

The Puzzle of El Lissitzky's Artistic Identity

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To celebrate the birth of his first son, Jen, on 12 October 1930 in Moscow, El Lissitzky (1890–1941) created a multiple exposure photograph known today as the *Birth Announcement of the Artist's Son* (fig. 1). A poignant and enigmatic image, the photomontage evokes many of the questions surrounding Lissitzky's elusive identity, both as an artist of the European and Russian avant-gardes and as a propagandist for the Soviets. Let us begin by considering the iconography of this piece, with its seemingly optimistic, joyful message: the infant Jen is superimposed upon photographs of a smiling female worker, a smoking factory chimney and whistle, and a newspaper celebrating Stalin's First Five-Year Plan. Lissitzky borrowed the image of the factory chimney from the frontispiece for the first issue of *SSSR na stroike* (1930; *USSR in Construction*), the most widely distributed propaganda periodical of its day, published simultaneously in Russian, English, French, and German.¹ The full-page photograph, by Dimitrii Georgevich Debabov, uses the oblique angle to highlight the sheen and enormity of the chimney (fig. 2); a propaganda message to party officials in the Soviet Union and abroad, the frontispiece called attention to the achievements of the newly industrialized Soviet state. Lissitzky's choice of Debabov's photograph as one of four in his photomontage signals his desire for an optimistic tone. Together, the overlaid photographs convey a sense of hope, both for Lissitzky's personal world, especially the future of his infant son, and for his professional future in the new Soviet state.

According to Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, the artist's wife and longtime collaborator, the birth of Jen was "one of the happiest moments of [her husband's] life."² In a stirring, personal letter to Edith Tschichold, wife of the German typographer Jan, written less than a week before the baby was due, Lissitzky-Küppers confided that she and her husband regarded the birth as a "great blessing, as a way to break free from our intellectual confinement and really live. . . . Lissitzky is so calm and looking forward to the new life; this time with him is very beautiful."³ Her letter makes clear that daily life in Moscow was intolerable: groceries were "appallingly expensive," household items were impossible to find, and hospital accommodations for childbirth were substandard. Nonetheless, and perhaps because of such grim conditions, Jen's arrival offered a ray of hope. Moreover, the birth came amid a time of professional success for Lissitzky—in 1930 he had been awarded commissions to design the Soviet pavilions for two highly touted major exhibitions:



Fig. 1. El Lissitzky
Birth Announcement of the Artist's Son, 1930, gelatin silver print, 13.5 × 8.9 cm (5³/₈ × 3¹/₂ in.)
Los Angeles, Collection Robert Shapazian



Fig. 2. El Lissitzky (photograph by Dimitrii Georgevich Debabov)
Frontispiece
From *SSSR na stroike* (USSR in construction), no. 1 (1930): 1

the Internationale Hygiene-Ausstellung in Dresden and the Internationale Pelz-Ausstellung in Leipzig. In the birth announcement, we can read the merging of Lissitzky's personal and professional aspirations as he links Jen's future with factory images symbolizing functional architecture and the grand building and housing projects in which Lissitzky hoped to participate.⁴

Lissitzky made several prints of the *Birth Announcement of the Artist's Son*, including a postcard that he sent to his close friends and colleagues in Russia and central Europe, most likely including the Russian filmmaker Dziga Vertov, the Dutch architects J. J. P. Oud and Theo van Doesburg, the German artists Kurt Schwitters and Hans Richter, the Hungarian painter László Moholy-Nagy, and Jan Tschichold.⁵ The postcard that Tschichold received is now in the collections of the Getty Research Institute (see pl. 1). A typed inscription in red heralds the arrival of "klein el" (little el), and gives his birth date, "12 oktober 1930," and place of birth, "moskau." The words, set at an angle and in the lowercase type that Lissitzky sometimes used in the 1920s in letters to his wife and colleagues, provide a personal signature and enhance the intimacy of the birth announcement.

Yet the addition of the German text also tempers the pro-Soviet message conveyed by the visual images; optimism about Soviet industry and housing is qualified by an expressed alliance with the central European avant-garde. The red type can be traced to Lissitzky's treatment of his name, "el," on the printed letterhead design he invented while in Switzerland in 1924 (see pl. 13). Certainly, in reading the postcard, Tschichold would have immediately associated the inscription with Lissitzky's letterhead and with the Bauhaus and constructivist typography reproduced and promoted in Tschichold's publications on avant-garde design. Bauhaus colleagues likewise would have made the connection with Lissitzky's red letterhead, since they also corresponded with him and experimented with font, color, and typeface in their own letterheads.

On a more personal level, too, it was quite natural for Lissitzky to incorporate Western elements into his graphic design — German was, after all, the language he spoke with his wife, a German art dealer whom he met in Hannover in October 1922. Several months after this first meeting, Lissitzky received a solo exhibition of his work at the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hannover — Lissitzky-Küppers's first husband, Dr. Paul Erich Küppers, had created the Kestner Gesellschaft as a venue to support and promote the German avant-garde, and, when he died of the Spanish flu in 1922, Lissitzky-Küppers continued his work.⁶ Subsequently, Lissitzky gladly accepted commissions to design exhibitions in Dresden (*Raum für konstruktive Kunst*, 1926) and Hannover (*Kabinett der Abstrakten*, 1927–28), because Lissitzky-Küppers remained in Germany until their marriage in January 1927 in Moscow. The inscription on the birth announcement thus invokes a network of personal and professional loyalties to Germany and in so doing mediates the futuristic imagery and the message of Soviet propaganda.

