

Christopher Columbus was neither a writer nor a philosopher; he was merely the discoverer of new countries.

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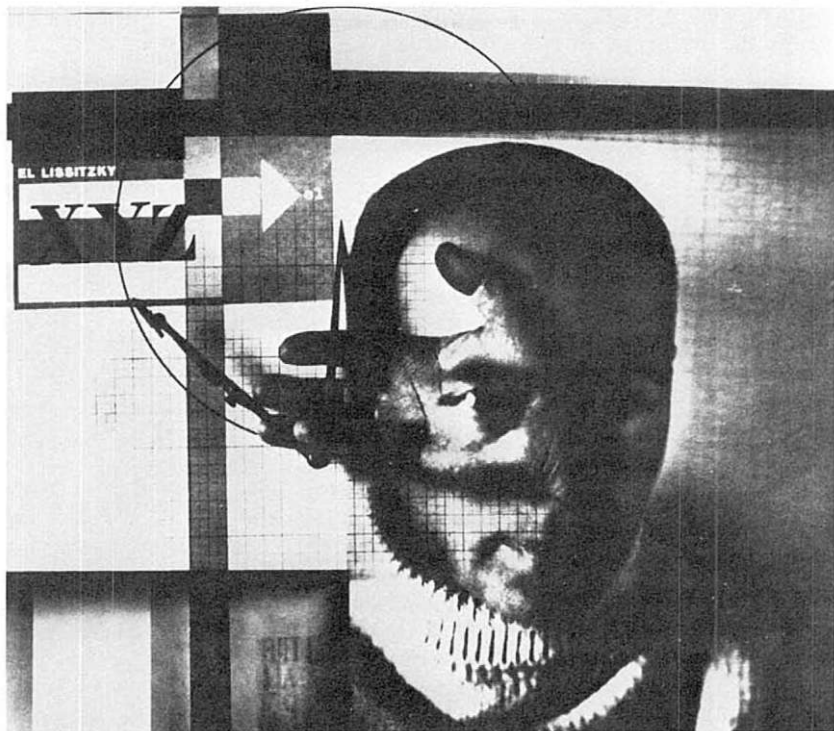
EL LISSITZKY

Suprematism in  
World Reconstruction, 1920

Real name Lazar M. Lisitsky. Born near Smolensk, 1890; died Moscow, 1941. 1909–14: at the Technische Hochschule in Darmstadt; also traveled in France and Italy; 1914: returned to Russia; 1918–19: member of IZO Narkompros; professor at the Vitebsk Art School; close contact with Kazimir Malevich; 1920: member of Inkhuk; 1921: traveled to Germany; 1922: in Berlin, edited *Veshch/Gegenstand/Objet* [Object] with Ilya Ehrenburg [bibl. R61]; 1925: returned to Moscow; taught interior design at Vkhutemas.

The text of this piece is from a typescript in the Lissitzky archives and, apart from the notes, is reproduced from Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky* (London and Greenwich, Conn., 1968), pp. 327–30 [bibl. 247], with kind permission of Thames and Hudson and New York Graphic Society. Despite its title, this essay acts as a retrospective commentary on Malevich's original formulation of suprematism and advances a far wider concept with its emphasis on such ideas as visual economy and the universal application of suprematism (ideas also developed by Malevich in his *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve* [On New Systems in Art] [Vitebsk, 1919]; English translation in bibl. 159, vol. 1, 83–119).

Both for Lissitzky and for Malevich, but more so for the former, the architectural discipline presented itself as an obvious vehicle for the transference of basic suprematist schemes into life itself. In this respect, Lissitzky's so-called Prouns [*proekty ustanovleniya (utverzheniya) novogo*—projects for the establishment (affirmation) of the new], which he designed between 1919 and 1924 were of vital significance since they served as intermediate points between two- and three-dimensional forms or, as Lissitzky himself said, “as a station on the way to constructing a new form” [bibl. R450, p. 85].



El Lissitzky: *The Constructor*, 1924. A triple-exposure self-portrait.

