

МАРСОВО ПОЛЕ, № 7.  
**ПОСЛѢДНЯЯ**  
**ФУТУРИСТИЧЕСКАЯ**  
**ВЫСТАВКА КАРТИНЪ**  
**„0,10“**  
**(НОЛЬ - ДЕСЯТЬ)**  
составъ участниковъ—выставки „Трамвай В“,  
50% чистой прибыли въ пользу Лазарета  
Дѣятелей Искусства.  
**ВЕРНИССАЖЪ—19-го Декабря, плата 1 рубль.**  
**ОТКРЫТІЕ—20-го Декабря, плата 50 коп.**  
Въ день Верниссажа выставка открыта съ  
4 час. дня до 8 час. веч.  
Въ день Открытія и прочіе дни съ 10 ч. до 5 ч.  
Входная плата въ день верниссажа 1 р. Въ день открытія 50 к., прочіе дни 50 коп., учащіеся 30 к.  
**Трамваи: №№ 1, 2, 3, 12, 15, 22.**

fig. 1  
*Ivan Puni*  
Poster, 0.10: The Last Futurist  
Exhibition, 1915.  
*Lithograph, 74 x 55.5 cm.*  
*Private collection, Zurich.*



# The Critical Reception of the 0.10 Exhibition: Malevich and Benua

Jane A. Sharp

The prominent St. Petersburg critic Aleksandr Benua (also known as Alexandre Benois) begins his review of the 0.10 exhibition (Petrograd, 1915–16) and of Kazimir Malevich's latest innovation—Suprematism—with the admission that he is not in a position to judge vanguard art, that it is “absolutely foreign to me.” And in a self-reflexive passage of the text he explains why: “But what I see at the exhibitions of our ‘ultra-Modernists, as such’ simply leaves me cold and indifferent. I do not sense the ‘spirit of art’ and I just become bored at them. In this [reaction] a certain psychologizing manifests itself: I become interested not in what I see but in the reasons why it leaves me cold. My psychologizing is confused and full of contradictions, bringing forth ever renewed floods of fatigue and, again, boredom.”

But these first observations are deceptive; Benua's topos in fact calls attention to the immense significance of Malevich's inauguration of Suprematism. Above all, the review is apocalyptic. Benua articulates his response to Suprematism in terms of the horror of the unknown as well as in terms of a certain horror of uniformity—the possibility of endless repetitions of faceless, figureless canvases. For Benua, the 0.10 exhibition was not simply the “last Futurist exhibition” (as the show was subtitled); it represented the end of painting altogether and not the beginning of a new “national style.” Moreover, Benua did not interpret the *Chernyi kvadrat* (*Black Square*, 1915, fig. no. 2) as a sign of radical social engagement or *épatement* as he did earlier vanguard work. Instead, he describes the *Black Square* as a tabula rasa, a “complete zero” that has made representation (as a response to the natural world) irrelevant to a completely decadent “indifferent” society. The review proclaims a watershed moment in the vanguard artist's challenge to and absorption into the status quo: the “boorishness” and “Americanization” of Russian society predicted by Benua (and by Dmitrii Merezhkovskii in an earlier review) has in fact been achieved, and no one has noticed.<sup>2</sup>

This reaction has its reverse parallel in a number of comments by vanguard artists and critics after the Revolution when the *Black Square* came to represent the very face of the ongoing revolution and the new society that it sought to create. Like the earliest theorists of the European avant-garde in the mid-nineteenth century, El Lissitzky understood and valued the dynamic power of the radically new in art to predict or even effect radical political and social change.<sup>3</sup> In his essay of 1920, “Suprematism in World Reconstruction,” Lissitzky presents his view of the *Black Square* as the harbinger of a new cosmic era: “for us SUPREMATISM did not signify the recognition of an absolute form which was part of an already-completed universal system. on the contrary here stood revealed for the first time in all its purity the clear sign and plan for a definite new world never before experienced—a world which issues forth from our inner being and which is only now in the first stages of its formation. for this reason the square of suprematism became a beacon.”<sup>4</sup> Following the Revolution, Lissitzky cast the aims of Suprematism in political terms by counterpointing parallel descriptions of the successive upheavals brought about through art and Bolshevik Communism: “into this chaos came suprematism extolling the square as the very source of all creative expression. and then came communism and extolled work as the true source of man's heartbeat.”<sup>5</sup>

Landmarks in the periodical criticism of the times (such as Benua's review of 0.10) reveal that the alliance forged between stylistic innovation and radical social politics which we ascribe to the revolutionary era was grounded in earlier perceptions of avant-garde art. Benua's response to Suprematism as the herald/revealer of social and aesthetic cataclysm shows how the



reception of avant-garde art before the Revolution determined the artist's paradoxical status as a "leftist" wielding considerable authority after the Revolution. In order better to understand this condition, we must recognize first that both left artists and leftist politicians drew their authority in the new society from the radical contexts of their prerevolutionary activities.

Malevich was sufficiently disturbed by Benua's review to write an angry reply, which he intended to have published in a daily newspaper but instead sent directly to the critic himself.<sup>6</sup> In the letter, Malevich reproaches Benua for dominating a system that has exhausted itself and survives only to impede the new. But his response is more than a complaint lodged against the status quo. In language that abounds with social and political metaphor, the letter threateningly predicts the system's violent demise: "You have deprived the academy and museum of any real significance. You have made them strictly partisan exhibitions and thus a tool, the casemate of a prison, a restraint on freedom of thought. You have set up your commonplace clichés there and built up a reputation for them; and the work of anyone that follows your pattern faithfully can hang alongside yours in your exhibitions . . . You have all the tools to erase everything that is not made in your image, but canvas is strong and the garret serves as the boor's gallery and museum. Your grandchildren will get the canvases out from there and will wring the neck of your system."<sup>7</sup>

Of course, a little over a year later, with the October Revolution, the system that Benua represented for Malevich would be overthrown and, by 1920, with the inception of Unovis (the Affirmers of the New Art) in Vitebsk, Malevich's own collective "system" would be installed. His program, like the statutes designed by a number of artists in the years of War Communism, functioned as a critique of the Imperial academic system by replacing its teacher/student hierarchy with a collective workshop structure. The significance of this inversion of social hierarchy and its synecdochical relation to the birth of Suprematism was articulated even before the formal transformation of the Vitebsk Popular Art School into Unovis. The cover of Malevich's pamphlet *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve* (*On New Systems in Art*) collapses the primary geometric forms of Suprematism and the admonition that "the overturning of the old world of arts will be etched across your palms" (recto); the notice on the verso reads "Work and edition by the workshop [artel'] of artistic labor at the Vitebsk Svomas" (fig. no. 3).<sup>8</sup>

This attack and counterattack between critic and artist epitomizes communication before the Revolution between vanguard artists of Malevich's generation and their critics. The exchange manifests the contradiction inherent in the vanguard's position as a movement of opposition to a dominant social structure and aesthetic system which it essentially seeks to replace. Similarly, Benua's discussion of Malevich's work, like his evaluation of other vanguard artists, particularly Natal'ia Goncharova and David Burliuk, is at once an extended critique and a measure of the avant-garde's impact on prerevolutionary Russian society. Although Benua would periodically claim he was bored by the vanguard artist's posturing, a summary reading of his reviews of any number of avant-garde exhibitions before the Revolution would lead us to attribute to him any reaction but ennui. Indeed, Benua was extremely vocal in his hostility to Russia's fledgling vanguard. A prominent artist himself, cofounder of the journal *Mir iskusstva* (*World of Art*) in 1898, and an art historian, Benua became in 1908 the chief art critic of the daily St. Petersburg newspaper *Rech'* (*Speech*), which published each month his reviews of artistic and theatrical events. He was the among the first critics to isolate and describe the new Primitivism

manifested in vanguard exhibitions beginning with the Golubaia roza (Blue Rose) exhibition of 1907.<sup>9</sup> In 1912 he wrote a blistering critique of avant-garde polemics, "Kubizm ili kukishizm" ("Cubism or *Je-m'en-foutisme*"), which focused on the interpretations of French Cubism by David Burliuk and other artists.<sup>10</sup> He may be credited as one of the critics who defined and named the avant-garde, using the terms *peredovaia molodezh'* (vanguard youth), *levye* (leftists), and *futuristy* (Futurists) somewhat indiscriminately in referring to the artists of Petersburg and Moscow who formed the groups Soiuz molodezhi (Union of Youth), Bubnovyi valet (Jack of Diamonds), and Oslinyi khvost (Donkey's Tail). (In his review of the *0.10* exhibition, he would describe Malevich's group as the *krainii levyi flang* [extreme left flank] of the art world.) Together with Iakov Tugendkhol'd, Sergei Makovskii, and Maksimilian Voloshin, all contributors to major newspapers as well as to the influential art journal *Apollon* (*Apollo*), he was a powerful arbiter of taste among the art-going (and art-buying) public; as Malevich would claim with good reason a few years later, "without the stamp of Benua and his associates, no work of art could receive civil rights and life's benefits."<sup>11</sup> Malevich continued by listing the names of artists who had both suffered from and profited by the attention of Benua and his colleagues: "This was the case with Vrubel, Musatov, P. Kuznetsov and Goncharova, whom they finally recognized after throwing mud at them for a long time; but how many have still not been acknowledged!"<sup>12</sup> Malevich's response, in other words, recognizes that the critics (Benua in particular) who so successfully dominated and controlled the art market played a primary role in defining the avant-garde as a marginal, radical force.

