

EL LISSITZKY'S ART-GAMES

Fundamental to El Lissitzky's arts is its precision of execution: the paintings are highly finished, and the color planes smooth and machine-like, with ruler and compass drawn lines. This characteristic was recognized by Lissitzky's contemporaries: Ernst Kallai¹ and Will Grohmann² celebrated the regularity of his paintings with their mathematical and technical exactness which they attributed to his obsession with modern technologies. The same quality led later scholars such as Nikolai Khardziev³ and Stephan Bann⁴ to consider Lissitzky a classicist, while others, such as Jean-Paul Bouillon,⁵ placed him along with Le Corbusier and the "Call to Order."⁶

¹ S. Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky, Life, Letters, Textes*, 2nd ed. (London, 1980), p. 380–381.

² *Ibid.*, p. 62.

³ Khardzhiev wrote that *Veshch* (Lissitzky's and Ilya Ehrenburg's Berlin based periodical) did not break off from the classical tradition. N. Khardzhiev, "Pamiati khudozhnika Lissitzkova," (In Memory of the Artist Lissitzky), *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo SSSR*, II, February 1961, p. 30.

⁴ Bann sees in Lissitzky a constructivist, and for him "constructivism signifies a revival of the belief in a fixed classical vocabulary." S. Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism*, (London, 1974) p. XXX.

⁵ J. P. Bouillon, "Le retour à l'ordre en URSS, 1920–1923," *Le Retour à l'ordre dans les arts plastiques et l'architecture, 1919–1925*. (Paris, 1975)

⁶ Lissitzky's theoretical writings in which he praised clear geometry, economy and order appear to confirm the opinion of these scholars. Like Le Corbusier, Lissitzky saw in the machine and its products the advent of a new art — an art created not by the artist but by the engineer. He exalted, "the vitality, the uniformity, the monumental quality,

What these interpretations do not take into account is that Lissitzky viewed art as a game. Hence mathematical precision, while integral to his oeuvre also served the particular art games he played. The importance of mathematics for Lissitzky was also expressed in a lecture on the Prouns where his definition of art as a game was explicitly couched in mathematical terminology.⁷

the accuracy and . . . the beauty of the machine . . . created by the economy of the age." Lissitzky repeated *L'Esprit Nouveau's* demands on modern architecture, and he paraphrased Le Corbusier's famous dictum: "The house is a machine to live in" when he wrote: "After all, a house is a device for living in, just as a car or an airplane is a device for travelling in." Lissitzky-Küppers, p. 337 and 374.

⁷ There are three versions of the text "Prouns":

1. "Tezisy k prounu," (Theses on the Prouns) written in 1919, published in the original Russian by M. Barkhin, *Mastera sovietskoi arkhitektury ob arkhitekture*, II (Moscow, 1975), p. 133-135.
2. Text written in German, published in: *De Stijl*, 5 (June 1922), and in: *ABC*, 2 (1925), rpt. Lissitzky-Küppers p. 347-348.
3. Another version was probably written before the second in Vitebsk and Moscow in 1920-21. It was translated into Italian and published in: V. Quilici, *L'Architettura del Costruttivismo*, Bari, 1969, p. 487-493. An English translation by J. E. Bowlt appeared in: *El Lissitzky*, (exh. Cat. Cologne, Galerie Gmurzynska, 1976), p. 60-72.

I believe that this last mentioned text is the text of the lecture delivered at the Moscow Inkhuk on 23 September 1921. In his notes to the English translation dr. Bowlt writes that the text originates from a second lecture on the Prouns given by Lissitzky in October 1924. This is improbable for several reasons. In October 1924 Lissitzky was in Switzerland recovering from tuberculosis. Consequently, he could not have delivered lectures in Moscow at the same time. If such a lecture had been read by a third party in the absence of Lissitzky, it would have somehow been mentioned in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers recollections or in Lissitzky's letters to her. In the German edition of this text, translated by S. Lissitzky-Küppers, the editor wrote in the note to the publication: "Lecture delivered at the Inkhuk on September 23rd, 1921." He mentioned a contract between Lissitzky and the Inkhuk by which Lissitzky was to deliver more lectures, but they were never delivered, for reasons unknown. *El Lissitzky, Proun und Wolkenbügel, Schriften, Briefe, Dokumente*

From the canvas Suprematism discarded all depiction and representation of objects and colors. It left behind pure color within pure form. From these elements it began to compose whole classes, groups and equations of formal possibilities according to their functional interdependences. . . . Archimedes would have regarded modern mathematics as a clever, but curious GAME (because its aim is not an end result like three buns, forty five kopecks, etc . . . , but the actual operation, combination and construction of dependences which we find with Gauss, Riemann and Einstein), . . .

The result of the Suprematist 'game' was a canvas which bore within it a kind of symbol.⁸

Thus, according to Lissitzky, modern mathematics is a game: it is an autonomous activity; it is not concerned with the absolute property of the elements and its aim does not lie outside the actual mathematical operation. The object of modern geometrical and mathematical investigations is the relational structure as such: the various species of dependency that can subsist between numbers and forms.⁹ In 1920, at the same time as Lissitzky

(Dresden, 1977), p. 6-7. Moreover, according to Christina Lodder's most recent study of Russian Constructivism the last attendance list of Inkhuk meetings is for 1 February 1924. There may have been a few informal meetings held after that, possibly until the end of March 1924, thus it is difficult to imagine a lecture on the Prouns on 23 October 1924 either by Lissitzky or anybody else. On the history of Inkhuk and its activities see Ch. Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, New Haven and London, 1983, especially note 84 p. 281.