In a wider context, the spatial graphics of Petr Miturich, the linear paintings of Aleksandr Vesnin, and the mono- and duochromatic paintings of Aleksandr Rodchenko, all done about 1919, symbolized the general endeavor to project art into life, to give painting a constructive dimension. More obviously, the suprematist constructions—the so-called *arkhitektony* and *planity*—modeled as early as 1920 by Malevich and the *unovisovtsy* (members of the Unovis group organized by Malevich in Vitebsk) also supported this trend, thereby proving Ilya Ehrenburg's assertion that the "aim of the new art is to fuse with life" [bibl. R450, p. 45]. Lissitzky's description of the radio transmitting tower as the "centre of collective effort" is therefore in keeping with this process and anticipates the emergence of constructivism and the emphasis on industrial design a few months later. In this context, Lissitzky's references to the "plumbline of economy" and the "contre-relief" remind us of Naum Gabo and Vladimir Tatlin, respectively (see their declarations, pp. 208ff. and 205ff.), and of course, reflect the general concern with *veshch* [the object as such] on the one

hand, and the contrary call for its utilitarian justification on the other, manifested in Inkhuk in the course of 1920.

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at present we are living through an unusual period in time a new cosmic creation has become reality in the world a creativity within ourselves which pervades our *consciousness*.

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.

in this way the artist became the foundation on which progress in the reconstruction of life could advance beyond the frontiers of the all-seeing eye and the all-hearing ear. thus a picture was no longer an anecdote nor a lyric poem nor a lecture on morality nor a feast for the eye but a sign and symbol of this new conception of the world which comes from within us. many revolutions were needed in order to free the artist from his obligations as a moralist as a story-teller or as a court jester, so that he could follow unhindered his creative bent and tread the road that leads to construction.

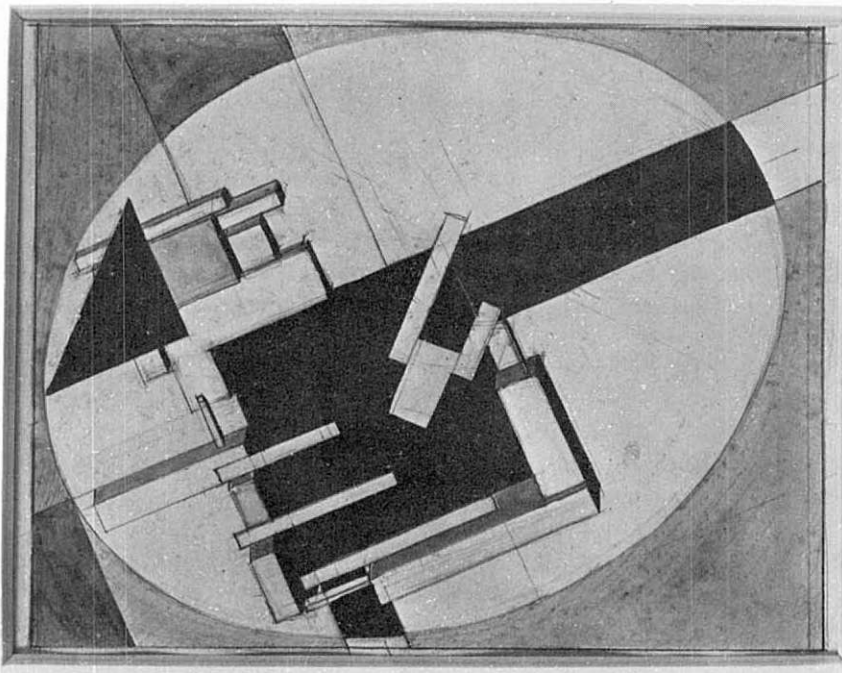
the pace of life has increased in the last few decades just as the speed of the motor bicycle has been exceeded many times over by the aeroplane.

after art passed through a whole series of intermediate stages it reached cubism where for the first time the creative urge to construct instinctively overcame conscious resolve. from this point the picture started to gain stature as a new world of reality and in this way the foundation stone for a new representation of the shapes and forms of the material world was laid. it proved to be essential to clear the site for the new building. this idea was a forerunner of futurism which exposed the relentless nature of its motivating power.

revolutions had started undercover. every thing grew more complicated. painting economical in its creative output was still very complicated and uneconomical in its expression. cubism and futurism seized upon the purity of form treatment and colour and built a complicated and extensive system with them combining them without any regard for harmony.

the rebuilding of life cast aside the old concept of nations classes patriotisms and imperialism which had been completely discredited.

the rebuilding of the town threw into utter confusion both its isolated



El Lissitzky: *Proun Study*, ca. 1920. Watercolor, 18.1 x 22.9 cm. Collection Grosvenor Gallery, London. "Proun" is an abbreviation of "proekt ustanovleniya (utverzheniya) novogo (v iskusstve)" [project for the establishment (affirmation) of the new (in Art)]. This was one of Lissitzky's earliest Prouns.

elements—houses streets squares bridges—and its new systems which cut across the old ones—underground metro underground monorail electricity transmitted under the ground and above the ground. this all developed on top of a new powerhouse whose pumps sucked in the whole of creation.

technology which in its achievements took the most direct route from the complexity of the train to the simplicity of the aeroplane from the basic primitiveness of the steam boiler to the economy of the dynamo from the chaotic hubbub of the telegraphic network to the uniformity of radio was diverted by the war from the path of construction and forced on to the paths of death and destruction.

