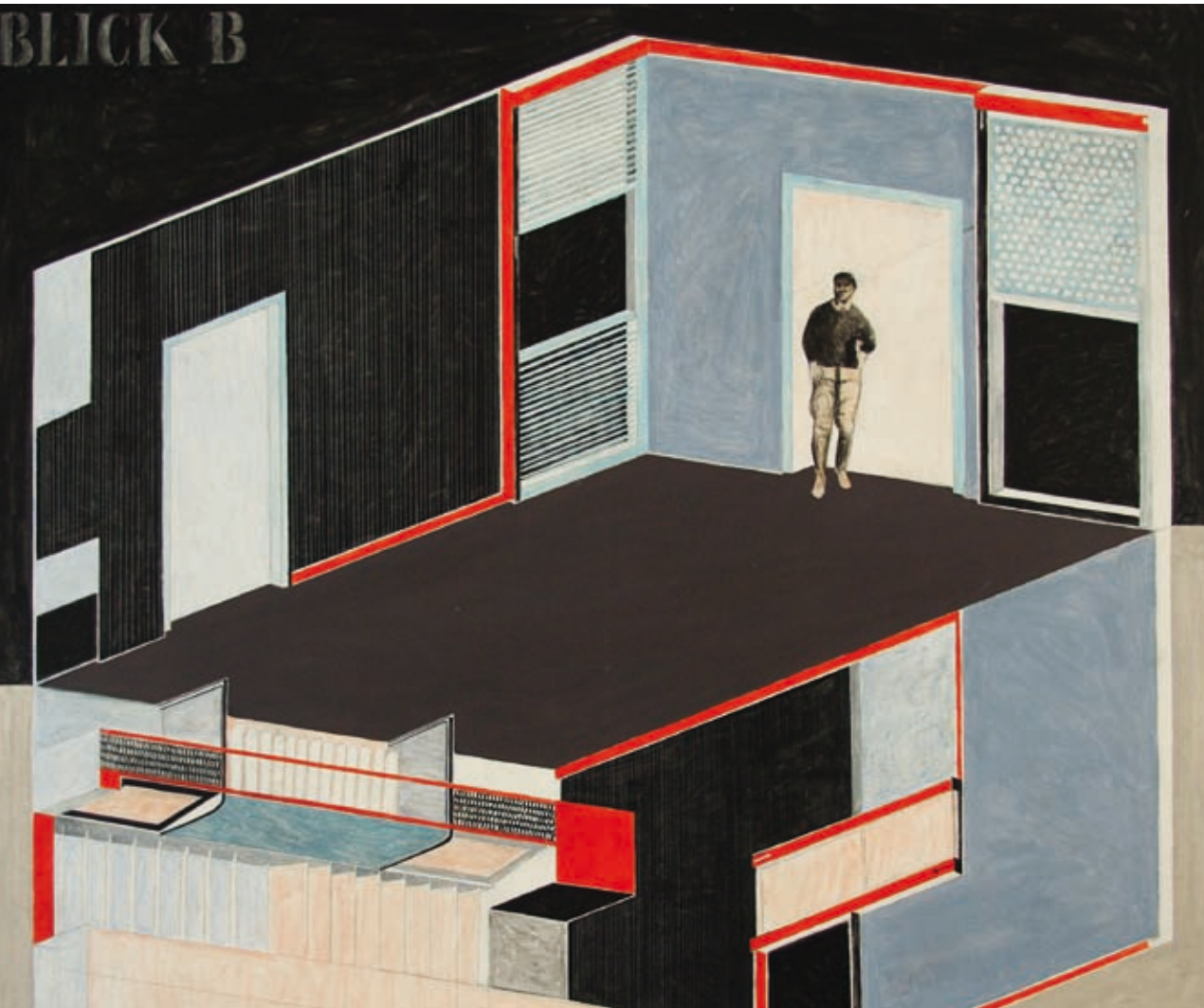


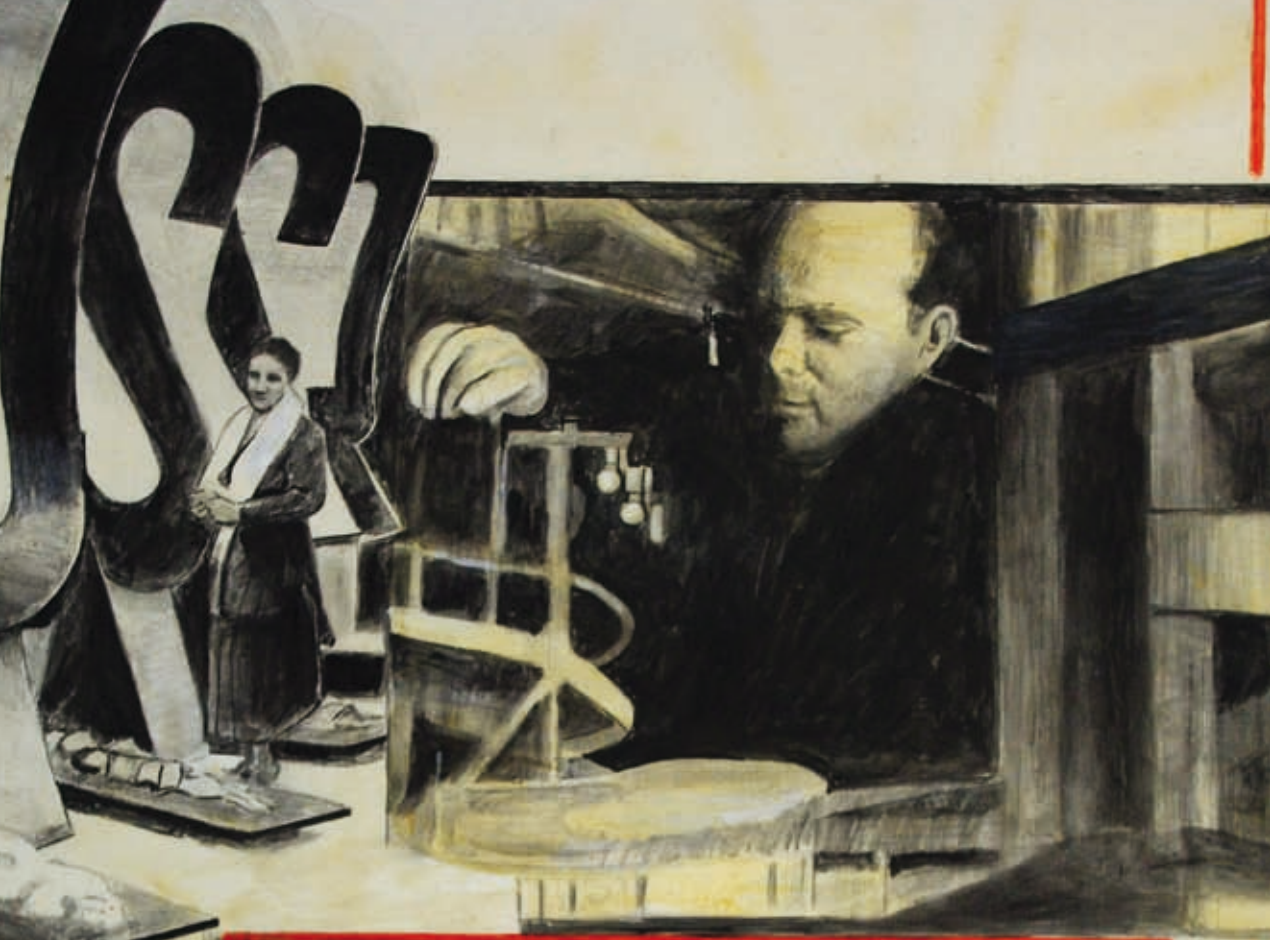
**el lissitzky and alexander dorner**

**kabinett der abstrakten  
original and facsimile**

**museum of american art berlin**

BLICK B





DORNER'S,  
DEN  
ERHALTERN  
des wirklichen  
lebendigen Hainners  
in Frankfurt

