

stay in
the EU

make all
schools
art schools

create a
universal
income

support
the welfare
of all

make all
homes
affordable

read these
words aloud
in public

shout
them

whisper
them

upcycle
them

upcycle
this
book

26 texts
by Gavin Wade
& friends

Gavin Wade interviews El Lissitzky

Gavin Wade

How does this *Abstract Cabinet Show* differ from the previous incarnations of your *Abstract Cabinet* in the 1920s?

El Lissitzky (Gavin Wade)

The *Abstract Cabinet*, as it has become known, is here for the expansion of the human being and the human being's environment. This new incarnation then expands on my original ideas of expansion. If we walk, we walk faster and further. If we fly, we fly with more grace and more purpose. If we define the superstructure of our environment through responses to synergetic spheres of contextual influence then we have to take on board the complexity of fluctuations in our reality findings as opposed to our speculative projections. Inbetween we discover, nurture and utilise a new public sphere. This is the purpose of the *Abstract Cabinet*, and it only becomes more clear as we try to keep up with the ecological deviations of a strained society. This *Abstract Cabinet* bursts at the seams in honour and contradiction of a past yearning for equilibrium. Equilibrium is no longer our goal. Instead the portability of our avatar-like beings through the reconstituted technological super-complex leads us to skip from equilibrium to overload. Through understandings of imbalance, and overlaps of being, our energies can be concentrated towards new modes of reflection, expression and above all — revolution.

Gavin Wade

You have been one of the first to use new technologies as they become available. Do you see technological development

as an key instrument in defining and steering contemporary culture?

EI Lissitzky (Michael Takeo Magruder)

I have endeavoured to assimilate the technological processes and products of science and industry into my practice as such innovations have become realistically available to those working in the arts. Of course, this is not a revolutionary stance as technology and culture have maintained a close relationship throughout history, and have arguably become increasingly interdependent over time. Technology provides artists new means for creative expression, and in return, the creative application of technology facilitates both its evolutionary refinement and uptake within society. This recursive relationship can at times even provoke the critical spark of inspiration for truly progressive developments spanning both fields. Perhaps this is why some of the traditional distinctions and boundaries between artists and technologists have become increasingly blurred at present.

Gavin Wade

Does your vision of the world become more remote from reality as you enter further into virtual realities, even though your notion of a shared physical and virtual reality still seems entirely a social enterprise?

EI Lissitzky (Michael Takeo Magruder)

Illusion and immersion, the fundamental basis of all virtual realities, are artistic concepts with lineages that can be traced back through Western culture to the panoramic Roman frescos of antiquity, and perhaps even to pre-historic cave paintings from Palaeolithic sites like Lascaux. These

inherently social environments encouraged our ancestors to project their consciousnesses into 'other' spaces extending far beyond the confines of their actual surroundings, invoking shared experiences that were inseparable from communal rituals of everyday life. Although modern technologies have removed the need for physical localisation within the process, virtualisation of the self is still aligned with notions of social connectivity. Through technology, we may now exist amongst (or even between) more realities than ever before, but our engagement — however distinctly 'virtual' it may be — remains predicated on augmenting or extending our relationships within the real world.

Gavin Wade

Is your vision of the world a sexualised utopia? How do you see the conditions of your work surviving when placed into other cultures? Is it your intention to influence or combine with other cultural positions outside of your own experience or do you consider your position to be part of a shared global experience?

EI Lissitzky (Mithu Sen)

The sexualised utopia? Maybe it would do no good to a world which has de-sexualised / de-castrated itself in order to be economically stronger, more power-hungry, more violent! That's the world view, but every single individual viewpoint is what I seek. The utopia created is my world of desire where the sexual menace, overpower and tug of war of male / female is its defining passage. What I create is what I exist with. It's the Mithu Sen vibrating its conscious cause. My admission is not to paint pornography or male or female sexuality or sex or sexual connotation. Basically I paint that which seems as to the mind that reflects upon it. I would like to ask viewers

(readers), does this excite you? Does this tease you? Is this what you fantasise about or somewhere close to it? Does my painting put you off? Does it turn you off? In both ways I succeed. We in today's world become more and more control freaks who do not appreciate any human emotion to be emoted in public. We shy away. We get embarrassed. We like strained behavior. Any loud, profound, real emotion may lose you. We are scared of being us. May I push each person to confront their own self — their mind in my work.

