

Fig. 1. El Lissitzky, Russian, 1890–1941. Title page from *Proun 1. Kestnermappe*, 1919–23. Lithograph with red ink numeral and signature, upper right. The University of Michigan Museum of Art, Paul Leroy Grigaut Memorial Collection.

El Lissitzky's *Proun 1. Kestnermappe*

by Lynn Gumpert

As recently as 1968, Herbert Read suggested that El Lissitzky's relative obscurity among Russian avant-garde artists was true in part because "maybe he was never a 'creative' artist of the kind that seeks to express a personal vision, to project symbols of a personal feeling."¹ Yet less than a decade later, on the occasion of a retrospective exhibition in Europe, Lissitzky and Kandinsky were grouped together as "supreme creators."² This recent reappraisal of Lissitzky is part of a more general re-evaluation of the Russian avant-garde and its contribution to twentieth-century art.³ In this context, Lissitzky's role takes on added significance since he was a principal transmitter of the new Russian ideas to the West. He occupied an intermediary position between such expatriates as Kandinsky, Jawlensky, Larionov, and Goncharova; and Malevich and Tatlin, who remained in Russia.

Lissitzky communicated to the West not only the ideas of his colleagues working in Russia after the October Revolution of 1917,

[*Author's Note:* This article was first written as a paper for a seminar, "The Visual Aspects of Architecture," taught by Professor Rudolf Arnheim at The University of Michigan in the spring of 1978. I am very grateful for Professor Arnheim's encouragement and suggestions.]

1. Herbert Read, Introduction to: Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters and Texts*, London, 1968, p. 7.

2. John Bowlt, "El Lissitzky," in Galerie Gmurzynska, *El Lissitzky*, exhibition catalogue, Cologne, 1976, pp. 47-48.

3. This interest has been accompanied by a wealth of articles and exhibitions on the Russian avant-garde. John Bowlt has added considerably to our knowledge of this period, and Alan Birnholz has written extensively on Lissitzky.

but also his own "personal" and "creative" concept of art: Prouns, which Lissitzky himself described as an "interchange station between painting and architecture."⁴ Executed as designs for spatial constructions, Prouns consist of geometrical forms that appear to float in a cosmic, infinite space.

The University of Michigan Museum of Art has in its collection an important portfolio of lithographs by Lissitzky: *Proun 1. Kestnermappe* (Figs. 1-7).⁵ Commissioned by the Kestner Society in Hannover in 1923, this portfolio has been described by John Bowlt as "perhaps the finest group of Prouns."⁶ The *Kestnermappe* marks a crucial transitional point in Lissitzky's artistic career. It is at once a summation and distillation of earlier experiments as well as a springboard for later developments.

El Lissitzky was born in Polschinok near Smolensk in 1890. He was refused admission to the St. Petersburg Academy of Art in 1909, probably because of limited enrollment for

4. El Lissitzky, "The film of El's Life," 1928 in Lissitzky-Küppers, *Lissitzky*, 1968, p. 325. The exact derivation of the word "Proun" is still debated. John Bowlt postulates that Proun was an acronym based on the words "Proekt utverzhdenniaa novogo," or "Project for the Affirmation of the New" (Bowlt, *El Lissitzky*, 1976, p. 50).

5. Accession numbers 1969/2.52-58. Each sheet approximately H. 60.3 cm. W. 44 cm. The Museum of Art acquired the seven prints in 1969 from the estate of Paul Leroy Grigaut who was, at the time of his death, associate director of the Museum. It is not known when or where Grigaut bought the prints, but it is likely that he acquired them in Europe. He also owned another Kestner portfolio now in the Museum's collection: *Konstruktionen* by László Moholy-Nagy. Missing from Michigan's *Kestnermappe*, which is numbered 15/50, is the cover lithograph. [Figs. 1-7 presented in order of accession; original order unknown.]

6. Bowlt, *El Lissitzky*, 1976, p. 51.

Jews. He subsequently left for Germany and enrolled at the Darmstadt school of architecture and engineering where he remained until the outbreak of World War I. After his return to Russia, Lissitzky participated in the "Jewish Renaissance," illustrating children's books in Hebrew. In 1919, he was invited by Chagall to join the Vitebsk Art Labor Cooperative as professor of architecture and graphic arts. The arrival of Malevich in Vitebsk, and the subsequent collaboration of the two artists, was to have a profound influence on Lissitzky. Later that year he created his first Proun. In 1921, Lissitzky was summoned to Moscow to head the faculty of architecture at the new Vkhutemas art school, where he met Tatlin.

Lissitzky's studies in Germany made him the logical choice to travel to Berlin with the "First Russian Art Exhibition," which he had helped organize. He left for Germany in 1922 with express orders to establish contacts between the artists of the two countries. In Berlin, Lissitzky continued to work on his Prouns. He frequented the Café Nollendorfplatz, where he would meet his Russian compatriots. He also became friends with many of the German avant-garde, among them, Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch, and Hans Richter. Later, Lissitzky accompanied the "First Russian Art Exhibition" to Amsterdam, where he met Dutch artists and architects. He contributed to international art journals and, with Ilya Ehrenburg, collaborated on a short-lived periodical, *Vesch*. Lissitzky's role as proselytizer of the "New Russian Art" forced him to define the multitude of developments in Russia and to clarify his own position in relation to both the Russian and the Western European art scenes.

In the autumn of 1922 the avant-garde from Berlin met in Weimar and then proceeded to a conference of artists in Düsseldorf. They stopped in Hannover where, after a "Dada evening" at a gallery, Kurt Schwitters introduced Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers of the Kestner Society.

The Kestner Society is important to an understanding of these lithographs. It was

founded in Hannover on 10 June 1916 to exhibit and foster contemporary art. At this time, the civic authorities controlled the artistic policies of the Landesmuseum and the Städtische Galerie, and in 1916 the officially sanctioned art ended with the German Impressionists.⁷ Dr. Brinckmann, then director of the Kestner Museum and Städtische Galerie, joined with his assistant, Dr. Paul Erich Küppers, and Dr. von Debschitz, director of the school of arts and crafts, to sponsor exhibitions free from the conservative strictures of the provincial city leaders. The exhibition schedule in the first two years, under the artistic directorship of Küppers, included shows by Max Liebermann, Paula Modersohn-Becker, Emil Nolde, and the Hannoverische Sezession. The young society met with great approval and soon branched out into fine arts publishing. Among their early publications was Küppers's book on Cubism—the first to be published on that subject in Germany—and Worringer's *Anmerkungen zur neuen Kunst*.⁸ Küppers's untimely death in January 1922 left his widow temporarily in charge of the exhibition space at 8 Königstrasse.

