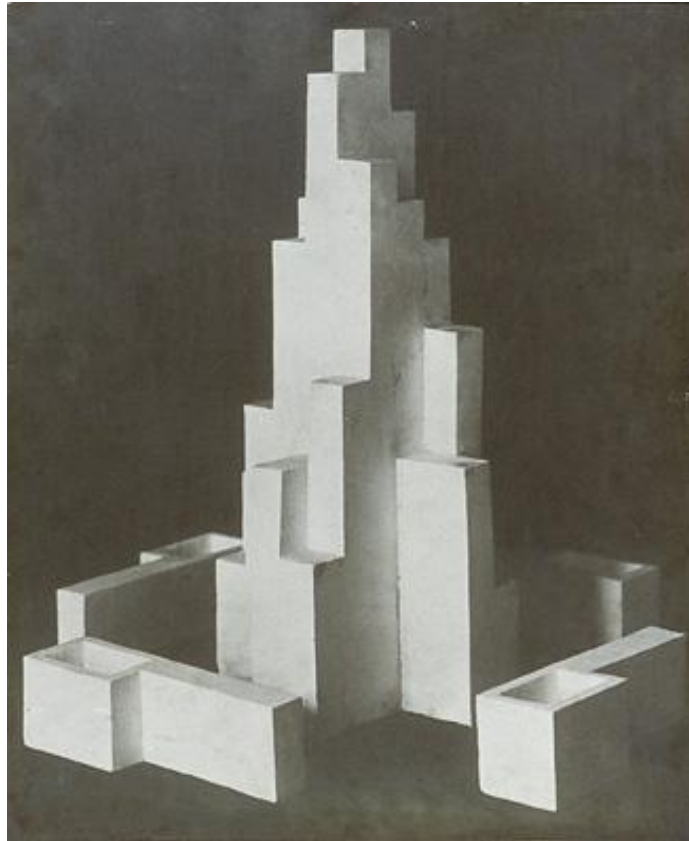
**Figure 6.19**

**Gerrit Rietveld**

*Design for Schröder House*

1924

Kunstmuseum, The Hague



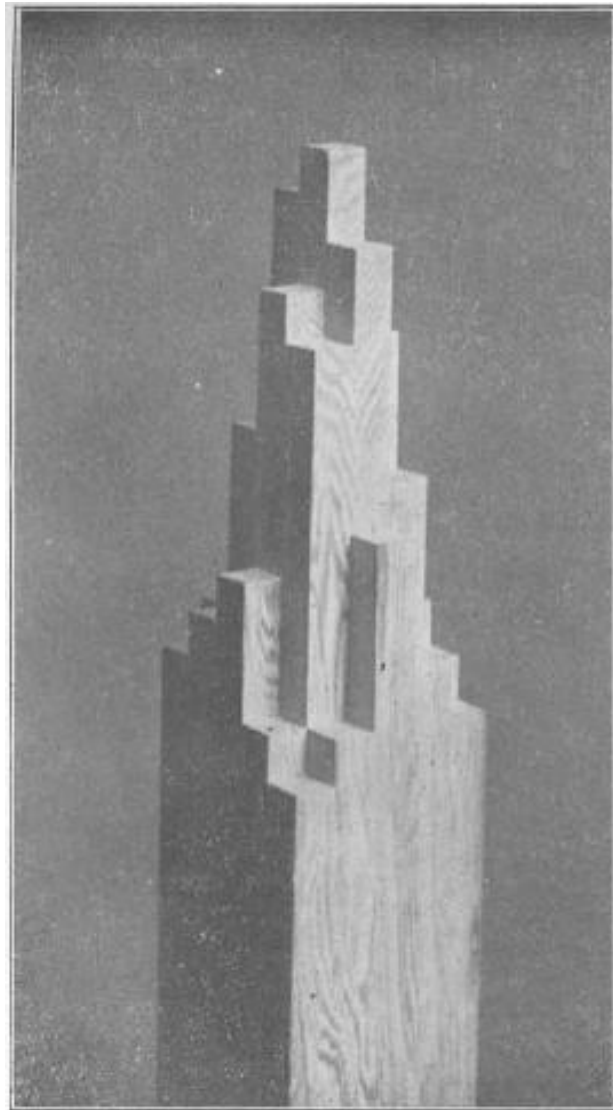
**Figure 6.20**

**Theo van Doesburg**

*Design for a Fountain*

1917

Netherlands Institute for Art History, The Hague



**Figure 6.21**

**Robert van 't Hoff**

*Banister Post*

1918

Netherlands Office for Fine Arts, The Hague

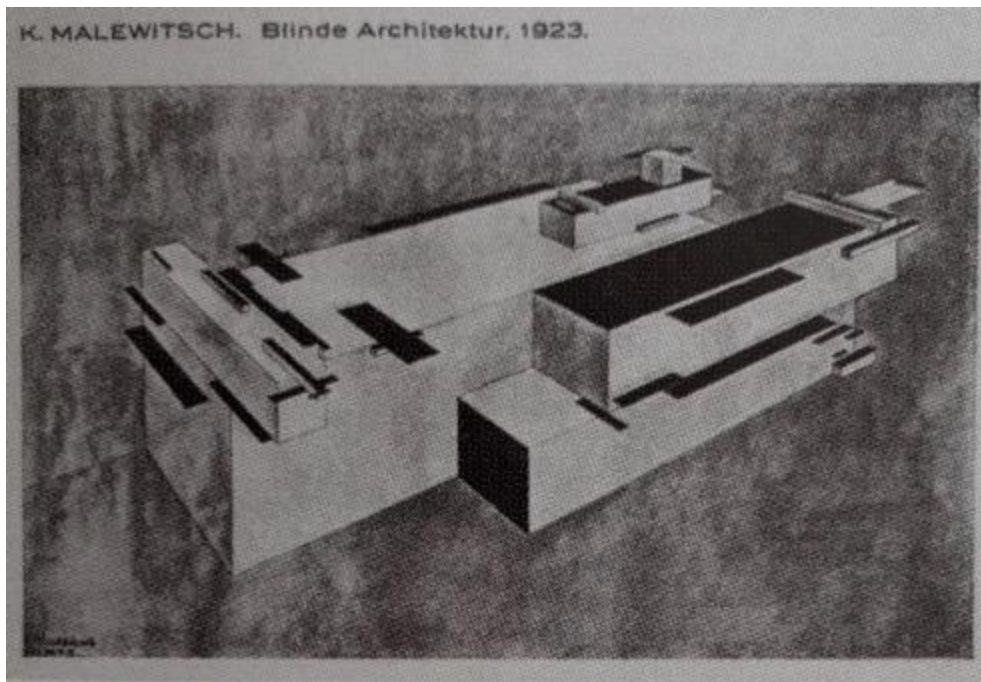


Figure 6.22

Cover of *Veshch'*/Gegenstand/Objet

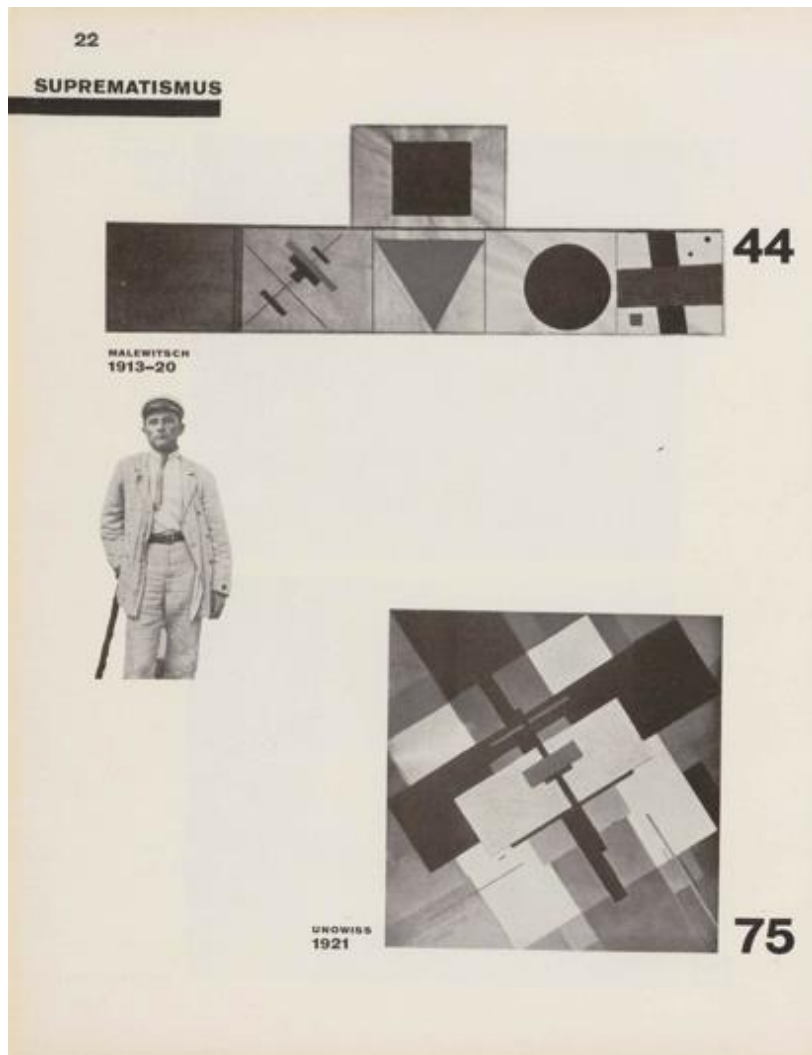
1922

Reproduced from Richard Anderson, *Wolkenbügel: El Lissitzky as Architect* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024)