I certainly would claim that I am more than my painting, but my paintings are also more than me. They interact with different human psyches and morph into something which I may not have perceived while making it, and yet it is certainly what I intended. Here it is not me who is painting, but it is the experience of the viewer who is making my work more than merely what it seems. Thus I suppose the culture biases of society are actually intangible ... my works interact with human minds and hence via them to their culture, society, bias ... etc. So I succeed in penetrating each human, their family values, societal values, ethics. When my work comes in contact with him or her (do we not all ... wish for a sexualised utopia, a floating world where our carnal desire exists with no limits?)

Gavin Wade

To what extent do you see your practice as transformative? Is it enough to relay an idea of transformation, or do you demand actual transformation of the world through your work?

El Lissitzky (The Hut Project)*

Practice converts material and senses in relation — senses process in proportion to material and material are given to

the senses therefore they are included in a practically acting relation — the output changes our feeling of the idea, the sense, and in the final analysis us. Practice means to constantly self-educate, own-reflect, own-articulate through the advanced process of distribution — so if you love, then we are living in the technological chains of peace (technologically in the most basic and widest feeling in which everything has its own activity). In our recent strand of work we assumed the possession of examples of our distribution — as we come to exist out of our own personalities — and then brought them back into the practice as material for new work. In proportion we convert in this way, pulsation moves always more externally and implicates more than people and senses — where be this end? If the idea of conversion is in the work, then the symbolic attribute of the actual process is of conversion — we never establish outside simply in order to transmit ideas, we experience them through the active processes. It is simple to transfer though never sufficiently for us. We supply converting the potential of works in the world, but wouldn't know how to convert peace, or even what peace it is which is necessary to convert. The practice innately is transformative and testing the limits of this always.

Gavin Wade

What methods do you feel are currently the most effective tools for affecting the existing conditions for the development of a national cultural agenda?

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This text, and the text by The Hut Project on p. 82 have been entered into an online translator converting the text into Russian and then back into English.

EI Lissitzky (The Hut Project)

We question proposals not perturbed with the development of national cultural agenda. In proportion to, we see any agenda of the day ideal — and in actuality — it constantly establishes and by practice exist in which they gave position to the time, and this is something which cannot be predetermined. The most effective tool to begin national cultural agenda correct is probable distribution, or, to detain to allocate accordingly pre-conceived, conservative and instrumentalised ideas of culture. We see that entirely all around we do not have tools necessary to include at this level. We also would not want to enter that level of bureaucratic structure into that offhand 'proper' role.

Gavin Wade

Is your work also the work of politics? How does your work differ from political actions made by politicians or activists?

EI Lissitzky (Freee)

First things first. Politics has changed. There is a difference between politics at the time of the Russian revolution and politics today, after the onslaught of neo-liberalism. I'm not just thinking of the collapse of 'actually existing socialism' but the systematic undermining of all leftwing, alternative and oppositional culture and organisation within western democracies and around the world on their behalf. Look at the European Union, for instance. Despite all the high claims about a political and cultural union, what we actually have is an economic and legal union, with politics left to nation states in a severely reduced form (distorted by the fact that the key economic and legal decisions that set conditions for political choices are taken at the supranational level).

Making political art, being a politicised artist or making art politically in these circumstances is hardly heroic.

The assumption underlying your question, though, is the gap between art and politics. It's not a bad assumption, even if we want to get beyond it. Typically, the problem of the gap between politics and art — of the depoliticisation of art and of art's alienation from social life more generally — is traced back to the emergence of art's autonomy. When art freed itself from the dictates of state, church and academy, it also distanced itself from society and politics. But to account for the gap between art and politics as a result of art's withdrawal is just not good enough. What we need to understand is how the state of modern politics contributes to art's withdrawal from it. In fact, what becomes apparent on closer inspection is that the withdrawal from politics is not something idiosyncratic about art but is utterly endemic to modern liberal democracies.

At the heart of liberal democratic thought is the esteem and protection of the private — private life, privacy, private citizens, private space, private interests and private property. So, one of the key contributions to political thinking made by the liberal tradition has been that private individuals need to be protected from the state. Politics within liberal democratic societies is reduced to a minimum that, if it works, private individuals can ignore and simply live their lives. Now, what this means is that liberal democratic societies are not participatory democracies in the strict sense because they do not call their citizens forth into political debate and collective action. What happens instead is that politics becomes ever more professionalised, specialised and separated off from

society in general — in a word, politics becomes autonomous. And when the autonomy of art meets the autonomy of politics we are left with a very unpromising situation for political art and politicised artists.