⁸ *El Lissitzky*, p. 64. Game in capital letters and between quotation marks in the text. J. E. Bowlt translated the term "classes" used by Lissitzky in his original Russian text as "categories." I believe that in accord with mathematical terminology we should leave the term used by Lissitzky. I wish to thank Ms. K. Rubinger, of the Galerie Gmurzynska Cologne, for providing me with the Russian text. Until about 1925 Lissitzky considered himself a Suprematist though he was not. On Lissitzky as a Suprematist see A. C. Birnholz, "El Lissitzky's Writings on Art," *Studio International* 183, March 1972.

⁹ On the autonomous quality of modern mathematics see Ernst Casirer, *Substance and Function & Einstein's Theory of Relativity* (New York, 1953).

wrote his lecture on the Prouns, formalist mathematicians were also beginning to consider mathematics a game with symbols. For them mathematics became an endless game with no meaning beyond the rules of the game.¹⁰

Lissitzky's analogy between art and mathematics establishes that for him, art was also an autonomous activity. Modern art does not refer to objects beyond itself; its sole concern is the relationship and dependency established among the plastic elements. Lissitzky not only acknowledged art's autonomy by analogy and implication, but also explicitly: "A painting is an end in itself, perfect and finished".¹¹

The other point of comparison of art to mathematics and to games is the existence of rules. Mathematical operations are always rule-bound, thus by comparing art to mathematics it is implicit that for Lissitzky art is also rule-bound. Lissitzky understood modern art not as disorganized arbitrary chaos, but as a regulated ordered system of colors and forms in mutual relations on a rectangular plane.¹² Without rules the elements of the painting, pure color and pure form, might be just "rubbish heaps" or at best tapestries, fine wall paper.¹³ For Lissitzky as for Anton Ehrenzweig "Creativity can almost be defined as the capacity for transforming the chaotic aspect of indifferentiation into a hidden order."¹⁴

The rules that Lissitzky had in mind for art are of the same kind as those that Wittgenstein later had in mind for language. It is interesting to note that although neither Wittgenstein (in the nineteen forties) nor Lissitzky (in the nineteen twenties) knew of the other's work, they independently developed analogies

¹⁰ E. T. Bell, *The Development of Mathematics*, 2nd ed., New York, 1945, p. 182.

¹¹ Lissitzky-Küppers, p. 348.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 338.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 339.

¹⁴ A. Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1971), p. 127.

between game and language and game and art respectively, using the two essential game elements: autonomy and rules.¹⁵

In comparing language, cookery and chess, Wittgenstein determined that the concept of cookery was defined by its purpose. One may cook in a variety of ways, using various rules but the right rules are those best suited to achieving a result external to cookery. But there is no such external purpose in the case of either chess or language, where following the rules is not for achieving an external result, but rather for the sake of the activity itself.¹⁶ Language, according to Wittgenstein, is not rule-bound in the same way as games. The rules of a game are stipulated in advance: "If you follow other rules than those of chess you are *playing another game*. But if you follow grammatical rules other than such and such ones, that does not mean that you say something wrong, but that you are speaking of something else."¹⁷ Wittgenstein, however, allows for a certain freedom within the set rules; the rules of a game are not invari-

¹⁵ By definition, play is an autonomous rule-bound activity. See Gilbert Boss, "Jeu et Philosophie," *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale* 84, 1979, p. 495. This definition is based on Roger Caillois's six characteristics of play: free, separate, uncertain, unproductive, governed by rules, or make believe. R. Caillois, *Man, Play and Games* (New York, 1961), p. 9–10. Autonomous means free and separate, and the definition includes the requisition of rules. The other three characteristics are unnecessary restrictions. Not every game is uncertain; one may enjoy the charms of playing even when the result is known in advance. Not every game is unproductive; the game may finally be productive in another sphere, although productivity is unimportant for the game itself. Make-believe does not exclude rules; children playing make-believe make up rules beforehand. Caillois's rationalist definition of game opposes game to reality, for Lissitzky game is the principle of all culture, he denies "reality" an absolute validity against which the imaginary can be evaluated.

¹⁶ L. Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, paragraph 320, in: O. Hanfling, "Does Language Need Rules?," *The Philosophical Quarterly* 30, July 1980, p. 199.

¹⁷ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Grammar*, Oxford, 1974, p. 184. See also Hanfling, p. 199–200.

ably rigid and fixed: in a ball game there are no rules as to how hard or how high one may throw the ball. In the same passage Wittgenstein considers still another possibility — games in which the rules are made up “as we go along.”¹⁸ Thus according to Wittgenstein, though the use of words is not everywhere circumscribed by rules, language is a game the rules of which are made up as we go along.¹⁹ There is a basic difference between the rules of a game, such as chess, and the rules of language-games and art-games. Anton Ehrenzweig observed that: “Playing games is rarely a creative activity; the number of possible choices, however many, are strictly limited by the rules of the game. No such limiting rules exist in creative work; it creates its own rules which may only be known after the work is finished.”²⁰ Lissitzky allows for the same freedom in art.

According to Lissitzky the artist is free to invent his own rules; to use symbols other than the commonly accepted visual signs. He distinguishes between a symbol that has been previously stipulated and one which has not been agreed on in advance: “A symbol can have two derivations. Its meaning can be stipulated beforehand, by agreement — that’s the first derivation. For example, the plan of a hilly city outlined on a piece of paper expresses the diversity and complexity of the environment by a number of symbols; and we have made a prior agreement as to how decipher these symbols. . . . The second derivation is when a symbol is born, when it acquires its name later and when its meaning is revealed later still. That is why the symbols created by the artist are incomprehensible to us.”²¹ The liberty that Lissitzky recognized as the prerogative of the artist is essential to modern art. Invention of new codes is a constant of contemporary art. In a non-objective painting, in a serial composition and in certain modern poetry every work inaugurates an autono-

¹⁸ L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* I, 2nd ed., Oxford, 1963, paragraph 83.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, paragraph 68.