**Figure 6.23**  
**Kazimir Malevich**  
*Blinde Architektur*  
*ABC: Beiträge zum Bauen*  
1926

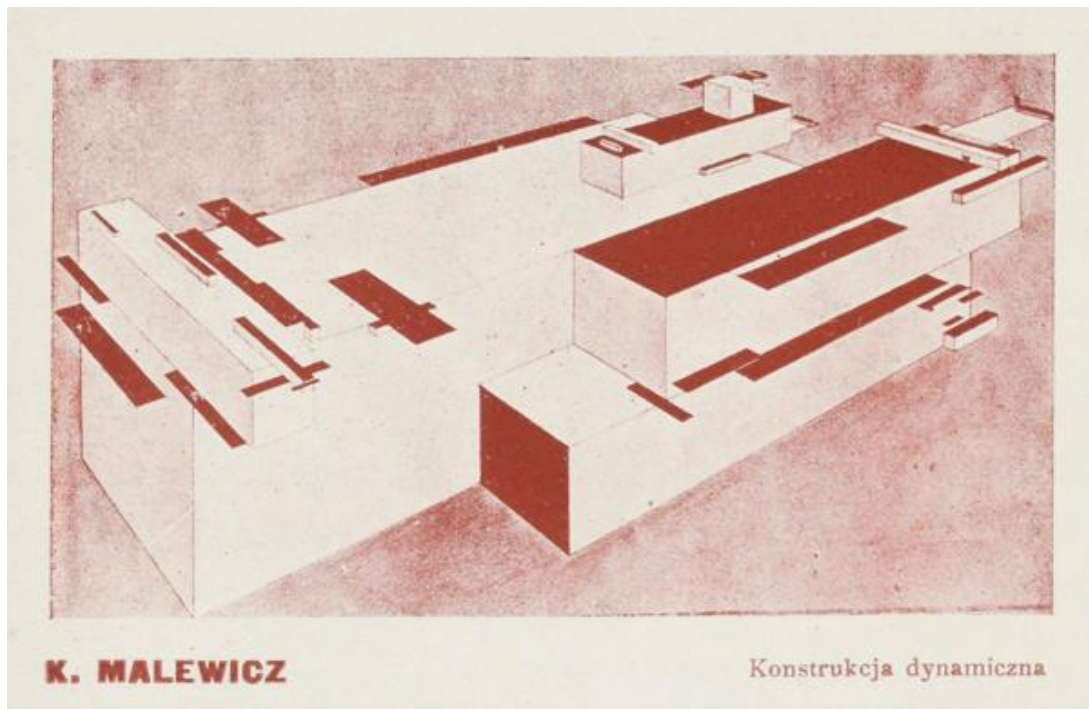
Reproduced from Achim Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Kazimir Malevich* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014)



**Figure 6.24**

Page dedicated to Kazimir Malevich in El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, *Die Kunstismen/Les Ismes de l'Art/The Isms of Art* (Erlenbach-Zurich, Munich and Leipzig: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925)

Reproduced from Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth* (London: The Pindar Press, 2007)



**Figure 6.25**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Untitled (Dynamic Construction)*

1924

Published in *Blok*, 8-9



**Figure 6.26**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Suprematist Structure Among American Skyscrapers*

Published in *Praesens*, no. 1

1926

Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles



**Figure 6.27**

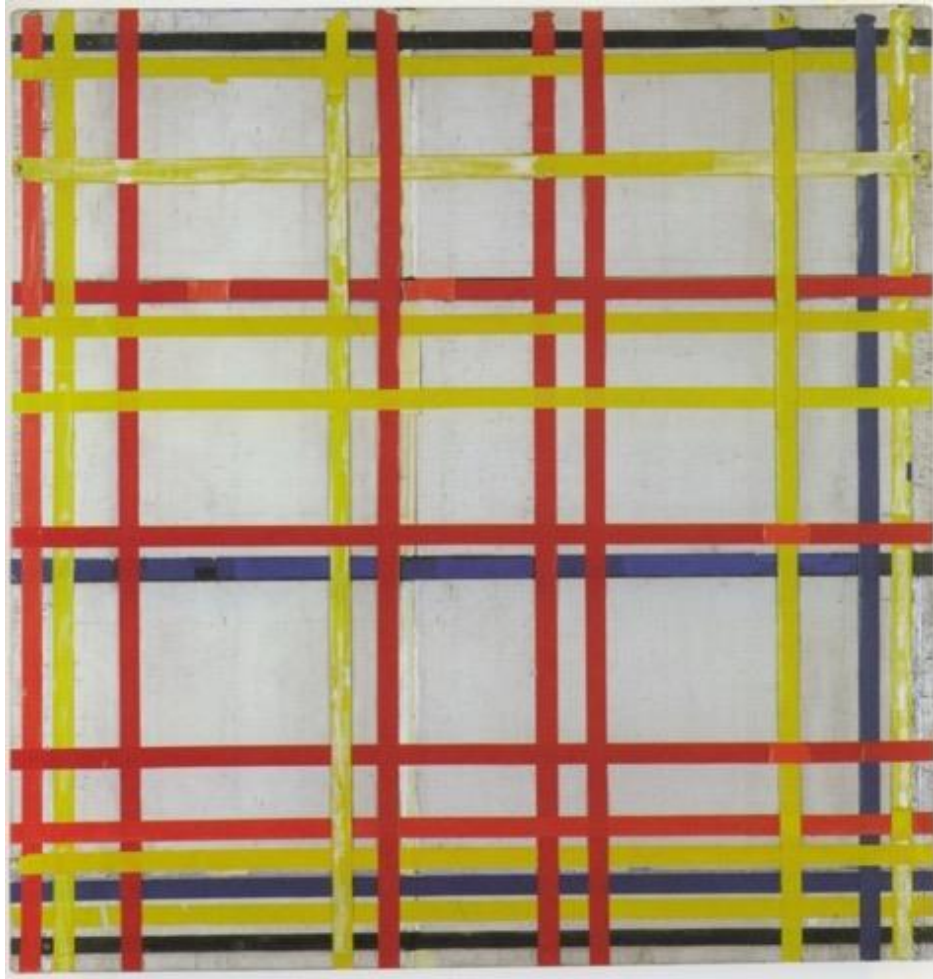
**E. R. Graham**

Equitable Life Insurance Building

1913-15

New York

Reproduced from Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1976)



**Figure 6.28**

**Piet Mondrian**

*New York City I* (upside down)

1941

Oil and painted paper strips on canvas

120 x 115.2 cm

Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Centre Pompidou, Paris



**Figure 6.29**

Kazimir Malevich in Warsaw

1927

Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles



**Figure 6.30**

Kazimir Malevich with members of the Polish art world at the Polonia Hotel, Warsaw  
25 March 1927

Reproduced from Achim Borchardt-Hume, ed., *Kazimir Malevich* (London: Tate Publishing, 2014)

## Conclusion

### *Malevich's Final Years: Suprematism's Endurance in Painting and Architecture*

Suprematism's formulation in painting and architecture unfolded in close relation to its historical moment; it depended on collective contributions and the movement's many accomplishments prompted Malevich to assert his individual legacy. As his career progressed, Malevich was forced to adapt the idealism he always sought to privilege in his practice and navigate the limitations imposed on him by the state. Many of these pressures, which Malevich faced to differing degrees throughout the course of his career, were felt most acutely in the final stages of his life.

By 1927, Malevich was intensely aware of the complex nature of his professional identity. Writing from Warsaw to his old friend and colleague, Mikhail Matiushin, Malevich stated: 'when I'm back I must work as an artist and only an artist'.<sup>740</sup> Certainly, Malevich had accumulated many identities throughout his career. The words he wrote from Warsaw reveal just how alert he was to the repressive conditions that awaited him in the USSR and the problematic nature of certain aspects of his professional activity. Illustrating the often inscrutable nature of Malevich's practice, Anatolii Lunacharskii stated in 1927 that 'the trouble begins when Malevich stops painting and starts writing pamphlets'.<sup>741</sup> Although the State Institute of Artistic Culture (Gosudarstvennyi institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury – Ginkhuk) had been closed and Malevich's Formal and Theoretical Department was transferred to the State Institute for the History of Art (Gosudarstvennyi institut istorii iskusstv – GIII) in January 1927, the Suprematist was never again able to operate with the relative freedoms he had enjoyed in the years immediately after the revolution. Navigating setbacks was nothing new for Malevich, but the threat posed by the state from the late 1920s onwards was profound and had a lasting impact on the trajectory of Suprematism.

Given the repressive professional atmosphere in the USSR and Malevich's commitment to work only as an artist, it is significant that he produced some new architectural models when he returned to Leningrad. One of these new models was a column formation (1927) (Fig. 7.1), which embraces a degree

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<sup>740</sup> Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin, 20 March 1927; English translation in Kazimir Malevich, *Letters, Documents, Memoirs and Criticism*, Russian edition: eds., Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko; English edition: trans. Antonina W. Bouis, ed. Wendy Salmond, general ed. Charlotte Douglas (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), I: 195.

<sup>741</sup> Anatolii Lunacharskii, 'Russian Artists in Berlin', quoted in Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930*, trans. Alexander Lieven (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 328.

of ornamentation that was not present in his initial models and asserts a new idea of mass. Malevich also produced *Suprematist Architecton* (c. 1929) (Fig. 7.2), which incorporates large, slim circular elements and is more complex than his earlier models. When Malevich entered the field of architecture he may well have sought to broaden the definition of architect, but this continued practice with volumetric forms does not readily square with his resolve to work only as an artist.

Despite this ostensible contradiction, it is possible that Malevich's post-1927 architectural volumes represent an effort to distance himself further from the ideologically charged notions of architecture that he had introduced earlier in the decade and to reposition Suprematism in closer relation to the built environment and contemporary political priorities. It is not incidental that Malevich's post-1927 works in architecture foreshadow the politically charged Palace of the Soviets competition, which was announced in 1931 and was intended to demonstrate communism's global superiority.<sup>742</sup> This reframing is reflected in the naming of the columns and, in some instances, the inclusion of a pedestal supporting a human figure. By the time Malevich exhibited his architectural ideas at the *Exhibition of Artists of the RSFSR of the Past Fifteen Years* held in 1932 (Fig. 7.3), he had strategically positioned his practice to show that it was integrated with political priorities. Malevich's *Column of a Monument to the Land of the Soviets* and *Themes for Architectural Monuments* (1930-32) (Fig. 7.4) is a pertinent example of this and is very similar in spirit to Boris Iofan's winning design for the Palace of the Soviets competition (1933) (Fig. 7.5). Situating Malevich's work in close relation to realised architecture and political priorities, Christina Lodder has suggested that the additional circular form in *Suprematist Architecton* may have been conceived as an auditorium 'in relation to a project like the Palace of Soviets or even a house of culture'.<sup>743</sup> A large and imposing mode of artistic creativity, such as that embraced in Malevich's architectural models post-1927, was very shortly to become the only permissible mode of expression in architecture in the Soviet Union.