Lissitzky's encounter with the Kestner Society and later friendship with Sophie Küppers was to have important ramifications in his life and art. Sophie Küppers had already seen Lissitzky's work at the "First Russian Art Exhibition" in Berlin. When she met Lissitzky in Hannover in October of 1922 she immediately bought one watercolor, which generated a great deal of excitement among the Kestner Society members.⁹ An exhibition

7. The then Mayor of Hannover, Herr Tramm, is reputed to have stated: "As long as I have anything to say in Hannover, there will be no Noldes and no Rohlf's." (Kunstverein, Hannover, *Die Zwanziger Jahre in Hannover*, exhibition catalogue, 1962, p. 22).

8. Kunstverein, *Die Zwanziger Jahre in Hannover*, 1962, p. 27.

9. This watercolor may have been a study for a Proun lithograph in the *Kestnermappe* (Fig. 5). She describes it: "Schwitters placed in front of me a portfolio of watercolours . . . I was particularly captivated by one watercolour. It showed a transparent gelatinous ball which was held poised by a black rod as a counter-balance." (Lissitzky-Küppers, *Lissitzky*, 1968, p. 33).

was planned for later that year. The impoverished artist was also offered living quarters and studio space on the third floor of the house on Königstrasse. In addition to financial and artistic support, a sympathetic group of Hannoverians assisted Lissitzky when tuberculosis necessitated treatment in a Swiss sanatorium, where he remained until 1925.

The success of Lissitzky's exhibition and of the lecture he delivered on the "New Russian Art" prompted the Kestner Society to commission the Kestnermappe as an annual New Year's "gift" to the Society's members.¹⁰ *Proun 1* was published by Ludwig Ey in an edition of fifty, and printed by the firm Leunis and Chapman. The series of six prints, with cover and title page, was extremely well received. Donald Karshan has attributed this success in part to the luxury and novelty of the three two-color lithographs (black and buff), and two collage prints, all signed by the artist.¹¹

A discussion of one *Kestnermappe* Proun (Fig. 5), will serve as an introduction to the portfolio. Since Lissitzky employed an abstract mode, careful formal analysis of these non-objective forms is vital to an understanding of his art. This print is characteristically composed of geometric forms that maintain a precarious balance between dominant vertical and horizontal axes. The circular configuration in the lower third of the composition sets a tone of spatial ambiguity. A sphere is defined by two interlocking circles; one appearing parallel to the picture plane and the other at an angle to it. The possibility of perceiving the form as a flat circle is complicated by the dissection of the "sphere" by a black disk, carefully bisected at the center and at points of

10. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers stated that the lithographs were commissioned as a New Year's "gift" for the members of the Society (Lissitzky-Küppers, *Lissitzky*, 1968, p. 34). Karshan, however, indicates that the portfolio was totally subscribed. (Donald Karshan, "Lissitzky: the Original Lithographs, An Introduction," in Galerie Gmurzynska, *El Lissitzky*, exhibition catalogue, Cologne, 1976, p. 30). The prints were apparently only made available to Kestner Society members.

11. Karshan, *El Lissitzky*, 1976, p. 30.

connection with the "oval" outline of the spheres.¹² This sphere rests on a black horizontal line and supports a geometrical configuration of planes that appear to project at various angles.

The overall impression of instability and tension is caused, in part, by the asymmetrical placement of the sphere to the right of the center and the apparent disregard of gravitational forces by the top-heavy configuration of planes. Tension is increased when one perceives that this same configuration of planes, repeated in various shades of gray, tilts to the left. Upon closer examination, one realizes that every element in the composition is repeated in a lighter, buff tone and set at an angle.

Lissitzky renders this inherently unstable composition even more dynamic by a number of perceptual devices. I have already noted his construction of a precarious space by the disproportionate weighting of the top half of the composition. The repetition of forms tilting to the left reads as phases of a stroboscopic movement; a denial of gravity and a subsequent surrendering to that force.

Lissitzky also plays with visual perception by depicting forms that can be read either two- or three-dimensionally. The geometrical configuration of forms in the top half of the

12. Here I refer to a basic principle of depth perception formulated by Rudolf Arnheim, which is derived from the law of simplicity: "a pattern will appear three-dimensional when it can be seen as the projection of a three-dimensional situation that is structurally simpler than the two-dimensional one." (R. Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*, new version, Berkeley, California, 1974, p. 248). In other words, an oval is more perceptually complicated than a circle seen in depth; therefore, the viewer when presented, as here, with an oval will perceive it as a circle seen at an angle. In this case, both the black disk that bisects the sphere parallel to the picture plane and the outline of the "circle" seen at an angle will be seen as having the same contour. These two ellipses intersect at right angles and thus can also be read as a "cross" inscribed in a flat circle. Since El Lissitzky makes use of many perceptual devices in his art, I shall refer often to ideas presented in Professor Arnheim's course at The University of Michigan, "Perception and Expression in Art," and in his book, *Art and Visual Perception*.

composition is dominated by a black, two-dimensional "L" placed parallel to the picture plane. Also parallel is the dark, two-dimensional square. These two forms are tenuously connected by parallelograms, which are most easily read as rectangles set at angles into space. The parallelism of the right angles of the square with those of the black "L," and the connecting oblique lines formed by two borders of the parallelograms, induce one to read the enclosed form as connecting sides of an open, cubic interior. Yet, this hollow interior, as is often the case with isometric patterns, is reversible. It can also be read as a solid cube projecting forward into our space. The square is no longer perceived as the back wall, but rather as the front of the cube, seen from above and at an angle, abutted in the lower left-hand corner by the black "L." Once perceived, this version tends to dominate; yet it is challenged by the parallelograms that can be read as receding back into space.