²⁰ Ehrenzweig, p. 39.

²¹ *El Lissitzky*, p. 64.

mous code that is understood only by those who know the rules. The spectator is urged to scan the picture in order to detect the particular system of relations among the elements and thus the code.

The study of Lissitzky's comparison of art to games in the light of Wittgenstein's language-games is advantageous especially when we turn to analyse the Prouns. According to Wittgenstein, language is a game because the practice of language is inside a pattern of activity understood or accepted by a community of people. Wittgenstein compared the sound or shape of a word to a chessman; the word by itself is dead, a mere noise, just as the chess-piece, by itself, is only carved wood. What makes the carved wood into a king or a queen is the existence of the practice of playing chess, just as the practice of playing one or another language-game turns a sound into a word.²² Lissitzky's games with forms and colors are art-games because his playing with proportions, symmetry, vanishing point perspective and with the fore, mid and back planes of the picture are games inside the practice of Western art. Without the accepted tradition of Renaissance art the Prouns would be meaningless. While it is possible to attribute the order in Lissitzky's paintings to his exaltation of the modern machine it is clear that the precision of execution is in fact required by the particular art-games he plays: games based on the rules of Academic art.

Lissitzky played with proportions in at least two Prouns. The dimensions of *Proun 1D* (Fig. 1) are 71.5 × 96 cm., numbers which are the mean and greater extreme of the arithmetic proportion 48:72:96, in other words, a ratio of almost 3:4. (For an exact 3:4 the height is 0.5 cm. short). The game continues inside the painting: the white horizontal on the lower part of the circle is equidistant from the top and the bottom of the painting; the distance across the stripes moving diagonally

²² L. Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, paragraph 31, and J. V. Canfield, *Wittgenstein, Language and World*, Amherst, 1981, p. 15-16.

from the lower left is a quarter (1:4) of the painting's width; the length of the horizontal bar on top is almost two thirds (2:3) of the width; the horizontal bar at the bottom is almost a third (1:3) of the width, and the diameter of the black circle is almost a half (1:2) of the width.²³ Similarly, in the *First Plate* of the *First Kestner Portfolio* (Fig. 2) there is also a game with proportions. Its dimensions are 39 × 57 cm., 3 cm. too long on both sides for an arithmetic proportion reapplying the mean and greater extreme of the ratio 18:36:54. Inside, we find again a game with mathematical ratios. The black horizontal on top divides the plate into a third (1:3) and two thirds (2:3); the double vertical on the right divides the plate into almost a third (1:3) and two thirds (2:3); the horizontal at the bottom is half (1:2) the length of the horizontal at the top, while the diameter of the black circle is half (1:2) of the width of the plate.

The game is, of course, a play on the basic axiom of Renaissance architecture, on the mysterious harmony that pervades the universe. The mathematical progressions 1:2:3:4 are the Pythagorean musical consonances, an octave, a fifth and a fourth, and the composite consonances: octave plus fifth (1:2:3) and two octaves (1:2:4). The arithmetic progression is based on Plato's two geometrical progressions: 1,2,3,4,8,9,27 — the seven numbers that express the harmony of the world.²⁴ Hence, Lissitzky's play with proportions was not an idle occupation; he blew up the entire creed and order of the old universe and established his own free order.

The same fate awaited the other corollary of universal harmony, the Vitruvian ideal man, ad quadratum or ad circulum. Lissitzky's ideal man was the engineer whom we find on two Prouns: *Proun 43* (Fig. 3) and on the cover of *Ma*, the Hungarian

²³ The analysis of *Proun 1D* is based on that of A. C. Birnholz, but he spoke only of the ambiguity and inconsistency of the proportions to make the composition always elude the spectator's total grasp. A. C. Birnholz, "El Lissitzky," Ph. D. thesis (Yale University, 1973), p. 95-96.

²⁴ R. Wittkover, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, (London, 1967), p. 101-113.

avant-garde art magazine (Fig. 4). *Proun 43* is a square composition (as are many other Prouns). The square is the second shape, following the circle on Palladio's list of recommendations for beautiful shapes of rooms.²⁵ Inside the square there is a circle equidistant from all sides of the square. Thus, the new ideal man is *ad circulum*, but he is not *ad quadratum* because the shape inside the circle is a rectangle. Moreover, the circle is open; the man may escape at any moment, following the path taken by the *New Man* in the puppet portfolio *Victory over the Sun* (Fig. 5).

At the end of the fifteenth century, symmetry along with harmony and proportion, was identified with consonance, and for generations, the image of the universe was that of balance. But perfect symmetry signifies a state of frozen and bound formal rigidity with no further possibilities of growth or change.²⁶ Therefore, Lissitzky replaced balance, generator of inertia, with mobility by playing games with the rules of symmetry. He destroyed balance by opening it up to the living principle of freedom and game. *Proun 93 — Free Floating Spiral* (Fig. 6) is a square composition. Inside the square there is a white circle, but this time, the circle is only almost equidistant from all four sides of the square: the distance on the left is somewhat greater than on the right, and at the top a little longer than at the bottom. On the upper left hand side of the circle there are a number of black non-concentric circles; they advance and recede from the picture plane forming a spiralic cone in depth or in projection. It is a form in movement, open to the ambiguity of becoming and thus a negation of symmetry. For Lissitzky, the cone best expressed the idea of a form in genesis. Listing the plastic elements, the Philebian forms, he modified their static, stable

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

²⁶ Pierre Francastel tells us that an art founded on symmetry corresponds to a period of art history in which man made the inventory of a universe considered objective, stable and positively balanced. P. Francastel, *La Réalité Figurative*, (Paris, 1965) p. 184.

nature: "Cone — it *rises* on the base of the circle, the outline of the triangle, . . . the spiral. If we advance the vertex into infinity, it turns into a cylinder."²⁷ Lissitzky disrupted symmetry by playing with it; it is always there in the circle, but at the same time it is subverted. The introduction of asymmetry, the insertion of non-concentric circles — of a "Free-floating Spiral" — inside the perfect circle and square, is a conscious and wilful destruction of symmetry, of the closed and immutable system. Game is the deliberate introduction of disorder into what was hitherto accepted as order; it is fantasy and irrationality that destroy necessity and liberate the possible.