One option for the contemporary politicised artist, as your question suggests, is to engage in Activist Art. This, in a nutshell, means accepting the liberal democratic shrinking of politics and operating within the narrow, professional field of political campaigning. Another option is to become a really useful member of the community by producing Public Art or engaging in Culture Led Regeneration. This, effectively, reenacts the liberal colonisation of the public sphere by the values of the private sphere, producing an ethics instead of a politics. This is why community-based artists justify themselves in terms of their relationship to their community (how long they spent with them, how well they listened, how participatory they are and how sincerely they care). The new relational art, which proposes simple acts such as sharing a beer or having a conversation as glimpses of utopia, follows the liberal tradition in a different way. Here, private moments of interaction are framed as critical, radical and questioning. Politics, which is thought of as alienating and vaguely inhuman, is refashioned as private, intimate and convivial. Politics is saved by taking the politics out of it and being sensitive to the ethics of everyday life.

The Free Art Collective reject these options for politicised art because they are nothing but adaptations to liberal democracy's distortion of politics and inflation of the private sphere. We are committed, instead, to the politicisation and political interrogation of art by immersing it into the cultural

processes of the opinion formation — creating opportunities for discussion, debate, dispute and protest that are not colonised or instrumentalised by professional politics, by the state and the bureaucratic techniques. We work, therefore, somewhere between the private and the public, in the 'space' that the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas calls the 'public sphere'.

Politics has been turned into administration but private life is no solution for the political failings of politics. As such, the problem with politics — and the gap between art and politics — cannot be solved by becoming more political or by abandoning politics altogether. Politics needs to be rejuvenated at grassroots level, people need to become more involved in making decisions, forming judgements and sharing opinions. This does not mean bringing official politics to a wider audience, it means producing spaces and events for collective opinion formation.

What this must include is a sustained challenge to the apparent monopoly of the mass media on the power to form opinion. This is why our billboard works, for instance, temporarily reclaim public space for the purposes of debate rather than promotion and commerce.

We often work with slogans to animate public spaces and activate individuals as critical citizens. Slogans do not ask to be interpreted in the way that artworks tend to; they ask you to make a decision, form a judgement. 'Do you agree or disagree?' the slogan says, in addition to whatever else it says. If you agree, the slogan implies, pass it on, and if you disagree, write your own. Slogans, in this way, are the currency of

politics but also, and more importantly, one of the key tools in the process of politicisation.

The task today is not to produce a political art, which would merely inflict professionalised politics onto more victims and by so doing underline the liberal division between the private and the public; no, the task today is to produce an art that politicises, that takes a position and divides opinion. The task of a politicised art today is not to enter into the realm of political business — certainly not in its present, unpromising form — but to call into question the business of politics with a million little wake up calls.

Gavin Wade

How then does your work respond to or attempt to deal with the success and ensuing problems of global capitalism? Is the artist's role really sufficient to deal with the magnitude of a global system?

EI Lissitzky (D Salomon)

Se vi havas tre lauvortan interpreton de mia laboro, vi povus diri ke mi provas plibonigi tutmondan kapitalismon. Sola monda monunujo estus bona por la internacia komerco en libera — kvankam pli justa — merkato. Sed estas arto, do espereble mia laboro transdonas pli ol unudimensia mesaĝo. Arto estas spaco kie ni povas trakti aferojn senpretendi alporti iujn solvojn. Komprenibile en ĉi tiu projekto mi predikas por sola monda valuto, kaj tio sonas kiel solvo, sed ne forgesu ke estas diferenco inter la aŭtoro kaj la rakontanto. Mi rakontas la historion pri viro kiu sole strebas por treege ambicia celo, tio estas iom kortusa, ĉu ne? Ĝi ankau pritraktas la utopion de simpla kaj racia sistemo por

ĉies bono, kontraste kun realeco, kiu ĉiam estos kompleksa, neperfekta kaj plena de kontraŭdiroj. Mia celo ne estas konvinki homojn, sed igi ilin pripensi pri kiel la aferoj funkcias kaj montri ke oni fakte eblas sangi ilin. Eble ne rekte, sed per imagpovo kaj persisto, ni efektive estigas pozitivan sangon kiel individuoj. Tion almenaŭ mi esperas.