Malevich's activity in architecture after 1927 reflects how aware the Suprematist was of the current political context, but his modified practice in the field was emblematic of his ongoing efforts to secure a legacy for Suprematism. As Tatiana Mikhienko has pointed out, even though his new column form engaged

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<sup>742</sup> See Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, 'The Competition for the Palace of Soviets, 1931-33', in *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in the 1920s and 1930s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1983), 402-403.

<sup>743</sup> Christina Lodder, 'Living in Space: Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist Architecture and the Philosophy of Nikolai Fedorov', in Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth* (London: The Pindar Press, 2007), 187.

what she described as ‘monumental motifs’, which represent a ‘distinct point of departure’ from his earlier architectural models, the column should still be linked with the artist’s earlier ambition to create a new ‘Suprematist order’.<sup>744</sup> Following on from Mikhienko’s reading of Malevich’s work from the late 1920s, it is possible to argue that Malevich’s new architectural models were produced to demonstrate that all of Malevich’s activity in architecture, past and present, was essentially realisable, attuned to political expectations, and far from being excessively abstract and ideological. Malevich’s post-1927 designs symbolise a continuity with his earlier models in the sense that they sought to establish a Suprematist order. From the late 1920s, however, Malevich seemed to adopt a new sense of monumentality which symbolised Suprematism’s position within the emerging tradition of Socialist Realism.

From 1928 until 1930, Malevich became involved in Ukrainian cultural activity and contributed articles to the Kharkiv journal *Nova generatsiia*. In what was his last major body of writing, Malevich established a set of theoretical ideas which he hoped would reframe Suprematism’s past and present activities in architecture as something appropriate for the new priorities of the Soviet state. The tone in *Nova generatsiia* was deliberately aligned with the ambitions of Joseph Stalin’s First Five-Year Plan and a period of accelerated industrialisation, in which new buildings began to appear at an increased pace. In his ideologically framed criticism, Malevich protested that ‘cowardly architects have been unable to rise up and abandon the speculative building demanded by life’s speculators in order to extend the front of the new architecture’.<sup>745</sup> By condemning the architectural excesses associated with the New Economic Policy (NEP), Malevich implies that Suprematism should – in a very broad sense – be associated with contemporary and socially acceptable architecture, which claimed to serve the collective rather than cater to private speculation. It is likely that Malevich did not have anything specific in mind when he published ‘Painting and the Problem of Architecture’ in 1928 and criticised speculation. He was hedging rather than being explicit about how Suprematism might represent an appropriate mode of architecture that was suitable for the current task in the Soviet Union.

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<sup>744</sup> Tatiana Mikhienko, ‘The Suprematist Column – A Monument to Nonobjective Art’, in Matthew Drutt, ed., *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism* (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2003), 81.

<sup>745</sup> Kazimir Malevich, ‘Maliarstvo v problemi arkhitektury’, *Nova generatsiia*, 2 (Kharkov/Kharkiv, 1928): 116-124; English translation, as ‘Painting and the Problem of Architecture’, in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), II: 15.

In this text, Malevich returned to ideas that he had established over the previous ten years and reiterated the painterly aspect which he felt qualified his cultural, rather than legal, copyright over a new mode of architecture. He explained that ‘painting in the twentieth century has discovered a new “additional forming element” which has led us to the problem of form in architectonics and thence to new Suprematist architecture’.<sup>746</sup> This essentially meant that ‘both the horizontal and vertical models reveal those features which it seems to me ought to be in the new architecture’.<sup>747</sup> Malevich asserted that this forming element ‘can lead to a school, a current style’ in creative culture.<sup>748</sup> This observation reflects one of the most important and most enduring ideas for Malevich, which he maintained throughout the remainder of his life: in new architecture, the art of painting – specifically Suprematist painting – was an irreplaceable aspect in identifying new form.

Malevich also uses ‘Painting and the Problem of Architecture’ to reiterate a familiar criticism of sections of the avant-garde and states that the Constructivist approach is bound to fail because it is exclusively concerned with functionality. The journal *Contemporary Architecture* [*Sovremennaia arkhitektura*], Malevich suggests, emerged as a response to this problem. He argued that the journal ‘appeared not as an artistic journal or a journal of purely functional mechanics but as an architectural journal, that is to say a journal of a new artistic form’.<sup>749</sup> Malevich remained close with Aleksei Gan, one of the editors of *Contemporary Architecture*, and it is therefore not surprising that Malevich wrote favourably about the journal. Similarly, Gan continued to promote Malevich’s formal ideas, ‘without which’ he maintained, ‘modern architecture is not architecture at all’.<sup>750</sup> Art historian Kristen Romberg has reiterated this view and proposed that ‘Malevich’s architectons may have been born out of the shadowy depths of the artist’s subconscious, but once they were inserted into the pages of the constructivist magazine [*Contemporary Architecture*], they shed that content, becoming a raw material’ for architects.<sup>751</sup> A shared position between Malevich and Gan was the view that Suprematism offered the Constructivists a way out of the cul-de-sac in which they had found themselves trapped.

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<sup>746</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>747</sup> Ibid.

<sup>748</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>749</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>750</sup> Aleksei Gan, ‘Spravka o Kazimire Maleviche’ [Note on Kazimir Malevich], *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 3 (1927): 106; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 541.

<sup>751</sup> Kristin Romberg, *Gan’s Constructivism: Aesthetic Theory for an Embedded Modernism* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), 188.

It is useful, at this juncture, to examine more closely the potential points of alignment between Malevich's formal and theoretical assertions and his new architectural projects from the late 1920s. It is possible, for instance, to see formal links between Malevich's architectural models and the Vesnin Brothers' *Workers Club* at Baidov (1928) (Fig. 7.6), as well as their entry for a competition for the *Lenin Library* (1928) (Fig. 7.7), both of which were produced under the auspices of the Constructivist group OSA (Ob'edinenie sovremennykh arkitekotorov – the Society of Contemporary Architects). One notices perhaps most acutely that the almost flat, planar elements of the *Workers Club* recall features present on Malevich's *Alpha* model (Fig. 5.5). These elements in *Alpha* do not indicate any particular function, but in the Vesnin Brothers' design at Baidov, this formal idea was perhaps embraced with the intention of shielding the worker from the hot Azerbaijani sun. A similar parallel in approaches to form can be noted in *Derzhprom*, designed by Sergei Serafimov, Samuel Kravets and Mark Felger, constructed in Kharkhov and completed in 1928 (Fig. 7.8). The multiple interlocking blocks in this building, used to articulate one singular architectural configuration, closely recall John Milner's idea about the importance of volumetric experimentation which he argues was significant to Malevich's models.<sup>752</sup>

Gan's insistence on the importance of Suprematism is noted in the work of architect Iakov Chernikhov. Echoing Gan's view, Chernikhov stated that 'the Suprematist approach is essential to the solution of our tasks'.<sup>753</sup> By the late 1920s, Chernikhov was clear that Suprematism offered an approach that could relate to the built environment.

With the help of so-called objectless elements, we have the possibility of creating a series of the most fantastical formal constructions which are not initially formally constrained by any direct practical application, but in return possesses properties which make them available for real and direct application in the future.<sup>754</sup>

Chernikhov's *Monument to Christopher Columbus, A Planar Architectural Fantasy* (1930) (Fig. 7.9) essentially affirms the above statement and closely recalls Malevich's *Zeta* formation.

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<sup>752</sup> John Milner, *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 192.

<sup>753</sup> Iakov Chernikhov, quoted in 'The Elements of Form', *Architectural Design* 54, no. 9/10 (1984): 24.

<sup>754</sup> Ibid.

Visual affinities can also be identified between Malevich's volumetric experiments in architecture and the bold, geometric forms of Aleksei Shchusev's Lenin Mausoleum (1930) (Fig. 7.11). Shchusev, who built the Kazan Railway station in Moscow (Figs. 4.33 and 4.34) and became president of the Moscow Architectural Society (Moskovskoe Arkhitekturnoe Obschestvo – MAO) in 1922, pragmatically moved towards contemporary modes of architectural design. Shchusev retained a spirit of classicism in his Lenin Mausoleum but, like Malevich's earlier architectural models, the design was purged of ornamentation. The polished flat surfaces and the combination of volumetric forms are emphasised, which result in a powerful and unified construction that alludes to the myth of Lenin himself.

Malevich's ideas in architecture certainly permeated the avant-garde and creative thinking in architecture as he hoped. Selim O. Khan-Magomedov has suggested that Suprematism's contribution to the field of architecture increased year on year by the end of the 1920s.<sup>755</sup> However, the extent to which Malevich might be identified as the pre-eminent stimulus in these works so far discussed is, at the very least, a thorny issue. The Vesnin Brothers' designs may emphasise an accumulation of volumetric masses which echo Malevich's models, but their very limited detailing can also be said to recall the formal simplicity of Khidekel's *Worker's Club* (1927) (Fig. 6.13) and *Sports Club* (1927) (Fig. 6.15). In fact, illustrating the former Unovis (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva – Champions of the New Art) member's input in bringing together ostensibly opposing movements, Khan-Magomedov also wrote that Khidekel played a part in establishing a new sort of 'Suprematist Constructivism'.<sup>756</sup> As well as bringing to mind Malevich's *Gota* and *Zeta* models, Chernikhov's *Monument to Christopher Columbus* also closely resembles the two dimensionality of one of Nikolai Suetin's designs from the early 1920s (Fig. 7.10).