One wonders, though, given the political events in Russia and Germany in 1930, how Lissitzky's artist friends received and interpreted the postcard's

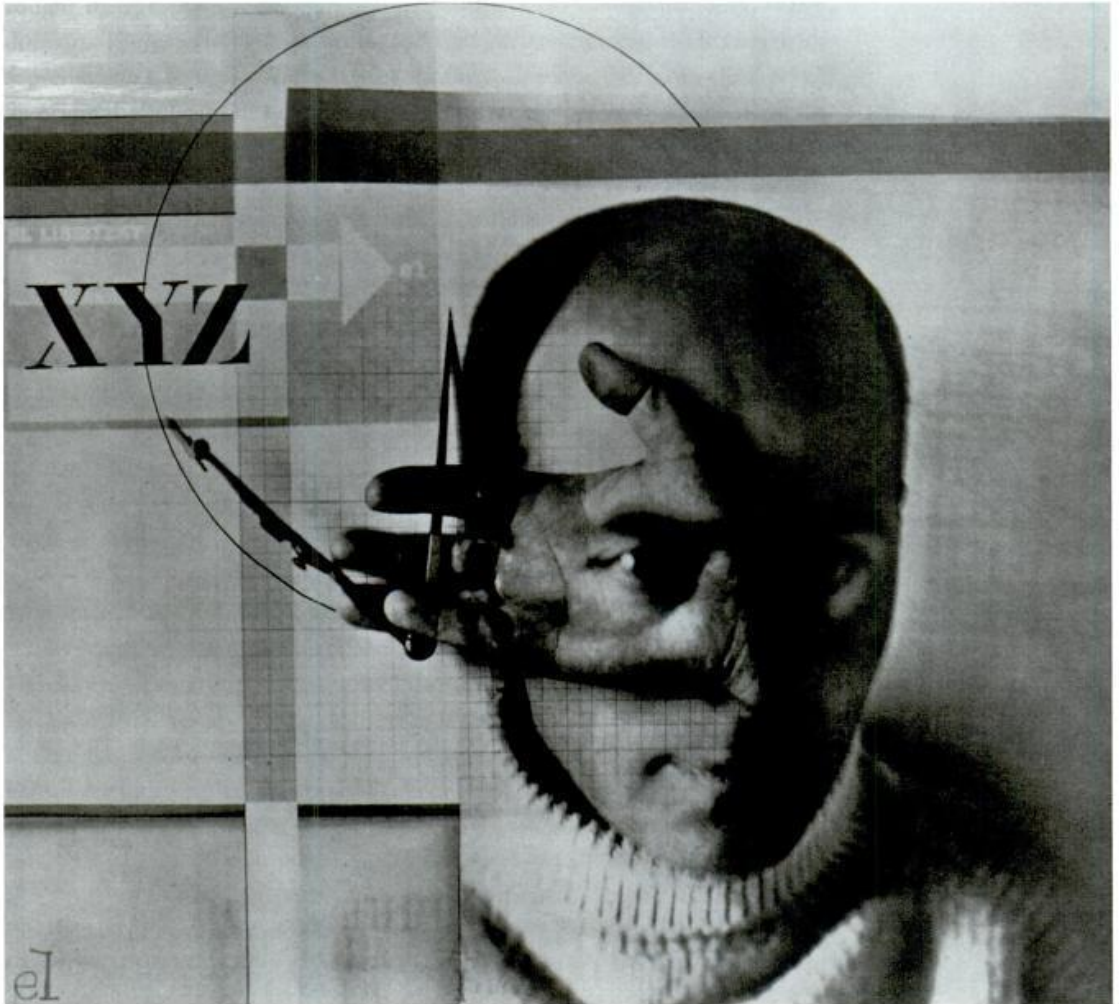


Fig. 3. El Lissitzky
The Constructor (Self-Portrait), ca. 1924, gelatin silver print, 19 × 21.2 cm (7½ × 8⅝ in.)
Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute



Fig. 4. View of El Lissitzky's propaganda board in front of a factory in Vitebsk, 1920
Moscow, RIA-Novosti

optimistic Soviet imagery. In Germany the Dessau Bauhaus was on the verge of collapse—not only its leading artists but also its director, Hannes Meyer, accused of Communist connections, had fled to Moscow. In April 1930 in the Soviet Union, Vladimir Mayakovsky, the great poet, playwright, and longtime collaborator of Lissitzky's, committed suicide. And for nearly three months in 1930, Lissitzky's friend and colleague, Russian artist Kazimir Malevich, was imprisoned by the state on suspicion of spying for Germany.⁷ How eagerly could Lissitzky have awaited the future, living in Soviet Russia in 1930 and with so many colleagues far away in Germany?

The text and imagery of the *Birth Announcement of the Artist's Son* thus point to enigmatic issues surrounding Lissitzky's career and his art: his relation to the Russian and European avant-gardes of the early 1920s; his role and intentions as a Soviet propagandist; and his conception of national identity, for himself and for his son, "klein el." The essays in this volume seek to reconstruct aspects of this identity through a critique of the artist's work and theory, and through revisionist readings of both celebrated images, such as the photographic self-portrait of 1924, *The Constructor (Self-Portrait)* (fig. 3), and the exhibition space known as *Proun Room* of 1923 (see p. 49, fig. 1), and little-studied works, such as the Vitebsk propaganda board of the civil war years (fig. 4), the photographs produced in Switzerland in 1924, and the unrealized book covers of the mid-1930s. A full and coherent portrait does not emerge, perhaps because it is still too early in the scholarship. Instead, Lissitzky's many facets—Bolshevik visionary, craftsman, cinema artist, suprematist book artist, Soviet propagandist, internationalist—are interpreted against the shifting geographical and sociopolitical contexts in which he worked.

I

Lazar Markovich (El) Lissitzky was born in the Smolensk province in western Russia in 1890 to an educated middle-class Jewish family. He grew up in Vitebsk, a small Jewish town in Belorussia, where he took art lessons from Russian painter Iurii (Yehuda) Mosseevich Pen, who also taught Marc Chagall. Lissitzky left Russia for the first time in 1909 to enroll at the Technische Hochschule in Darmstadt, Germany, where he studied architectural engineering. While a student in Darmstadt, Lissitzky traveled in Germany and also to France and Italy, but was forced to return to Russia at the beginning of World War I. He enrolled as a student of engineering and architecture at the Riga Polytechnical Institute (*Rizhskii politekhnicheskii institut*), temporarily quartered in Moscow, and received his diploma on 3 June 1918 with the degree of engineer-architect.⁸

In 1916 Lissitzky became deeply involved in a Russian national movement to create a revival of Yiddish culture for modern Russian Jews. With the artist Issachar Ryback, he set off on an expedition organized by the Jewish Historical and Ethnographic Society (*Evreiskoe istoricheskoe-etnograficheskoe obshchestvo*) to study and record the ornamentation and inscriptions in synagogues located along the Dnieper River. Following the February Revolution of

1917, Lissitzky moved from Moscow to Kiev where he devoted himself to the illustration of Yiddish books, especially for children, and organized and submitted work for exhibitions of Jewish art in Moscow. In early 1919, he helped found the publishing house Kultur-Lige, which became a leading force in the dissemination of Yiddish culture. Toward the end of his stay in Kiev, Lissitzky worked for the art section of the local branch of Narkompros (Narodnom komissariat po prosveshcheniyv; People's commissariat of enlightenment).⁹