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.

and amid the thunderous roar of a world in collision WE, ON THE LAST STAGE OF THE PATH TO SUPREMATISM BLASTED ASIDE THE OLD WORK OF ART LIKE A BEING OF FLESH AND BLOOD AND TURNED IT INTO A WORLD FLOATING IN SPACE. WE CARRIED BOTH PICTURE AND VIEWER OUT BEYOND THE CONFINES OF THIS SPHERE AND IN ORDER TO COMPREHEND IT FULLY THE VIEWER MUST CIRCLE LIKE A PLANET ROUND THE PICTURE WHICH REMAINS IMMOBILE IN THE CENTRE.

the empty phrase "art for art's sake" had already been wiped out and in suprematism we have wiped out the phrase "painting for painting's sake" and have ventured far beyond the frontiers of painting.

first of all the artist painted the natural scene which surrounded him. then this was obscured by towns roads canals and all the products of man for this reason the artist began to paint artificial nature—but involuntarily he referred in his works to the method for depicting this new nature. suprematism itself has followed the true path which defines the creative process consequently our picture has become a creative symbol and the realization of this will be our task in life.

when we have absorbed the total wealth of experience of painting when we have left behind the uninhibited curves of cubism when we have grasped the aim and system of suprematism—then we shall give a new face to this globe. we shall reshape it so thoroughly that the sun will no longer recognize its satellite. in architecture we are on the way to a completely new concept. after the archaic horizontals the classical spheres and the gothic verticals of building styles which preceded our own we are now entering upon a fourth stage as we achieve economy and spatial diagonals.

we left to the old world the idea of the individual house individual barracks individual castle individual church. we have set ourselves the task of creating the town. the centre of collective effort is the radio transmitting mast<sup>1</sup> which sends out bursts of creative energy into the world. by means of it we are able to throw off the shackles that bind us to the earth and rise above it. therein lies the answer to all questions concerning movement.

this dynamic architecture provides us with the new theatre of life and because we are capable of grasping the idea of a whole town at any moment with any plan the task of architecture—the rhythmic arrangement of space and time—is perfectly and simply fulfilled for the new town will not be as chaotically laid out as the modern towns of north and south america but clearly and logically like a beehive. the new element of treatment which we have brought to the fore in our painting will be applied to the whole of this still-to-be-built world and will transform the roughness of concrete the

smoothness of metal and the reflection of glass into the outer membrane of the new life. the new light will give us new colour and the memory of the solar spectrum will be preserved only in old manuals on physics.

this is the way in which the artist has set about the construction of the world—an activity which affects every human being and carries work beyond the frontiers of comprehension. we see how its creative path took it by way of cubism to pure construction but there was still no outlet to be found here. when the cubist had pressed forward and reached the very limits of his canvas his old materials—the colours on his palette—proved to be too pale and he put into his picture cement and concrete and home-made iron constructions. not content with that he started to build a model of the structure he had depicted on canvas and then it was only a short step to transform the abstract cubistic still-life into a contre-relief which was complete in itself.

the short step then required to complete the stride consists in recognition of the fact that a contre-relief is an architectonic structure. but the slightest deviation from the plumbline of economy leads into a blind alley. the same fate must also overtake the architecture of cubist contre-relief. cubism was the product of a world which already existed around us and contre-relief is its mechanical offspring. it does however have a relative that took the straight path of economy which led to a real life of its own. the reference is to the narrow technical discoveries for example the submarine the aeroplane the motors and dynamos of every kind of motive power in each part of a battle-ship. contre-relief is instinctively aware of their legitimate origin their economy of form and their realism of treatment.

by taking these elements FROM THEM for itself it wants to become equally entitled to take its place alongside them as a new creation. it seeks to demonstrate its modernity by surrounding itself with all the devices of modern life although this is really nothing other than a decoration of its own self but with intestines stomach heart and nerves on the outside.

in this fragment of TECHNICAL INVENTIVENESS we can see the construction of these pattern systems in the artist's materials. there is iron and steel copper tin and nickel glass and guttapercha straight and curved areas and volumes of every description and colour nuance. it is being made by several master-craftsmen who well know the work of their colleagues but not the beauty of their materials. this complicated structure taken as a whole represents a UNIFIED organism. is it not therefore for that very reason "artistic"?