This subtle yet extremely dynamic manipulation of forms is the means through which Lissitzky attempted to create a new reality.¹³ John Bowlt notes: "Like Kandinsky and like Pavel Filonov, Kazimir Malevich, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Vladimir Tatlin, Lissitzky was committed to the total reconstruction of artistic perception, and, like them also, he was concerned, ultimately, with the universal application of this new perception to social reality."¹⁴

Lissitzky's successful realization of his ideas in the form of the *Kestnermappe* Prouns is closely connected to the circumstances of their commission. The history of the Kestner Society reveals that conditions were right for both the artist and his audience. In 1923 the Hannover Kestner Society members had been primed by seven years of excellent exhibitions and catalogues, and were very receptive to new trends in art. Moreover, the precise, geometrical

13. E. Lissitzky, "PROUN, Not world visions, BUT-world reality," *De Stijl*, volume 5, number 6, June 1922 in: Lissitzky-Küppers, *Lissitzky*, 1968, pp. 343-344.

14. Bowlt, *El Lissitzky*, 1976, p. 48.

nature of Lissitzky's art with its positive, Utopian overtones was a refreshing change from the excesses of German Expressionism and post-war depression.¹⁵ Lissitzky, in turn, received both moral and financial support from the Kestner Society. In addition, the greater sophistication of German printing facilities, compared to the Russian state printing ateliers, provided Lissitzky with an increased range of technological possibilities.¹⁶ Indeed, many of the subtleties of the Kestner prints were achieved through the use of the well-equipped printing studio of Leunis and Chapman. For example, some of the various shades of gray and buff within the upper configuration of one of the prints (Fig. 5) are not solid color areas, but rather created through the repetition of fine, parallel lines. The overall precision and clarity achieved by Lissitzky in the *Kestnermappe* indicates that he had moved beyond a ruler.¹⁷

For Lissitzky, the Kestner commission marked a crucial point in his artistic career. By indicating the dates 1919-23 on the title page of the portfolio (Fig. 1), Lissitzky ex-

15. Lissitzky-Küppers, *Lissitzky*, 1968, p. 34.

16. Karshan, *El Lissitzky*, 1976, p. 30.

17. It is clear that Lissitzky in at least two lithographs of the *Kestnermappe* (Figs. 5 and 6), used pre-printed, mechanical elements, as did Schwitters in his *Merz* portfolio (Hannover, 1923). In fact, in a 1904 book on lithography, one of the actual pre-printed gelatin transfers used by Lissitzky in Fig. 5 is illustrated as an example of a mechanical means for achieving shaded and stippled effects (David Cummings, *Handbook on Lithography*, London, 1904, plate III: "Fine Ruling"). Lissitzky worked on commercial advertisements, most notably for the firm Günter Wagner. This experience, as well as his participation in the design and editing of periodicals like *Vesch, G*, and *Merz*, would have kept him aware of the latest developments in the printing media. In addition, the firm of Leunis and Chapman handled commercial assignments (they printed the "money" in Hannover during the uneasy post-war financial situation). In the end, we know that Lissitzky was very pleased with the printing of the *Kestnermappe*, "which gave a new technical perfection to his drawing." (Lissitzky-Küppers, *Lissitzky*, p. 34).

PLICITLY traced the genesis of the prints back to Russia in 1919 when he created his first Proun. How do the Kestner lithographs relate to Lissitzky's earlier work? Karshan has noted the "monumental calm," "reassuring equilibrium," and compositional simplicity of the Kestner Prouns when compared to earlier Proun lithographs (Fig. 8).¹⁸ The monumentality of the Kestner lithographs is, however, due less to a simplification of composition than to an increased subtlety and sophistication. The concise images of the Kestner Prouns belie the many perceptual complications evident upon closer examination. The Kestner lithographs are perhaps even more complex precisely because of their apparent simplification.

This complexity is perhaps most evident in another Kestner lithograph (Fig. 3). This second Proun is an isometric, schematic representation of a room Lissitzky executed later in 1923. Under the aegis of the Novembergruppe, he was given free rein with the interior of a room in the Lehrter Bahnhof for the "Great Berlin Art Exhibition" of 1923.¹⁹ This Kestner lithograph is often illustrated as a plan for the "Proun Space" of 1923. The Proun Space has, in turn, usually been viewed as an antecedent for the "Abstrakte Kabinett" in Dresden (1926) and Hannover (1927).²⁰ The print has not, to my knowledge, been considered in terms of its design as a lithograph

18. Karshan, *El Lissitzky*, 1976, pp. 30–32. This earlier print (Fig. 8), as well as others from 1919, tends towards a more overall, less focused composition than the consolidation of imagery in the Kestner Prouns.

19. Lissitzky's exhibition at the Kestner Society apparently took place during the winter of 1922–23. His lecture on the "New Russian Art" was on 6 March 1923 and the prints were probably completed around that time. The "Great Berlin Art Exhibition" most likely took place in the summer of 1923, as the dates for the 1927 exhibition were 7 May–30 September.

20. The room that Lissitzky created in conjunction with Dorner of the Landesmuseum is described and illustrated in S. Cauman, *The Living Museum*, New York, 1958, pp. 100–104. As opposed to the Proun Space, the "Abstrakte Kabinett" was designed specifically as an exhibition space for abstract art, not as a work of art itself. With this type of design, Lissitzky introduced a radically new concept for the display of modern art.

or in relation to the other Prouns of the *Kestnermappe*.²¹

First, this is the only print of the six lithographs in which the compositional format is horizontal. Within the horizontal format, the layout of the design moves diagonally from the lower right to the upper left. The artist has indicated this axis of movement by printing the words *Eingang* in the lower right and *Ausgang* towards the upper left. The inherently dynamic movement of the diagonal is somewhat stabilized by its "reverse" symmetry, which has caused the lithograph to be reproduced frequently upside down.²²

Once the general composition has been grasped, as well as the print's function as a room as indicated by the printed words, a number of ambiguities become apparent. Drawn in isometric perspective, the "central" wall of the design tends to be perceived as the front wall of a cube completed by the "ceiling" and "left" wall. An empty three-sided figure, where the central wall then reads as the "floor," is also possible. The center wall, however, can also be read as the front wall of a cube seen from below and completed by the right wall and the floor. The latter interpretation is made more difficult by the fact that the bottom connection line of the floor is left incomplete. This "incompletion" also reinforces the diagonal reading of the composition, since the floor lines double as parallel diagonals. This diagonal axis adds measurably to the dynamism of the composition.