Proun 93 is not the only work in which symmetry is carefully and painstakingly destroyed; it is a recurring theme in Lissitzky's oeuvre. Thus, *Proun 95* (Fig. 7) is divided horizontally into two halves with the right edge of the black bar in the center of the composition. This balance, however, is discovered only after careful examination for the other elements efface the basic regularity. The black balance on the lower half — the very image of bilateral symmetry — is off-center; it is neither equidistant from the edge of the canvas nor is it in the middle of the white curve. The artist also plays with our expectations; our eyes would like to put things in order, to arrange the various elements in their "right" place, but our glance shifts from one form to the other without finding repose.

Many of Lissitzky's games incorporate the cube, as if it were retaining its etymological Greek sense of *kubos* — die. Lissitzky's cubes are rarely perfect bodies; their sides are not exactly equal to each other. Often they are set on one of their points, seen in extreme oblique view, and sometimes they are shattered. The game with the cube is a multi-edged weapon against Academic logic. Its destruction is a corollary of the game with symmetry: genesis, life and fantasy. The subject of *Proun 5A* (Fig. 8) is a shattered and open "cube" presented in an extreme oblique view, falling between two curves. In *Proun*

²⁷ Lissitzky-Küppers, p. 349, (Italics mine).

ca. 1920–21 (Fig. 9) there is another open “cube”; its body has fallen into pieces, perhaps because of the imagined rotation of the circle-sphere to which it is attached. The rectangular bodies scattered all over the surface of *Proun ca. 1922* (Fig. 10) may be read as the fragments of a large cube previously destroyed. This interpretation is justified in light of Lissitzky’s view of the cube. In a letter to the Dutch architect J. J. P. Dud, Lissitzky explained that for him, the crystal of the universe was the sphere (in opposition to De Stijl’s theory), but nothing could be done with the sphere, because it was the final state — death, and “that is why we concentrate on the element of the cube, which can always be reassembled and destroyed at will (life).”²⁸ Thus, the operating principle is game; the introduction of the element of life and growth, of becoming instead of being. Every work of art had to carry within itself the possibility of change. No. 8–9 of Schwitters’s periodical *Merz*, which was edited in collaboration with Lissitzky, was devoted to the idea of “Nacsi” whose meaning was explained on the front cover of the magazine: “Nature, from the Latin NACSI means becoming, proceeding; that is to say, everything that develops, forms and moves by its own power.”²⁹ In an accompanying article bearing the title “Nacsi,” Lissitzky wrote: “We acknowledge works which contain a system within themselves, a system which has not been evolved before the work started but has evolved in the course of it.”³⁰

The destruction of the cube was also the destruction of the schemata of perspective, of the scenic cube — the image of vanishing point perspective.³¹ It signified liberation from the binding rules of Renaissance rationality, which Lissitzky

²⁸ *El Lissitzky*, p. 73.

²⁹ Lissitzky-Küppers, fig. 114.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 351.

³¹ In his historical review of spatial systems Lissitzky expressed the view that perspective enclosed the world in a cube; “Perspective has comprehended space according to the concept of Euclidean geometry as a constant three dimensional state. It has fitted the world into a cube . . .” Lissitzky-Küppers, p. 353.

feared.³² He set his cube in an oblique view — a system employed by Giotto in the Arena Chapel frescoes at Padua.³³ By going back to Giotto, to the empirical and personal, to a period in which external logic did not impose its laws on the artist, Lissitzky undermined the fixed and rigid laws of Academic art and its rationality. He opted for freedom and play. In *Proun 99* (Fig. 11) and in the *Sketch for Proun 99* (Fig. 12) the “cube” is set in an extreme oblique view, precariously held on the surface between the two curves which form a sharp contrast to the rectilinearity of the “cube”. The internal tonal contrasts on the side of the cube create ambiguity and indeterminacy: the configuration may indeed be a cube, but it also may be an open box. It is a receding and advancing form, a constant play between forward and backward movements.³⁴ This game undermines the historical idiom of fore- mid- and back-planes.

This game is the subject of another work, *Proun ca. 1920* (Fig. 13). Here the small square inside the transparent cube induces us to read the cube in two different positions relative to the picture plane. The square may be either on the far side of a cube parallel to the plane and receding into depth, or on the fore side of a cube projected outward and to the left.

Another important element in the last three works is the cartesian grid. In *Proun 99* and in the *Sketch for Proun 99* the grid defines space, but in *Proun ca. 1920* it is a purely formal

³² In a letter to Cud, Lissitzky admitted that though he was a rationalist there were moments when he was afraid of the ratio, “This electric tension that clings to me as if it wanted to blend with me only to better reject me later.” *El Lissitzky, Proun und Wolkenbügel, Schriften, Briefe, Dokumente*, p. 123.

³³ In the summer of 1912 Lissitzky travelled through Northern Italy and was most impressed by the works of the Italian Primitives, Cimabue, Giotto, and Paolo Uccello. Lissitzky-Küppers, p. 19.