Gavin Wade

In this scenario you have just outlined how can the art dealer make a difference within the current recession? Is the role of the dealer or curator made redundant as soon as capitalism gets a hiccup?

EI Lissitzky (Malgras & Naudet)

We argue that a strong society must nurture and grow the culture of collecting and patronage. That for artists to develop away from the dogma of political interest, opportunities must exist for them to support their practices by means other than the state funding. One function of the dealer is to act as a catalyst for relationships between artists and collectors. This may become harder in a recession but in many ways that only makes the activity more vital.

Arthur C. Danto predicted that the market would never again reach the dizzy financial heights that it hit before the last recession. Twenty years later sale room records were again being broken, more fairs than ever existed, and the biggest problem for many dealers was not finding collectors but finding artists who were operating at a sufficient level with work of sufficient provenance to satisfy demand. Many resorted to selling the emperor's new clothes; their loss in the recession can only be understood as positive.

The current slowdown in the market has followed the pattern of the recession but not (yet) matched it in severity and part of the nature of capitalism is the ability to reinvent itself returning stronger. The art market shares this characteristic. Both will come again. We cannot speak for curators (they are a different breed) but we believe that the role of the dealer is an essential part of the reinvention helping to revitalise the micro economy of the art world and hence allowing artists to flourish.

Gavin Wade

You seem to have an interest in how things come apart and go together, finding perhaps some kind of elegance in the way that we humans organise materials and look for magical ways of ensuring that any result is more than the sum of its parts. What has your analysis of instructions, diagrammatics and the informational led to?

EI Lissitzky (Magnus Quaife)

The interest in instructions has something more to do with the authentic, maybe exhibiting them questions when the work begins to exist as well as the relationship between the idea and the audience. Looking at how things come apart and go together is certainly part of this but I think the instructions also ask interesting questions about ideas of rehearsal, repetition, precision and authorship. A wise man once told me that he wondered what the purpose of a work of art was when it didn't need to exist. I think he meant when it being made physical added nothing to the idea because it functioned purely in relation to the artist's intention and the spectator's understanding, whereas in other works the idea being made manifest as an object is essential. And the

instructions seem to me, on one level at least, to have these kinds of questions inherent in them. Showing them in a gallery focuses this, especially when several of the artists have exhibited, or will be exhibiting in the same space. More so because some of the documents have an aura of their own, perhaps in the elegance you describe, perhaps because they mark the presence of the artist, but also because while we are not presenting them as works of art some certainly seem to claim this for themselves.

Gavin Wade

What are your conclusions on the relationship then of (display) space to (display) instruction?

EI Lissitzky (David Osbaldeston)

When faced with the possibility of arranging the 'hanging' instructions in the first place — it struck me that for an audience to make sense of it we needed to make clear aesthetic considerations on a very formal level, and how necessary it is to follow convention and orthodoxy in such circumstances. I don't think I can add much to what's been said other than thinking of this endeavour as some kind of analogy to the Möbius strip. Perhaps for me the elegance is in the illusion of more than one thing happening at a time; between the artwork's conception and manifestation under different contexts. Sometimes the 'between' space is the most interesting if only through the sheer variability of circumstances.

Gavin Wade

What has become the fate of lines, shapes and abstract forms that once contained such promise and vitality for a

new future? How are the new forms of the twentieth-century still useful to us in the twenty-first-century? What new forms replace the old?

EI Lissitzky (DJ Simpson)

The more I think about it the more I am unhappy with being used as a ghost to haunt your present. I am happy to be dead and buried. Artists should always at least be trying to make work that is the start of something, not the end of something. Human habit and history will always complicate things and give you an elaborate argument if that's what you want. But then you are dealing in conventions which are just lies agreed upon. As for lines, shapes and abstract forms — what do you want from me? The next Malevich?

Gavin Wade

Is the way we live our lives indicative of failures or successes of the various modernities of the twentieth-century or are all the traces of movements such as Suprematism and Constructivism lost amongst all the other available options for living in families and communities?

EI Lissitzky (Grizedale Arts)

The way we all live our lives is fundamentally barely touched by the theories and ideals espoused through the centuries by religious groups, artists and intellectuals. Our lives are governed by a drive to be out of the weather, warm, fed and able to do nothing but sleep. Or as a southern US politician said moments before he resigned 'all the American ... wants is loose shoes, tight pussy and a warm place to shit'.