In fact, it is only with great difficulty that the space can be understood as an interior at all. Lissitzky apparently used isometric perspective in order to cause less distortion, but it is clear that he was also concerned with the aesthetics of the "design" for the Proun Space

21. In fact, in the Lissitzky-Küppers monograph (*Lissitzky*, 1968), this lithograph is not illustrated with the other Kestner prints (plates 47–51), but rather as plate 184 in the section, "Exhibition Design."

22. This print is reproduced upside down in: Galerie Gmurzynska, *El Lissitzky*, 1976, p. 114 and Galerie Gmurzynska, *The 1920's in Eastern Europe*, exhibition catalogue, Cologne, 1975, p. 102.

as a lithograph. This conflict between its two-fold function as a “diagram” for the Proun Space and as a graphic design is repeated in the conflict between the alternate readings of a two- or three-dimensional form and a solid or empty space.

This Proun shares many of the formal devices contained in the Proun discussed above (Fig. 5), such as spatial dynamism and ambiguity between two- and three-dimensional forms. What can be deduced from the examination of these two prints is Lissitzky’s concern with the perception and depiction of space. Indeed, space is the key to understanding all of Lissitzky’s art. His creation of a “dynamic space” demonstrates an allegiance to Malevich, to whom he credited the discovery of the third phase of the art-historical evolution of the depiction of space: “irrational space.” Lissitzky, however, went beyond Malevich to define a fourth category: “imaginary space.”²³ This space is distinguished by the addition of a fourth dimension, the element of time, and is characterized by movement or dynamism.²⁴

Another important aspect of Lissitzky’s art is its relationship to the October Revolution in Russia. The cosmic space created by the Prouns symbolized for Lissitzky the Utopia he envisioned would result as the new social order after the Revolution. The artist, too, would change roles and become a *zhizostroitel*, or artist/engineer.²⁵

23. E. Lissitzky, “A. and Pangeometry,” in *Europa-Almanach*, edited by Carl Einstein and Paul Westheim, Potsdam, 1925, reprinted in: El Lissitzky, *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1970, pp. 146–149.

24. The concept of time and the fourth dimension has emerged as an important factor in much of the art of the early twentieth century. For its importance to the Russian avant-garde see: L. D. Henderson, “The Merging of Time and Space: ‘The Fourth Dimension’ in Russia from Ouspensky to Malevich,” *The Structurist*, volume 15/16, 1975/76, pp. 97–108.

25. For Lissitzky’s conception of the artist/engineer as semi-divine, see: A. C. Birnholz, “El Lissitzky, The Avant-Garde, and the Revolution,” *Artforum*, volume 11, September 1972, pp. 70–76.

Lissitzky’s emphasis on the actual construction of this new space, indicated by the inclusion of the Proun Space lithograph/plan in the Kestner portfolio, aligns him with another member of the Russian avant-garde: Tatlin. This link is clarified in a third Kestner Proun (Fig. 4), which consists of a series of floating, superimposed planes. The black “void” that frames the right-hand side of the composition is balanced by the white and colored planes to the left. A horizontal bar serves to unite these three vertical planes. Even though the principal compositional elements consist of rectangular forms at right angles, inherently more stable than the diagonals of another Kestner Proun (Fig. 7), ambiguity and dynamism are subtly asserted. For example, the black “bar” at the center of the composition appears at the top end to be a three-dimensional form seen in perspective, the shaded portion receding into space. However, at the bottom end the black and shaded lines end simultaneously, thus appearing to be two-dimensional. Similarly, the “cube” in the center can be perceived as both a six-sided solid cube and a three-sided open construction.

The connection with Tatlin becomes clear when one realizes that this lithograph is a detail of the third wall of the Proun Space lithograph (Fig. 3). Seen in this light, the composition reads as a relief construction, a mode that Tatlin had developed.²⁶ The black “void” is now read as a fragment of the large black rectangle, and the white space is perceived as the supporting wall. The bar that makes the connection around the corner to the second or central wall in the Proun Space reappears in this third Proun. In describing the Proun Space, Lissitzky mentioned the relief:

26. The corner constructions are generally acknowledged as an important innovation and achievement by Tatlin. Lissitzky, in his lecture on the “New Russian Art,” specifically commented on the reliefs (E. Lissitzky, “New Russian Art; a Lecture,” 1922, in Lissitzky-Küppers, *Lissitzky*, 1968, p. 333).

The room (as an exhibition room) is designed with elementary forms and materials; lines, flat surfaces and bar, cube, sphere, and black, white, grey, and wood; and surfaces which are spread flat on to the wall (colour) and surfaces which are placed perpendicular to the wall (wood). The two reliefs on the walls provide a problem-situation and the crystallization of the entire wall-area (the cube on the left wall in relation to the sphere of the front wall, and both in relation to the bar of the right wall). The room is not a living-room.²⁷

To the Proun lithographs, which are two-dimensional representations of three-dimensional space, Lissitzky added the fourth dimension of time to create his imaginary space. By showing in the Kestner portfolio two views of the same space, he has introduced simultaneity. The first Proun discussed above (Fig. 5) also contains a temporal element—the repetition of forms that can be read as a stroboscopic movement in time.

Further levels of meaning can be deciphered in the *Kestnermappe*. Lissitzky was adamant that in the new construction of space the forms must be universal, “immediately recognizable to everyone.” Geometrical forms were the most obvious solution, for “no one is going to confuse a square with a circle, or a circle with a triangle.”²⁸

Lissitzky defined the plastic elements of construction as the cube, cone, and sphere. In addition to noting their inherently dynamic qualities, he characterized the sphere as “the crystallization of the universe.”²⁹ Alan Birnholz, in a recent article, has further identified various levels of meaning that these geometrical forms possessed for the Russian avant-garde. The square, especially for Malevich, was endowed with significant meaning. “It was a window opening onto the cosmos, much like a modernized icon,” as well as “the virgin plane on which the architecture of the

future utopia would be built.”³⁰ Lissitzky, by “cubing” the square, symbolically proclaimed the superiority of architecture as a three-dimensional art form, thus bridging the distance between Tatlin’s functional Constructivism and Malevich’s spiritual cosmic Suprematism.³¹

In the fourth print (Fig. 5), Lissitzky included both a cube and a sphere. In addition, the black disk and spherical contour seen at an angle, when isolated from the confining boundary of the circle parallel to the picture plane, appear somewhat similar to a diagram of an atom. Whether Lissitzky intended this as a symbol of the dynamic nature of the universe cannot be definitively ascertained.³² However, the tension between the ovals when viewed as two-dimensional forms, and their spherical counter-function when perceived as three-dimensional forms, certainly is intentional.