³⁴ For Lissitzky the surface of a Suprematist painting functions like the *O* on the number line thus, the direction in depth may be described by — (negative) and the forward direction by + (positive) or the other way round. Lissitzky-Küppers, p. 354.

element rather than an instrument of space construction. Neither the cube nor the receding parallelepiped on the left are in perspective to the superimposed systems of grids whose vanishing points face one another at the upper and lower edges of the canvas. Only the white "shadow" of the cube, on the extreme right, is in perspective to the upper grid whose focal point is at the bottom of the picture. Apart from that, the other elements in the painting maintain ambiguous positional relations with the grid, the picture plane and with each other. On the left, the large, dark orange oval is directly on the surface of the canvas; but slightly farther to the right, it is under the system of grids. Further still to the right, the two grids are on the surface of the canvas. At the top, a part of the red semi-circle passes under the oval and the grid; later it emerges from under the oval, and in the middle of the composition it passes over a white strip. This indeterminate relationship among the various elements invites the spectator to collaborate with the artist in the completion of the painting. The spectator is encouraged to decipher and interpret the positions of the elements of the painting.

In modern art a new type of cooperation and partnership is established between the artist and the public. Marcel Duchamp, the unequalled master of games, said that: "All in all, the creative act is not performed by the artist alone. The spectator brings the work in contact with the external world by deciphering and interpreting its inner qualifications and thus adds his contribution to the creative act."³⁵ All the games Lissitzky plays depend on a public that is aware of the rules and thus detects the game. The works acquire their meaning through the active participation of the spectator who deciphers and interprets them. But in works where the positional relations are uncertain and ambiguous as in *Proun ca. 1920* (Fig. 13), or those in which the configuration may be viewed as either receding or advancing

³⁵ M. Duchamp, "The Creative Act," *Marchand du Sel, Salt Seller*, M. Sanouillet and E. Peterson eds. (London, 1975), p. 140.

or as two and three dimensional at one and the same time as in *Proun 99* and the *Sketch for Proun 99* (Figs 11 and 12), the spectator becomes a fully active partner, himself playing with the colored forms. He is called on to change and rearrange the elements as he wishes.

In several early works the spectator is encouraged to actually change the position of the work, to turn it around;³⁶ in later works the mobility of the forms is only imagined, but the painting is meaningless without the spectator's mental participation. This quality of the Prouns and especially of the *Exhibition Rooms* in Dresden (1926) and in Hanover (1927) has been described and discussed at length by many scholars.³⁷ But these scholars have failed to view Lissitzky's involvement with the spectator as part of the game of his art. Without the active partner the art-game is meaningless.

The search for means to activate the spectator, to induce him to play games with the artist, was only a prelude to the total Revolution, the practical realization of art by the extension of art's autonomy to the totality of collective life.³⁸ Since this revolution could not be accomplished at once, the artist had to lead the spectator slowly into art and game. The ultimate aim, which Lissitzky shared with the other Russian Constructivists, was the reconstruction of life by the manifestation of art. This was the ideal that led Lissitzky to declare "... all are creators and there is no reason of any sort for this division into artists and non-artists."³⁹ Lissitzky distinguishes between "artistic

³⁶ Works such as *Proun 1*; *Proun, Floating Construction in Space Proun 68*.

³⁷ For a summary of the means for spectator activation and Lissitzky's supposed motivations see A. C. Birnholz, "El Lissitzky and the Spectator: From Passivity to Participation," *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910-1930; New Perspectives*, (exh. cat., Los Angeles, 1980).

³⁸ For a critical analysis of the ideology of the practical realization of art in Russia, and Lissitzky's contribution see M. Perniola, *L'aliénation artistique* (Paris, 1977).

³⁹ Lissitzky-Küppers, p. 333.

work” and creativity: creativity is not restricted to an “artistic work”; the latter term is used only to demonstrate the “sacredness” of the work the artist does and to deny creativity to the masses.⁴⁰ But, “In the new order of society, in which work will cease to be slavery, in which there will be no longer small groups producing luxuries for a restricted stratum of society, but where work is being done *by everyone for everyone*, in such a society work is given free scope and everything which is produced is art.”⁴¹ A society in which everything which is produced is art is a society in which creativity is not limited to “artistic creation”. It is a society in which art has been realized – in which the autonomy of art and game is the prerogative of all.

For Lissitzky game was the principle of all culture, therefore the determining factor in his art, in his Revolutionary ideology and in his life. He opened art to the liberty of play and fought against the immobility of proportion, symmetry and perfect harmony which signify purity, and purity means death. Art, however, is the principle of life, or as Lissitzky said in his lecture, “art creates BEYOND NUMBERS, because it creates a living thing.”⁴²

In 1925 Lissitzky returned to the Soviet Union although Malevich had advised him not to return “yet”.⁴³ Rationality would have made him stay in Germany and then later take the route of exile farther and farther as did many other Russian artists of his generation. But Lissitzky was afraid of the ratio and chose game. He returned even if it meant the ultimate game, a game with life and death in Stalinist Russia, because only in the Soviet Union, or so he thought, was it possible to make his ideal come true: the realization of art in life, the realization of the principle of game.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 333.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 334. (Italics in the text).

⁴² Ibid., p. 351

⁴³ Ibid., p. 53.