Lissitzky's move in July 1919 from the relative isolation of the Bolshevik-controlled city of Kiev back to Vitebsk brought with it a shift in focus from Yiddish culture to architecture and book design. At the invitation of Marc Chagall, Lissitzky began a new position teaching architecture, graphic arts, and printing at the Vitebsk Popular Art Institute (Vitebskoe Narodnoi khudozhestvennoi uchilishche). In September, he was joined by Malevich, whose system of nonobjective art, suprematism, inspired Lissitzky to take up painting and to invent his own form of abstract art, which he named *Proun* (Proekt utverzhdania novogo; Project for the affirmation of the new).¹⁰ Propaganda also became a more overt part of Lissitzky's artistic mission at this time; during the civil war, he worked in the suprematist collective UNOVIS (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva; Affirmers of the new art) as a designer of agitational posters meant to incite workers back to the factory benches and to rally Jews around Bolshevism.

After disagreements between Chagall and Malevich led to the disbandment of the Vitebsk Popular Art Institute in 1921, Lissitzky returned to Moscow to teach architecture at the newly established VKhUTEMAS (Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvennye tekhnicheskie masterskie; Higher state artistic and technical workshops). This was a period of great artistic ferment and debate in Moscow. Lissitzky's arrival coincided with the emergence of the radical First Working Group of Constructivists (Pervaa rabochaia gruppa konstruktivistov), which advocated a utilitarian and socialist platform of art for industry.¹¹ In September 1921, at INKhUK (Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury; Institute of artistic culture), Lissitzky put forth his own program in an important lecture, outlining the connections between suprematist painting and the principles of space and construction in his *Proun* works.

Late in 1921, Lissitzky left Russia for Berlin, by way of Warsaw, dispatched by the Soviet government to establish cultural contacts between Soviet and German artists. He collaborated with Schwitters, the French artist Hans Arp, van Doesburg, Richter, the Swiss architect Emil Roth, the Dutch architect Mart Stam, the American writer Matthew Josephson, and others on printmaking, book and periodical designs, and manifestos promoting *Proun* theory and a new international constructivism (figs. 5, 6). In 1923 Lissitzky contracted tuberculosis and spent the next three years in Swiss sanatoriums where, with the help of his future wife, he produced books and photographs at a remarkable pace. After trying unsuccessfully to renew his Swiss visa, he returned to Moscow in 1925. By 1927, with the success of his design for the All-Union Printing Trades Exhibition (Vsesoiuznaia poligraficheskaia vystavka)



Fig. 5. El Lissitzky at the Union Internationaler Fortschrittlicher Künstler in Düsseldorf

Left to right: unidentified man, Ruggiero Vasari, Werner Graeff, unidentified man, Hans Richter, Nelly van Doesburg, unidentified man, unidentified boy, El Lissitzky, Theo van Doesburg, Kurt Seiwert, Raoul Hausmann
1922, gelatin silver print, 9 × 14.2 cm (3½ × 5⅝ in.)

Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute



Fig. 6. El Lissitzky with the American writer and editor Matthew Josephson and an unidentified woman in Berlin
1922, toned gelatin silver print, 14 x 9 cm (5½ x 3½ in.)
Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute



Fig. 7. Georgy Zelma

El Lissitzky in Moscow Working on the Album Raboche-krest'ianskaia krasnaia armiiia (Workers and peasants' Red Army), 1934, gelatin silver print, 15.9 x 22.5 cm (6¼ x 8⅞ in.)
Los Angeles, Getty Research Institute

in Moscow, Lissitzky had become a much sought-after propagandist for the Stalinist regime. Until his death in 1941, Lissitzky designed exhibitions and propaganda albums, applying avant-garde techniques to photographic murals and spreads that celebrated the accomplishments of the Soviet state in social welfare, fur trading, the press, and film (fig. 7). Lissitzky died of tuberculosis in Moscow at the age of fifty-one.

II

This volume takes its place among a small number of English-language monographs on Lissitzky. Two early monographs provided the essential documentation for subsequent scholarship. *El Lissitzky: Maler, Architekt, Typograf, Fotograf: Erinnerungen, Briefe, Schriften* by Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, published in Dresden in 1967 and translated from the German in 1968, is both a biography based on Lissitzky's letters to his wife and a collection of primary texts. *El Lissitzky, 1890–1941*, Peter Nisbet's catalog for an exhibition of Lissitzky's graphic design work held at the Busch-Reisinger Museum in 1987, offers a critical history of the artist's life, drawn from documents and photographs in Russian archives, as well as a catalogue raisonné of Lissitzky's book and periodical designs. Nisbet postulates three Lissitzkys: a Chagallian Lissitzky of early 1919; a suprematist Lissitzky of late 1919 and the early 1920s; and a Stalinist Lissitzky of the 1930s.¹² Nisbet's periodization has been reinforced, most famously by Yve-Alain Bois, who interprets a vast discontinuity between the suprematist and the Stalinist Lissitzkys. Whereas the former critiqued the illusions of perception and spatial orientation, Bois argues, the latter dropped this play with the spectator's expectations of perspective.¹³

More recent works include *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917–1946*—in which Victor Margolin analyzes Lissitzky's methods of photomontage, design, and layout, and his direction, in close collaboration with Soviet officials, of special issues of *SSSR na stroike*—and *El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet: Photography, Design, Collaboration*, in which Margarita Tupitsyn highlights the photographic experiments from 1925, after Lissitzky's return to Moscow, and his graphic innovations in book and exhibition designs of the 1930s.¹⁴ Tupitsyn's analysis points to the tensions in Lissitzky's later art between the coercive, collective message of Soviet propaganda and the avant-garde experimentation with layout, lettering, photomontage, and book display.