Benua's antipathy to avant-garde art appears to have peaked earlier, in 1912, with his cutting reviews of the Union of Youth exhibitions which took place in St. Petersburg and included members of the Moscow avant-garde as well.<sup>13</sup> His criticisms of vanguard art typically center on the Russian artist's accursed proclivity for assimilating external influences. In Benua's view, Russian art is so assimilative that its history and the vanguard's place in this history must be characterized as nonevolutionary. Vanguard innovations in style do not point toward a movement laying the basis for a new school or "national style"; rather they appear as "nothing else but equilibristic stunts, somersaulting in the air." Benua situates this observation, however, in the context of Russian society. Deprived of social support (a stable, informed audience), contemporary art appears to be "arbitrary" and "impermanent"—it can only reflect the current fashion or trend. He argues that despite the remarkable talents involved, vanguard artists share a common trait: they produce "hurried, unthought-through work—shoddy goods [*deshevka*]. This is the absence of what is called a school."<sup>14</sup> Although this attack was leveled at the vanguard youth in general, in his review of Malevich's Suprematist work Benua uses similar metaphors: "And this is not merely the hoarse cry of the carnival barker [*zazyval'shchik*] but the main 'trick' in the puppet show [*v balaganchike*] of the very last word in culture."<sup>15</sup>

By the end of 1913, however, with the opening of Goncharova's mammoth solo exhibition in Moscow, Benua seemed to have reconciled his wholly negative view of vanguard culture with a new appreciation of the expressive power of Primitivism and even of Cubo-Futurism in Russian art. His comments on this occasion reflect his broader anxiety over the "difficulties" inherent in reading vanguard art, prefiguring his critique of Malevich in 1916. In this respect, Benua's review remains an important record of the process of public and critical acceptance that this exhibition initiated for Goncharova's work and for vanguard art generally. Like his



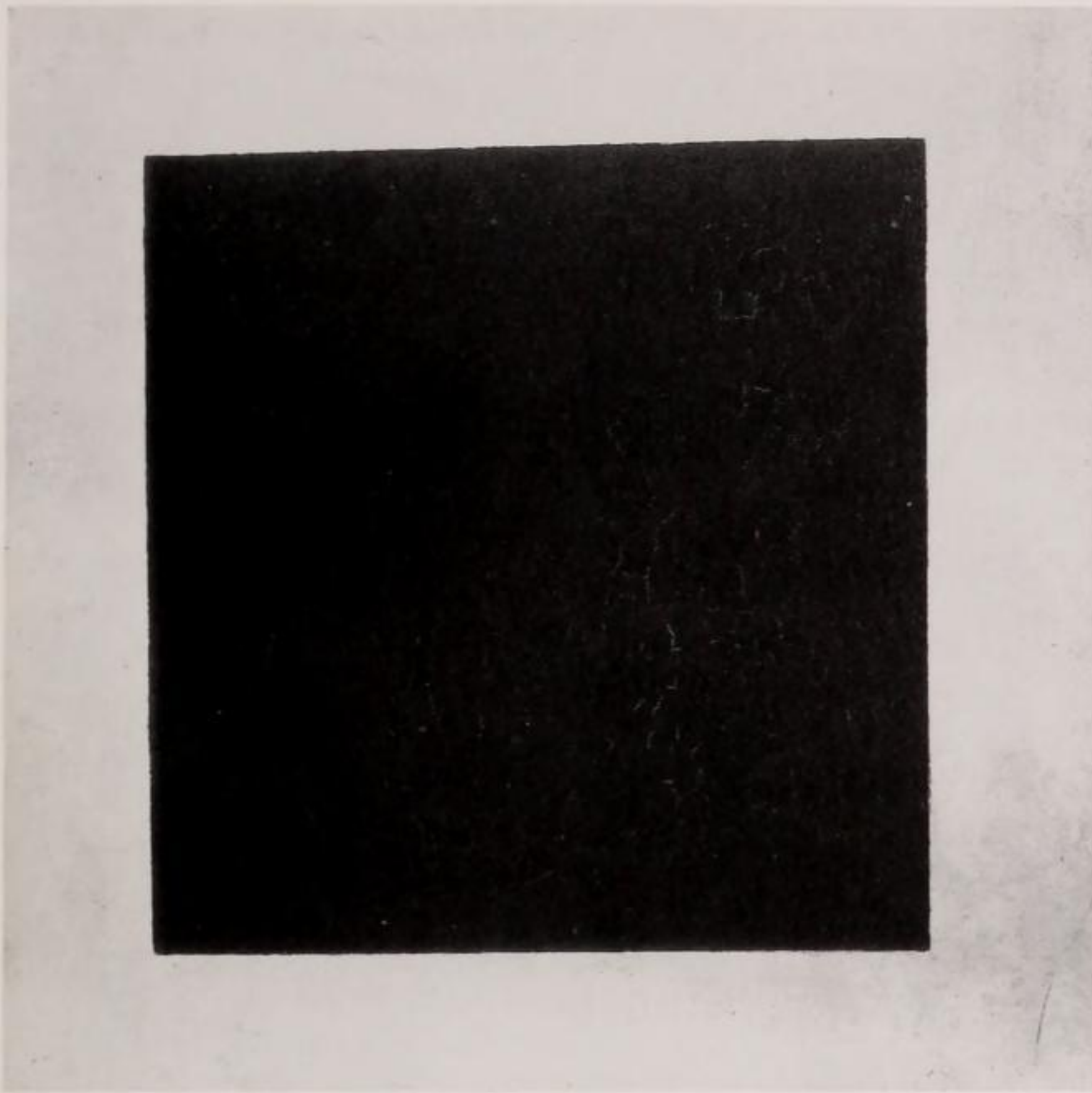
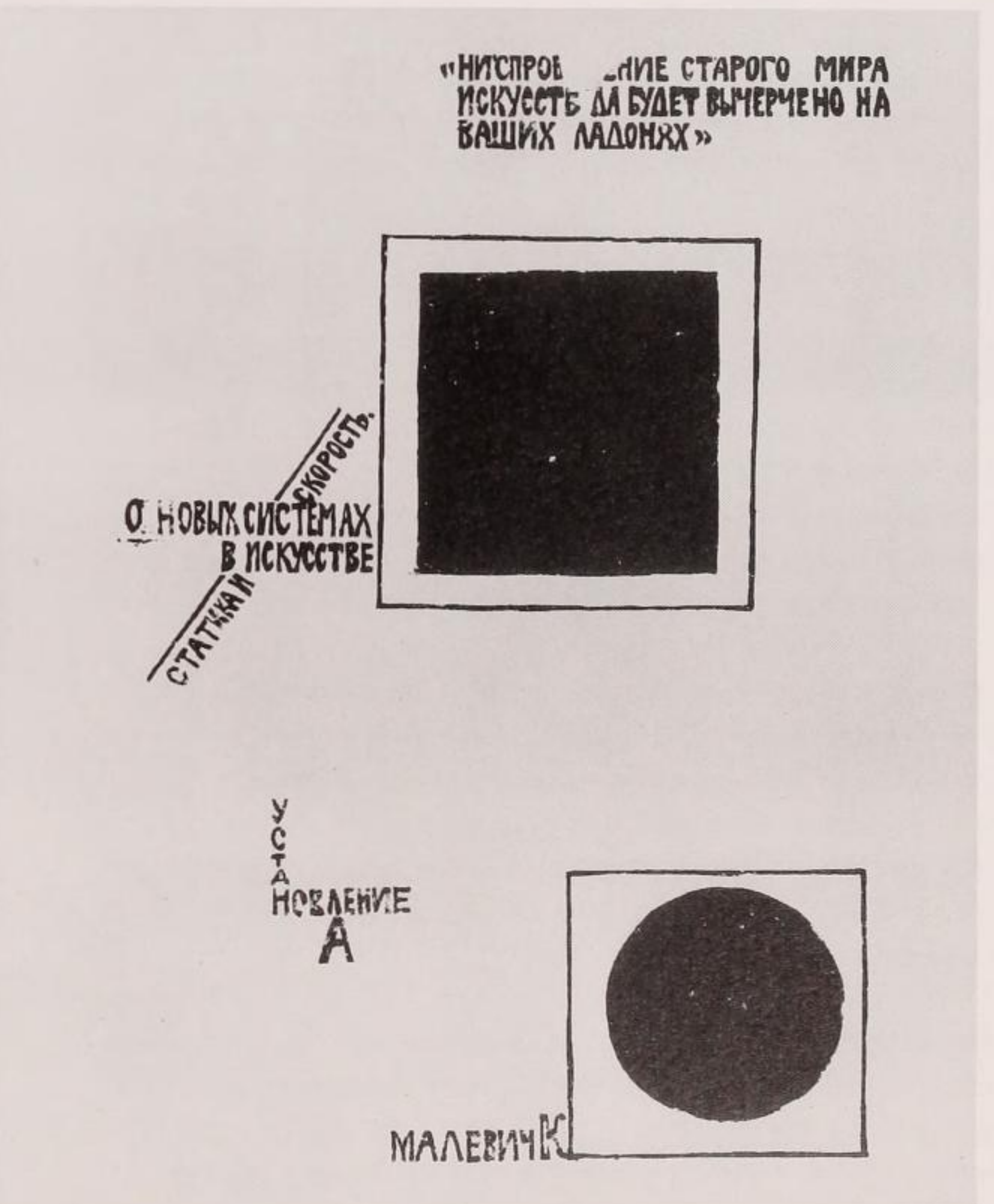
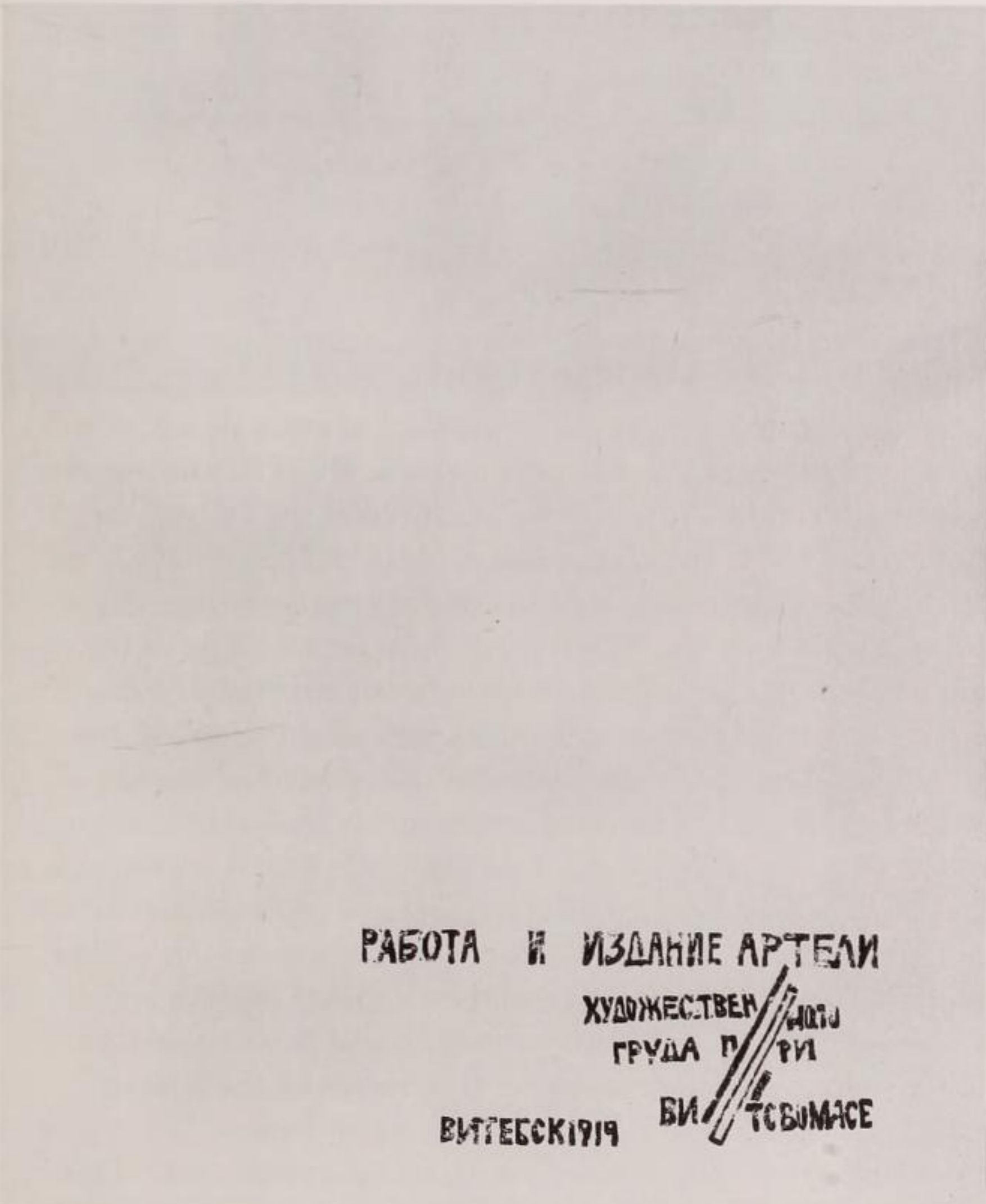


fig. 2  
 Kazimir Malevich  
 Black Square, 1915.  
 Oil on canvas, 79.5 x 79.5 cm.  
 State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow.