Transparency as a formal device employed by Lissitzky in the Kestner Prouns also lends itself to iconographical interpretation.³³ An altered perception of reality was, according to Lissitzky, due in part to recent scientific and technological advances, which made the earth smaller and smaller while the concept of space

27. E. Lissitzky, “Proun Room, Great Berlin Art Exhibition,” *G*, Berlin, July 1923, in: Lissitzky-Küppers, *Lissitzky*, p. 361.

28. E. Lissitzky, “New Russian Art,” in: Lissitzky-Küppers, *Lissitzky*, 1968, p. 334.

29. E. Lissitzky, “Element and invention,” *ABC-Beiträge zum Bauen*, number 1, Basel, 1924, in: Lissitzky-Küppers, *Lissitzky*, p. 345.

30. A. C. Birnholz, “Forms, Angles, and Corners: On Meaning in Russian Avant-Garde Art,” *Arts Magazine*, volume 51, February 1977, p. 102.

31. Birnholz, *Arts Magazine*, 1977, p. 102.

32. The discovery of atomic force played an important role in the art of other Russian artists. Kandinsky notes in his autobiographical “Reminiscences”: “A scientific event cleared my way of one of the greatest impediments. This was the further division of the atom. The crumbling of the atom was to my soul like the crumbling of the whole world. Suddenly the heaviest walls toppled. Everything became uncertain, tottering and weak. I would not have been surprised if a stone had dissolved in the air in front of me and became invisible.” (W. Kandinsky, “Reminiscences,” in *Modern Artists on Art: Ten Unabridged Essays*, edited by R. L. Herbert, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1964, p. 27.)

33. Arnheim notes that other twentieth-century artists, such as Feininger and Klee, have used perceptual transparency to give the effect of dematerialization, or to “break up the continuity of space.” (Arnheim, *Art and Visual Perception*, 1974, p. 257).

was growing larger and larger.³⁴ In addition, Lissitzky firmly believed that the world was becoming increasingly dematerialized. This dematerialization of form is graphically represented by the various degrees of transparency in the fourth Kestner Proun. Not only are the facets of the “original” configuration perceived as translucent, but they undergo further dematerialization in the shadowed counterpart.

Another Proun from the Kestner lithographs confirms that meaning can be derived from the forms (Fig. 7). At first glance, a struggle occurs between the solid geometrical forms of the black circle and the red collage quadrilateral on the one hand, and the underlying “skeleton” of the crossed diagonals on the other. This struggle is uneasily resolved only when one realizes that the forms can be perceived as a human figure. This process, of course, occurs in a few moments. It is a tribute to Lissitzky that he is able to create an uneasy but dynamic balance between forms that can be read as either individual components or as a totality.

This dynamic composition seems relatively stable when compared to a slightly later version of the same theme (Fig. 9).³⁵ A source for this later lithograph has been identified in Leonardo’s *Vitruvian Man*.³⁶ Another level of meaning thus tantalizingly presents itself. If the Kestner Proun can also be seen as a geometric version of the Universal Man, cannot another Proun from this series be interpreted as a representation of the Universal Woman (Fig. 6)? These two prints do,

34. A. C. Birnholz, “Space and Time in the Art and Thought of El Lissitzky,” *The Structurist*, volume 15/16, 1975/76, p. 90.

35. *Neuer* is folio 10 of *Figurinen. Die plastische Gestaltung der elektro-mechanischen Schau “Sieg über die Sonne,”* known as the “Puppet Portfolio,” and published the same year (1923). It was inspired by Kruchenykh’s futurist opera, “Victory over the Sun,” for which Malevich designed the stage sets and costumes in Luna Park, Leningrad, 5 December 1913. Lissitzky helped Malevich restage the opera in Vitebsk in 1920.

36. Birnholz, *Arts Magazine*, 1977, p. 102.

in fact, seem to have been conceived as a pair since they both incorporate collage—a glossy black paper circle in the fifth Proun; a red quadrangle in the sixth. The circle and cross-like configuration in the fifth print, dynamically tangent rather than joined, suggests the age-old botanical and astrological symbol of the female or Venus.³⁷ The reference to these symbols, which can be associated with Renaissance ideal proportions, and by association perspectival, measurable space as well as the astrological domain, is perhaps a further indication of Lissitzky’s awareness and rejection of these systems of space and his own creation of “imaginary space.”

In the second portfolio of lithographs published by Ludwig Ey, to which *Neuer* (Fig. 9) belongs, Lissitzky resorted to a text in order to insure that his intended meaning was communicated. Here he noted somewhat regretfully that the text of the opera that inspired the second portfolio, “compelled me to preserve something of the anatomy of the human body.”³⁸ Perhaps, as Lissitzky explained to the Western European public in a lecture on the “New Russian Art:”

A sign is designed, much later it is given its name, and later still its meaning becomes clear. So we do not understand the signs, the shapes, which the artist created, because man’s brain has not yet reached the corresponding stage of development.³⁹

Lissitzky grew increasingly dissatisfied with easel painting and turned towards more practical applications of his ideas through architecture, typography, and exhibition design. His use of a multiple medium, lithography, for the *Kestnermappe* is an indication of a more social orientation in contrast to the bourgeois and elitist connotations associated with easel painting. In fact, soon after this

37. In addition to the astrological and botanical meanings, the symbol is also used in astronomy and Kabbalism as Venus, and in mineralogy as copper ore.

38. E. Lissitzky, “The plastic form of the electro-mechanical peepshow ‘Victory over the sun,’” in: Lissitzky-Küppers, *Lissitzky*, 1968, p. 348.