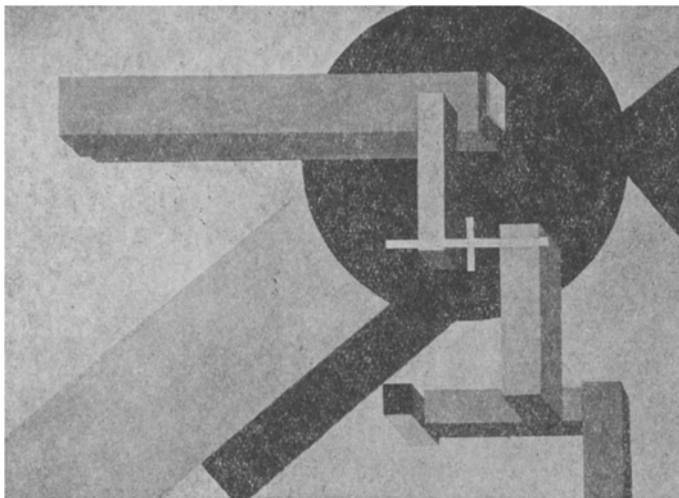


Fig. 1. Proun 1D, 1921, Oil on canvas, 71.5×96 cm. Basle, Kunstmuseum

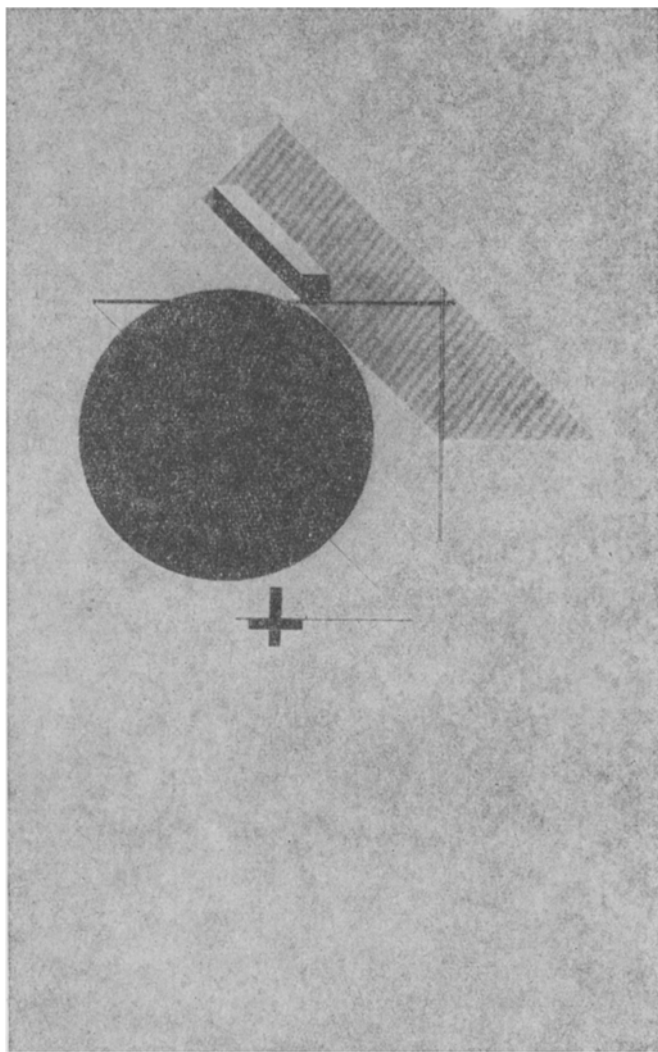


Fig. 2. First Kestner Portfolio, Plate One, 1923, Lithography and collage, 39×57 cm. (photo: Cologne, Galerie Gmurzynska)

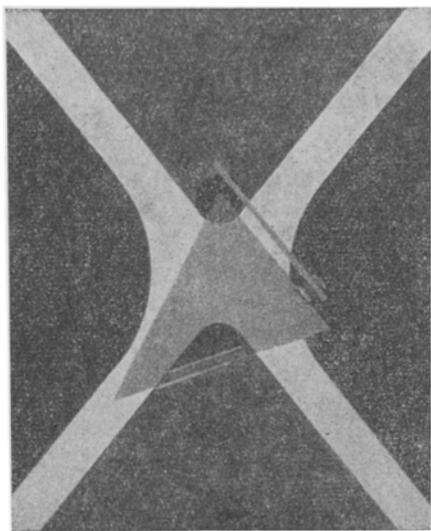
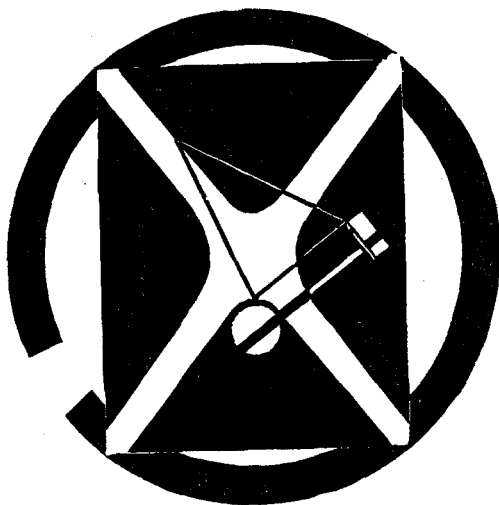


Fig. 3. Proun 43, ca. 1923, Gouache, 50×50 cm. Moscow, Tretyakov Gallery. (photo: from Lissitzky-Küppers, Fig. 35)

Ma

AKTIVISTA FOLYÓIRAT



© Ljaltky (Orsz)