fig. 3  
 Kazimir Malevich  
 Cover for his On New Systems in Art, 1919.  
 Lithograph, 23 x 37.2 cm.  
 Collection of Prints and Drawings,  
 The Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich.





critique of Malevich's work, this earlier review is unusually self-reflexive; it mediates between references to his previously negative evaluation of Goncharova's work and soul-searching examinations of the reasons for his present capitulation:

*I went again to Goncharova's exhibition in part to test my first impression, in part simply to delight in it. It turns out I had not gone astray the first time, I was not mistaken. On the contrary, today I sensed even more clearly that this is a great talent and a true artist. Generally speaking, I believed her even more, and consequently I may change completely my whole attitude toward the kind of painting which she represents . . . I saw at this exhibition many old familiar paintings which were in our {World of Art} and other exhibitions. It means a great deal to see them now within the artist's whole oeuvre. Their "talent" was always clear to me and I got into many arguments with close friends over this. But I did not completely "believe in them." Much of her art seemed a pose to me, a distortion and youthful joke. Now I am ready to believe in the complete sincerity of a master and at the same time it is absolutely clear to me that it is not Goncharova who needs to learn but we who must learn from her, as it always follows that one should learn from all the great and strong. No, this is not ugliness or distortion but the very opposite: the intention (accomplished) to become perfectly connected with oneself; to express in the simplest way that which is hidden in the soul and bursts to the surface.<sup>16</sup>*

Paradoxically, it is now Benua who comes to the vanguard artist's defense, countering Goncharova's detractors by arguing that much of her work, especially her earliest paintings and pastels, is "completely 'acceptable,' accessible to the comprehension of those who have only an amateurish interest in art."

Benua's acceptance of Goncharova's work, however, like his acceptance of the new trends it represents, does not read as a step toward the commodification of a previously "militant" artistic message.<sup>17</sup> Rather, it is a disruptive, continuously equivocal process for him that requires a complete reevaluation of the whole vanguard tradition which he had dismissed just the year before in his essay "Cubism or *Je-m'en-foutisme*":

*As with my experience last year in Sergei Ivanovich Shchukin's gallery, I lived through a lot in the past two days at Goncharova's exhibition. Now I can no longer consider as heresy even the most extreme dislocations {sdvigi}, that nightmarish abracadabra that has issued from Picasso and has infested all of the vanguard youth, here and in the West. These pictures still disturb me, yet I now clearly feel that they exist within the realm of art.*

Benua's lengthy discussion of Goncharova's work registers in actuality what Viktor Shklovskii later defined as an aim of *ostranenie* (making strange) in literature—the deliberate impeding of the viewer's perception.<sup>18</sup> Developing his new insights into the pictorial forms of Cubism and Futurism, Benua describes his response to a roomful of Goncharova's latest and most trying Futurist works, her urban machine and factory images:

*In accordance with the new formulae of painting: objects are depicted as precisely fragmented and incorrectly reconstituted colors, terrifyingly "raw"; through forms, which only with great difficulty are identifiable with forms in reality, some sort of "half-spoken" signs pass by. One has to look at the painting, and involuntarily read what is said there. One's attention is intensified—even more than that, it is tormented. Looking at such pictures requires suffering.*

Benua's appreciation of his dilemma is contingent upon recognizing in Goncharova's language and subject matter signs of the modern age, which he, like so many artists of his

generation, transposes into an apocalyptic vision of the future. In this context, the vanguard artist appears as a clairvoyant of the encroaching industrial era—the machine its new god. Benua ultimately finds positive value in Goncharova's work, which he now interprets as a messianic expression of the impending battle with the "philistinism" and "American devilry" associated with developed capitalism in Russia. He concludes that this trend can only be overcome or reversed by "looking for the revelation of God in everything, turning away from superficial stagnation and [instead] constantly penetrating into the essence of things." The difficulty in reading the image has the effect of slowing down perception, allowing the viewer to contemplate the relationship of the fragmented forms to his or her life experience. For Benua, who finds a direct correspondence between the *faktura* (density) of Goncharova's canvases and real perceptual phenomena, her art becomes the "sincere" and "honest" reflection of a world in turmoil. Thus, Benua assures his readers that the "suffering" experienced in viewing Goncharova's work is essentially beneficial, even redemptive.

Two years later, in his review of the *0.10* exhibition, Benua reversed this position. Malevich's *Black Square* cannot redeem society—it is the icon of a cardinal sin: humankind's arrogant elevation of the self (and the machine) above nature and God—the *Black Square* is blasphemy. Benua expresses this view in no uncertain terms, repeating the words *koshchunstvo* (blasphemy) and *koshchunstvovat'* (to blaspheme). It is clear that, with the advent of the *0.10* exhibition, Benua shifted his critique of vanguard art from accusations of epigonism and eclecticism to the hostile recognition that with Suprematism Malevich had truly advanced a coherent new style in painting.

In order to understand Benua's extreme reaction to the first presentation of Suprematism, we must examine his quasi-religious, quasi-social/political rhetoric in more detail. Benua's critique focuses on the way in which the *Black Square* was hung in the exhibition: "high above, right under the ceiling, in the 'holy place'"—in the traditional place of the icon (fig. no. 4). Because of Malevich's choice in hanging the painting, the *Black Square* does not merely constitute an analogue to the icon and thereby acquire similar authority as an image; the *Black Square* actually replaces the icon. By usurping the seat of the icon, the *Black Square* diagrams the destruction of one set of values and the installation of a new hierarchy—the dominion of forms over nature. Benua explains: "Without a doubt, this is the 'icon' which the Futurists propose as a replacement for the Madonnas and shameless Venuses [*besstyzhie venery*], it is that 'dominion' [*gospodstvo*] of forms over nature." Malevich's system signals the encroachment of an insidious rationalistic logic into the realm of aesthetic experience, at the base of which lies a "horrific means of mechanical 'renewal' [*mekhanicheskoe 'vosstanovlenie'*] with its machinishness." This act of blasphemy even penetrates Benua's description of the *Black Square*: it is a "Black Square in a white frame" (here Benua uses the term that denotes the setting of the icon—*v belom oklade*—to describe the frame). His language clearly indicates a refusal to acknowledge the evolution of Malevich's art; his concern to expose Malevich's blasphemous act prevents him from taking any notice of Suprematism's own dependence upon the icon (a source for Malevich's Primitivism of circa 1910–12).

Thus, he claims that the *Black Square* issues from and serves only to illustrate Malevich's "sermon of zero and death," his statement (nearly identical to the first paragraphs of *Ot kubizma k suprematizmu* [*From Cubism to Suprematism*]) published in a leaflet which was distributed free at the exhibition.<sup>19</sup> In Benua's view, Malevich's claim to authority, to "dominion" or "supremacy" (whence the term Suprematism is derived), is



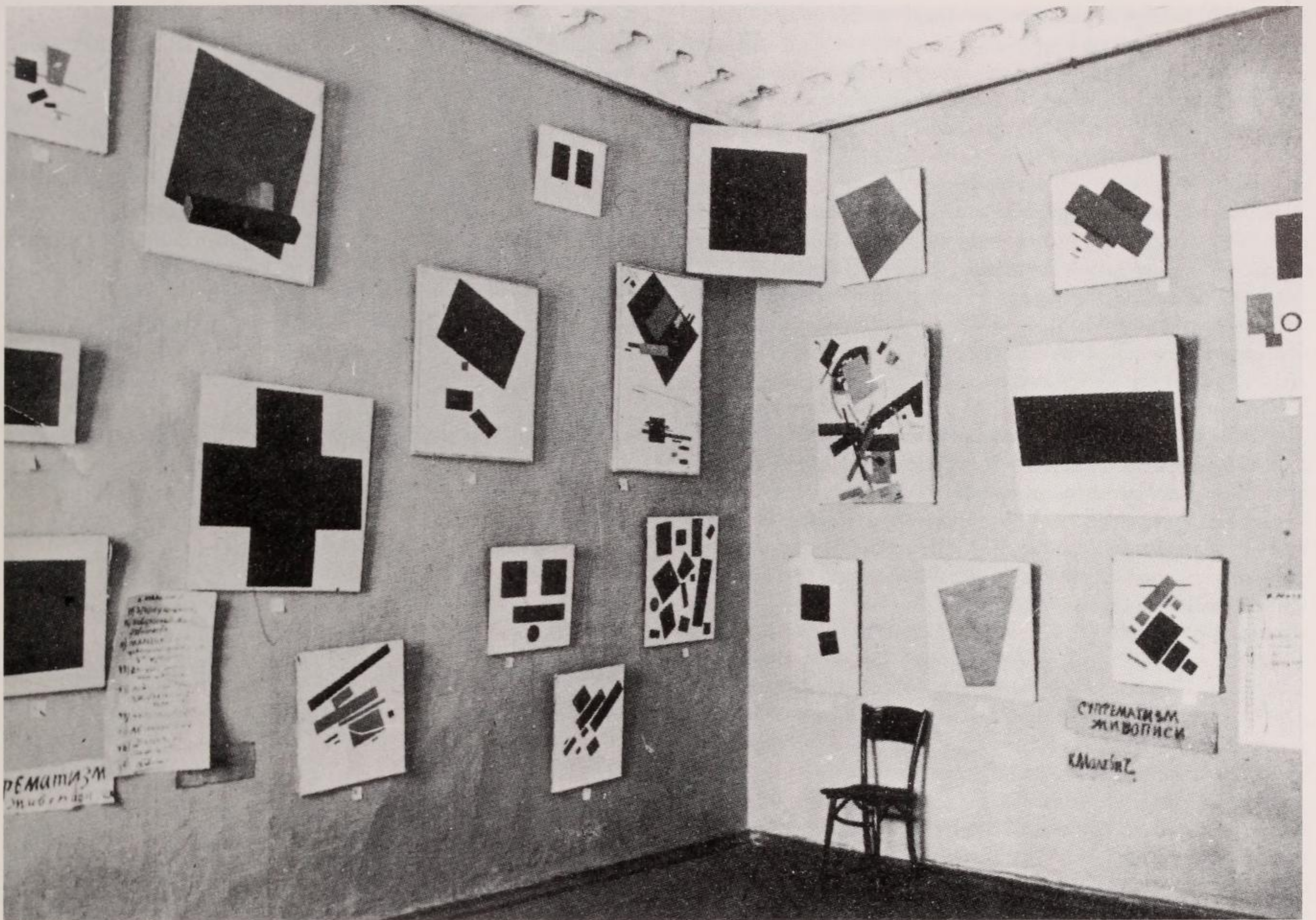


fig. 4  
View of the 0.10 exhibition showing Malevich's Black Square in the  
"icon's place," center top.