39. E. Lissitzky, “New Russian Art” in: Lissitzky-Küppers, *Lissitzky*, 1968, p. 335.

period Lissitzky was to abandon easel painting altogether.

From this discussion of the *Proun 1* lithographs, the many layers of meaning in this very rich and complex portfolio become apparent. Their importance in Lissitzky's career is closely allied to the circumstances under which they were commissioned. After a period of time in the stimulating art world of Berlin and as a result of his role as disseminator and proselytizer of the Russian post-war avant-garde, Lissitzky further refined and distilled his own concepts of both.

Within the imaginary space of these six Prouns, Lissitzky attempted to convey the qualities of the new Utopian reality that

would be constructed by the artist/engineer. Through the formal devices of dynamism, ambiguity, and tension, Lissitzky presented the symbols for the New Man and New Woman and the "signs" of the square and sphere of the future.

With the Proun Space lithograph in particular, Lissitzky heralded the new direction in which his art was to develop. He would, in the next few years, seek a more practical application of his theories, both through the plan and the execution of the three-dimensional Proun Space, and through further exploration of the medium of lithography. Upon his return to Russia in 1925, El Lissitzky turned to architecture and to typographical and exhibition design, areas in which he was also to contribute substantial innovations.

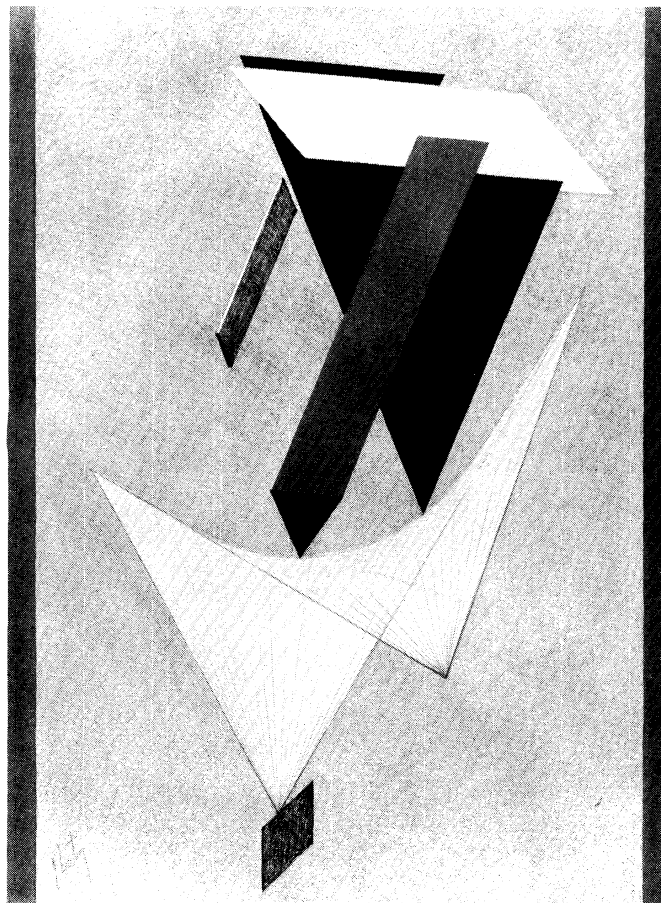


Fig. 2. El Lissitzky, Proun from *Proun 1*. *Kestnermappe*, 1919–23. Two-color lithograph (black and buff). The University of Michigan Museum of Art, Paul Leroy Grigaut Memorial Collection.

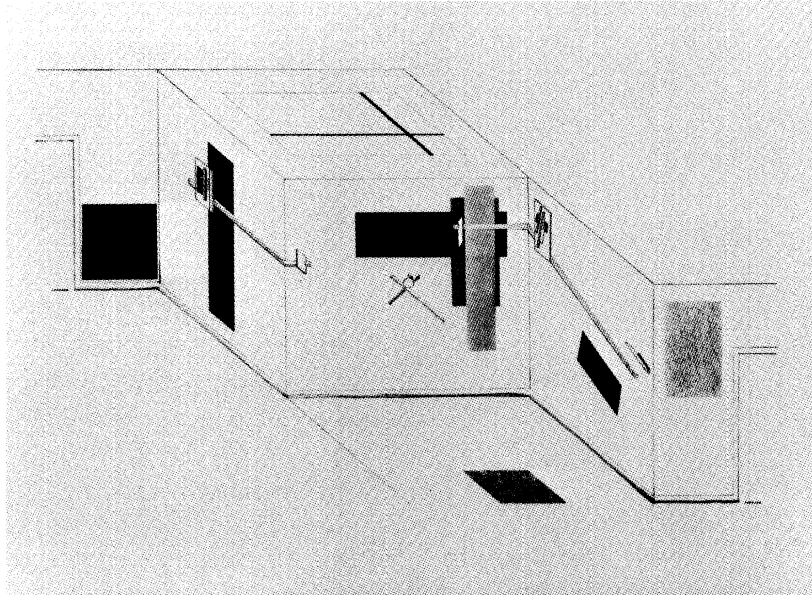


Fig. 3. El Lissitzky, Proun Space from *Proun 1. Kestnermappe*, 1919–23. Lithograph. The University of Michigan Museum of Art, Paul Leroy Grigaut Memorial Collection.