# Lissilzky  
P. Lissidky - Kieppers

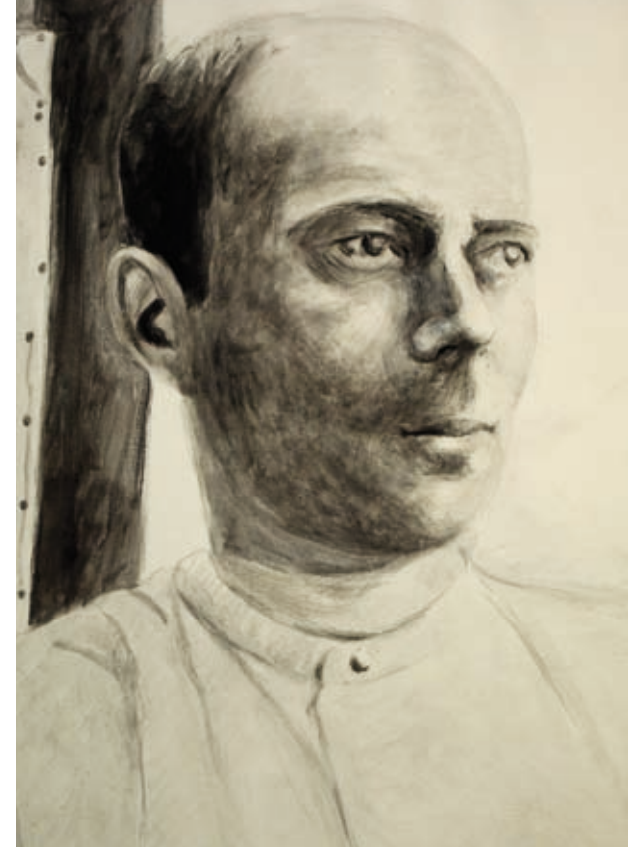
## ARTIST

Once upon a time, in a faraway Empire in the East, there lived a young and inventive artist. He full-heartedly joined the Revolution that swept the nation after a long and terrible war that destroyed the Empire for good. Soon after, he began traveling through the world, taking part in many exhibitions and spreading the magnificent achievements of the new Revolutionary Art. One day he was invited by the Director of the museum of the land in the West to make a room specially designed to show abstract art. He made the room with unusual walls that had moving parts and changing colors. It was filled with abstract paintings and had a special mirror behind a single statue. The walls looked different as the visitor walked around. Named the Abstract Cabinet, it became the best-known room of the museum. Unfortunately, after not too long, the circumstances began to change for the worse, and abstract art was not appreciated any more. It was now considered decadent and degenerate and, accordingly, the once-famous Cabinet was dismantled and completely forgotten. Meanwhile the Artist returned to his native land forever. Soon after, another terrible war among the nations of the Old World destroyed everything, including the traces of the memory of abstract art and the Cabinet as well.

Luckily, the memory of abstract art and the Cabinet was not forgotten everywhere. It was being kept alive in the museum that opened in the New World. That museum became known as the Modern. And that is how we know about all this today.

*From the Tales of the Artisans*

Alexander Dörner: *Artist*, 2028, acrylic on canvas, 80x60cm



## DIRECTOR

A long time ago there lived a young and ambitious man who loved history and museums. It so happened that one day, after the Great War that ruined his land, he became the Director of the most important museum in a certain province. In this museum, like in all other museums, various epochs from the past were displayed in the same monotonous way. The young Director made it his business to change the museum completely. He decided that each epoch would be confined within its own, specially arranged room. While connecting the rooms he abandoned the Law of Symmetry, and adopted the Law of Chronology. Also, all the museum's windows had to be covered in order to separate the Past from the Present. The last room was devoted to the most advanced style of the time, known as Abstract Art. It was designed by the Artist who came from the vast and far away land in the East that had just been born in the Red Revolution. The Abstract Room the Artist had made was unique and attracted a lot of attention. Soon after the Museum became recognized as the most advanced museum in the entire world and the Director was widely praised and respected by his colleagues. After some time, cold winds of hatred and intolerance swept the land, and the Director had to flee across the ocean to the New World, bringing with him novel ideas about the Museum and History. He there became the Director of yet another museum, and changed it according to his principles as well. His ideas became widely accepted, and after not too long, other museums followed the Director's ideas. But it seems nobody understood that by changing the Museum, they were changing History as well.