there is one element to which special importance attaches—scale. the scale gives life to relationships in space. it is that which determines whether every organism remains whole or is destroyed—it holds all the parts together. the index for the growth of modern man is the ability to see and

appreciate the relative scales of everything that has been made. it is right that this perceptivity shall pass judgment on man's concept of space on the way he reacts in time. cubism demonstrated in its constructions its modernity in relation to scale. but in painting and contre-relief we have in front of us an absolute scale which is this—forms in their natural size in the ratio 1 : 1. if however we wish to transform the contre-relief into an architectural structure and therefore enlarge it by one hundred times, then the scale ceases to be absolute and becomes relative in the ratio of 1 : 100. then we get the american statue of liberty in whose head there is room for four men and from whose hand the light streams out.

seven years ago suprematism<sup>2</sup> raised aloft its black square but no one sighted it for at that time a telescope for this new planet had not yet been invented. the mighty force of its movement however caused a succession of artists to focus on it and many more were influenced by it. yet neither the former nor the latter possessed sufficient inner substance to be held fast by its attractive power and to formulate a complete world system from the new movement. they loosed their hold and plunged like meteorites into irrelevancy extinguishing themselves in its chaos. but the second much-improved phase is already following and the planet will soon stand fully revealed.

those of us who have stepped out beyond the confines of the picture take ruler and compasses—following the precept of economy—in our hands. for the frayed point of the paintbrush is at variance with our concept of clarity and if necessary we shall take machines in our hands as well because in expressing our creative ability paintbrush and ruler and compasses and machine are only extensions of the finger which points the way.

this path into the future has nothing in common either with mathematics and scientific studies or with raptures over sunset and moonlight—or indeed with the decline of the subject with its plague-ridden aura of individualism—rather is it the path leading from creative intuition to the increased growth of foodstuffs for which neither paintbrush nor ruler neither compasses nor machine were required.

we must take note of the fact that the artist nowadays is occupied with painting flags posters pots and pans textiles and things like that. what is referred to as "artistic work" has on the vast majority of occasions nothing whatever to do with creative effort: and the term "artistic work" is used in order to demonstrate the "sacredness" of the work which the artist does at his easel. the conception of "artistic work" presupposes a distinction between useful and useless work and as there are only a few artists buyers can be found even for their useless products.

the artist's work lies beyond the boundaries of the useful and the useless.

it is the revolutionary path along which the whole of creation is striding forward and along which man must also bend his steps. "artistic work" is but an obstacle on this path and in consequence a counter-revolutionary concept. the private property aspect of creativity must be destroyed all are creators and there is no reason of any sort for this division into artists and nonartists.

by this reckoning the artist ceases to be a man who is not producing useful things and must not strive to attain his title to creative activity by painting posters in the prescribed form and colour on which any attempt to pass judgment shows a GROSS LACK OF FEELING. such work now belongs to the duty of the artist as a citizen of the community who is clearing the field of its old rubbish in preparation for the new life.

therefore the IDEA OF "ARTISTIC WORK" MUST BE ABOLISHED AS A COUNTER-REVOLUTIONARY CONCEPT OF WHAT IS CREATIVE and work must be accepted as one of the functions of the living human organism in the same way as the beating of the heart or the activity of the nerve centres so that it will be afforded the same protection.

it is only the creative movement towards the liberation of man that makes him the being who holds the whole world within himself. only a creative work which fills the whole world with its energy can join us together by means of its energy components to form a collective unity like a circuit of electric current.

the first forges of the creator of the omniscient omnipotent omnific constructor of the new world must be the workshops of our art schools. when the artist leaves them he will set to work as a master-builder as a teacher of the new alphabet and as a promoter of a world which indeed already exists in man but which man has not yet been able to perceive.

and if communism which set human labour on the throne and suprematism which raised aloft the square pennant of creativity now march forward together then in the further stages of development it is communism which will have to remain behind because suprematism—which embraces the totality of life's phenomena—will attract everyone away from the domination of work and from the domination of the intoxicated senses. it will liberate all those engaged in creative activity and make the world into a true model of perfection. this is the model we await from kasimir malevich.

AFTER THE OLD TESTAMENT THERE CAME THE NEW—AFTER THE NEW THE COMMUNIST—AND AFTER THE COMMUNIST THERE FOLLOWS FINALLY THE TESTAMENT OF SUPREMATISM.