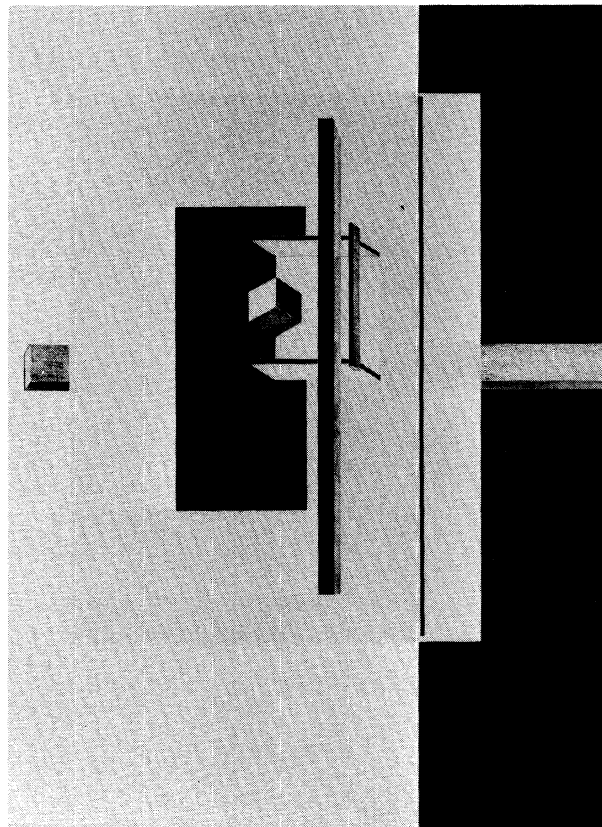


Fig. 4. El Lissitzky, Proun from *Proun 1. Kestnermappe*, 1919–23. Two-color lithograph (black and buff). The University of Michigan Museum of Art, Paul Leroy Grigaut Memorial Collection.

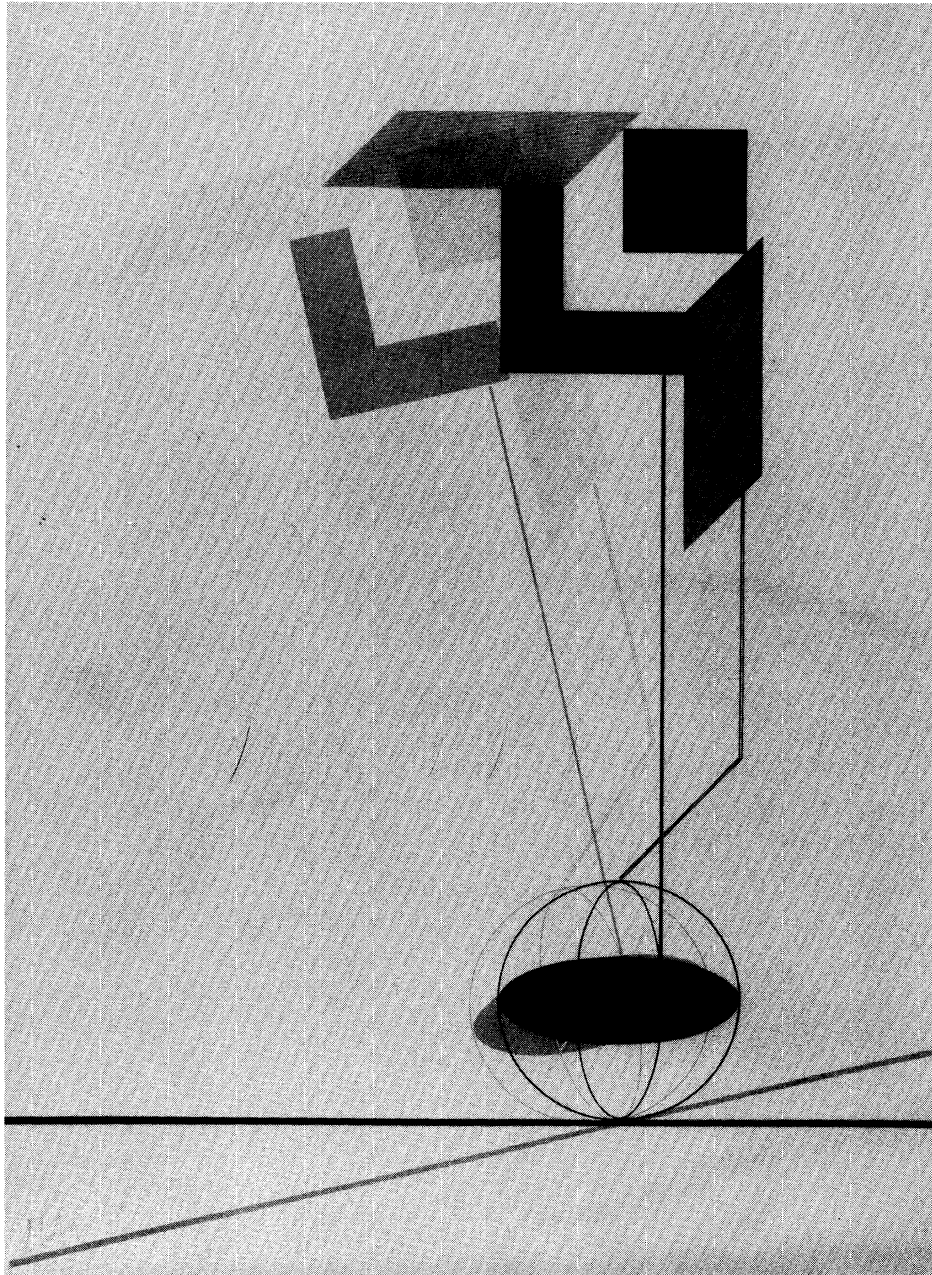


Fig. 5. El Lissitzky, Proun from *Proun 1. Kestnermappe*, 1919–23. Two-color lithograph (black and buff). The University of Michigan Museum of Art, Paul Leroy Grigaut Memorial Collection.

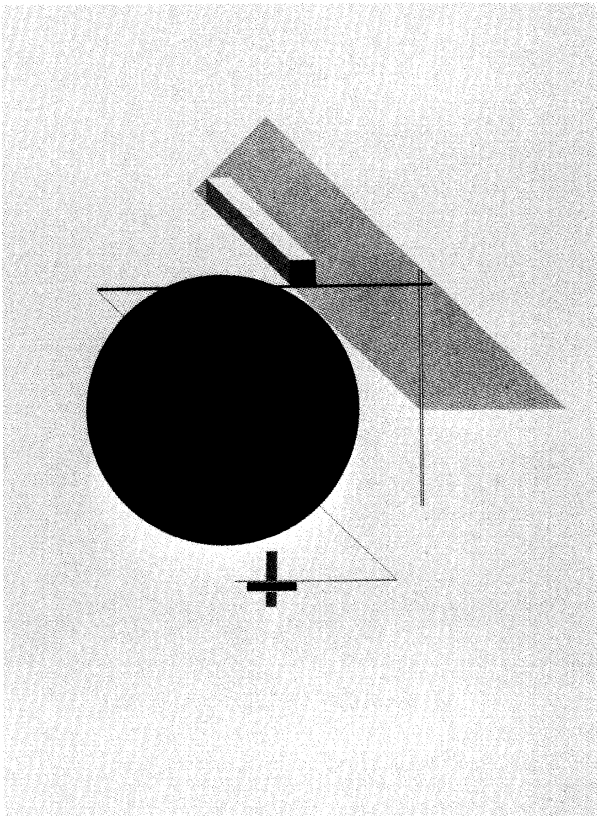


Fig. 6. El Lissitzy, Proun from *Proun 1. Kestnermappe*, 1919–23. Lithograph with black collage. The University of Michigan Museum of Art, Paul Leroy Grigaut Memorial Collection.