ahistorical, for it is achieved only through pride, by self-assertion. The point and purpose of his essay—to demonstrate the destructive force of Malevich's blasphemous act—are achieved through references to a chief biblical sin, that of vainglory: “[This] is not a chance little episode that occurred on the Field of Mars; it is one of the acts of self-affirmation the source of which has as its name the abomination of desolation. It asserts itself through arrogance, haughtiness, and by trampling over all that is dear and tender; it will lead only to death.”<sup>20</sup> Text and review combined, this is an account of “absolute origins”<sup>21</sup> that has no equivalent in Russia's past cultural experience. The force of the disruption that the advent of Suprematism hailed is mirrored in the passion of both the artist's and the critic's language.

A year later, in his review of the *Sovremennaia zhivopis'* (*Contemporary Painting*) exhibition held at Nadezhda Dobychnina's gallery (where the *0.10* exhibition had also been held), Benua continues his attack on the ahistoricity of Suprematism, asserting that Malevich's “little circles, squares, and sticks have only given birth to Aleksandra Ekster's exercises.”<sup>22</sup> Benua's review is a willful misstatement, since we know that within the year (1916–17) a number of artists—including Nadezhda Udal'tsova, Ivan Puni, Liubov' Popova, Ol'ga Rozanova, Ivan Kliun, and Mikhail Men'kov, among others—had adopted Suprematism as their own and formed the group known briefly as Supremus.<sup>23</sup> Benua's purpose, however, is consistent with his long-standing commitment to exposing the commercial self-interest and “trickery” of avant-garde art.

Malevich's written response is a protracted attack on Benua's system, his authority, and the value which he attaches to mimesis. (Indeed, most vanguard critiques of the art establishment link mimesis with the power obtained by specific artists and critics in the academy and press.) In the first section of the letter, Malevich counters Benua's argument by asserting that mimetic representation, based on the canons of Roman and Greek art, has long ceased to have any value for society. Furthermore, he claims that critics like Benua and Merezhkovskii have failed to see the future in the new; instead, he writes, “Merezhkovsky stands on the new age's square amidst the furious vortex of machines both on earth and in the sky; he stares with blind eyes and continues to hold Caesar's bone above his gray head and to shout about beauty.”<sup>24</sup> Contesting Benua's argument that Suprematism is ultimately destructive, he asks, “but how has the World of Art enriched our own times?” and responds with a parodistic description of Benua's own painting: “He has given us a couple of crinoline petticoats and a few uniforms from the time of Peter the Great.” Similarly, he matches Benua's biblical rhetoric with his own. His account of the difficulties the avant-garde artist faces in countering Benua's system of “commonplace clichés,” which dominates by entrapping unsuspecting young artists desperate to exhibit and attain fame, is a *cri de foi* far more eloquent than his manifesto, *From Cubism to Suprematism*:

*I possess only a single bare, frameless icon of our times (like a pocket), and it is difficult to struggle.*

*But my happiness in not being like you will give me the strength to go further and further into the empty wilderness. For it is only there that transformation can take place.*

*And I think you are mistaken when you say in reproaching me that my philosophy will destroy millions of lives. Are you not, all of you, like a roaring blaze that obstructs and prevents any forward movement?*<sup>25</sup>

Malevich's statement engages one of the principal motifs in Benua's review, that of the vanguard artist as social outcast. Extending his metaphor of the carnival barker, Benua makes an

analogy between the cries of the barkers on the streets of Petrograd and the vanguard's claim for legitimation in Russian culture. He writes: “You see that they are artists, that they have the right to a critical evaluation. And yet everything that they say and do rings out with such cries of poverty that pity, which had been verging on respect, yields to some kind of internal panic, and one wants to run away in any direction (even to the lackey-like Petrograd artists) without looking back, only so that one might no longer see those shapes bent by the bitter cold, those painted faces, or hear those horrible cracking voices.”<sup>26</sup>

Malevich's dialogue with Benua essentially confirms Benua's analogy—that the vanguard artist acts out in the world of art the experiences of the unenfranchised, the true outcasts in society. This analogy explains, in part, the passion of Malevich's response to Benua—clearly more was at stake in his inauguration of Suprematism than the advancement of a new “style.” Malevich's battle was one of empowerment and entitlement in a society which viewed art, politics, and morality as essentially and implicitly integrated.

It is ironic that Benua failed to appreciate the historical evolution of Malevich's work. For there is every indication that Malevich, more than any other vanguard artist of his generation (with the possible exception of Mikhail Larionov), sought to promote a historical context for the inauguration of his movement that would validate his claim for recognition. If Malevich asserted that “the face of my Square cannot become merged with a single master or age,” he also affirmed, practically in the same breath, that “I, too, am a stage of development.”<sup>27</sup> This statement sets forth the paradox embodied in the avant-garde artist's position, overlaying the values Malevich clearly attached to historical views of his own artistic evolution (and the possibility of engendering a “school”) with his desire to create a style that was absolutely unfamiliar to his contemporaries.

Malevich's statement epitomizes the dialectic operating within Modernist discourse on originality and imitation. Inasmuch as Malevich claimed his place in history as the originator of a unique style, his contribution required a context for its interpretation. The desired interpretation (the originality of Suprematism) could be assured only by establishing relationships to preceding artistic trends and by the generation of a following among like-minded artists. Malevich's dual concern echoes in the work and theoretical writings of other left artists throughout the 1920s. The will among vanguard artists to invent or trace their artistic evolution runs up continually against their momentous ruptures with the past and their utopian interest in generating a new origin for the art of the future. Here again, Malevich stands out; the charts which he generated through teaching at Vitebsk and, after 1921, in Petrograd/Leningrad are unique if characteristic. They map the evolution of modern art from Realism to Suprematism and ascribe the generation of a new characteristic form (the “additional element”) to a master artist at the head of each new movement. In this way Malevich could diagram his place within an evolutionary model of art history and at the same time point to his unique contribution, the “additional element” contained within Suprematism.<sup>28</sup>

Benua's reaction to the *0.10* exhibition and his analogy between the vanguard artist and the carnival barker provide part of the background for Malevich's historicizing efforts. Like other vanguard artists, Malevich tended to counter critics' misinterpretation of his art, and their authority, by generating his own stylistic history. Evgenii Kovtun and Charlotte Douglas have traced the evolution of Malevich's ideas that led to the development of Suprematism as a style by drawing principally on the remarkably revealing correspondence



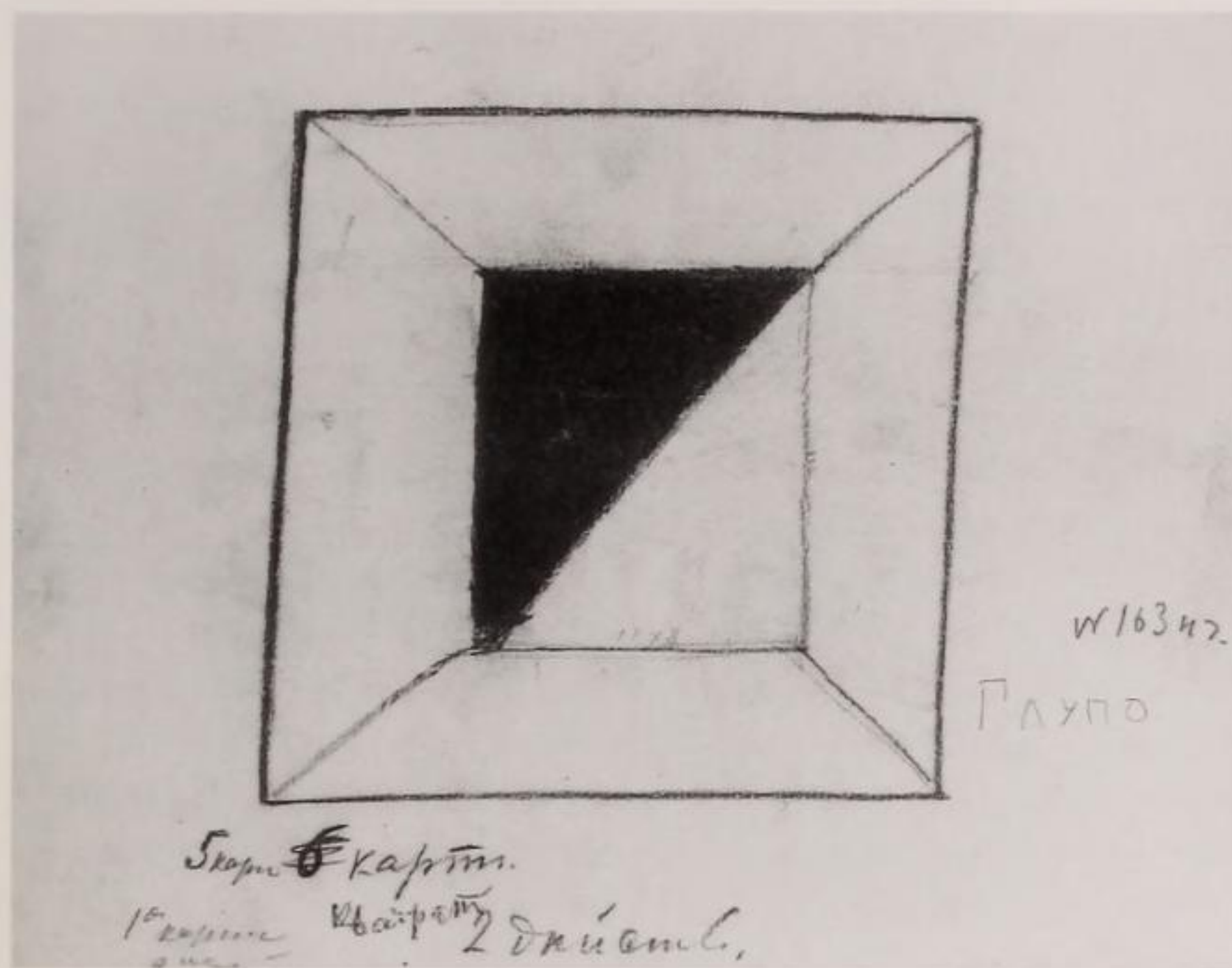


fig. 5  
 Kazimir Malevich  
 Set design: Act II, scene 5, for Aleksei Kruchenykh,  
 Victory over the Sun, 1913.  
 Pencil on paper, 21 x 27 cm.  
 St. Petersburg State Museum of Theater  
 and Musical Arts.