Gavin Wade

The way you live your life, though, and the expression of quality of living, seems as much part of your work as individual projects, participants and events. How conscious is this exploration of lifestyle and how much with or against the grain do you feel your practice to be?

EI Lissitzky (Grizedale Arts)

The Grizedale ethos is certainly conscious of lifestyle, the way we attempt to make the organisation work is part of the all encompassing artwork. This position is mediated by the reality that no one sane really wants to do anything that is hard, or uncomfortable, that of the many utopias attempted nearly all failed due to the division of labour and leisure amongst the participants. In a way the attempt to achieve a kind of ideal living is a critique of that human desire, like so many human ambitions — art for example — its failure is inbuilt. I sort of see our position in similar light to Thomas More's original description of Utopia as articulated by Raphael Hytholady, a surname that in translation means speaker of nonsense. The provinces of Utopia are named Tallstoria, Nolandia and Aircastle all of which suggests Utopia to have been a satirical ideal, a comparator with which to interrogate contemporary life.

Gavin Wade

Are you suggesting that we are all puppets running to some misguided master's directions?

EI Lissitzky (Heather & Ivan Morison)

No. The world is understood through myths. All meaning comes to us as stories. We can take control of these stories

to create our own meaning and form new myths. The midden is the detritus of society and we sit upon it, pick things from it, re-mould them and model them into objects that can act out new histories and possible futures.

Gavin Wade

Your work can often contain something of the end of the world about it and yet there is passion and joy and humanity to be found in your stories and scenarios, even at the edge and end of civilisation. Are you interested in your works acting as warnings to the world or as the opposite, signs that everything will be OK after all even if we do so many wrongs by our planet?

EI Lissitzky (Heather & Ivan Morison)

A common mistake is to assume that we are the only people to have ever lived in the present, or to have ever faced the prospect of great change. Many peoples before us have had to endure, adapted to or had to flee great upheaval, and their histories are testament that life does go on, is reordered and progressed through these periods. We are fortunate to have the time to be able to indulge ourselves with the innumerable forecasts, scenarios and visions of catastrophe from the stability of the present; it's almost as if, having lived through a lifetime of comfort and order, we are craving the reordering brought about by change.

Gavin Wade

There are so many truths to be found in your work. Do you find the truth wins out in all situations or are there times when dishonesty in art is the way forward? Where do you draw the line between what is public and private and how much of yourself are you prepared to give to the world?

EI Lissitzky (Bedwyr Williams)

There are many truths in my work but I also include a quota of handy lies and half-truths that I use to muddy the water a little bit. So there is a line between public and private but where people think that line has been drawn and where it's actually been drawn are very different. 'I never want to show my bottom to people who may grow to dislike me.'

Gavin Wade

Is the choice to perform so often in your work now a response to any particular realisations of power?

EI Lissitzky (Juneau Projects)

The choice to perform arose from our dissatisfaction with creating permanent artworks for a world in which a proliferation of objects already existed. The desire to make 'things' is strong though and we have subsequently struggled to find ways to bring together studio practice and live performance.

Gavin Wade

It seems to me that the contemporary rock star is one of the most powerful positions to inhabit in a global community looking to be led and given instructions of how to live their lives. Do you feel a responsibility to deliver to people what is missing in their lives? Is to perform to take on the role of a temporary saviour?

EI Lissitzky (Juneau Projects)

Performance offers a means of direct connection with an audience not necessarily afforded by a non-engaged practice. Our desire is not to lead or give instructions but

to attempt to establish a means of direct communication with people through methods not wholly reliant upon verbal exchange. For some the choice to perform may stem from a desire to preach; for us it is a medium that offers the opportunity to articulate ideas we are unable to share in other ways.

Gavin Wade

Why then do you insert yourself into the space of popular culture? Are there great benefits to society or new conclusions to be found from investigating the popular artforms of 'The People'?

El Lissitzky (Laureana Toledo)



Gavin Wade

The use of older forms of social resistance seems highly charged in the current climate of depression as we look for patterns of problems that may have occurred in our societies over the past century. Do you feel there could be some usefulness in reflecting upon what had seemed outmoded forms?