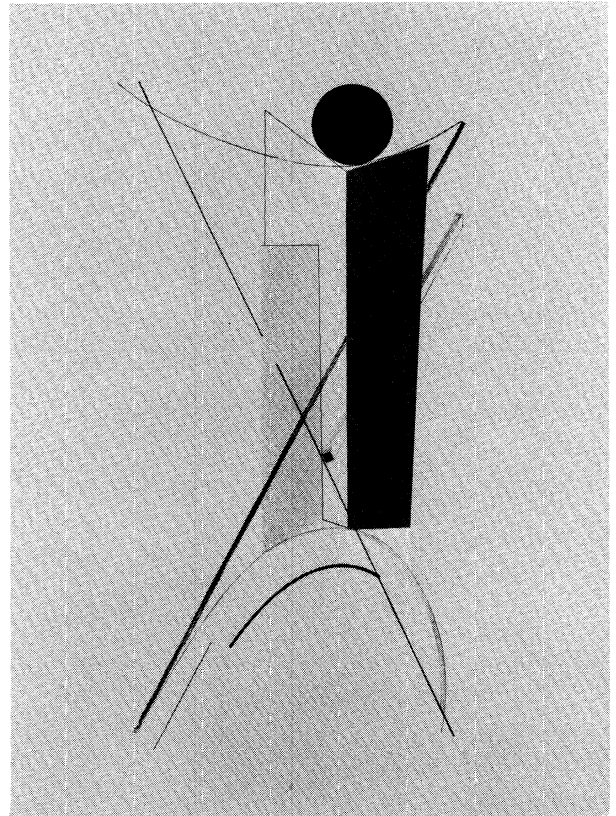


Fig. 7. El Lissitzy, Proun from *Proun 1. Kestnermappe*, 1919–23. Lithograph with red collage. The University of Michigan Museum of Art, Paul Leroy Grigaut Memorial Collection.

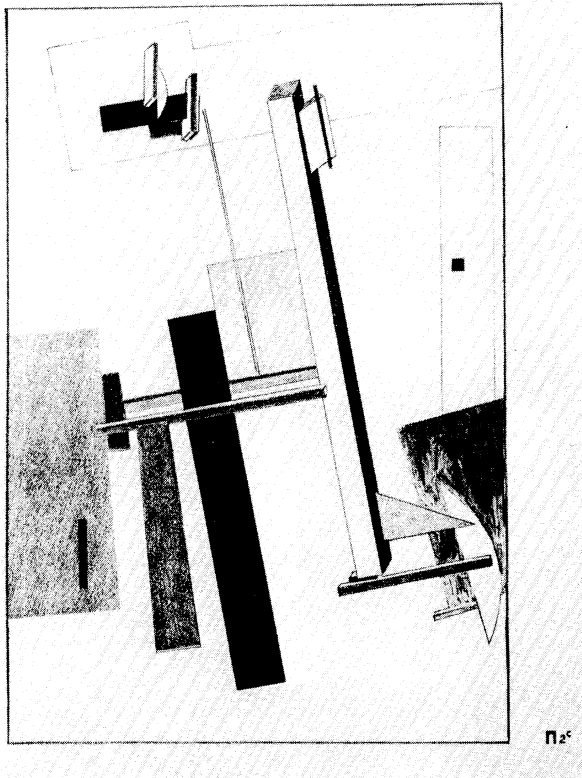


Fig. 8. El Lissitzky, *Proun 2 C*, 1919. Lithograph, H. 45.5 cm. W. 34.5 cm. Photo courtesy Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne.

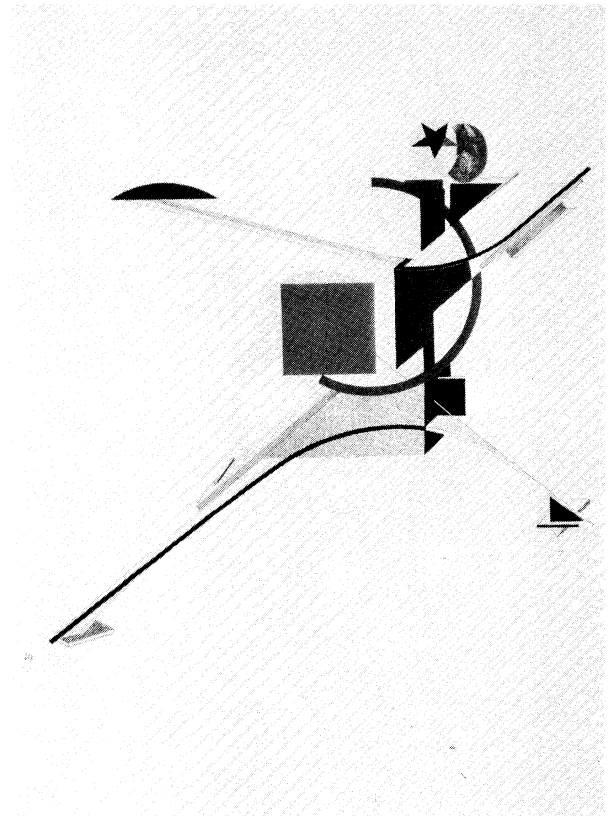


Fig. 9. El Lissitzky, *Neuer*, folio 10 from *Figurinen*. *Die plastische Gestaltung der elektro-mechanischen Schau "Sieg über die Sonne,"* or "Puppet Portfolio," 1923. Color lithograph. H. 53 cm. W. 45.4 cm. Photo courtesy Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne.