Notes on the Chronology of El Lissitzky's Proun Compositions

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Since the retrospective exhibition of the work of El Lissitzky (1890–1941) in 1965–1966,[1] increasing attention has been paid to this seminal figure in Russian and Western European art.[2] Lissitzky's work revolved around the concept of Proun, a Russian acronym signifying "for the new art."[3] Non-objective in formal vocabulary, based heavily on the Suprematist art of Malevich, the Prouns were conceived by Lissitzky as the place where painting would "change trains" to the spatial effects of architecture.[4] Beginning in early 1919,[5] the Proun series gradually evolved by the mid-1920's from paintings and prints to plans for theatrical productions[6] and exhibition design.[7] Our knowledge of the chronological development of the Prouns, however, has remained uncertain and speculative.[8] An examination of the goals Lissitzky set for himself in the Prouns and of the works themselves now permits the formulation of a reliable chronology for this work. With this knowledge, one is able to place the Proun compositions in the context of developments in Russia and in Western Europe where Lissitzky served as a cultural emissary from the Russian avant-garde.[9]

In recent years, observers of Lissitzky's art have proposed various criteria to help establish a chronology for the Prouns. For example, it is maintained that the Proun compositions gradually turned away from color,[10] displayed a growing sense of clarity and economy,[11] and/or tended to diffuse the areas of tension in the formal interrelationships over the entire picture surface.[12] Yet when these characteristics are set against Prouns whose date is certain, one quickly realizes the inadequacy of these criteria. *Proun 23, No. 6* (Fig. 1), done in 1919,[13] shares all the above features ostensibly characteristic of the later Prouns. Thus one is compelled to look more closely into the Prouns to understand the great difference separating *Proun 23, No. 6* from one of the last works in the series, *Proun 99* (Fig. 2).

It is important to recognize that Lissitzky approached a Proun composition essentially as a problem in the definition of space.[14] As the Proun series developed, the spatial interplay increased both in dynamism and in subtlety. *Proun 23, No. 6*, at the beginning of these experiments in space, contains spatial ambiguities in the tangent relationships and in the illusionistic effect of volumes projecting in front of the picture plane. But the spectator's position is static as he views these forms from below, with this overall calm supported by the muted red and cream colors. In *Proun 99* the spatial configuration has changed dramatically. Tangent relationships thoroughly confuse the positions of the cube, curved lines, grid, and the vertical form in the background. Lissitzky enhances the tonal contrasts to give the surface a pulsating rhythm. The grid, with its delicate linear interplay, acts as a repoussoir into three-dimensional space and as a flattened shape reasserting the painting's two-dimensionality. The cube also reads as a hollow, three-sided

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[1] The exhibition was shown at the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; Kunsthalle, Basel; and Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hanover. The catalogue has remained a most valuable source on Lissitzky.

[2] The most comprehensive survey of Lissitzky's work appears in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, Dresden, 1967 (English trans., Greenwich, Conn., 1968). See also N. Khardzhiev, "El Lissitzky, konstruktor knigi," *Iskusstvo Knigi*, III, 1962, 145–161 (abridged in Lissitzky-Küppers, *Lissitzky*, 379–385); N. Khardzhiev, "Pamyati khudozhnika Lissitzkova," *Dekorativnoye Iskusstvo SSSR*, II, February, 1961, 29–31; J. Baljeu, "The Problem of Reality with Suprematism, Constructivism, Proun, Neoplasticism, and Elementarism," *Lugano Review*, I, 1965, 105–128; K. Frampton, "The Work and Influence of El Lissitzky," *Architects' Year Book*, XII, 1968, 253–268; V. Roskin and Yu. Gerchuk, "O Lissitzkom," *Dekorativnoye Iskusstvo SSSR*, V, 1966, 28–30; and A. Birnholz, "'For the New Art': El Lissitzky's Prouns," *Artforum*, VIII, October, 1969, 65–70, and November, 1969, 68–73.

[3] G. H. Hamilton, *Painting and Sculpture in Europe 1880–1940*, Harmondsworth, 1967, 204. Lissitzky sought a term with great aural impact and conciseness to join his art, as Elderfield put it, to the "cult of efficiency which characterized post-Revolutionary society." See H. Richter, *El Lissitzky, Sieg über die Sonne, zur Kunst des Konstruktivismus*, Cologne, 1958, 13, and J. Elderfield, "On Constructivism," *Artforum*, IX, May, 1971, 58.

[4] "Proun ist die Umsteigestation von Malerei nach Architektur" (E. Lissitzky and H. Arp, *Die Kunstismen*, Munich and Leipzig, 1925, xi).

[5] Belloli dates the first Proun to late 1918 (C. Belloli, ed., *Il contributo russo alle avanguardie plastiche*, Milan, 1964, 83). For criticism of Belloli's text see N. Khardzhiev, "Appunti," *Paragone (Arte)*, XVI, May, 1965, 71–81.

[6] For Lissitzky's work on *Victory over the Sun*, see Richter, *Sieg, passim*. The opera, symbolic of man's supremacy over nature, played an important

part in the development of Malevich's Suprematism (T. Andersen, *Moderne Russisk Kunst 1910–1930*, Copenhagen, 1967, 49ff.). An English translation of *Victory over the Sun* appears in *Drama Review*, XV, Fall, 1971, 107–124.

[7] D. Helms, "Lissitzkys Demonstrationsräume," in Kestner-Gesellschaft, Hanover; Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven; and Kunsthalle, Basel, *El Lissitzky*, Eindhoven and Hanover, 1965, 26–28.

[8] For information on the Proun compositions destroyed in Germany during the 1930's, see F. Roh, *"Entartete" Kunst, Kunstbarbarei im Dritten Reich*, Hanover, 1962, *passim*.

[9] Although Lissitzky is often incorrectly numbered among the emigrés leaving Russia in the early 1920's, in fact he went to Germany to help establish contacts with avant-garde artists after the anti-Soviet blockade was lifted. See E. Lissitzky, "New Russian Art," *Studio International*, CLXXVI, October, 1968, 146–151, and E. Steneberg, *Russische Kunst Berlin 1919–1932*, Berlin, 1969, 31ff.

[10] Lissitzky in 1922 identified color, as a vehicle of emotion, with the Russian village, "close to the soil, colorful, still enclosed in medieval manner" and thus to be diminished in the Prouns (E. Lissitzky, "New Russian Art," 148).

[11] L. Leering-van Moorsel, "The Typography of El Lissitzky," *Journal of Typographic Research*, II, October, 1968, 328.

[12] J. Leering in conversation with the author, July 15, 1970.

[13] This date is certain because of the work's appearance in a photograph of Lissitzky in his studio in Vitebsk in 1919 (Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, pl. 28).
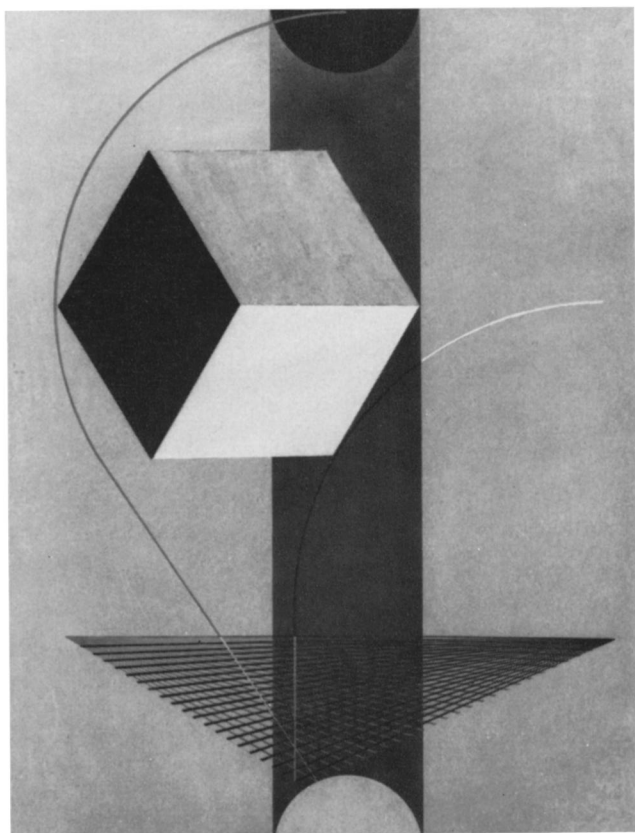
[14] "He saw essentially a technical problem in every work" (J. Tschichold, *El Lissitzky*, Berlin, 1971, 3).
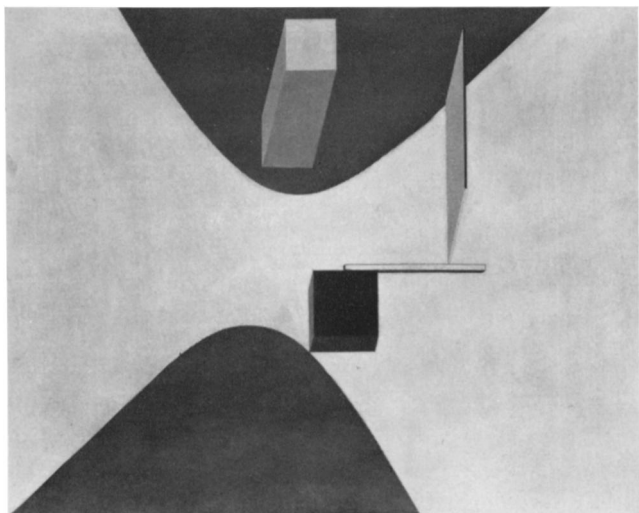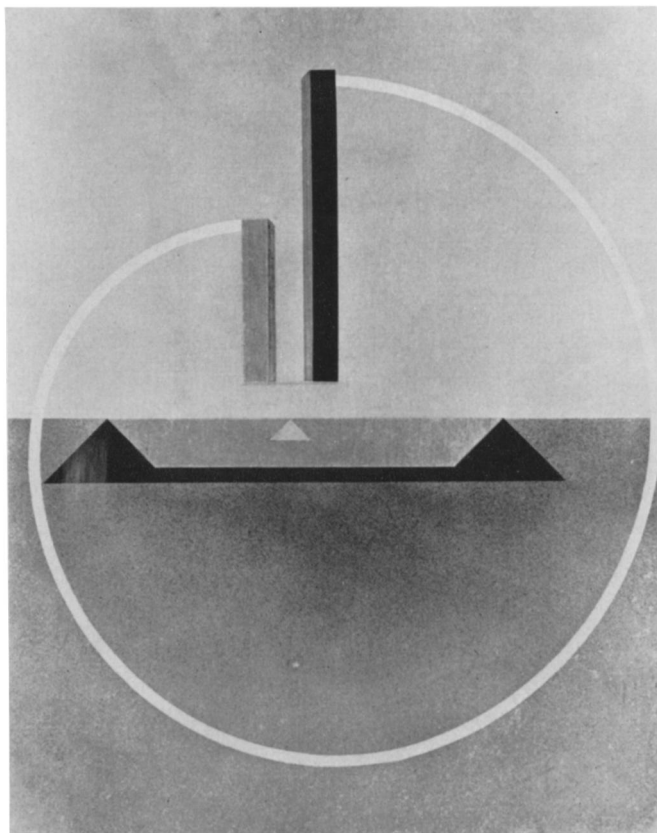
1 El Lissitzky, *Proun 23, No. 6.* London, Tate Gallery
(courtesy Grosvenor Gallery, London)
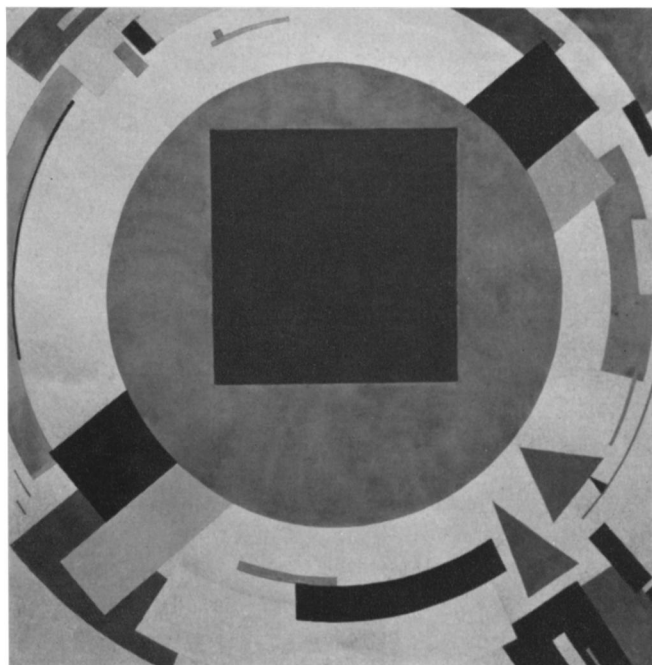
3 El Lissitzky, *Proun.* Eindhoven, Stedelijk van Abbemuseum