These monographs are united by a historical and analytic approach to most aspects of Lissitzky's wide-ranging art. In the past few years, Russian modernist studies have addressed the contemporary reception of the avant-garde. In a recent assessment of new approaches to Russian modernism, Jane Sharp defines the artistic production as a "collusion of interests among the various parties, avant-garde artists, Bolshevik or Stalinist institutions, and, in instances, critical reception."¹⁵ Several new essays on Lissitzky reflect the move to look more closely at the artist as polemicist. Éva Forgács, for instance, traces Lissitzky's deliberate forging of a modernist artistic persona contra

Malevich, while Paul Galvez analyzes *The Constructor* as both an expression of the Enlightenment project of self-knowledge and an assertion of man's stupidity and bestiality, symbolized by the image of the hand, which Lissitzky referred to in a personal letter as his "monkey-hand."¹⁶

The present collection of essays pushes these perspectives further. Leading scholars of Russian and European modernism boldly question and revise interpretations that have become standard in the literature on this period. The result is a *mise au point* that introduces readers to the salient questions in contemporary Lissitzky scholarship: How does the cool, rational statement of the artist-engineer in *The Constructor* vie with the image's critique of industry and the machine? Where did Lissitzky situate himself among the international avant-gardes of his day? How do we reconcile Lissitzky the refined aesthete and technician with Lissitzky the Soviet propagandist, and was his propaganda "reluctant"?¹⁷ What aesthetic criteria can be applied to the Stalinist work? Through a laying bare of these and other problematic issues, and through critical accounts that address political context, technique, and media, *Situating El Lissitzky* not only maps the current state of Lissitzky research but also grapples with the many facets of his artistic identity and with the meaning of his art for his contemporaries.

This book grew out of a conference that accompanied the exhibition *Monuments of the Future: Designs by El Lissitzky*, organized by the Getty Research Institute in the winter of 1998–99.¹⁸ The conference brought to the fore central themes that were chronicled visually in the exhibition through a display of book designs, manuscripts, and photographs held in the Research Institute's collections. Both the exhibition and the conference were inspired by the belief that underlying continuities unified the sudden changes in Lissitzky's style and media. Indeed, the exhibition argued that in all three of the phases identified by Nisbet (Chagallian, suprematist, and Stalinist), Lissitzky conceived of the book as an object, in terms of its tactile, optical, and architectural properties, and, moreover, that in all three of the phases, Lissitzky habitually aligned his artistic work with contemporary social and cultural conditions. The conference probed the question of stylistic continuity, with the discussion centering particularly around Lissitzky's early Bolshevism, his position within the different avant-garde movements in Russia and in the West, and the problem of evaluating his Stalinist work.

The essays in this volume are complemented by a selection of five letters from the Jan and Edith Tschichold Papers at the Getty Research Institute (see pp. 243–59); four are from Lissitzky to Jan Tschichold, and one is from Sophie Küppers to Edith Tschichold. Often confined to bed because of his tuberculosis, Lissitzky wrote frequently to his many colleagues and to his wife in order to conduct professional transactions, relating to both collaborations with other artists and to Soviet and German commissions, and as a forum for his aesthetic and political views. The five letters published here span the years from 1925 to 1932, and they chronicle Lissitzky's continued close relationship with his German friend, his determination to publish in Russian translation

Tschichold's important books on typography, and his insistent requests for copies of two recent European publications—the German photographer Franz Roh's book on the new realism in painting of the mid-1920s, entitled *Nach-expressionismus; magischer Realismus: Probleme der neuesten Europäischen Malerei* (1925), and a book on typography by the German designer Paul Renner, who taught with Tschichold at the Meisterschule für Deutschlands Buchdrucker, the printing school in Munich in the 1930s.¹⁹ The letters capture Lissitzky's liveliness as a writer and theorist, and they convey in absorbing detail his plight as a Soviet artist, his struggles to find creative work, his progress on specific projects, and the effects of his illness on his work and family. While they do not resolve the questions of continuity in Lissitzky's many styles and ideologies, they certainly demonstrate how his personal and professional sides were inextricably linked.

Like the selection of letters, the present collection of essays cannot claim to be comprehensive. Lissitzky's Yiddish period, for example, is an area in need of documentary research, specifically the rise and subsequent fall-off of his enthusiasm for the artistic expression of Jewish secular traditions. For now, however, the most heated reevaluations of Lissitzky's art center around the periods of his career associated with Vitebsk, Berlin, and Moscow. Perhaps these new interpretations will in time lead scholars back to a critical examination of Lissitzky's work as a Yiddish artist, thus furthering our understanding of his artistic identity.

III

The organization of the essays in *Situating El Lissitzky* is topical. "East-West," the first of the book's three parts, considers Lissitzky's strategies as a Russian artist working among the European avant-garde of the early 1920s. "Hand-Eye," the second part, ranges from Lissitzky's early training as an engineer-architect in Darmstadt to his photographic technique and theory in Switzerland to the innovative blending of photographic forms that he grouped under the neologism *fotopis'* (painting with photographs) of the late 1920s. The essays in "Hand-Eye" probe the meaning of constructivism, both in relation to craft and artistic practice and to the industrial and mass-produced object. "Propaganda," the third part, takes up Lissitzky's propaganda of the 1930s and his politically motivated designs produced in Vitebsk. The five letters included in this volume offer a glimpse into Lissitzky's personal and professional concerns during his first six years in Moscow, from 1925 to 1932. The book's organization suggests that particular media and strategies consistently absorbed Lissitzky, even as he moved among the geographical settings and political circumstances of Vitebsk, Berlin, and Moscow.

In the book's opening essay, "El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism," Christina Lodder overturns the standard portrait of Lissitzky as international constructivist. Invoking Stephen Bann's first use of the term in 1974, Lodder explains that scholars have typically drawn a distinction between the aesthetic enterprise of international constructivism and the utilitarian goals of

Russian constructivism, which sought to create a new art for the postrevolutionary order. She herself endorsed this view in 1983, when she contrasted the purely aesthetic goals of the Western movement with the political intentions of its Russian counterpart. Yet, in her present essay Lodder challenges the theory of an East-West polarity.²⁰ She is convinced that radical politics motivated both movements and that Lissitzky was responsible for introducing the Russian progressive ideology to the West as part of a carefully orchestrated, semiofficial strategy that he pursued as a committed Communist and potentially as an employee of the Cheka (Russian secret police). According to Lodder's thesis, the progressive aspect of UNOVIS—its activist call for a new social order that would match the universalist aesthetic of abstract color planes—contributed to Lissitzky's formulation of international constructivism. Indeed, she argues, ideology was a driving force of the avant-garde movements of the early '20s: the geometric abstraction that Richter, Lissitzky, and their Western colleagues labeled constructivist was an ideological instrument intended to promote world revolution in the capitalist West, just as the UNOVIS collective sought artistic revolution in the Soviet East. Lodder concludes that schematic distinctions between Russian and Western constructivism ultimately oversimplify the nuanced set of circumstances that defined the constructivist movement.