between Malevich and his close friend and associate, Mikhail Matiushin.<sup>29</sup> References to this correspondence have tended to further Malevich's own interpretive aims: to aggrandize and mystify the creative act of invention (or "self-creation").<sup>30</sup> As this correspondence confirms, by May 1915 Malevich had come to attribute the historical evolution of his new style to a particular origin in his work—to his set designs for *Pobeda nad solntsem* (*Victory over the Sun*, 1913), a performance on which he had collaborated with Matiushin and the poets Aleksei Kruchenykh and Velimir Khlebnikov.<sup>31</sup> Douglas has drawn our attention particularly to the set design for Act II, scene 5 (fig. no. 5) and its "square-within-a-square format" as a design that was "halfway to [the Suprematist square's] realization."<sup>32</sup> Yet Malevich's own intentions *are* realized here—for he had written to Matiushin asking that he include in a new edition of the libretto (planned but never published, according to Kovtun) an illustration of this particular work. Through this publication, the stage backdrop would serve as a testament documenting the origins and evolution of Suprematism. Thus Malevich writes to Matiushin: "I would be very grateful if you would include my drawing of the curtain for the act in which the victory took place . . . This drawing will be of immense significance for painting. That which was done unconsciously now bears unexpected fruit [*neobychnyye plody*]."<sup>33</sup>

Malevich's concern to identify a point of origin for Suprematism and at the same time to advance Suprematism as a new origin in a continuous historical evolution of styles explains the tremendous secrecy with which he guarded the work that he painted in this year. In a manner that has no parallel in Russia, Malevich was determined to *author* Suprematism. It was advanced specifically as his signature style. Both Kovtun and Douglas assert that until the autumn of 1915 no one except Matiushin knew what Malevich was working on in his studio, but that on or just before September 25, 1915, Ivan Puni surprised Malevich with an unexpected visit and saw his latest work. Malevich immediately wrote Matiushin, urging him to move ahead with the brochure: "Now, no matter what, I must publish the brochure on my work and christen it and in so doing protect my rights as author."<sup>34</sup> A few days later he informs Matiushin of the aftereffects in the Moscow art world, noting that a bitter debate over the creation of a new direction has arisen, but that "no one knows the how or the what of it," and everyone wants to study his (Malevich's) notes. Still, for the larger public, Malevich's new work remained unknown. As late as November 25th, he could write to Matiushin, "The name everyone knows, only the content no one knows. Let it *remain a secret*."<sup>35</sup>

The control with which Malevich manipulated the inauguration of Suprematism can also be understood in the light of Benua's frequent reviews or critiques of vanguard epigonism. Two external factors impinged both on Malevich's concern over the historical representation of Suprematism's origin and on Benua's response. First, the rapid pace at which artists were exposed to new trends and producing new work, together with the constant turnover of exhibitions and debates and the flood of reviews, had effected a perceptible acceleration of change in the art world. As early as 1909, Benua characterized this phenomenon as uniquely Russian. In February of that year, he wrote a polemical critique of the Russian art world that begins with the observation: "There is not a day when a new art exhibition does not open. This would be interesting if our groups of artists were organized according to essential [common] features or strivings determined by each group. But nothing of the sort . . . In a provincial manner, divisions occur among artists here for the most absurd reasons . . . and so now simultaneously a mass of exhibitions have opened of a 'midsize type' in which all the



same artists participate, and the character of the work from one group to the next is indistinguishable."<sup>36</sup>

Internecine feuds among artists as well as reviews of art exhibitions testify to the spirit of competition which this pluralism of the art world engendered. From the 1911–12 season on, vanguard groups were beset by factionalism, with artists continually realigning themselves. The Donkey's Tail group was formed initially by artists who, with Larionov and Goncharova, broke away from the Jack of Diamonds.<sup>37</sup> Although they exhibited together, Malevich feuded with both Larionov and Tatlin, and Malevich's invention of Suprematism was in part fueled by his long-standing rivalry with both artists.<sup>38</sup> This struggle for ascendancy and legitimation was mapped out in the installation of the *0.10* exhibition, with Malevich and his supporters occupying one room while Tatlin and his group (including Popova, Vera Pestel', and Udal'tsova) were positioned in another; the sign PROFESSIONAL ARTISTS marked the difference between them.

Malevich's efforts during the year preceding the exhibition manifest the profound competitiveness that shaped all aspects of vanguard activities. In this sense his writings conveyed a very clear public message which linked the historical legitimation of his new style with assertions of its superiority over other potential contenders. In 1915, Malevich's letters to Matiushin record Malevich's frustration with the contemporary art scene and with its eclecticism, and articulate the sense among artists that a new coherent movement was needed. As Malevich puts it, "In Moscow they are beginning to agree with me that we must present ourselves under a new banner."<sup>39</sup> Thus, while he asserts the need to present a coherent movement through the *0.10* exhibition, he wonders if anyone else has advanced a rival theory or style and continues by giving the reasons why he finds Suprematism the best name for his: "But it will be interesting to see: will they give [this banner] a new form? I think that Suprematism is the most appropriate [name], since it signifies supremacy [or dominion—*gospodstvo*]."<sup>40</sup> He attached tremendous importance to the text which first bore the name of the style (*From Cubism to Suprematism*) and which had been published by Matiushin in time to be sold at the exhibition. Thanking Matiushin, Malevich writes, "It will advance my position tremendously" and again a few days later, "the brochure is playing an important role for me."<sup>41</sup> In the context of vanguard rivalries, there could be no mistaking the value which Malevich placed on competitive public access to his work and on control over the means and process of its critical reception.

An equally important consideration for Malevich was the changing makeup of the public and the shifts in its reaction to the vanguard debates and exhibitions. Outside of published criticism, the social composition of the urban Russian public is extremely difficult to document. Reviews, however, give a good indication of the turnarounds in the public response to vanguard art. In his "Cubism or *Je-m'en-foutisme*" of 1912, Benua writes that just two years earlier, portions of Burliuk's speech on Cubism would have created a scandal. Benua makes these comments in order to illustrate "how fast we have declined," indicating that by 1912 segments of the public had become inured or even attracted to the vulgarity of vanguard debates and exhibitions. The year 1910 is in fact an appropriate one to mark, since it constitutes the beginning of this generation's series of confrontations with the public in the exhibition space. The first Jack of Diamonds exhibition (which included work by Malevich, Goncharova, Larionov, and Tatlin together for the first time) opened to cries of scandal in December 1910,<sup>42</sup> a year later, at a public debate organized by this group, Larionov announced the platform of the Donkey's Tail group to jeering crowds.<sup>43</sup> By 1912, the public usually attended these debates in

the hope of witnessing a scandal or fight (notorious incidents were always documented in the press). In 1913 Larionov was tried and fined for having punched one artist in the face and thrown the podium into the audience.<sup>44</sup> But in 1913 there were also signs of acquiescence, of public acceptance of provocations and, indeed, of new "radical" painting.

The overwhelming success of Goncharova's solo exhibition in Moscow at the end of 1913 is the first significant measure of public acceptance and critical acclaim for the vanguard artist. Paintings which had been considered radical just a year ago were now appreciated or accepted by the same public and described in the press as "accessible." A reviewer in *Moskovskaia gazeta* (*The Moscow Gazette*) declared: "It seems that Rayist and Futurist art are becoming stylish [*modnyi*]. In a little while, both Goncharova and Larionov will be acclaimed on the level of Korovin and Kustodiev."<sup>45</sup> The same reviewer writes that the success of the opening night was completely unexpected by the organizers and made Goncharova an instant sensation. His summary of the "successful components" of the evening focuses primarily on the appeal her exhibition had as a social diversion, uniting in symbiotic agreement the vanguard artist as *provocatrice* and her receptive audience: "Packed halls, 'chic' public, the incredulous looks and confused smiles of those who were leaving, the ironic 'witticisms' and independent poses of the brave, a couple of Futurist characters persistently competing for attention in orange jackets and with carnations braided in their hair, the blushing-for-joy Goncharova and the magically-appearing-in-twenty-places-at-once Larionov."<sup>46</sup> Thus, the fresh appeal of Goncharova's art is set, within the context of the exhibition space, as that of a new type of urban spectacle—dominated by an elite Muscovite public that now included the vanguard artist.