El Lissitzky (Clarke & McDevitt)

Yes, but critically and carefully so. As Larry Elliot pointed out in *The Guardian* newspaper on 12 October this year, 'Keynesians (and Marxists, to be fair) haven't had so much fun in years.' The collapse of international capitalism with all its holy grails falling into the crevice has been fun ... of sorts. Just as I'm sure the collapse of communism from the other side of the fence was 20 years ago. While much can be gained in returning to Marx at present (more copies of the Communist Manifesto were sold in Germany than ever before this year — yet a conservative coalition swept up the recent election) perhaps what is needed is a complete reappraisal of the early critiques of modernity; taking close consideration of the momentous failures of the twentieth-century. Maybe the quiet voices of early modernity, like that of Victor Serge, are more pertinent than contemporary finger-wagging and denunciation.

Gavin Wade

Is the use of shared social graphic systems a way to further erode the grip of the current dominant systems of the western world?

El Lissitzky (Clarke & McDevitt)

If a shared social graphic system is a decontextualisation, aestheticisation and depoliticisation of an already existing radical politicised form of visual critique: then no. What would I, El Lissitzky, think of using an established visual motif as a cunning way to gain acceptance by an emphatically capitalist form of acknowledgement? I'd probably think it was shit.

Gavin Wade

Is pornography what the people want?

EI Lissitzky (Clarke & McDevitt)

You can tease some of the people all of the time and all of the people some of the time but you can't tease all of the people all of the time.

Gavin Wade

(Laughs.) How essential then do you see the role of design and typography in terms of constructing a new world? You seem to have invested so much energy into developing new concepts of layout and relationships of language to form. Are design skills a prerequisite for leading any revolution?

EI Lissitzky (James Langdon)

I don't like to imagine all of this again. I am an old man now. Early in my life I was energised by the opportunity I saw to discover a visual language that could express a new world. The sensibility of the new society was being shaped by our tools. We were idealists but we understood the brutality of the world. It felt that ours was an unflinching vision of things as they were and as they would become. I see now that it was an illusion — what I thought we had expelled has resurfaced, what I thought we had constructed has melted into air. Our discoveries have been undermined. Governments saw the power of our vision to sculpt the public mind and co-opted it. The world they have made is tribal, not the unified society that seemed possible to me as a young designer. I saw the power of design to foster a connection between men. Now I cannot see how a revolution could manifest itself when that connection has been trivialised and exploited.

Gavin Wade

What does it mean to make functional art now?

EI Lissitzky (Céline Condorelli)

To create functional art is to concentrate all the elements of modern knowledge, all existing systems and methods, and with these to form plastic elements, which from then on exist just like the elements of nature, such as H (hydrogen) and O (oxygen). The creator of functional art amalgamates these elements and obtains acids which bite into everything they touch, that is to say, they have an effect on all spheres of life. Perhaps all this is a piece of laboratory work: but it does not produce any scientific preparations which are only interesting and intelligible to a small circle of specialists. It produces living bodies, objects of a specific kind, new relationships and connections, new forms of knowledge, whose effects cannot be measured with an ammeter or a manometer ...

Gavin Wade

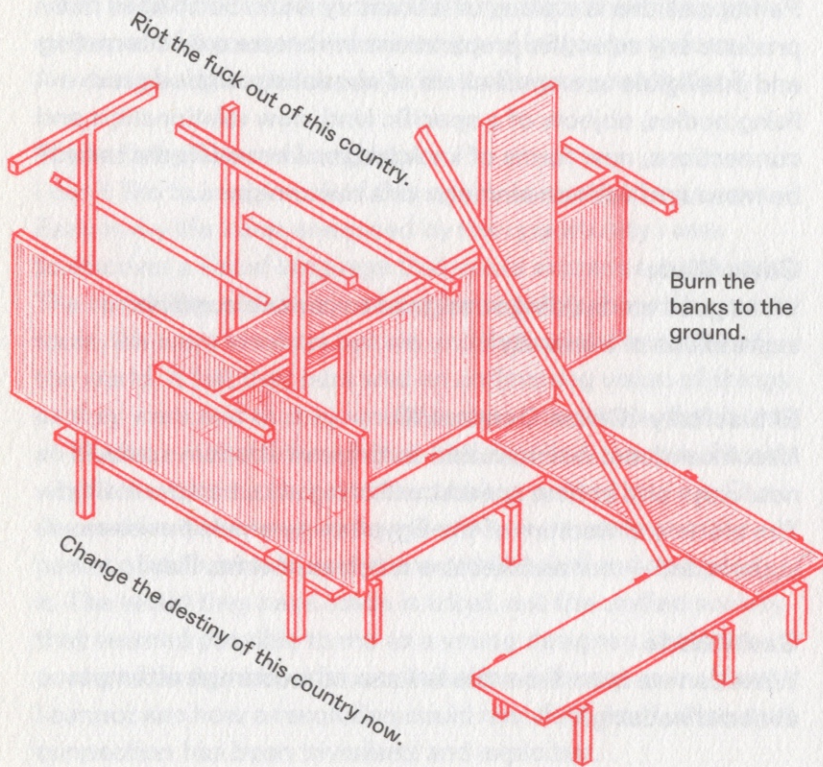
What good are buildings designed to contain complex expressions of humanity?

EI Lissitzky (Céline Condorelli)

New inventions, which enable us to move about in space in new ways and at new speeds, will bring about a new reality. The static architecture of the Egyptian pyramids has been superseded — our architecture revolves, swims, flies.

Gavin Wade

What can we learn from the failures of modernist attempts at social housing?



El Lissitzky (Barbara Holub)

In the beginning there was utopia, connected to function. The problems started to arise when it was reduced to functionality. The failure became obvious when housing was reduced to merely provision of living space without offering infrastructure for daily life and spaces of communication.

I think we have to differentiate between the modernist attempts concerning social housing (mainly in the western European countries) and modernist living being propagated as 'the future living' in the eastern European countries.

The success or failure of modernist housing depends on how it is placed and interwoven in the social context of the urban fabric and how it relates to the infrastructure of everyday life needs. When looking at the diverse contexts between socialist countries / cities (for example, Novi Beograd / New Belgrade or Petrzalka / Bratislava) and western European cities, the big difference is that in former eastern Europe new city quarters based on modernist concepts were realised together with infrastructure providing a future living, where the identity of the individual was considered as part of a larger context of a future vision of society. In Novi Beograd / New Belgrade and Petrzalka / Bratislava mostly intellectuals or higher educated people lived.

In the West modernist concepts were often reduced to mono-functional areas for social housing, rather than seeking a mixture of people and providing infrastructure. An interesting example in this context is 'Les Olympiades' in Paris which turned into Chinatown. Originally conceived as the example of future living, as a mixture of different social backgrounds

which was also reflected in the architecture, it took a shift after the oil crisis in 1973, when the originally envisioned inhabitants of 'yuppies' did not have the money to move in. Instead it was inhabited by 'boat people' from Vietnam and is now offering the biggest Asian supermarket in Europe (Tang Frères). The tower blocks still have a mixture of intellectuals and clandestine sweat shops by Asians.

So, what we can learn is that architecture by itself does not make for a living environment. It has to be conceived together with developing a social climate and urban / public sphere — and this is the responsibility of the whole society, namely the stakeholders and politicians involved, to assume that responsibility rather than mis-using modernist concepts for exerting social segregation.

Gavin Wade

What do you hope are the outcomes of your work on shared space in the city?

EI Lissitzky (Barbara Holub)

To create an awareness that it is the responsibility of all of us (not just the artists as marginal parts of society) to take a stand, to position ourselves as political subjects, and then we can claim a space for visions. To transgress the boundaries of the art context in order to position current issues of societal relevance by using the art context and the longing of certain parts of society (like the 'successful companies' who mostly don't care about social issues) to be part of the 'chic' art world in order to raise their image. Art cannot and must not resolve problems — and this is ever more important to state in the current condition of society where everything is reduced

to measurable economical benefits and the lack of solutions or ideas from political parties. But art can create a wider awareness for addressing contradiction, conflict, conflicting interests, humour, poetic moments and any quality in life that does not have a direct economical relevance — the extra which is considered a luxury — a luxury which we should strive for.

Gavin Wade

When should art be functional?

EI Lissitzky (Barbara Holub)

When it is needed in the specific context. When art needs to be functional artists have to be paid equally like other experts or consultants. A clear distinction has to be made. This offers a chance for artists engaging in social / political / urban issues to also free themselves from function, when not hired and paid in that function. It is vital to maintain their criticality rather than catering to the interests of investors or toothless city governments (like in recent regeneration processes). It is time to withdraw from the recent functions that artists are asked to comply with and return to claim a new independence.

Gavin Wade

How important is it that you as an artist familiar with so many forms of the use of structure continue to design new things for the World?

EI Lissitzky (Céline Condorelli)

We are approaching the state of floating in air and swinging like a pendulum. I want to help discover and mould the form of this reality.

Gavin Wade

What do you think the role of the gallery is now, and how does the format of exhibition or display fit into any contemporary language of art production? Is art or the gallery actually a precarious condition itself — could we see it vanish?

EI Lissitzky (Katharina Schlieben)

The idea is great. I like your approach very much of believing and constructing polyphonous thoughts of different contexts and times together. The interview allows that, especially in such a way you are suggesting it. But I must admit, that the schedule is very limited. I am just coming back from Italy and Switzerland to Cologne today — reading through my emails, and knowing that I have to finish two more texts before the end of the upcoming week. So I cannot really reply in a proper way, but maybe a short comment ...

The question you raise is so super important as we have to rethink the format of the institution as a site for production urgently — in our everyday practice at Shedhalle it was a constant sub-question. On the one hand, too many resources go into the infrastructures of sometimes quite heavy institutions which allow no flexibility, instead causing a kind of motionlessness. On the other hand, one has to be very careful with such kinds of tendencies in the argumentations as they include the danger of moving close to the neo-liberal rhetoric of the so often mentioned 'flexible' thinking and 'slimming' structures which would mean the opposite of needed individualistic approaches and instead would strengthen consensual ideas of 'how to do it right'. But exactly here lies the crux and the dilemma: the situation of a

lot of interesting institutions is so precarious in terms of funding (knowledge) productions that they have to gather together on a trans-national / cultural level. That is why the BAC in Sweden invites people to discuss production conditions in institutions and Maria Lind invites people to a symposium on funding policies and production conditions etc. ...

The question you pose is a philosophical, social, political and of course art-related one, which is not easy to answer. I would argue for slowness and reduction. Even so we know that that is paradoxical and difficult in a moment of precarious working conditions. But if I think about Shedhalle — and I guess Sönke would argue similarly — it is a space that is physically too big for its interests in conceptual, immaterial and context-related productions. At the same time such an argument needs to be very carefully put and addressed as different parties in history, as well as nowadays, show interest and claim ownership for such a space (that at least survived for more than 25 years).

I would very much like to follow Paul Feyerabend's concerns in his treatise *Against Method*, at least the methodological approach he suggests, which would mean in a translated sense concerning art institutions, that an anarchistic activity and thinking is needed. But instead we find ourselves so often in situations of pragmatic and strategic thinking, which often cover anarchistic ideas.

This is not meant as an answer, more a comment about your very open question and your idea of speaking in a polyphonous way.

Gavin Wade

But is this what is essential for the gallery to do now when so much art exists in other realms? We need to know what is urgent!

El Lissitzky (Céline Condorelli)

Great international exhibitions resemble zoos, where visitors are roared at by a thousand different beasts at the same time.

In the gallery the objects should not all suddenly attack the viewer. If on previous occasions in his march-past in front of the picture-walls and object-rooms, he was lulled by painting into a certain passivity, now exhibition spaces should make the man active. This should be the purpose of the gallery.

The equilibrium which one seeks to attain in the gallery must be elementary and capable of change. It must acknowledge and work with existing conditions, social, spatial, political. The light, in which the effect of colour originates, should be controlled. Colour is an epidermis covering a skeleton. According to the construction of each skeleton, the epidermis is pure colour or tone. Each demands a different manner of isolation and illumination. Just as the best acoustics are created for the concert-hall, so must the best conditions be created for the show-room, so that all the works may achieve the same degree of activity. But gallery-space is not there for the eyes alone, it is not a picture; it must be lived in. The gallery is there for the human being — not the human being for the room.



This interview was produced in 2009 as part of the development of *Abstract Cabinet Show* at Eastside Projects. I had taken on the persona of a number of artists, curators and designers in my own artworks and had seen other artists do this. I wondered if the participants of this group show of groups and collectives that I was curating would all take on the persona of El Lissitzky, whose 1920s *Abstract Cabinet* was being referred to in the title. The result reveals surprising connections, and makes a coherent (in places) conversation. I'd like to interview El Lissitzky again sometime. Perhaps I'll do it 100 years after he made his famous artist-curator works!