Fig. 4. Cover for Ma, No. 8, August 1922

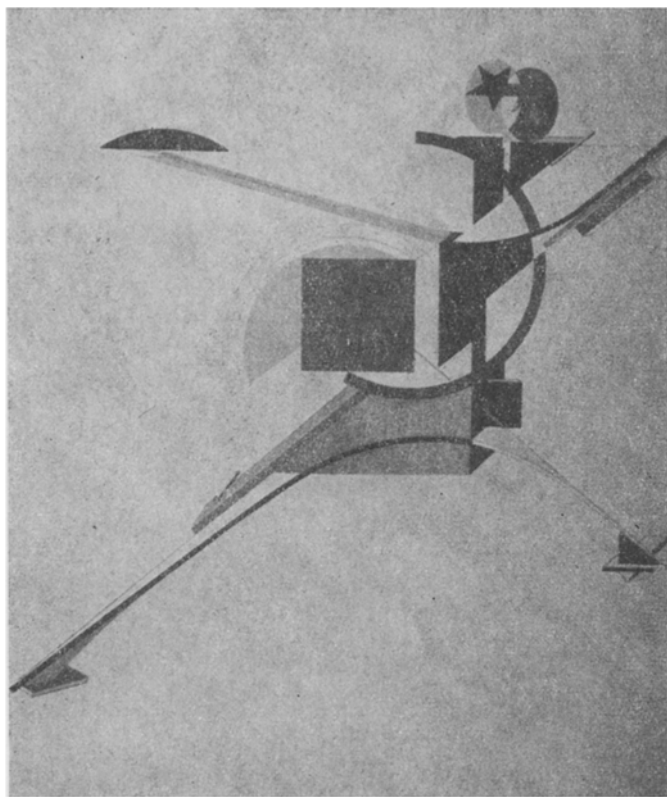


Fig. 5. The New Man, 1923, Lithography, 53×45,5 cm. (photo: Cologne Galerie Gmurzynska)

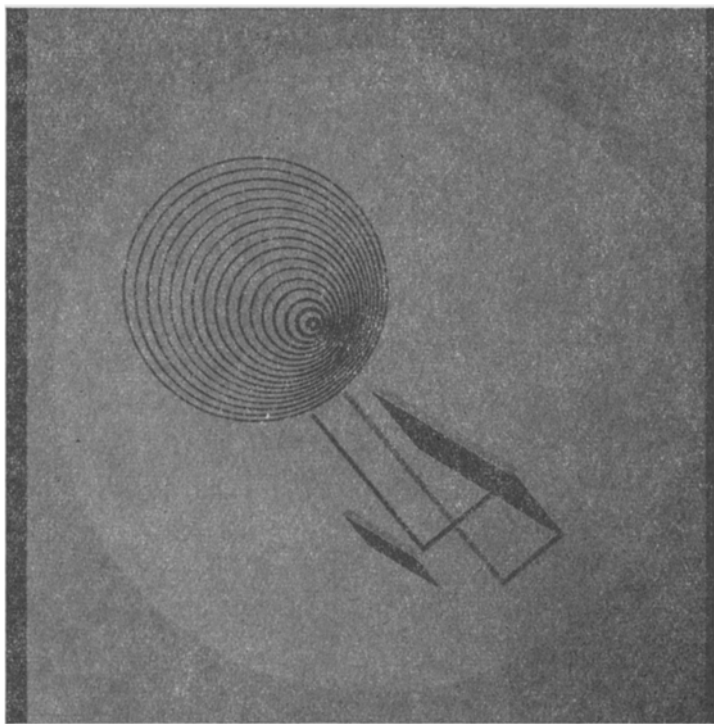
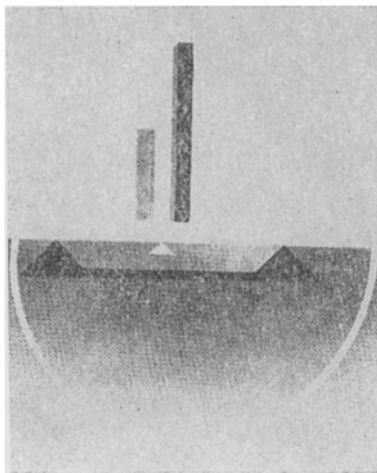
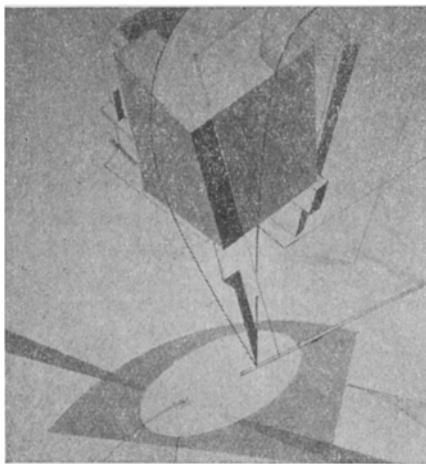


Fig. 6. Proun 93 — Free-floating Spiral, ca. 1923, Pencil, ink watercolor, (dimensions unknown) Halle, Galerie Moritzburg. (photo: from Lissitzky-Küppers, Fig. 33)



*Fig. 7. Proun 95, ca. 1923, Oil on canvas, 57.8×47.6 cm.
Birmingham, Michigan, H. L. Winston coll*



*Fig. 8. Proun 5A, Watercolor, 17.5×22 cm. Cologne, Galerie
Gmurzynska*

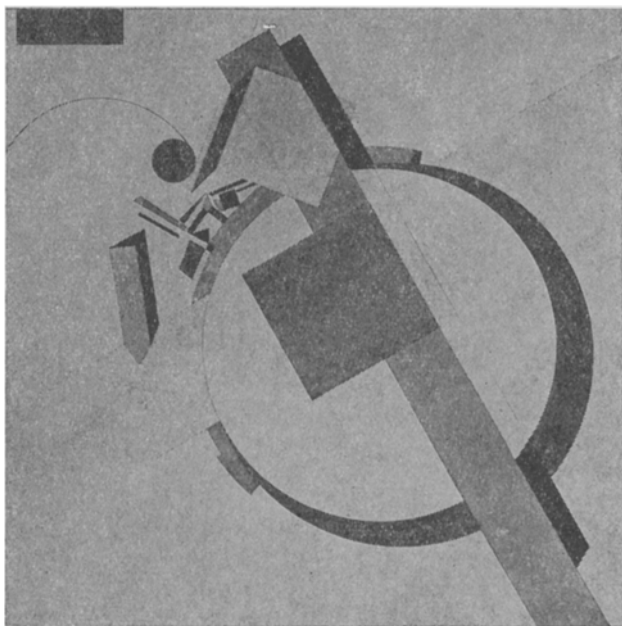


Fig. 9. Proun, ca. 1920–21, Gouache and watercolor on paper, 39.1×40.3 cm. Bloomington, Indiana University Art Museum. (photo: Paris, Galerie Jean Chauvelin)