There are parallel contemporary accounts of the public-debate forum which by 1913 had become an established event. A booklet published in Moscow in 1914 chronicles the reciprocity between the audiences and the organizers of these vanguard debates.<sup>47</sup> Observing that the debates have become increasingly frequent and varied, the anonymous author writes:

*If one studies carefully the different lectures, and particularly the debates, one comes to the inevitable conclusion that they are no more than a shameless and open exploitation of popular entertainment. It is frequently so hapless, and crude (an exploitation), that one has to wonder why the public reacts with such relative calm to these lowbrow transgressions.*

*By the way, the public, for the most part, gets what it is looking for. And it is usually looking for a scandal.*

*The participants in debates and lectures have reckoned beautifully with this search for scandal and organize them relatively skillfully. To the naïve person it may seem that the scandal arose suddenly, without warning. Whereas the entrepreneur has invited a particular opponent (especially from among the Futurists), knowing full well in advance that he will create a scandal.<sup>48</sup>*

The new reconciliation of the "radical" and the "acceptable" in the public reception of vanguard art and in the forum of the debate explains much about the seemingly contradictory responses to the *0.10* exhibition. Thus, among the reviews of that exhibition, we find a number of wholesale rejections of the work shown there as well as a few of the most subtle positive

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fig. 6

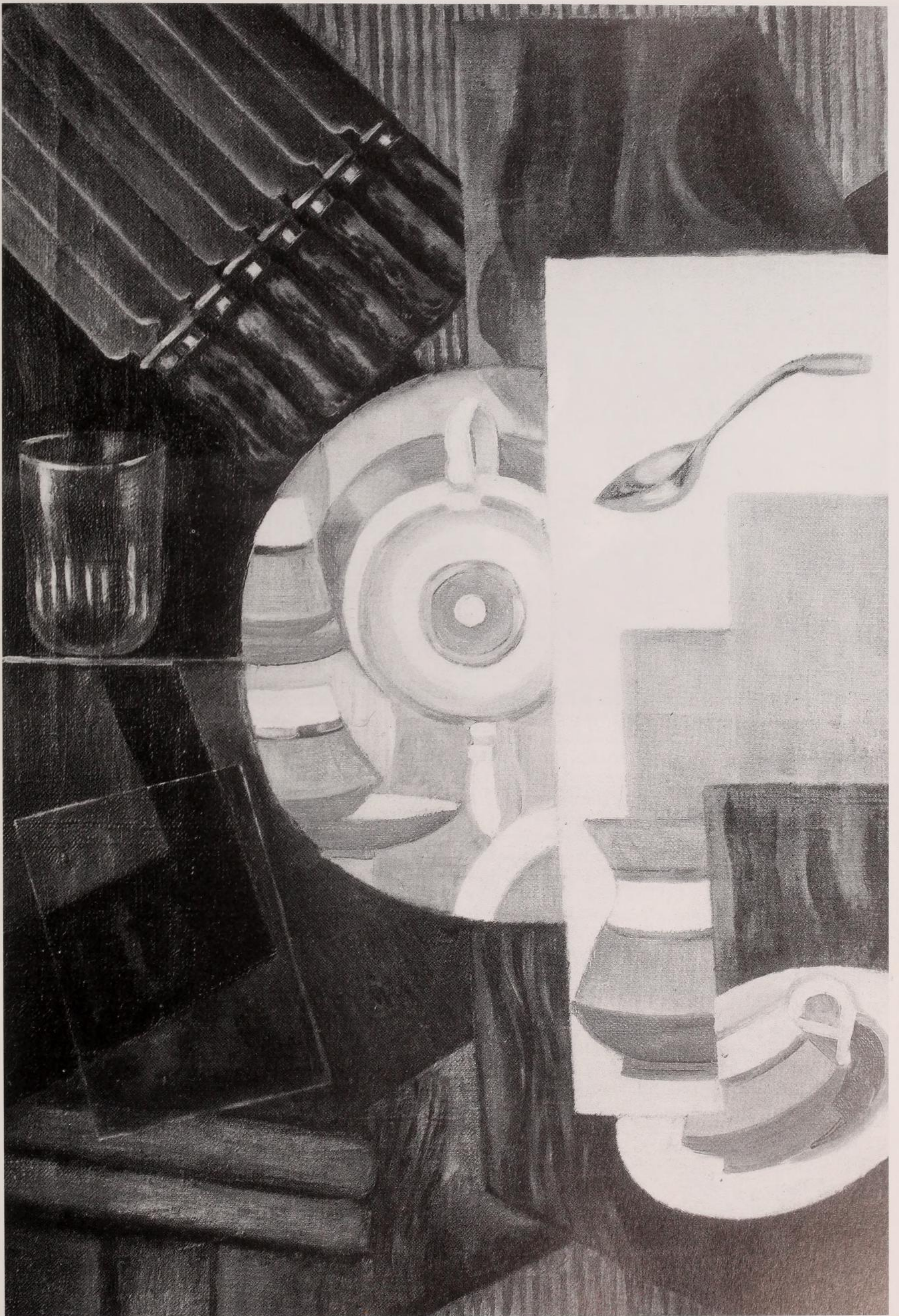
*Ol'ga Rozanova*

Cupboard with Dishes, 1915.

Oil on canvas, 64 x 45 cm.

State Tre't'iakov Gallery, Moscow.







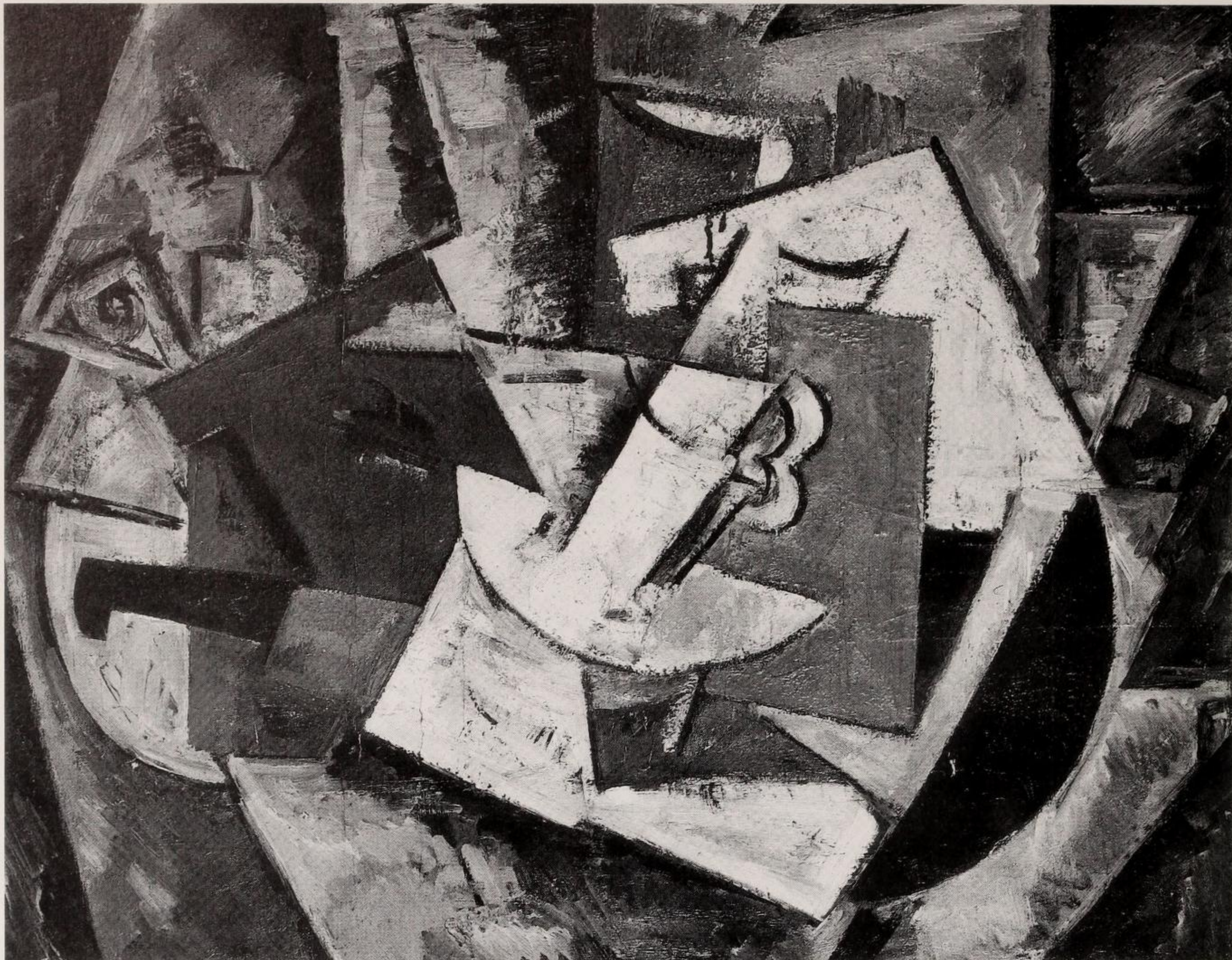


fig. 7  
*Nadezhda Udal'tsova*  
*Kitchen, 1915.*  
*Oil on canvas, 66 x 81.5 cm.*  
*State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.*



appraisals. One of the more negative reviewers connected Suprematism with Tatlin, exclaiming that “the audacity of Futurism has given birth to Suprematism, sincerity has turned into a joke at the public’s expense. And not a trace of painting remains. Only tinplate.”<sup>49</sup> Like Benua in his earlier reaction to Goncharova’s Cubo-Futurist work, the reviewer describes his appreciation of the difficulties inherent in looking at the Cubo-Futurist painting, contrasting that perceptual process with the new work on view:

*You squint, you blink, you unexpectedly study the corners of the painting on the canvases of the Futurists.*

*But not with the Suprematists. The work is dry, monotonous, there is neither painting nor individuality. Malevich is like Popova, Popova is like Puni, Puni is like Udal'tsova. You can't distinguish between them.*

Negative reviews such as this one are typical of the majority of reviews of avant-garde art and, in their leveling of individualities, rationalize the competitive spirit of vanguard enterprises—both exhibitions and debates. The dialogue between Benua and Malevich is unusual precisely because of the passion and personal nature of the attack. It was in the interest of those in control to underplay the shock of avant-garde transgressions and to neutralize, as the reviewer does above, difference as a function of vanguard innovation. In this context, the positive reviews are more interesting, for they display far more critical sophistication than the negative ones (Benua’s aside). And, while reviewers occasionally take sides, they openly refer to artists’ concern with their place in history, engaging in a more explicit way the question of originality and *posledovatel'nost'* (succession). For example, Matiushin praises both Malevich’s and Tatlin’s work and, not surprisingly, asserts that Suprematism gives “the strong impression that it is the oncoming shift [*sdvig*] in art.”<sup>50</sup> Regarding Tatlin (“without a doubt, a great artist”), he argues that despite the “intensity of his constructive idea,” his earlier reliefs are stronger works of art.<sup>51</sup> Matiushin’s review is of greater importance as an indicator of the degree to which the language of criticism and theory had developed by 1915 (he speaks of the “strength of painterly masses,” of the “dynamism of colors,” of “color planes,” and so forth). He notes in closing that the competition among artists for *pervenstvo* (primacy) undercuts the development of their ideas: “Whoever says the last word is king!”<sup>52</sup>

Aleksandr Rostislavov’s review, published in the same journal as Benua’s, is the strongest positive review of both Malevich’s and Tatlin’s work.<sup>53</sup> He first notes that the exhibition marks a “difficult shift [*tiazhelyi sdvig*]” in the “changing forms of art.” Meanwhile, he argues, this exhibition does constitute the end of a tradition (Cubo-Futurism), whose past has become clearly associated with the work of French artists, primarily Cézanne and Picasso. He observes that the tremendous speed of creative “inventiveness” is underscored by the fact that “yesterday’s innovators are today’s ‘elders’” and are not represented at this exhibition (he probably had Goncharova, Larionov, Vasilii Kandinskii, and Burliuk in mind). He then discusses both Suprematism and Tatlin’s counter-reliefs in a way that has no parallel in Russian art criticism before the Revolution. His review of Malevich’s paintings concludes with the question: “Doesn’t this geometricization have something to say . . . this planar painting of such secretive and appealing complexity and mystery?” He observes of Tatlin’s *Kontr-rel'ef* (*Counter-Relief*, 1914–15, plate no. 70) “only an artist could so combine these materials . . . and harmonize the intersecting surfaces and inflections. Moreover, the mechanical work itself is not easy where the materials must strictly serve a preplanned totality.”