The identification of Malevich as the author of a new mode of Suprematist architecture in Russia is complicated by at least three principal factors. The first is that he did not build. When Malevich put down his brush in 1920, he picked up a pen to write rather than a trowel or draughting pencil to establish his ideas in architecture. Malevich may have hoped that his models demonstrated, as Chapter Five discussed,

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<sup>755</sup> S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Suprematizm i arkhitektura (problemy formoobrazovaniia)* (Moscow: Arkhitektura-S, 2007), 506.

<sup>756</sup> Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Lasar Khidekel, Makers of Avant-Garde* (Moscow: Russian Avant-Garde Foundation, 2011), 97.

a ‘purposive connection between the making of the model and the intended building’, but a new distinctly Suprematist school was always overly ambitious without his own direct practice.<sup>757</sup>

The second problem corresponds to the fact that Suprematism always functioned collectively. Despite Malevich’s efforts to assert his individual authorship, when Suprematism entered the field of architecture it did so with Unovis, as a collective, and its various creative activities. Even though Suprematism’s architectural ideas were enriched by the collective efforts of Unovis, and those who were not allied with Malevich, this meant that the attribution of authorship became complicated. This is perhaps why Larissa Zhadova wrote ‘when Malevich and his pupils took Suprematism into the field of volume construction in architecture, design and decorative art they were in fact themselves engaged in Production Art’.<sup>758</sup> The plurality that underpinned Suprematism’s activity in architecture and its integration into the social realm meant that Malevich’s individual authorship would remain elusive. Copyright in relation to collective authorship in cultural production has long been a contentious issue which still requires reform in the twenty-first century, as Daniela Simone has argued.<sup>759</sup>

Thirdly, the historical moment also helps to account for why Malevich struggled to establish a new and specifically Suprematist mode of architecture. Conditions in the Soviet Union moved from a state in which building was impossible to one in which there was a tremendous surge of activity. The conditions during the Civil War may have aided Malevich, inasmuch as the impossibility of construction permitted him the freedom to promote an abstract and elusive model of architecture. Once building began to happen, Malevich faced a greater challenge to position himself in a leading position amongst his contemporaries.

Suprematism’s ideas in architecture can be situated in close proximity to other contemporary ideas beyond the parameters of the movement, but quantifying its influence is an almost impossible task. By 1930, many architects had come to participate in what had become a general style in contemporary architecture. Malevich’s creative rights were made significantly more intricate, and indeed contentious, by the fact that Suprematism was so easily absorbed into the creative thinking of many architects. Suprematism merged with a range of other stimuli, which led to a new sort of plurality in contemporary form. Malevich’s

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<sup>757</sup> Nicholas Caddick, Gwilym Harbottle and Uma Suthersanen, eds., *Copinger and Skone James on Copyright*, 18th ed. (London: Sweet & Maxwell/Thomson Reuters, 2021), 2-152.

<sup>758</sup> Zhadova, *Malevich*, 104.

<sup>759</sup> Daniela Simone, *Copyright and Collective Authorship: Locating the Authors of Collaborative Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).

ideas had undoubtedly permeated new thinking in Soviet architecture, but the idea of a Suprematist mode of architecture in precise terms which could be attributed to Malevich alone was practically impossible. Even though Malevich never constructed a single building, and Suprematism did not establish a distinct mode of architecture, the artist's paintings, drawings, models and writing in this field – along with the many contributions of others within the movement – played a major role in the formulation of new architecture in the Soviet Union.

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It would almost certainly have been apparent to Malevich that the new architecture was not moving in the direction of a distinctly Suprematist mode, as he wrote in *Nova generatsiia*. Despite this, and the pressure from the state, Malevich continued to practise as freely, and as safely, as possible to assert his legacy in Suprematism.

As stated at the outset of this conclusion, Malevich's position at GIII was short-lived. He was dismissed in 1930 after his activities were characterised as 'having no relation to the current problems of Marxist art studies'.<sup>760</sup> After losing this post, Malevich secured a teaching position at the Art Institute in Kyiv and spent two and a half weeks of every month in Ukraine.<sup>761</sup> It was perhaps no coincidence that Malevich had turned to his Ukrainian heritage as Stalin exerted more authority over the USSR. The Suprematist, in fact, seems to have contemplated making his move to Kyiv permanent. As Myroslava Mudrak has discussed, however, this became an impossible goal as Stalin began to attack 'bourgeois intellectuals' right across the Soviet Union.<sup>762</sup> Malevich's position at the Kyiv Art Institute ended in 1930 and the Suprematist never again set foot in his homeland of Ukraine.<sup>763</sup>

Although this position would also turn out to be brief, it gave Malevich an opportunity to survive financially, and he hoped politically, through teaching. In addition to this teaching and the articles he published in *Nova generatsiia*, Malevich became involved in a project to design a fresco for the Hall of the

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<sup>760</sup> See 'To the Arts Council on the Affairs of the Literature and Art' [April 1930]; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 545.

<sup>761</sup> Malevich, letter to Kirill Shutko, [December 1929 – beginning of 1930], *ibid.*, I: 218-219.

<sup>762</sup> Myroslava M. Mudrak, 'Malevich and His Ukrainian Contemporaries', in Douglas and Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich*, 114.

<sup>763</sup> *Ibid.*

Presidium of the All-Ukrainian Academy of Sciences (Figs. 7.12-7.13). Malevich painted representational images of a cross and a human form, which point to an effort to incorporate long-held ideas into the vault of this Ukrainian institution. As he did so, it is possible that Malevich recalled his own words from 1918, when he wrote ‘down with the cupolas and heavenly vaults which with a little lid blocks the way for gusts of steam; let wedges cut into the bosom of space’.<sup>764</sup> As this thesis has argued, even before the First World War Malevich explored ideas of liberation and transcendence in art. It is very likely that in this fraught political context, Malevich’s continued aspirations towards liberation took on a new, ominous, meaning in which he felt Suprematism still had an important role to play.

Malevich had a similar opportunity to point towards his legacy in painting and architecture when he was employed to redecorate the Red Theatre in Leningrad (Figs. 7.14-7.17). It is unclear how far this project was completed, as this building was destroyed by a fire in 1932. His designs, however, show that Malevich intended vivid abstract colour to be applied to the cupola, columns and even staircases, suggesting that the total effect would have been a powerful encounter with colour. This project seems to have given Malevich the opportunity to realise a theoretical idea that he had explored with Unovis about interior space, as discussed in Chapter Four, but which he revisited in *Nova generatsiia*.

One’s impression of rooms identical in size but painted in different shades, for example red crimson and ochre, we will find that the impression of the rooms’ sizes will differ, if they are painted white they will seem much larger than in other colours, thus in this case colour influences our perception of dimensions and of space.<sup>765</sup>

As well as his own earlier ideas, this statement is evocative of the creative thinking of many other artists and architects who operated in the avant-garde in Russia. In particular, the sentiment above recalls the practices of Nikolai Ladovskii and Lissitzky discussed in the latter chapters of this thesis. As Malevich’s statement here makes clear, even by the late 1920s there continued to be a great closeness between the practices and creative thinking of different individuals.

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<sup>764</sup> Ibid.

<sup>765</sup> Malevich, ‘An Attempt to Determine the Relation Between Colour and Form in Painting’, *Nova generatsiia*, 2 (Kharkov/Kharkiv, 1928); Malevich, *Essays*, II: 129.

The commission for the Red Theatre is also emblematic of Malevich's ambition to claim individual authorship and ensure his personal survival. It was surely deliberate that the contract for this commission named Malevich as 'painter' and 'consultant for the artistic rehabilitation of the Red Theatre'.<sup>766</sup> This is a revealing choice of language which allowed Malevich to allude to, rather than declare, authorship. 'Painter', rather than artist, is a comprehensible term which has no sharp avant-garde edge to it. Similarly, consultant does not imply author. These more neutral terms minimise the avant-garde authority that Malevich really brought to this commission and gave him an opportunity to further explore painting, surface and architectural space, which had been central considerations in Vitebsk ten years earlier.

Malevich returned to figurative painting in the late-1920s and, as he did so, made a clear effort to demonstrate that he was engaged with politically acceptable topics. *Red Cavalry* (1928-32) (Fig. 7.18) is one example of this. The Suprematist dated this work to 1918, and in doing so suggested he had always been concerned with Bolshevism. 1918 was a year when Malevich began his *White on White* painting which was, arguably, the peak of his abstract and metaphysical concerns within Suprematism. Malevich wrote on the verso of *Red Cavalry*: 'from the capital of the October Revolution, the Red Cavalry rides out to defend the Soviet frontier'.<sup>767</sup> As earlier chapters of this thesis have argued, Malevich had long been in the habit of looking backwards as a way of attempting to resituate his future. As he returned to figurative painting, retrospection and the revision of his own past activity were habits necessary for survival.

It is possible to identify the spirit of Suprematism in Malevich's later paintings. *Woman with a Rake* (1928-32) (Fig. 7.19) is one such example. The horizontally positioned handle of the protagonist's tool merges with the stripes of colour in the landscape and the tines of the implement seem to interact with the row of houses observed in the background. Through this configuration, Malevich subtly implies the existence of a complex relationship between ideas of composition and construction in both painting and architecture. The illustration of a sickle on the protagonist's chest plays an important role in this reading. The sickle was identified as the additional element of Cubism in Malevich's theoretical charts (Fig. 5.19), but this implement is also symbolic of Communism, labour and the peasantry. In *The World as Objectlessness*,

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<sup>766</sup> See details of contract between Malevich and Gosnartdom K. Liebknecht and R. Luxemburg, 25 May 1931; Nakov, *Painting the Absolute*, III: 306.

<sup>767</sup> Kazimir Malevich, inscription on *Red Cavalry*, 1928-32, oil on canvas, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg (Fig. 7.18).

Malevich wrote, ‘under the sign of the additional element hides an entire culture of action’.<sup>768</sup> *Woman with a Rake* delicately incorporates metaphysical ideas, indicating Malevich’s conviction about the role of painting in shaping the coming world, while, more ostensibly, it embraces a much more profane subject matter and represents an engagement with acceptable Soviet themes.

*Half Figure in Yellow Shirt* (c. 1932) (Fig. 7.20) also alludes to Malevich’s past activity and does not, at least as overtly as *Woman with a Rake*, include any clear subject that relates to Soviet values and seems braver still. The fine brushwork and very limited vocabulary of colours create a formally austere aesthetic. Malevich has situated the figure in an enigmatic location, with the protagonist’s head seeming closer to the cosmos than the earth. For Charlotte Douglas, however, this work ‘conveys the nobility and spiritual grace of the archetypal peasant, a literal and metaphorical link between the heaven and earth’.<sup>769</sup> The yellow shirt of the protagonist recalls the vision of *The Aviator* (Fig. 1.24) of 1914, who looked on his aerial view and encountered non-representational forms in a new metaphysical space. Similarly, *Half Figure in Yellow Shirt* recalls *Yellow Plane in Dissolution* (1917) (Fig. 3.1), which aspired to a distinctly Suprematist mode of ascension. By the start of the 1930s, when political expectations essentially forced artists to abandon abstraction, Malevich continued to allude to his Suprematist legacy.

Collegial backing remained an important facet of Malevich’s practice into the 1930s and was of great importance in cementing his legacy and his safety. While he was based in the USSR, Lissitzky published *Russland* (Fig. 7.21) in Europe in 1930. In this book, Lissitzky promoted Suprematism and suggested he still saw value in the movement that he had first encountered a decade earlier.<sup>770</sup> Lissitzky stated:

The changing interrelationship between the newly emerging arts is another important factor that vitally affects the basic elements of new architecture. The influence of the arts on architecture has been valuable and extraordinary [...] The creative forces in art have uncovered the basic elements of three-dimensional design by a process of analysis.<sup>771</sup>

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<sup>768</sup> Malevich, ‘The World as Objectlessness’, in Baier and Dümpelmann, Malevich, *The World as Objectlessness*, 163.

<sup>769</sup> Charlotte Douglas, ‘Malevich and Chirico’, in Douglas and Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich*, 285.

<sup>770</sup> El Lissitzky, *Russland: Die Rekonstruktion der Architektur in der Sowjetunion* (Vienna: Verlag Anton Schroll, 1930); trans. Eric Dluhosch, *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984).

<sup>771</sup> Lissitzky, ‘Interrelationships Between the Arts’, *Russia*, 28.

As though reiterating these ideas about the importance of art in architecture, even the cover of *Russland* recalls Lissitzky's *Prουν 1E (City)* (1919) (Fig. 4.30), produced in Vitebsk under the auspices of Unovis. The development of forms around a square on the cover and the concern with different points of perspective, beneath the words 'to build something new in the world', suggest that Lissitzky retained a strong regard for his involvement in Suprematism in Vitebsk.

In a similar collegial spirit, Ivan Kliun wrote a feature in *Contemporary Architecture* entitled 'Cubism as a Painting Method' and referred to himself and Malevich as Cubist artists.<sup>772</sup> It is possible that Kliun's statement was an act of camaraderie towards Malevich and an expression of solidarity with his old friend. Certainly, both men needed to distance themselves from the sharp end of avant-gardism for the sake of their personal safety.

Malevich's efforts to practise solely as an artist and adapt Suprematism so that he might be at least tolerated by the state were unsuccessful. The Suprematist was arrested in 1930 and imprisoned for three months. In letters written following his release, Malevich made oblique references to his arrest, suggesting that he was unsettled by the experience.<sup>773</sup> The artist Pavel Filonov recorded in his diary that Malevich complained that he was repeatedly asked: 'what's all this Cezannism you're talking about? What's all this Cubism you preach?'<sup>774</sup>

In this climate of increasing risk, Malevich looked to his colleagues for much more than friendship and professional solidarity. By leaving his work in Europe, Malevich may have felt he had reason to return. In 1930, Malevich wrote to Władysław Strzemiński and attempted to organise an exhibition in Warsaw, with the renewed ambition to establish Suprematism in Poland.<sup>775</sup> Unfortunately, the international setting was not going to offer Malevich any professional opportunity or personal salvation. Strzemiński tried to help Malevich settle in Poland permanently but, in a tragic bureaucratic irony, Malevich was denied permission on the grounds that he had worked for the Soviet state.<sup>776</sup> As John E. Bowlt has noted, the

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<sup>772</sup> Ivan Kliun, 'Kukism kak zhivopisnyi metod' [Cubism as a painting method], *Sovremennaia arkhitektura*, 3 (1930): 194-199.

<sup>773</sup> See, for example, Malevich, letter to Kramarenko, 8 November 1930; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 229; and Malevich, letter to Kliun, 2 June 1931; Malevich, *Letters*, I: 239.

<sup>774</sup> E. Kovtun, ed., *Pavel Filonov. Dnevnik* (St. Petersburg: Azbuka, 2000), 165; English translation in Malevich, *Letters*, II: 130.

<sup>775</sup> Nakov, *Painting the Absolute*, III: 209.

<sup>776</sup> *Ibid.*

painter Pavel Mansurov was one of the last avant-garde artists to leave the Soviet Union in 1928.<sup>777</sup> The possibility of emigration was then closed and remained so into the 1960s.

By the early 1930s, Malevich had run out of options. In 1932, along with his colleagues and his rivals, Malevich was mocked by government officials at the *Experimental Comprehensive Exhibition of the Art of the Capitalist Era*, held at the State Tretyakov Gallery (Fig. 7.22).<sup>778</sup> Malevich's Suprematist paintings were displayed alongside a banner which read: 'Bourgeois art in the blind alley of formalism and self-negation'.<sup>779</sup> In 1932, the Soviet state took decisive action and issued the decree 'On the Reconstruction of Literary and Artistic Organisations', which abolished independent artistic groups and imposed the ideology of Socialist Realism.<sup>780</sup> If, fifteen years earlier, the Bolsheviks enabled Malevich's professional practice through their restructuring of cultural activity, the measures taken in 1932 plainly underscore just how fragile those freedoms really were.

In his final years, Malevich had no choice but to interact with ideological expectations imposed by the state and was acutely aware that his practice would have to be modified. Malevich may not have been able to achieve individual recognition for a specifically Suprematist mode of architecture, but his persistent practice and his many intense interactions with a variety of people meant that he was able to permeate this creative field. Malevich was stimulated by the world around him and, in turn, Suprematism stimulated the minds of those who came into contact with it. Pragmatism and a commitment to his creative practice were immutable aspects of Malevich's life and his work. These characteristics must, at the least, be attributed to the artist in this new history of Suprematism.

Given the conditions which defined Malevich's professional context after he returned from Europe, it is of great significance that the artist chose to portray himself as a painter in the Renaissance style in his final self-portrait, painted in 1933 (Fig. 7.23). This was the artist's final move to craft his individual legacy and, as the minute black square in the corner of this work alludes, to propagandise for

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<sup>777</sup> John E. Bowlt, 'Art in Exile: The Russian Avant-Garde and the Emigration', *Art Journal* 41, no. 3 (1981): 221, n. 30.

<sup>778</sup> See Maria Kokkori, 'Exhibiting Malevich under Stalin', in Christina Lodder, Maria Kokkori and Maria Mileeva, eds., *Utopian Reality: Reconstructing Culture in Revolutionary Russia and Beyond* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2013), 133-152.

<sup>779</sup> Experimental Comprehensive Exhibition of the Art of the Capitalist Era, 1931-32, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow (Fig. 7.27).

<sup>780</sup> 'O perestroike literaturno-khudozhestvennykh organizatsii', *Pravda* (24 April 1932); English translation in John E. Bowlt, ed. and trans., *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934* (New York: The Viking Press, 1976), 288-290.

Suprematism. In this self-portrait, Malevich moved to reinvent himself just as he had done throughout his life. The 1933 self-portrait was arguably one of the last and one of the bravest moves Malevich made in an effort to allude to his personal and professional legacy. In her essay ‘The Ghost in the Machine’, Lodder concluded that ‘Russia’s avant-garde architects displayed incredible courage and commitment to their fight to keep a small flame of modernism burning’.<sup>781</sup> Malevich cannot be viewed in any way apart from Lodder’s statement. Illustrating the severity of the professional conditions which had come to define Malevich’s life, Natalia Murray has speculated that if the Suprematist had survived another year it is highly likely that he would have been taken, along with 600 writers, and shot during the Great Purges of 1936.<sup>782</sup> In 1933, the same year Malevich painted his final self-portrait, he became ill with cancer. The Suprematist died in Leningrad on 15 May 1935, surrounded by his family.

\*

Having traced the final trajectory of Suprematism and Malevich’s career in relation to the historical context, the continued role of others and questions of legacy, it is possible to now reflect on the wider implications this work has for future studies of the movement and the historiography of the avant-garde.

The embrace of the art and life model in this thesis represents a new and ambitious contribution to Malevich studies. In direct opposition to the notion of discovery, this work has suggested that at every stage of its development, Suprematism’s efforts to move forward were marked by revision and reinterpretation, which were often direct responses to national or international socio-political developments. By affording equal weight to Suprematism’s painterly and architectural stages, this thesis rebalances Suprematist scholarship and appraises Malevich’s career with the movement in its entirety. As an academic field, the History of Art has long held a prejudice in favour of painting and this thesis challenges that inclination. Rather than attempting to impose clarity where it does not exist, this work has embraced the elliptical and often capricious nature of Malevich’s practice, writing and positions on creative innovation. Nothing stayed the same in Malevich’s practice, nor did it in the world around him during this

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<sup>781</sup> Lodder, ‘The Ghost in the Machine’, in Lodder et al., *Utopian Reality*, 191.

<sup>782</sup> Natalia Murray, *The Unsung Hero of the Russian Avant-Garde: The Life and Times of Nikolay Punin* (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2012), 215.

period. This thesis complicates the tendency to read Suprematism as a static or coherent system and reframes the shifting nature of Malevich's activities in direct relation to the contemporary circumstances.

In opposition to the heroic artist narratives common in Malevich scholarship, this work has emphasised the importance of collaboration. This thesis has demonstrated that other creative individuals were always important for Malevich. This extended beyond the cultural milieu of Moscow pre-1915 and Malevich's competitive relationship with Vladimir Tatlin. It has argued that the rich and complex relationships Malevich had with others in his orbit were not at all incidental but necessary for the continuation of Suprematism. This thesis develops the view that Suprematism shared affinities not only with Constructivism but also with other avant-garde modes of thinking. In this vein, this thesis builds on the ideas that Christina Lodder has discussed in her text, 'Conflicting Approaches to Creativity? Suprematism and Constructivism'.<sup>783</sup> Habitually viewed in opposition to Constructivism, which is more frequently aligned with contemporary political ideas and new possibilities of industry and engineering, this thesis has presented Suprematism as responsive to a range of stimuli and has argued that it should no less be viewed in relation to the socio-political environment.

Having situated Suprematism in its historical moment and re-examined the implications of collaborative practice within the movement, this thesis has enabled a reassessment of questions of authorship and Malevich's legacy. Central to this is an assessment of the concept of copyright, which is a new idea in Suprematist scholarship. Malevich's sustained efforts to secure his copyright and establish an individual legacy were dictated by his acute awareness of the instability of the contemporary world around him and the creative activities of others. This thesis has expanded on the idea present in scholarship that Malevich's engagement in architecture was linked to the collective efforts of Unovis in Vitebsk. It argues that the emergence of an architectural front in Suprematism was directly related to the institutional context in Vitebsk and also to emerging priorities that were felt nationally. This thesis, however, has made the new argument that *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*, and Malevich's subsequent architectural models and sketches were produced with the intention of defining and then asserting his authorship of what he felt to be his individual ideas in the field of the new architecture.

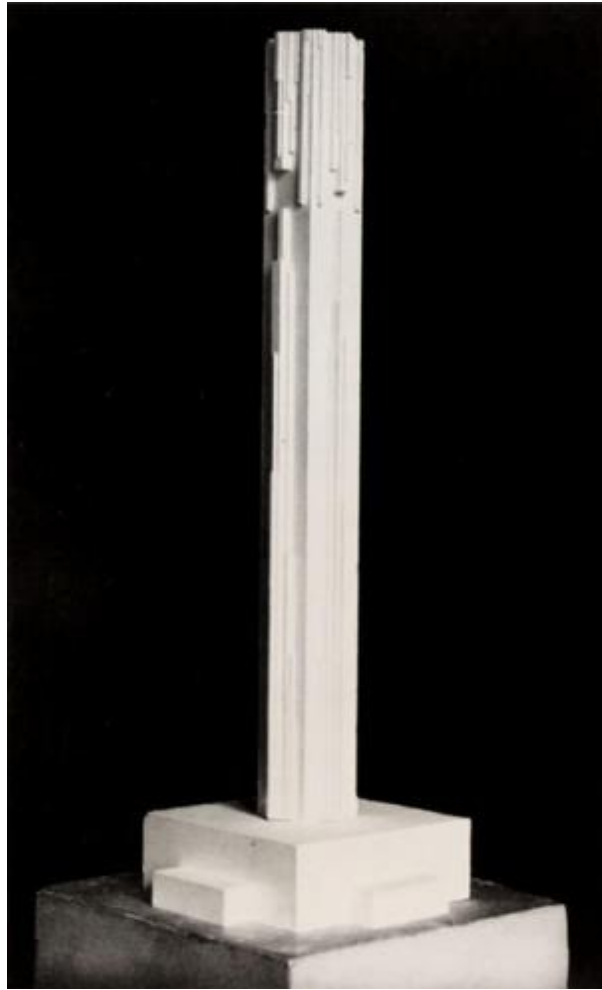
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<sup>783</sup> Lodder, 'Conflicting Approaches to Creativity? Suprematism and Constructivism', in Christina Lodder, ed., *Celebrating Suprematism: New Approaches to the Art of Kazimir Malevich* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 259-288.

With regard to the question of individual creativity, this thesis moves away from the myth making that Malevich himself sought to advance. This work has argued that Suprematism was never one fixed idea and could always be rewritten, as indeed Malevich did, in his efforts to manage its future reception. The ideas in this thesis relating to authorship and copyright have broader implications for how other avant-garde artists may be understood. This is particularly relevant to artists who explored forms of abstraction. The tensions this thesis has explored regarding copyright are interesting in relation to how other artists may have sought to protect their ideas on the canvas as unique expressions, despite the fact that their visual languages may have been inherently repeatable. One thinks most acutely of artists associated with the avant-garde in Holland and the so-called colour field painters of the avant-garde in New York.

As noted in the preface, the contemporary world is forcing us to re-examine how we view Malevich and Suprematism. In the first months of 2022, as I began researching what would become the opening chapters of this thesis, this project acquired a new and unexpected poignancy when Vladimir Putin escalated the war on Ukraine that he began in 2014. Exactly a century earlier, Malevich and his wife became consumed with fear as they anticipated that Kazimir would be conscripted into the Tsar's army and, in all likelihood, be killed in the First World War. The current conflict has made this same threat of mobilisation a grim reality for hundreds of thousands in Russia and Ukraine today. Another parallel between the present day and Malevich's professional life is that at no stage of the Suprematist's career did he operate under democratic conditions. The problem of creative autonomy within the context of authoritarian regimes was a reality that Malevich had to contend with, just as many artists do in modern-day Russia.

The movement of Suprematism was not established outside of the complex history of its time; rather, it was inseparable from it. The movement emerged not through heroic artistic invention but through a process of revision, reinterpretation and practice in direct response to the world around it. Suprematism, with its language of abstraction and its aspiration to liberate the arts, was in no sense apart from the pressures of its era but was defined by it. Suprematism, however, can also be understood in the context of the contemporary world. Given the current war on Ukraine, the necessity to rebuild will, sooner or later, return to the horizon. If Suprematism was an aspiration towards creative freedom under the weight of the world around it, then Malevich's idealism, pragmatism and creative thinking matter today as much as they did a hundred years ago.



**Figure 7.1**

**Kazimir Malevich**

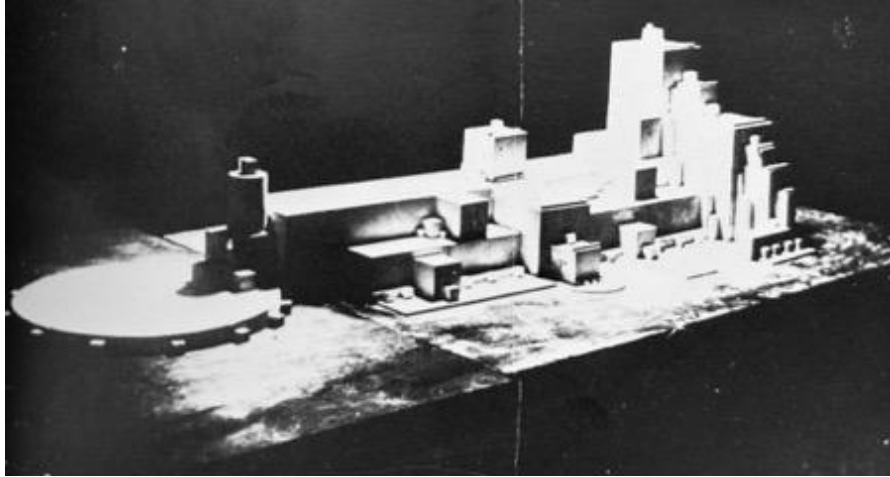
*Suprematist Architectural Model*

1927

Plaster

86 x 30 x 30.2 cm

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



**Figure 7.2**

**Kazimir Malevich**

Suprematist Architecton

c. 1929, destroyed

Plaster

Reproduced from Troels Andersen, *Malevich: Catalogue Raisonné of the Berlin Exhibition 1927* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970)



**Figure 7.3**

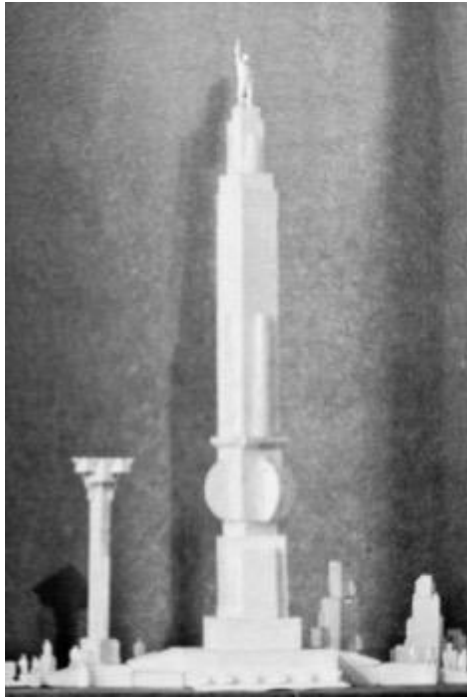
Kazimir Malevich at the *Exhibition of Artists of the RSFSR of the Past Fifteen Years*

1932

Russian State Museum

Leningrad

Reproduced from Andréi Nakov, *Kazimir Malevich: Catalogue Raisonné* (Paris: Adam Biro, 2003)



**Figure 7.4**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Column of a Monument to the Land of the Soviets and Themes for Architectural Monuments*

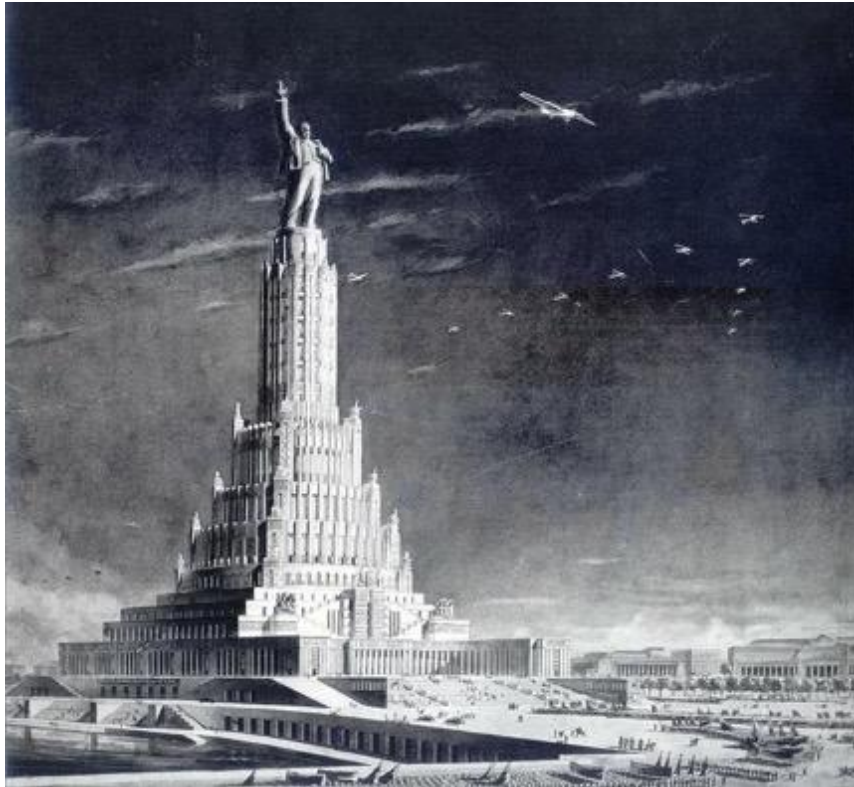
1930-32

On display at the *Exhibition of Artists of the RSFSR of the Past Fifteen Years*

Russian State Museum

Leningrad

Reproduced from Andréi Nakov, *Kazimir Malevich: Catalogue Raisonné* (Paris: Adam Biro, 2003)



**Figure 7.5**

**Boris Iofan, Vladimir Gelfreikh, Vladimir Shchuko and S. Merkulov**

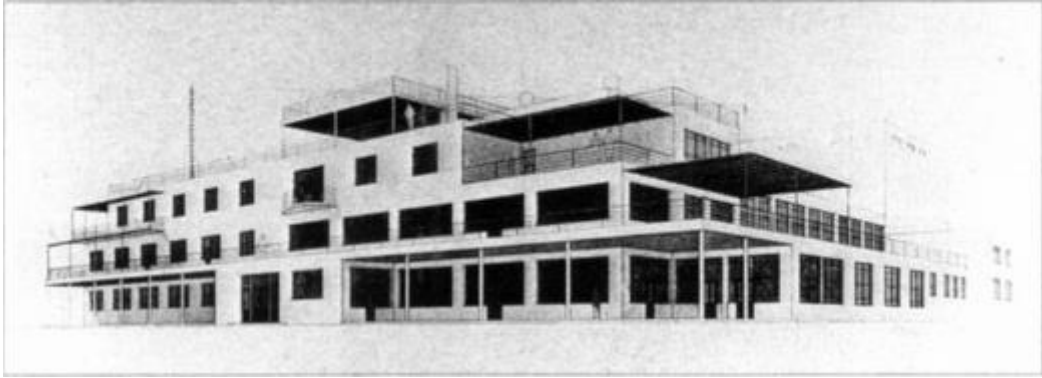
The approved design for the Palace of the Soviets

1933

Ink and collage on paper

96 x 102.7 cm

Shchusev State Museum of Architecture, Moscow



**Figure 7.6**

**Vesnín Brothers**

Workers Club in Baku in Baku

1928

Reproduced from Catherine Cooke, *Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture, and the City* (London: Academy Editions, 1995)



**Figure 7.7**

**Vesnín Brothers**

Competition entry for the Lenin Library

1928

Reproduced from Catherine Cooke, *Russian Avant-Garde: Theories of Art, Architecture, and the City* (London: Academy Editions, 1995)



**Figure 7.8**

Derzhprom

Designed by Sergei Serafimov, Samuel Kravets and Mark Felger

Constructed in Kharkov from 1925-28

Reproduced from Owen Hatherley, 'The Derzhprom Building and the Erasure of Ukraine's Avant-Garde', *ArtReview*, 5 November 2024, <https://artreview.com/the-derzhprom-building-and-the-erasure-of-ukraines-avant-garde/>



**Figure 7.9**

**Iakov Chernikhov**

*Monument to Christopher Columbus, a Planar Architectural Fantasy*

1930

Reproduced from Catherine Cooke, *Chernikhov: Fantasy and Construction*, *Architectural Design* 54, no. 9/10

(1984)



**Figure 7.10**

**Nikolai Suetin**

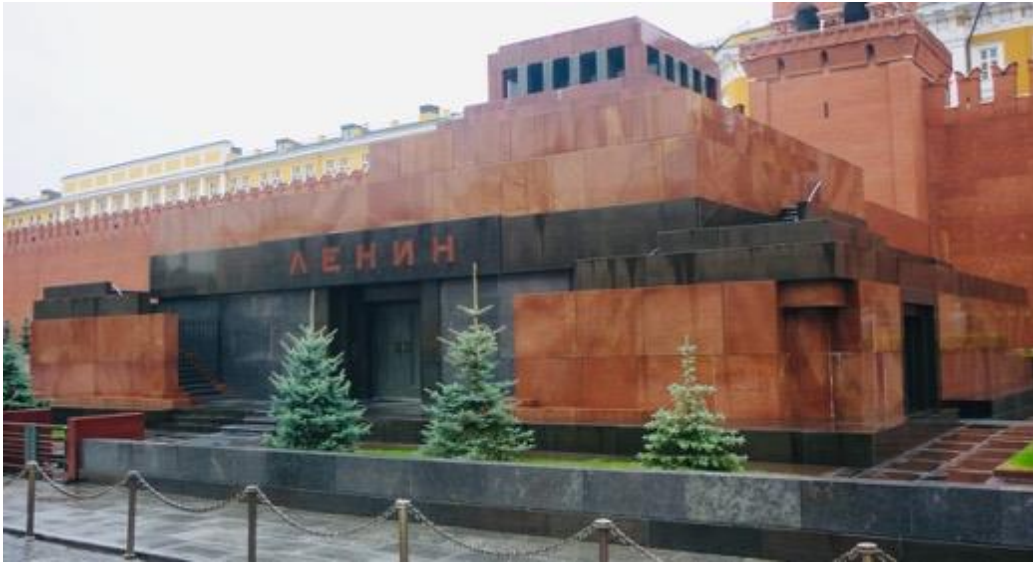
*Untitled*

1922-24

Watercolour on pencil and paper

10.6 x 30.5 cm

The Museum of Modern Art, New York



**Figure 7.11**

**Aleksei Shchusev, Isador Frantsuz and G.K. Yakovlev**

Lenin's Mausoleum

1930

Marble, porphyry and granite

Red Square, Moscow

Image from the author's collection



**Figure 7.12**

**Kazimir Malevich**

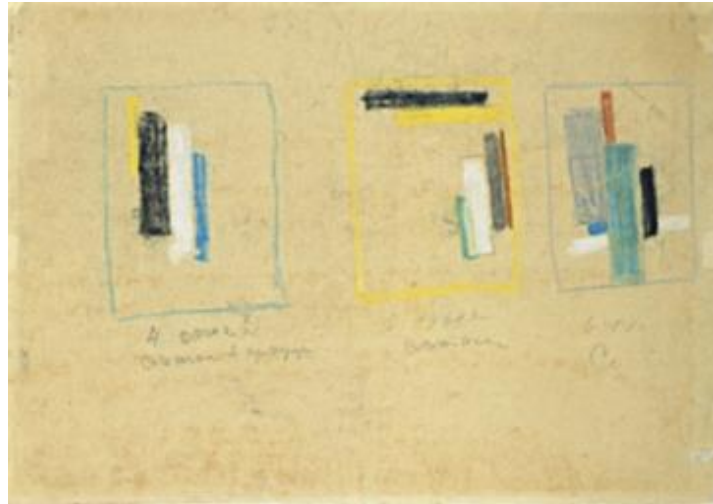
*Sketch for the Conference Hall of the All-Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, Kyiv*

1930

Pastel, gouache and graphite pencil on paper

44 x 31 cm

National Art Museum of Ukraine, Kyiv



**Figure 7.13**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Sketch for the Conference Hall of the All-Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, Kyiv*

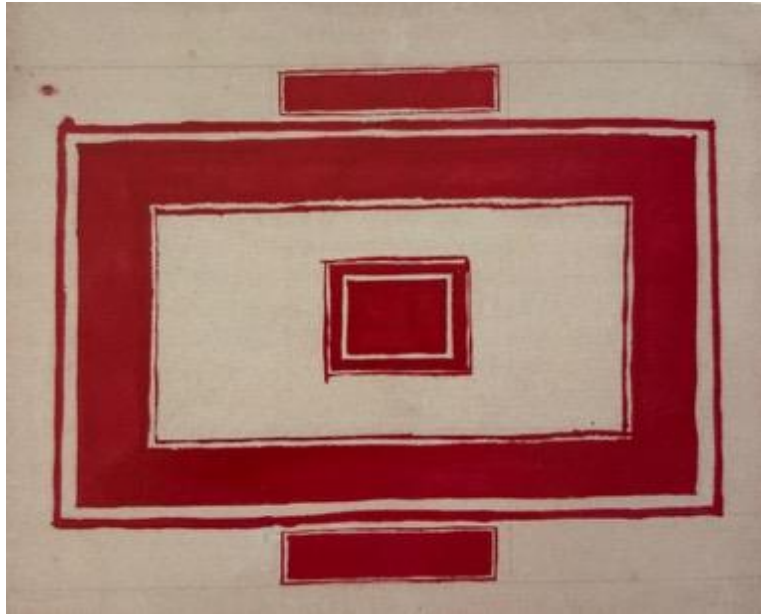
(verso)

1930

Pastel, gouache and graphite pencil on paper

44 x 31 cm

National Art Museum of Ukraine, Kyiv



**Figure 7.14**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Design for a Ceiling Decoration of the Red Theatre's Main Hall*

1931

Ink and pencil on paper

33.2 x 43 cm

Reproduced from Andréi Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, trans. Michael Taylor with Helen Knox  
(Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2010)



**Figure 7.15**

**Kazimir Malevich**

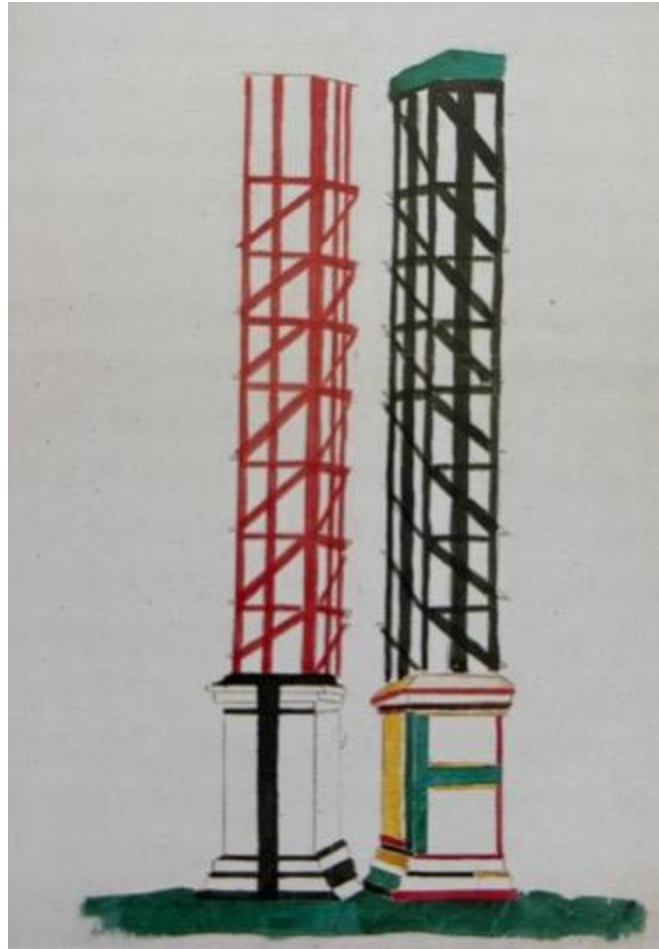
*Staircase Leading to the Third Staircase of the Foyer*

1931

Watercolour and pencil on paper

21.4 x 15 cm

Reproduced from Andréi Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, trans. Michael Taylor with Helen Knox  
(Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2010)



**Figure 7.16**

**Kazimir Malevich**

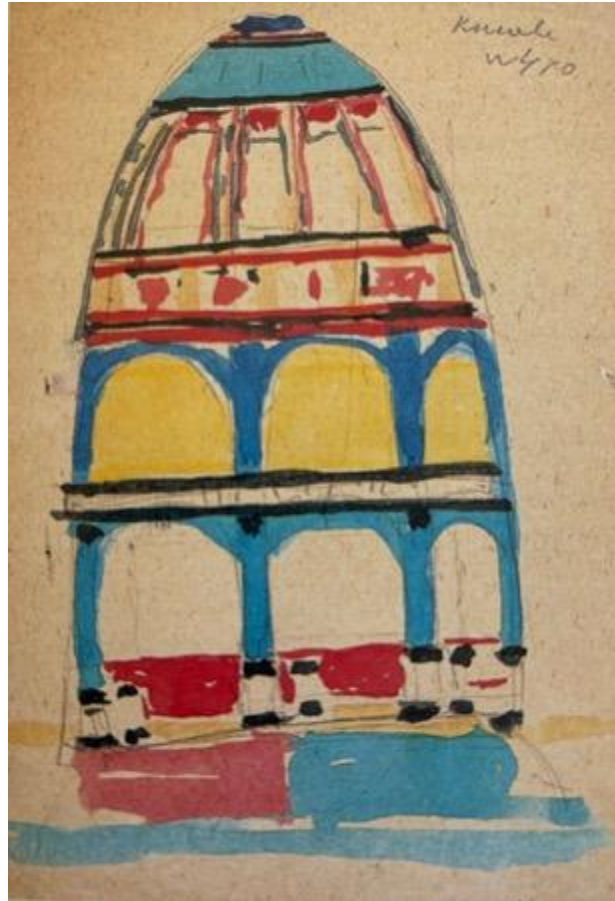
*Sketch Design for Decorating the Central Pillars of the Red Theatre*

1931

Watercolour and pencil on paper

56 x 46 cm

Reproduced from Andréi Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, trans. Michael Taylor with Helen Knox  
(Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2010)



**Figure 7.17**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Sketch Design for Decorating the Cupula of the Red Theatre*

1931

Watercolour and pencil on paper

21.4 x 15 cm

Reproduced from Andréi Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, trans. Michael Taylor with Helen Knox (Farnham: Lund Humphries, 2010)



**Figure 7.18**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Red Cavalry*

1928-32

Oil on canvas

91 x 140 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



**Figure 7.19**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Woman with a Rake*

1928-32

Oil on canvas

100 x 75 cm

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



**Figure 7.20**

**Kazimir Malevich**

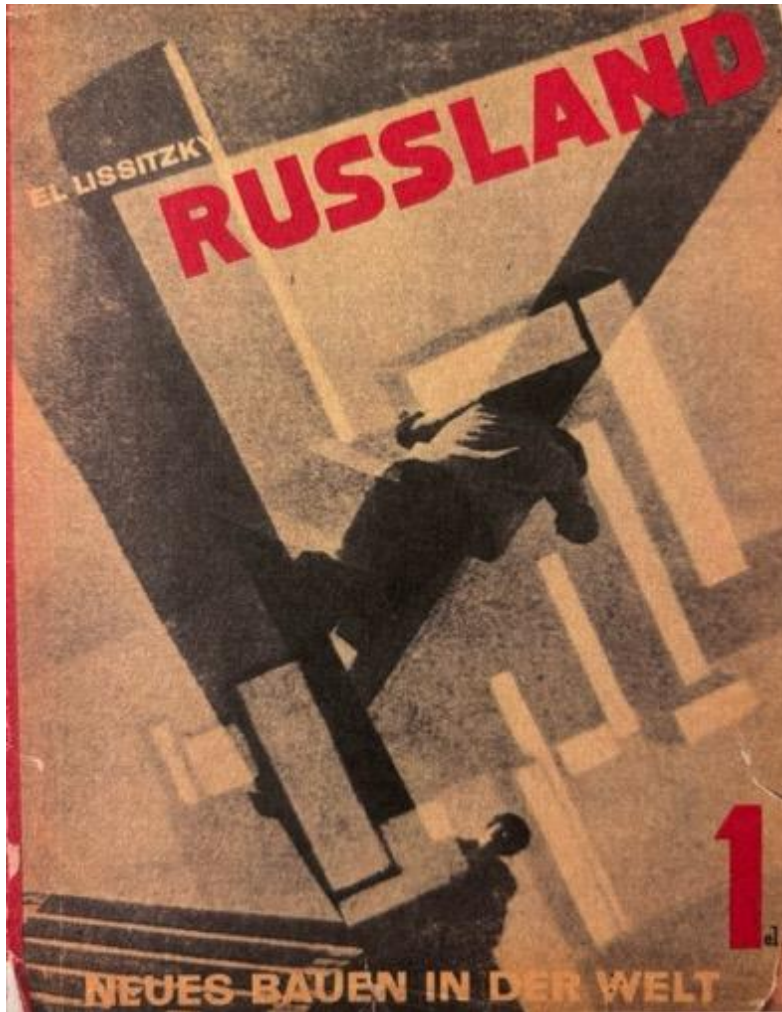
*Half Figure in Yellow Shirt*

c. 1932

Oil on canvas

99 x 97 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



**Figure 7.21**

**El Lissitzky**

*Russland*

1930

Reproduced from Richard Anderson, *Wolkenbügel: El Lissitzky as Architect* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2024)

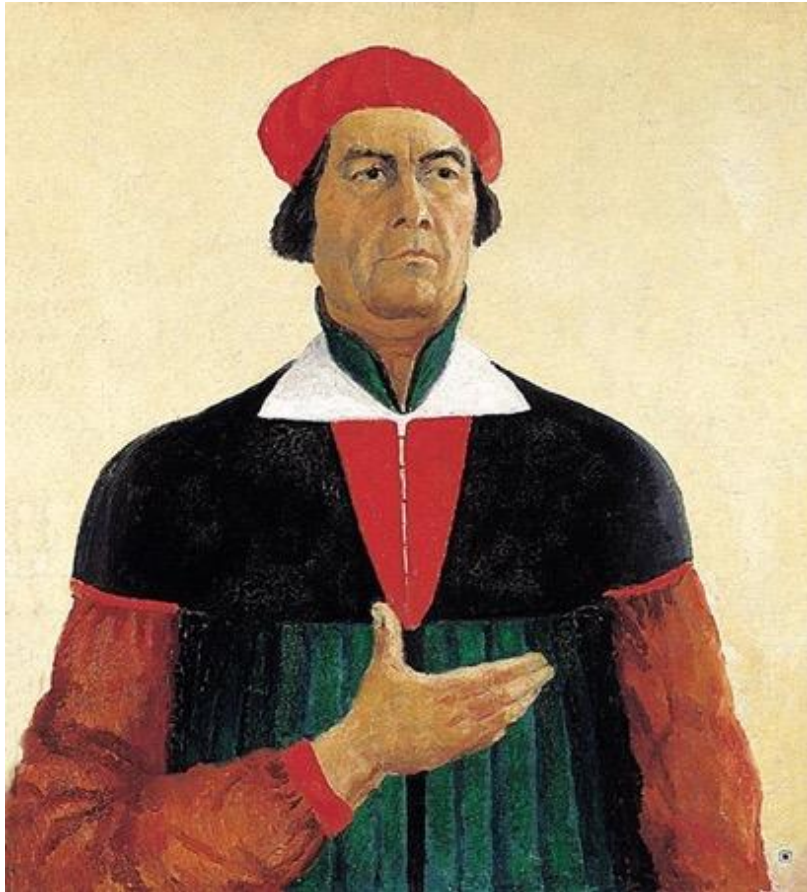


**Figure 7.22**

*Experimental Comprehensive Exhibition of the Art of the Capitalist Era*

1931-32

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow



**Figure 7.23**

**Kazimir Malevich**

*Self-Portrait*

1933

Oil on canvas

100 x 75 cm

State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

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