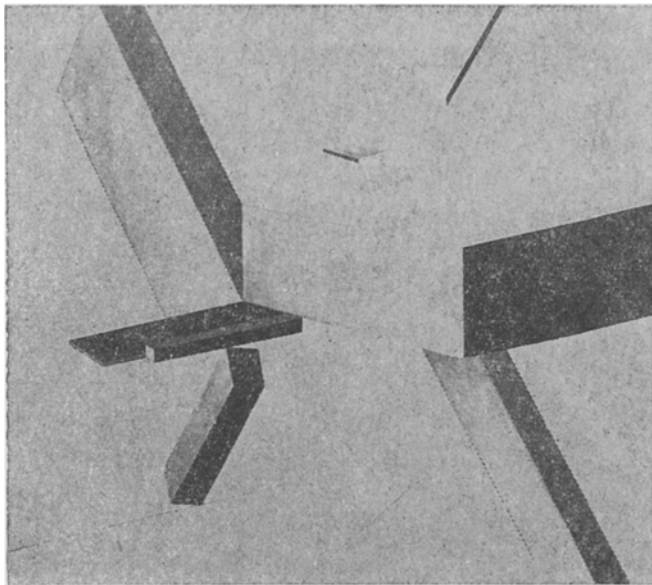


Fig. 10. Proun, ca. 1922, Oil on wood, 70×61.5 cm. Paris, Galerie Jean Chauvelin

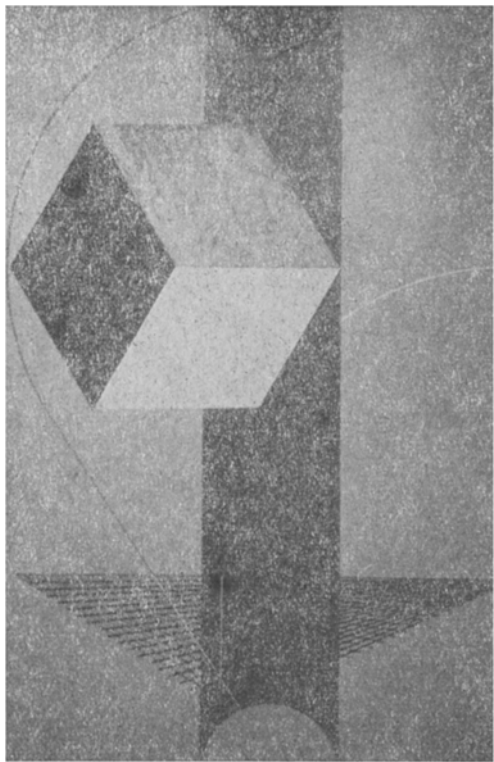


Fig. 11. Proun 99, 1923, Oil on wood, 99×129 cm. New Haven, Yale University Art Gallery

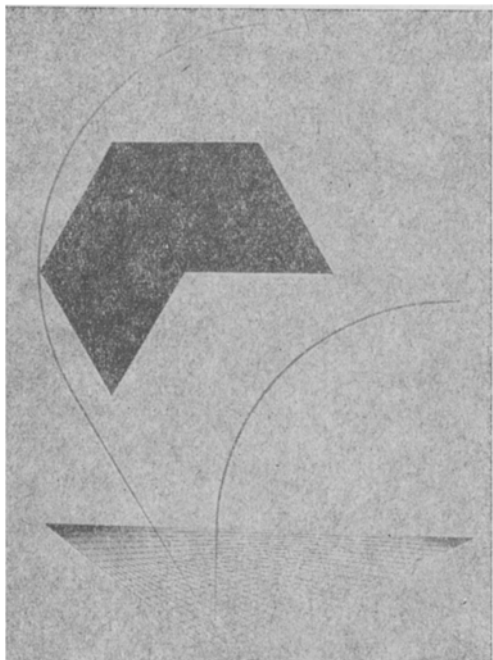
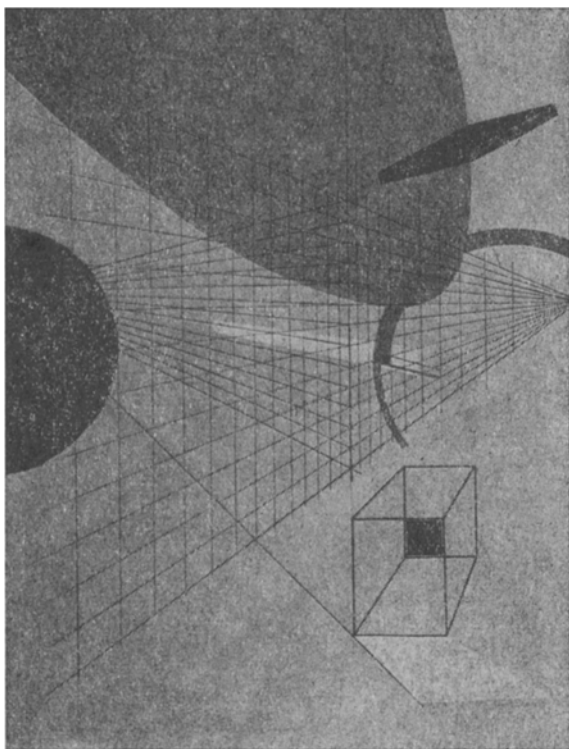


Fig. 12. Sketch for Proun 99, ca. 1923, Indian ink, watercolor, collage, 64.6×49.7 cm. Providence, R. I. Rhode Island School of Design



*Fig. 13. Proun, ca. 1920, Oil on canvas, 61 × 73 cm.
Cologne, Galerie Gmurzynska*