In "Definitive Space: The Many Utopias of El Lissitzky's *Proun Room*," Éva Forgács is similarly interested in Lissitzky's efforts to create an international art movement centered in Berlin. Forgács investigates, more specifically, Lissitzky's motivations for reconciling the competing ideals of the Russian and European avant-gardes. Forgács takes as her case study the *Proun Room* of 1923, which Lissitzky wrote about in Richter's journal, *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*. Forgács notes that in this text Lissitzky emphatically announced the erasure of the old and the confrontation with the new: "We are destroying the wall as the resting place for their pictures," he declared. "We no longer want the room to be like a painted coffin for our living body."²¹ In a posthumously published manifesto entitled "Demonstrationsräume," relied on frequently by contemporary critics, Lissitzky used his *Proun Room* and the two demonstration spaces he created subsequently in Dresden and Hannover—*Raum für konstruktive Kunst* (1926) and the *Kabinett der Abstrakten* (1927–28)—as a way of framing his radical exhibition techniques: the transformation of *Wohnzimmer* (living room) into demonstration space; the mobile viewer; the use of abstract elementary forms and materials and also of reliefs; and the shift from illusory to "real" space.

The purpose of Forgács's essay is to set aside such claims to originality and novelty and to investigate instead the myriad avant-garde visual sources from which Lissitzky borrowed for his *Proun Room*. Forgács argues that Lissitzky tried to modernize suprematism, that is, to retool it as more progressive and to claim that it shared with constructivism an interest in material reality and "real" space. His interest in the Dutch de Stijl movement and his friendship with van Doesburg led Lissitzky to incorporate the architectural application

of geometric abstraction to interior space, especially the extension of geometric forms across corners, and to suggest affinities with Russian constructivism, especially the dismissal of easel painting. Yet, as Forgács points out, the aesthetic goals of de Stijl in fact differed utterly from the utilitarian position of the Russian constructivists. Whereas Lodder argues that movements as seemingly divergent as suprematism and Russian and international constructivism shared the goals of radical politics, Forgács calls attention to their aesthetic and visual incompatibility in the *Proun Room*. In her discussion of ideology, Forgács assesses Lissitzky's efforts as being out of step with the fading of utopian politics in the East and also in the West. One of the interesting topics raised by both Forgács and Lodder is the articulation of Lissitzky's utopianism in the early 1920s: Forgács sees it expressed in the ideal of synthesizing what proved to be opposing artistic vocabularies, while Lodder views it as a cynical move to inspire world revolution in the West.

In "Constructivism Disoriented: El Lissitzky's Dresden and Hannover *Demonstrationsräume*," Maria Gough introduces a third perspective on Lissitzky's work in Germany in the 1920s and his production of designs inspired by Western European and Soviet aesthetics: Gough's specific focus is on the period of the *Raum für konstruktive Kunst* and the *Kabinett der Abstrakten*, when Lissitzky had returned to Moscow but continued to receive commissions in Germany and to travel back and forth between the two countries. How did his new home, where, as health permitted, he immersed himself in functional building projects from 1925 until his death, influence his conception of design and of the didactic and ideological roles of exhibitions? Did commissions to design Soviet periodicals and public building projects—such as his appointment to edit *ASNOVA: Izvestiia Assotsiatsii novykh arkhitektov* (Review of the association of new architects) and his work on an unrealized design for the yacht club of an international sports complex in Moscow's Vorob'evye Gory (Sparrow Hills, now Lenin Hills)—induce him to draw more heavily on Soviet constructivist design principles or to continue his synthetic approach, incorporating both Eastern and Western sources? Gough argues that Lissitzky modeled his designs for the two demonstration spaces on European and Soviet principles of standardization, according to which the demonstration space was a prototype, a site designed for the "substitution and exchange" of works of art: works chosen for display in the spaces were to be interchangeable, but each was to be differentiated in terms of its "manner of isolation and illumination."

This constructivist standard (unlike Lodder and Forgács, Gough does not designate it as Russian or international) prompted Lissitzky's use of new technologies such as open-construction, modular units and, in the Hannover space, stainless steel manufactured by Friedrich Krupp AG. Lissitzky moved away from constructivist mechanization, however, by creating what he called an *optische Dynamik* (optical dynamic), in which the shifting colors of the lath walls, depending on the viewer's position in the room and on asymmetries in the installation of the artworks, pulled the viewer's attention at once

to the individual works of art and to the striated wall, so that it was never quite possible to separate the two. The effect was not simply an “activation” of the viewer but also a disorientation caused by the spatial imbalance of surfaces, cubes, and vitrines: the Soviet filmmaker Dziga Vertov described his experience in the Hannover space as a kind of “groping.”

The idea of disorientation is central to Gough’s argument that Lissitzky’s practice of standardization (of the exhibition space) and continuous differentiation (of the artworks displayed within) distinguished his *Demonstrationsräume* of the late 1920s from the earlier *Proun Room*, which, with its synthesis of styles into a “real space” installation for the display of abstract art, embodied the ideal of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* (total artwork). Gough points out that in a letter of March 1926 to Sophie Küppers, Lissitzky referred disparagingly to Piet Mondrian’s design of a domestic interior as a “still-life of a room, for viewing through the keyhole.” The timing of this critique of de Stijl suggests that Lissitzky conceived the Dresden and Hannover demonstration spaces quite differently than he had his *Proun Room*. Indeed, the essays of Lodder, Forgács, and Gough, considered as a group, suggest that while the *Proun Room* was a utopian backward glance at a suprematist space and at the abstract, geometric, idealized interiors of de Stijl, the later demonstration spaces sought to radically transform the exhibition environment for viewing abstract art. All three authors provocatively position Lissitzky’s demonstration spaces in relation to Western sources (de Stijl, international constructivism, Western housing models) and to Eastern models of constructivism and Soviet building design, indicating that, even in designs conceived so differently, Western European and Soviet discourses continued to define his art.