Likewise, he notes the skill with which Rozanova in *Shkaf s posudoj* (*Cupboard with Dishes*, 1915, fig. no. 6; compare plate no. 46) and Udal'tsova in *Kukhnia* (*Kitchen*, 1915, fig. no. 7; compare plate no. 39) manipulate form and color.

Rostislavov reads an agenda into Malevich’s coordination of text (*From Cubism to Suprematism*) and event (the inauguration of Suprematism itself), questioning the linear history the brochure purports to establish. He observes that, from Impressionism to the present day, painting has indeed moved away from mimeticism to “self-contained painterly means of expression.” But he notes that others (he names Kandinskii) have reached “non-objectivism” and implies that this path may not lead “in strict sequence to Malevich’s Suprematism.” By citing both Kandinskii’s work and Tatlin’s achievement in creating the counter-relief, he essentially challenges the notion of singular stylistic histories, and points instead to the many manifestations of abstract art in Russia. Moreover, he laments the disappearance of Cubo-Futurist “painterly-ornamental perceptibility” and concludes that “the inventiveness and rapid advancements made by new artists cannot be doubted, but the question remains: are not concepts of form in art in a state of chaotic ferment?”<sup>54</sup>

Although diametrically opposed, Benua’s and Rostislavov’s reviews both register the assimilation of vanguard art to an unprecedented degree. By rejecting Malevich’s claims in the first place, Benua demonstrates the extent to which success as an artist was determined by the artist’s hegemonic conception of “style.” Rostislavov’s equivocation reveals, in contrast, a different sense in which “style” could be understood in Russia in 1915: as personal and pluralistic.<sup>55</sup> And significantly, despite Malevich’s effort, he remained unconvinced that Suprematism would transform the chaos of today into tomorrow’s order. The reception of Suprematism thus points to a broader phenomenon, the transformation of the avant-garde from oppositional strategists and instigators of public scandal into historians of their own recent past. Malevich’s affirmation in written texts of his own place in history, like his return in the 1920s to figurative painting of earlier Primitivist themes, continued and extended his quest for legitimacy in a factional and highly politicized cultural environment.

Benua’s review of the *0.10* exhibition has been overlooked by most contemporary scholars, even dismissed, no doubt because its tone and content demythologize avant-garde artists’ claims to absolute originality. Yet this text, perhaps more than any other, represents the paradoxical status of the Russian avant-garde before the Revolution as outsiders who turned to their advantage concepts of originality and succession which had marginalized them. Malevich’s response to Benua, read in the context of his correspondence with Matiushin, reveals both a public and a private creative concern over the legitimation of Suprematism in an art world marked by competition, stylistic eclecticism, and real social and economic disenfranchisement. Both Benua’s and Rostislavov’s reviews give shape to what might be called the politics of originality. The unique succession of “isms” in the art of the 1910s, documented by published manifestos and often by the press, reveals that the “anxiety of anticipation”<sup>56</sup> among artists in Russia was equal to that experienced by the West European avant-garde. And significantly, in light of the work displayed in the present exhibition, this suggests in turn that the tenor of competition and debate during the critical mid-teens prepared the ground for the combative responses of the same generation of artists to artistic pluralism in the 1920s.



## Notes

1. Aleksandr Benua, "Posledniaia futuristicheskaia vystavka," *Rech'*, January 9, 1916, p. 3.
2. Benua (and Malevich as well; see note 6) was responding to an article by the writer Dmitrii Merezhkovskii entitled "Eshche odin shag griadushchego khama," which was originally published in the Moscow daily newspaper, *Russkoe slovo*, June 29, 1914. This article, whose title may be translated "The Oncoming Boor Is One Step Closer," refers to the intelligentsia's anxiety over social philistinism and the commercial exploitation of culture during the period immediately preceding the Revolution in Russia.
3. Several of the earliest of recent studies on the theory of the avant-garde, including Renato Poggioli's *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, Belknap Press, 1968), trace the relationship of avant-garde aesthetics and social and political radicalism to the first and second quarters of the nineteenth century in France. Linda Nochlin's exploration of the avant-garde in France, published originally in 1968 in *Art News Annual*, cites the French utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon and the Fourieriste art critic Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant. See her essay, "The Invention of the Avant-Garde: France, 1830–1880," in her *The Politics of Vision: Essays on Nineteenth-Century Art and Society* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), p. 2. Laverdant is also quoted in Poggioli: "Art, the expression of society, manifests, in its highest soaring, the most advanced social tendencies: it is the forerunner and the revealer." *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 9.
4. El Lissitzky, "Suprematism in World Reconstruction," in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. Helene Aldwinckle and Mary Whittall (Greenwich, Conn.: New York Graphic Society, 1968), p. 327. The lowercase letters reproduce the style in Lissitzky's original text.
5. *Ibid.*
6. "A Letter from Malevich to Benois," May 1916, in K. S. Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915–1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), vol. 1, pp. 42–48. Andersen states (p. 243n) that Malevich intended to publish it. Instead, he apparently sent the letter directly to Benua, for it concludes with the postscript: "Since the doors of the press are closed to us I am writing to you personally." The letter is located in the Manuscript Division, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg, f. 137, d. 1186, l. 1–3. Excerpts were previously published in Russian in Lev N. Diakonitsyn, *Ideinye protivorechiia v estetike russkoi zhivopisi kontsa 19—nachala 20 vv.* (Perm': Permskoe knizhnoe izdatel'stvo, 1966), pp. 214–15. The quotations in this essay are adapted from the published English translation.
7. "Letter from Malevich to Benois," p. 45.
8. K. S. Malevich, *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve* (Vitebsk: Unovis, 1919). The cover is reproduced in Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art, 1910–1930*, trans. Alexander Lieven (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), plate 185. For a full discussion of the "collective" nature of the Vitebsk school (later Posnovis and Unovis), see Aleksandra Shatskikh, "Unovis: Epicenter of a New World," in this volume.
9. A. Benua, "Povorot k lubku," *Rech'*, March 18, 1909, p. 2. Sergei Makovskii was another critic to identify Primitivism as a trend among a new generation of artists. For a summary of and excerpts from Makovskii's writings, see John E. Bowlt, "The Blue Rose Movement and Russian Symbolism," *Slavonic and East European Review* 51, no. 123 (April 1973), pp. 161–81, reprinted in *Russian Art, 1875–1957: A Collection of Essays* (New York: MSS Information Corporation, 1976), pp. 63–93.
10. A. Benua, "Kubizm ili kukishizm," *Rech'*, November 23, 1912, p. 2. It was this review, no doubt, that incited Burliuk to publish his counterattack as a booklet entitled *Galdiashchie Benua i novoe russkoe natsional'noe iskusstvo* (St. Petersburg, 1913). The book took the form of an artificial debate with Benua in which Burliuk quoted long excerpts from Benua's writings interspersed with his own commentary.
11. K. S. Malevich, "Zadachi iskusstva i rol' dushitelei iskusstva," *Anarkhiia* 25 (March 23, 1918). As translated in "The Problems of Art and the Role of Its Suppressors," in Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915–1933*, vol. 1, p. 49. The essay is an important retrospective critique of the power individual critics exercised (both Benua and Iakov Tugendkol'd are named). Although the essay was published with the signatures of Aleksei Morgunov and Aleksei Gan in addition to that of Malevich, Andersen attributes the text to Malevich. For his discussion of Malevich's participation in this journal, see *ibid.*, p. 244n.
12. Mikhail Vrubel', Viktor Borisov-Musatov, Pavel Kuznetsov, and Natal'ia Goncharova were all major participants in avant-garde exhibitions at different points in time before the Revolution.
13. The organizers of the Union of Youth (1910–14) were Mikhail Matiushin and Elena Guro. Members of the group and participants in their exhibitions were Pavel Filonov, Ol'ga Rozanova, Iosif Shkol'nik, Vladimir Markov (Waldemars Matvejs), David Burliuk, Kazimir Malevich, and Vladimir Tatlin. A number of members of the Muscovite Donkey's Tail group exhibited in Union of Youth exhibitions, notably Natal'ia Goncharova and Mikhail Larionov. See E. F. Kovtun, "K. S. Malevich. Pis'ma k M. V. Matiushinu," *Ezhegodnik Rukopisnogo otdela Pushkinskogo doma na 1974 god* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1976), p. 178 n. 19.
14. Aleksandr Benua, "Sezan i Gogen," *Rech'*, January 27, 1912, p. 2.
15. In the review of the *0.10* exhibition, Benua paradoxically attributes some positive value to these "tricks." He praises Tatlin using the very same terminology with which he criticizes Malevich: "I am familiar with Tatlin's theatrical designs in which there is a charming and original quality of color and an unusual balancing [*ekvilibristika*] of line-[illeg.]. Perhaps this is only trickery, but even trickery is already an art, and for this talent is required." Benua, "Posledniaia futuristicheskaia vystavka," p. 3.
16. Aleksandr Benua, "Dnevnik khudozhnika," *Rech'*, October 21, 1913, p. 4.
17. Goncharova's work had been censored from exhibitions on several occasions, first in March 1910; as a result, she was tried in December 1910 for pornography, but acquitted. See Jane A. Sharp, "Redrawing the Margins of Russian Vanguard Art: Goncharova's Trial for Pornography in 1910," in *Sexuality and the Body in Russian Culture*, ed. Jane Costlow, Stephanie Sander, and Judith Vowles, forthcoming.
18. Victor Erlich translates Shklovskii's term *zatrudnennaia forma* as "deliberately impeded form," but as his analysis of this concept reveals, the term refers both the artist's act of "creative deformation" and to the perceptual process. Citing Shklovskii, he writes: "The act of creative deformation restores sharpness to our perception, giving 'density' to the world around us. 'Density' (*faktura*) is the principal characteristic of this peculiar world of deliberately constructed objects, the totality of which



we call art.' . . . Another crucial aspect of the 'deliberately impeded form' . . . is rhythm—a set of contrivances superimposed upon ordinary speech." Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History—Doctrine*, 3d ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 177–78.