2 El Lissitzky, *Proun 99.* New Haven, Yale University Art
Gallery, Gift of Collection Société Anonyme

4 El Lissitzky, *Proun 95.* Birmingham, Mich., Mrs. Barnett
Malbin, Lydia and Harry L. Winston Collection

geometrical form. Finally, the lowest edge of the "cube" is not parallel to the horizontals above, thereby suggesting the form has moved as the spectator, too, seemingly changes his position. In summary, onto the three-dimensional armature of *Proun 23, No. 6* Lissitzky has added the dynamic fourth dimension of time. Movement and time later formed the dominant factors in Lissitzky's exhibition designs.[15]

On the basis of a recognition of Lissitzky's concern with a dynamic space in the Prouns, one can reformulate the dating for these works. One Proun painting, in the Stedelijk van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven and dated "before 1924" (Fig. 3), clearly falls among the earliest Prouns not only because of its formal association with Lissitzky's academic position in Vitebsk at this time,[16] but also because of the lack of spatial interplay among the forms. *Proun 95* (Fig. 4), formerly dated ca. 1920, is close to *Proun 99* in such features as the curved forms that confuse the spatial relationship of the rectangular solids to the triangular shapes below, the positioning of the horizontal division of the canvas just below the center, the shift in tonalities, and the ambiguity of two- and three-dimensional forms.

For Lissitzky, the "cosmic space" of the Prouns came to symbolize the utopia he envisioned in the new social order of the Revolution.[17] In marking the steps toward this goal of an active, four-dimensional space, one possesses a reliable means for determining the chronology of the Prouns.

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[15] In *Das Abstrakte Kabinett* (Hanover, 1927), for example, the entire tonal configuration of the room changed with each step by the spectator. See Helms, "Demonstrationsraume."

[16] A red square (dark blue in the Proun) was the symbol of the Vitebsk UNOVIS (Institute of New Art) where Lissitzky served in 1919 under Chagall, and later Malevich. The painting also relates to Lissitzky's poster "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge" (1919) in which red triangular forms break apart an inert circular configuration (photo: Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, pl. 40).

[17] E. Lissitzky, "Proun" and "K. und Pangeometrie" in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, 344–45, 349–355.