The slippery designation of Lissitzky as constructivist is the subject of John Bowl’s essay, “Manipulating Metaphors: El Lissitzky and the Crafted Hand,” which opens the second part, “Hand-Eye.” Rather than taking an ideological stance, Bowl makes a case for the significance of applied art and manual techniques as components of Lissitzky’s production. He suggests that scholars who emphasize science and technology as the basis for Lissitzky’s worldview overlook the intriguing paradoxes that surround his particular brand of constructivism. To be sure, Lissitzky was precise and economical in his treatment of form, and he was interested in new printing and camera technologies, as readings of his photographic work *The Constructor* generally state. Yet he also relied on both traditional artistic practices that entailed dexterity and craftsmanship and on occult or spiritual sources of inspiration.

The central part of Bowl’s essay is a close documentation of Lissitzky’s early exposure to traditional arts and crafts and his later training at the Technische Hochschule in Darmstadt (1909–14) and the Riga Polytechnical Institute in Moscow. Although Lissitzky’s handicraft and book designs in the Yiddish period have prompted new research, his contemporaneous academic training continues to be neglected by scholars.²² Bowl maintains that the coursework in Darmstadt and Moscow encouraged Lissitzky’s talents as a draftsman and technician. Bowl bases his discussion on existing archival

materials concerning the Riga Polytechnical Institute and on correspondence with Malevich in the archive of the Khardzhiev-Chaga Kunststichting, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam. These historical sources enable Bowlt to reconstruct Lissitzky's probable courses of study and his interests in the functioning of machine parts and industrial objects. Bowlt argues that the appeal of the technical institute for an artist like Lissitzky must have been in the opportunity there to use the hand *and* the machine to produce industrial designs and models. Bowlt's reinterpretation of *The Constructor* gives new emphasis to the symbolism of tactility and handicraft (for him, the hand is as important as the eye) and to the material act of drawing on paper with a compass. The constructivist artist-engineer is also a craftsman.

The essays of Lodder, Forgács, and Bowlt use different kinds of evidence to put forth a shared assertion: Lissitzky's constructivism was not a straightforward method of geometric abstraction, economy, and the construction of objects; rather, it was a complex ideological mix, full of contradictory impulses that bespeak alignments outside constructivism. Leah Dickerman, in "El Lissitzky's Camera Corpus," likewise challenges rationalist interpretations of Lissitzky; like Bowlt, she makes the case that *The Constructor* is not principally about rationality, industrial design, and the pure machine. Whereas Bowlt pursues historical sources to support his argument, Dickerman analyzes the camera techniques that Lissitzky used in *The Constructor* and in other photomontages produced in Switzerland in 1924. Connecting the portrait to Lissitzky's theoretical writings of 1924, Dickerman argues that Lissitzky's critique of perspectivalism in his essay "K[unst]. und Pangeometrie" (A[rt]. and pangeometry) and the integration of the rational (technology) and the irrational (nature) in *Nasci*, the special issue of the dadaist journal *Merz* that Lissitzky coedited with Schwitters, are operative forces in his photomontage work of the period. Dickerman writes that "pockets of darkness and variable focus" in *The Constructor* are "as much about irrationality as rationality and as much about the body as the machine." Lissitzky's theory thus becomes a guide to his photographic practice: while axonometry in his *Proun* works subverts the model of monocular perspective through techniques of spatial rotation and shifting axes and a playful negation of the spectator's fixed position in relation to a picture plane, his photographs of 1924 explore the very tactility and subjectivity of the body itself to critique the rationalist perspective.

Dickerman illustrates her thesis with examples of photomontages that convey the reinscription of the tactile, the visible signs of temporality and movement (rather than a frozen instant), and the intrusion of body parts on the transparent picture plane. Her discussion of the shadowy and shadowed elements in the Swiss photographs parallels Gough's interest in the predicament of viewers who must grope their way through the demonstration spaces, as if in the dark, perplexed by the asymmetries of surfaces and striations. Is it possible that Lissitzky's early training in craft and technical design and his Swiss photos have been overlooked because they lie outside the constructivist

model? Lissitzky's interest in tactility is rarely addressed in the literature about him, yet according to Bowlt and Dickerman it prompted him to experiment with manual techniques—technical drawing, the physical manipulation of photographs—not typically associated with constructivism.

Dickerman's close reading of experimental photography is followed up in Margarita Tupitsyn's essay, "After Vitebsk: El Lissitzky and Kazimir Malevich, 1924–1929." Tupitsyn examines Lissitzky's methods of immateriality and abstraction in a group of photographs from the second half of the 1920s, a crucial moment in the Russian avant-garde, between *Proun* painting and the documentary photography and propaganda of the 1930s. The images that Tupitsyn analyzes, all produced while Lissitzky was living outside of Moscow—*Runner in the City* of 1926 (see p. 185, fig. 3), two examples of the *fotopis'* method from the Internationale Presse-Ausstellung in Cologne in 1928, and the splendid photomontage cover of 1929 for *Russland: Die Rekonstruktion der Architektur in der Sowjetunion* (see pl. 6), of the series *Neues Bauen in der Welt*—follow an aesthetic of *bespredmetnost'* (objectlessness). In Tupitsyn's view, Lissitzky's photographic work of this period was heavily influenced by the writings of Malevich, namely, *Iz knigi o bespredmetnosti* (From the book on nonobjectivity), in which Malevich outlined *bespredmetnoe* art as a postabstract utilization of photogram techniques and superimposed negatives to achieve the immateriality of cinema. Tupitsyn traces Lissitzky's neologism *fotopis'*, with its implications of a painterly treatment of the negative, to the fascination with cinema that he shared with Malevich. The abstraction of *fotopis'* derives less from nonreferentiality than from the immaterial quality of multiple negatives, a sharp contrast to the "real" documentary photograph, which relied on the single negative.

Tupitsyn's analysis takes her back to the photograms that Lissitzky designed in 1924 to advertise office supplies for the Pelikan Company in Hannover. She argues that cinematic techniques were already in play in the advertisements, although her commentary about Lissitzky's visualization of movement leads her to very different conclusions from those of Dickerman. Where Dickerman sees Lissitzky's use of motion as an expression of the temporal and the irrational and, thus, a challenge to conventional optics, Tupitsyn links motion and opticality to cinema. This analysis coincides with Gough's reading of the striated lath system in the *Kabinett der Abstrakten* as an *optische Dynamik* based on film.

In shaping her thesis that the late 1920s was a period of experimentation with *fotopis'* and with a new manipulation of light in photography, Tupitsyn posits that Lissitzky's subsequent return to propaganda photographs marked a move away from experimentation. The relation of formal experimentation to political content is a problem with which all of the authors in this volume wrestle: in the final section, "Propaganda," both T.J. Clark and Peter Nisbet explore the tension between avant-garde artist and propagandist. Although each author focuses on images from a single year, together they prompt intriguing questions about the profile of Lissitzky's entire career: How do we

identify and define Lissitzky's periods of formal and political innovation? Why are some periods considered more avant-garde than others? Does propaganda necessarily imply a retreat from the avant-garde?

In "El Lissitzky in Vitebsk," Clark takes up what he considers to be Lissitzky's radical artistic moment, and he formulates the idea of flatness as a modernist metaphor for a collision of forces. Clark identifies one instance in Lissitzky's career in which the convergence of propaganda with modernism resulted in a novel image: the propaganda board that Lissitzky produced in Vitebsk in 1920 to support the Bolshevik mobilization of workers. Clark's unabashed critique casts Lissitzky as an otherwise polite modernist who failed either to achieve a confrontation between three-dimensional solids and a painting's flat surface or to direct viewers toward a painting's totality. The relationship between Lissitzky and Malevich, recurrent in this book, is central to Clark's essay, where Malevich is Lissitzky's foil, the modernist who brilliantly achieved a vision of flatness as totality and as "absolute blind freedom."

Why does Lissitzky's propaganda board succeed when, in Clark's view, the contemporaneous *Proun* paintings do not? Clark's close reading of an oil on plywood painting entitled *Town* (see pl. 8) and a sketch for a painting entitled *Proun 1E: Town* (see pl. 9) yields some answers. According to Clark's analysis, Lissitzky rendered his circles and squares as solid forms suggestive of buildings. The central organizing circle of *Town*, for instance, retains its integrity, since the architectural pieces resting on it do not absorb its colors or become transparent when they cross the circle; *Proun 1E* makes a similar architectural analogy. Clark reads the circle and square in the propaganda board, however, as ambiguous "nonspaces, undecidably solid or void." The propaganda board thus becomes a unique demonstration, in Clark's polemic, of political extremism and visionary modernism. Clark attributes the political inspiration for this work to Leon Trotsky's speech on 18 April 1920, in which he warned railroad workers not to desert the factories. Lissitzky's response, an expression of early Bolshevism in an abstract painting, works effectively because of its opposition of solid and flat forms and its totalizing of the picture space. The value that Lissitzky placed on the Vitebsk propaganda board (which, sadly, does not survive) is conveyed in a letter to Tschichold, included in this volume, in which Lissitzky expresses hope that his friend will reproduce a photograph of the board. Lissitzky explains that he intended the board to be used "for the propaganda for the industrial buildup."²³

"The better a Bolshevik Lissitzky was," Clark writes, "the better his art." Clark privileges modernism as an unspoken third term in the equation between political commitment and artistic quality; he is less interested in socialist realism or in other compromises between the aesthetic and the totalitarian utopia. Yet Lissitzky's work of the 1930s, undertaken in the service of the Stalinist regime, complicates Clark's attentiveness to modernism, as Peter Nisbet demonstrates in his essay, "El Lissitzky circa 1935: Two Propaganda Projects Reconsidered," an analysis of two books produced fifteen years after

the Vitebsk propaganda board. Historians have traditionally been reluctant to chronicle this late work, believing that the inferior quality of Lissitzky's art from this period, most likely due to his illness and to political pressures, means that it is best left ignored.

In the last few decades, however, an increased interest in the history of photography in the Soviet Union has stimulated new scholarship on Lissitzky's Stalinist production, with research focusing particularly on his photographic designs. In Nisbet's view, while attention to the photographic image and layout in the Soviet albums and magazines is welcome, it has eclipsed the importance of Lissitzky's decisions about tactility and materials. Nisbet seeks to redress this problem by analyzing two projects from the socialist realist period: the slipcase of woven fibers for the *Pishchevaia industriia* album (1935–36; Food industry album) and the cover of *Four Victories* (1934), an issue of the English-language edition of *SSSR na stroike*, which incorporated a balloon fragment, a physical link to one of the victories documented in the magazine. Nisbet bases his research on Lissitzky's correspondence, including drawings in his letters, and on reviews in contemporary Soviet newspapers. Nisbet's reconstruction of the *Pishchevaia industriia* project shows how Lissitzky's proposed slipcase differed markedly from the published version, and Nisbet upholds this as a provocative example of avant-garde intentions thwarted by shifting alignments in the political bureaucracy. From Lissitzky's letters to his wife, Nisbet learns that the woven fibers for the *Pishchevaia industriia* album were intended to cover the case entirely, unaccompanied by either text or image. The case was to be nonrepresentational, while also comprised of the very material discussed within the album itself. This design and the balloon fragment on the cover of *Four Victories* represent, in Nisbet's view, avant-garde gestures in book design; by conceiving of the cover as a tactile object of weight and texture which actualizes the materials described in the propaganda text, Lissitzky in effect transformed the book into a sculpture. Nisbet situates the concept of three-dimensional book design in a continuum that includes the embossed covers on the catalog for the Internationale Presse-Ausstellung of 1928 and the *Industriia sotsializma* album of 1935.

Like Clark, Nisbet is interested in a particular moment in Lissitzky's artistic production. The years 1934 and 1935, he points out, offered Soviet artists and writers a brief reprieve from the stringency of previous years. This may explain the revival of some of the constructivist concerns of the avant-garde, such as we see in the two book covers. Yet these books were luxury items, and their complex and elaborate use of materials was for the approval of an elite audience of propagandists. Lissitzky the renewed avant-gardist was also Lissitzky the pragmatist, making material references to the successes in farming and industry promoted in the propaganda publications themselves. The given moments are critical, then, for the board and the late covers, because their political circumstances determine the work.

IV

Scrutinized again in light of the questions raised by the essays in this volume, the range of possibilities for critical analysis of the *Birth Announcement of the Artist's Son* is wide: the image is not only a product of the *fotopis'* method and an exploration of the visual effects of temporality and motion; it also speaks to the particular historical moment of its year of production, 1930, conveying a strong propaganda content that is enhanced by the photomontage technique. By floating the infant Jen amidst the chimney smoke, Lissitzky makes his child a product of the new Soviet factories. The female worker's head emerges from the factory chimneys, which become her industrial body. The juxtaposition of the German text with the Cyrillic letters CP, representing the second half of CCCP from the title of the magazine, alludes to the child's dual nationalities (German mother, Russian father). Moreover, Lissitzky heaps on the visual quotations by recycling and combining images with his own printed signature. The iconography of the Soviet images may have been lost on Lissitzky's German colleagues, but not on Vertov and fellow Russians. Even in a small postcard, Lissitzky had many audiences to please, including official censors and the secret police. By 1930, formal experimentation and political content were inseparable. The challenge for Lissitzky studies is not to shift the focus in one direction but to continually address the inescapable pull of both. Beneath its optimistic veneer, the *Birth Announcement of the Artist's Son* is a propaganda image, a testimony to the imprint of politics on Lissitzky's personal ambitions as an artist and father.

Notes

1. In the *Birth Announcement*, Lissitzky reverses Debabov's image. For the sources of Lissitzky's photomontage, see Margarita Tupitsyn, *El Lissitzky: Experiments in Photography*, exh. cat. (New York: Houk Friedman, 1991), 46; and Peter Nisbet, "Lissitzky and Photography," in Jan Debbaud et al., *El Lissitzky, 1890–1941: Architect, Painter, Photographer, Typographer*, exh. cat. (Eindhoven: Stedelijk Van Abbemuseum, 1990), 68 and 68 n. 14.

2. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. Helene Aldwinckle and Mary Whittall (London: Thames & Hudson, 1980), 95.

3. See Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers to Edith Tschichold, Moscow, 26 September 1930, Jan and Edith Tschichold Papers, 1899–1979, Getty Research Institute, acc. no. 930030 (box 3, folder 2), and this volume, pp. 249–53.

4. See Peter Nisbet, "Lissitzky and Photography" (note 1). In an ironic twist on the announcement's message, this hope was not borne out; during the 1930s, Lissitzky sustained himself less through architecture than through graphic design, becoming one of the chief artists to design issues of *SSSR na stroike*.

5. It is difficult to verify the recipients of the birth announcement without access to personal archives in which the postcard survived. My list of recipients is based on Lissitzky's close artist friends at the time, at the Bauhaus, in de Stijl and dada circles, and in Russia. Many of these friends are listed in his personal address books; see El

Lissitzky: Letters and Photographs, 1911–1941, Getty Research Institute, acc. no. 950076 (box 1, folder 7). Since the published collection, *Proun und Wolkenbügel: Schriften, Briefe, Dokumente*, ed. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers and Jen Lissitzky (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1977), contains the complete Lissitzky-Oud correspondence, one surmises that Oud was the recipient of the postcard reproduced in that volume. See Nisbet, “Lissitzky and Photography” (note 1) for the most detailed and extensive account of the different versions of the birth announcement.

6. See Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *Thirty-Six Letters*, ed. S. Morejko et al. (Jerusalem: Alphabet Publishers, n.d.), 10.

7. See “Chronology,” compiled by Anne-Laure Oberson in Magdalena Dabrowski, Leah Dickerman, and Peter Galassi, *Aleksandr Rodchenko*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 309.

8. See Peter Nisbet, “An Introduction to El Lissitzky,” in idem, ed., *El Lissitzky, 1890–1941*, exh. cat. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Art Museums, 1987), 14.

9. See Peter Nisbet, *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years: A Study of His Work and Thought, 1919–1927* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University Microfilms, 1995), 44; and Nisbet, “An Introduction to El Lissitzky” (note 8), 15.

10. Taking her lead from Lissitzky’s article, *The New Culture*, published in translation by Peter Nisbet in his *El Lissitzky in the Proun Years* (note 9), 48–49, Éva Forgács argues that Lissitzky shifted his attention away from Jewish culture well before he met Kazimir Malevich, espousing the idea of a “new man” who was not racially and religiously identified; see Éva Forgács, “Malevich, Lissitzky, and the Culture of the Future,” *The Structurist*, no. 39–40 (1999–2000): 50–57.

11. The First Working Group of Constructivists was comprised of Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, Liubov’ Popova, Karl Ioganson, Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg, Konstantin Medunetskii (all from INKhUK), and Aleksei Gan. See Nisbet, “An Introduction to El Lissitzky” (note 8), 21, 23, and Tupitsyn, this volume, p. 178, for two different perspectives on Lissitzky’s position among the new Russian constructivists.

12. See Nisbet, “An Introduction to El Lissitzky” (note 8), 13–52.

13. Yve-Alain Bois, “El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility,” *Art in America* 76, no. 4 (1988): 161–81.

14. Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917–1946* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1997); and Margarita Tupitsyn, *El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet: Photography, Design, Collaboration* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1999).

15. Jane Sharp, “SHERA Symposium/Russian Modernism: Methods and Meaning in the Post-Soviet Era,” *Bulletin of the Society of Historians of East European and Russian Art and Architecture* 5, no. 1 (1999): 10–11.

16. See Forgács, “Malevich, Lissitzky, and the Culture of the Future” (note 10); and Paul Galvez, “Portrait of the Artist as a Monkey-Hand,” *October*, no. 93 (2000): 109–37.

17. See Elaine Lupton, review of *El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet*, by Margarita Tupitsyn, *Print: America’s Graphic Design Magazine* 54, no. 3 (2000): 40, 118.

18. *Monuments of the Future: Designs by El Lissitzky*, exhibition curated by Nancy Perloff and Éva Forgács, Getty Research Institute, 21 November 1998–21 February 1999.

19. Lissitzky does not provide a title for Renner's book in the letters, but he is probably referring to Paul Renner, *Typografie als Kunst* (Munich: G. Müller, 1922).

20. Bann's translation and collection of the manifestos on international constructivism that Lissitzky wrote with his European colleagues van Doesburg and Richter aligns Lissitzky squarely in the Western camp. See Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1990).

21. El Lissitzky, "Prounenraum: Grosse Berliner Kunstaussstellung," *G: Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, no. 1 (1923): 4.

22. Bowlt suggests two reasons: one, the emphasis on Lissitzky the "great artist," rather than "dexterous craftsman"; and two, the dearth of archival material. The archive of the Technische Hochschule in Darmstadt was destroyed during World War II, while much of the Riga Polytechnical Institute archive was scattered during the revolution and civil war.

23. See El Lissitzky to Jan Tschichold, Moscow, 22 July 1925, Jan and Edith Tschichold Papers, 1899–1979, Getty Research Institute, acc. no. 930030 (box 3, folder 2), and this volume, p. 243.