19. K. S. Malevich, *Ot kubizma k suprematizmu. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm* (Petrograd, 1916). Although the brochure is dated 1916, a number of reviews document that it was sold at the exhibition when it opened on December 17, 1915. According to Evgenii Kovtun, it was published in two more editions in 1916, the second in Petrograd, the third in Moscow. See Kovtun, "K. S. Malevich. Pis'ma k M. V. Matiushinu," p. 181 nn. 28, 31.

20. Benua's paranoid response also has its precedent in a number of responses to Goncharova's solo exhibitions in both Moscow and St. Petersburg. A self-appointed critic, Valentin Songaillo, published a separate pamphlet on the occasion of her Moscow exhibition. Like Benua in his later critique of Malevich, Songaillo casts his language in quasi-religious terms, labeling Goncharova an "antiartist" in an obvious parallel to the Antichrist. This pamphlet did in fact achieve its intended effect of censoring Goncharova's exhibition. When the show (significantly reduced in size) opened in St. Petersburg in March 1914, police raided the building and seized all of her religious paintings in accordance with a *zapret* (ban) invoked by the "spiritual censorship committee" of the Orthodox Church. On this occasion she was also accused by the press of blasphemy. See Jane A. Sharp, "Primitivism, 'Neoprimitivism' and the Art of Natal'ia Goncharova, 1907–14." (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1992), chapter 4.3.

21. I refer to Richard Schiff's seminal writing on the history of this concept, and particularly to his discussion of the "classic" in "The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic: Theory and Painting in Nineteenth-Century France," *Yale French Studies* 66 (1984), pp. 27–54, where, referring to Quatremère de Quincy's writings on the classic Greeks, he observes: "They *initiated* a tradition characterized by a system and principle and served as an *absolute* origin, not a mere member, like any other member, of a sequence of copies" (p. 37). His discussion of this concept has extremely important implications for Malevich's view of his own originality, and his anxiety over his success at enlisting followers and having "copyists" who would simultaneously (and paradoxically) both ensure his place in history as an "absolute origin" and devalue his contribution, as will be seen in what follows.

22. Aleksandr Benua, "Vystavka 'Sovremennoi russkoi zhivopisi,'" *Rech'*, December 2, 1916, p. 2. Malevich did not exhibit work in this show; among the participants were David Burliuk, Nikolai Kul'bin, Chagall, Kandinskii, Popova, and Udal'tsova.

23. During the course of 1916 the group was formed and a publication planned; Malevich refers to the publication of a journal in his correspondence with Mikhail Matiushin as early as 1915. See Kovtun, "K. S. Malevich. Pis'ma k M. V. Matiushinu," p. 186. Due to the events of war and revolution, the publication was never realized.

24. "Letter from Malevich to Benois," p. 43.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 45.

26. Benua, "Posledniaia futuristicheskaia vystavka," p. 3.

27. "Letter from Malevich to Benois," p. 44.

28. For more details regarding these charts, see Troels Andersen's translations from Russian to English in Troels

Andersen, *Malevich*, catalogue raisonné of the Berlin Exhibition, including the collection in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970), pp. 115–36 and Linda S. Boersma's essay, "On Art, Art Analysis and Art Education: The Theoretical Charts of Kazimir Malevich," in *Kazimir Malevich, 1878–1935*, catalogue for exhibition organized by the Russian Museum, Leningrad, the Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow, and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1989), pp. 206–23. This linear evolutionary concept of art history was firmly entrenched in Russia by 1914, and the models were primarily West European. Iakov Tugendkhol'd writes, for example, of Matisse and Picasso: "If the work of Matisse represents the extreme and logical conclusion of the prophecies of Gauguin, then Picasso's painting represents the paradoxical completion of Cézanne's." Ia. Tugendkhol'd, "Frantsuzskoe sobranie S. I. Shchukina," *Apollon* 1–2 (January–February 1914), p. 28.

29. Kovtun, "K. S. Malevich. Pis'ma k M. V. Matiushinu"; Charlotte Douglas, "0–10 Exhibition," in *The Avant-Garde in Russia, 1910–1930: New Perspectives*, catalogue for exhibition organized by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art and the Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1980), pp. 34–40 and *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980), pp. 35–47.

30. Rosalind Krauss has called the avant-garde artist's discourse on originality (she refers specifically to Marinetti's 1909 manifesto) a "parable of self-creation" and explains: "more than a rejection or dissolution of the past, avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth." Malevich is one of her sources; she observes, regarding his famous pronouncement "Only he is alive who rejects his convictions of yesterday," that "the self as origin has the potential for continuous acts of regeneration, a perpetuation of self-birth." See Rosalind Krauss, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde: A Post-Modernist Repetition," *October* 18 (Fall 1981), pp. 47–66, reprinted in *Art After Modernism: Rethinking Representation*, ed. Brian Wallis (New York: The New Museum of Contemporary Art in association with David R. Godine, 1984), p. 18.

31. For details regarding the performance and its relationship to Suprematism, see Charlotte Douglas, "Birth of a 'Royal Infant': Malevich and 'Victory over the Sun,'" *Art in America*, March–April 1974, pp. 45–51, and her revised text in *Swans of Other Worlds*, pp. 35–47.

32. Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds*, p. 46.

33. Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin, May 27, 1915, in Kovtun, "K. S. Malevich. Pis'ma k M. V. Matiushinu," pp. 185–86. In his notes, Kovtun quotes from another, unidentified letter from Malevich to Matiushin which clarifies Malevich's image: "The curtain depicts the black square, the embryo [*zarodysh*] of all possibilities—in its development it acquires awesome power" (p. 180). That the correspondence dates to May 1915 suggests that Malevich may indeed have worked to Suprematism through a reexamination of his designs for *Victory over the Sun*. It is clear from the correspondence, at any rate, that his recognition of the historical value of the designs occurred simultaneously with the creation and development of his Suprematist paintings.

34. Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin, September 25, 1915, in Kovtun, "K. S. Malevich. Pis'ma k M. V. Matiushinu," pp. 180–81.



35. Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin, November 25, 1915, in Kovtun, "K. S. Malevich. Pis'ma k M. V. Matiushinu," p. 189.
36. He names the Soiuz russkikh khudozhnikov (the Union of Russian Artists), Salon, Novoe obshchestvo (the New Society), Obshchestvo peterburgskikh khudozhnikov (the Society of Petersburg Artists), Akvarelisty (the Watercolorists), and the Osennii salon (the Autumn Salon). Aleksandr Benua, "Khudozhestvennye pis'ma. Obilie vystavok," *Rech'*, February 13, 1909, p. 2.
37. The split occurred in November–December 1911 as a result of Larionov's disagreement with the official registration of the Jack of Diamonds group; Larionov and his supporters countered this move by announcing the separate organization of a series of exhibitions beginning with the Donkey's Tail show, which took place in Moscow in March–April 1912. His critique of the Jack of Diamonds group was publicized in the daily press; see "Ssora khvostov s valetami," *Golos Moskvy* 285 (December 11, 1911), p. 5.
38. See Vasilii Rakitin, "The Artisan and the Prophet: Marginal Notes on Two Artistic Careers," in this volume.
39. Kazimir Malevich, letter to Mikhail Matiushin, September 24, 1915, in Kovtun, "K. S. Malevich. Pis'ma k M. V. Matiushinu," p. 187.
40. Ibid.
41. Kazimir Malevich, letters to Mikhail Matiushin, November 22 and 25, 1915, in Kovtun, "K. S. Malevich. Pis'ma k M. V. Matiushinu," p. 189.
42. Gleb Pospelov has documented the reception of the Jack of Diamonds exhibition extensively in his article "O valetakh bubnovykh i valetakh chervonnykh," *Panorama iskusstv 1977* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1978), pp. 127–35, and more recently in *Bubnovyi valet. Primitiv i gorodskoi fol'klor v moskovskoi zhivopisi 1910–kh godov* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1990), pp. 98–114.
43. A summary of the debate was published in a daily newspaper: "Moskva. Khudozhestvennyi disput," *Protiv techeniia* 22 (February 18, 1912), p. 3. For an account in English, see Benedikt Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer*, ed. and trans. John E. Bowlt (Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1977), pp. 81–84.
44. These incidents occurred at a debate organized in conjunction with the *Mishen'* (*Target*) exhibition on March 23, 1913; a summary of the trial was published as "Futuristy na sude," *Golos Moskvy* 240 (October 18, 1913), p. 5.
45. F. M., "Chrezvychaino udavshiisia vernisazh," *Moskovskaia gazeta*, September 30, 1913. In these reviews Goncharova is frequently compared with Konstantin Korovin (1861–1939), a graduate of the Imperial Academy of Arts (who received the title of Academician in 1905) and one of Larionov's teachers at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture. Boris Kustodiev (1878–1927), a former student of Repin's at the Imperial Academy, received the title of Academician in 1909.
46. Ibid.
47. "O lektsiiakh i disputakh," *Al'manakh Verbnogo bazara. Moskovskii sezon 1913–14* (Moscow: Levenson, 1914), pp. 12–18.
48. Ibid, pp. 12–13. The author describes the public as being predominantly composed of young women from the provincial intelligentsia.
49. B. Lopatkin, "Futurizm–Suprematizm," reprinted in Herman Berninger and Jean-Albert Cartier, *Les Années d'avant-garde, Russie—Berlin, 1910–1923*, vol. 1 of *Pougny: Catalogue de l'oeuvre* (Tübingen: Ernst Wasmuth, 1972), p. 56.
50. M. Matiushin, "O vystavke 'poslednikh futuristov,'" *Ocharovannyi strannik. Al'manakh vesennii*, 1916, p. 17.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid.
53. A. Rostislavov, "O vystavke futuristov," *Rech'*, December 25, 1915, p. 3.
54. Ibid.
55. The succession of avant-garde exhibitions in 1915—*Moskva. 1915 god* (Moscow: *The Year 1915*, Moscow), *Tramvai V* (Tramway V, St. Petersburg), and *Vystavka kartin levykh techenii v iskusstve* (*Exhibition of Paintings of Left Trends in Art*, St. Petersburg)—must have confirmed the sense of extreme pluralism in vanguard art.
56. This term is borrowed twice: from Richard Shiff's adaptation of Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" (*The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1973]). See Shiff, "The Original, the Imitation, the Copy, and the Spontaneous Classic," pp. 27–31, 52–54.



# The Great Utopia

*The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde,  
1915–1932*

*Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum*

*State Tret'iakov Gallery*

*State Russian Museum*

*Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt*

G U G G E N H E I M M U S E U M



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*Red Square (Painterly Realism: Peasant Woman  
in Two Dimensions)*, 1915  
State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

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### **The Great Utopia**

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March 1-May 10, 1992

Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam  
June 5-August 23, 1992

Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum  
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