*From the Tales of the Artisans*

Alexander Dörner: *Director*, 2028, acrylic on canvas, 80x60cm





Anonymous: *Provinzial-Museum*, 1902, acrylic on canvas, 70x100cm

### *Provinzial-Museum*

Since their beginnings, museums have been places where one could see exhibitions of selected fragments from the past. However, those early museums were closer to the idea of libraries, lacking an over-arching narrative that would connect various exhibits and artifacts into a coherent story. Since the early 1800s, thanks to Vivant Denon, the first Director of the Musée Napoleon (*Louvre Museum*), those exhibits gradually became structured chronologically and by National Schools, in what became known as Art History. The display narrative of the museum and the story of art merged, and the Museum became the materialization of Art History—a special place where we would go to see the past remembered through this particular linear story, populated by unique characters (individuals, places, objects, etc.) The story begins in the distant past (as of last century it is Prehistory, before that it was Egypt and before that, Ancient Greece), and, flows chronologically through various civilizations, epochs, lands and places up to the present, opening indefinitely towards the future. The uniqueness of the characters and the chronology became the main aspects of this story, coinciding with the idea of evolution and progress. Although the connection between the Museum and Art History was well established, throughout the 19th and early 20th century the display narrative of the museums was governed

by other criteria like symmetry, the paintings' size, subject matter or the collection from whence they came rather than by chronology and evolution. The design of the museum displays was uniform regardless of the period, epoch or style, and that would give an impression of the timelessness of the Museum itself. When we go to the Museum we see the past, arranged as History, which is fixed and unchangeable. Of course, this was just a 'temporary timelessness,' since the technology, design, and aesthetic of museum displays were changing all the time. And thus the picture of the past kept changing as well.

The *Provinzial-Museum* in Hanover (later *Landesmuseum*) was one such place at the time young Alexander Dorner became its director. Soon after, realizing the necessity of a radical change of the museum's display, he came up with the idea to show the development of art as a chain of specially designed 'Atmosphere Rooms.' He adopted not only chronology, but also the evolutionary principle, as the foundation for the museum's display narrative. Each epoch, period or style would be confined in its own specially colored and designed rooms, exhibiting not only the artifacts, but immersing the visitor in a complete visual experience. Walking from one room to another, following the progressive timeline, a visitor would be able to see and experience the entire history of art as a progression of styles from the beginning of civilization to the present

Alexander Dorner: *Kabinett der Abstrakten*, 2028, acrylic on canvas, 150x200cm





Alexander Dorner: *Kabinett der Abstrakten*, 2028, acrylic on canvas, 150x200cm

day. The most famous room became the one devoted to abstract art designed by Constructivist artist and designer El Lissitzky. Since Lissitzky had designed a special room for abstract art at the 1926 *Internationale Kunstausstellung*, Dorner thought to ask him to do something similar now as a permanent installation at the Hanover museum. The result of this idea was the *Kabinett der Abstrakten* (*Abstract Cabinet*), opened in 1928. Among the various photos of the *Kabinett* we can recognize works of Picasso, Leger, Moholy-Nagy, Mondrian, Archipenko, Schlemmer, Baumeister, Van Doesburg, Marcoussis and El Lissitzky. There are indications that some of the works from Malevich's 1927 Berlin exhibition were exhibited as well. Those might be the works that Alfred Barr got from Dorner, later in 1935, for the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*, which remains on permanent display at the *MoMA* until today.

It is worth noting that at this time, no Malevich painting could be seen in any European museum. By the early 1930s his works had been removed, first from the Soviet museums, once the authorities had dismissed abstract art as bourgeois and formalistic. They were removed from museums in Germany a couple of years later, just after their mocking display at the 1937 exhibition, *Entartete Kunst*, under the auspices of the extreme conservative and nationalistic ideology of the National-Socialist party. This was also the reason why the *Kabinett der Abstrakten* had been dismantled by the time of this exhibition, and all abstract works removed from the *Landesmuseum*. Some of them had been

exhibited as 'degenerate art,' and some simply destroyed. Finally, in the capital of modern art, Paris, most of the European avant-garde, including Malevich, Mondrian, Schwitters, and Duchamp, could not be seen in the museums, since no museum had collected their work by then. However, across the ocean, then and for many years to come, the most important 20th century art movements were exhibited in the *Museum of Modern Art* in New York. Not only were the important works of modern art preserved and on public display, but the entire modern narrative was reinvented there. Instead of the 19th century concept of National Schools, the *MoMA* display narrative was based on the notion of International Movements, according to the evolutionary chart printed on the cover of the catalog *Cubism and Abstract Art*. After the war, this narrative was gradually introduced and adopted in Europe and became universally accepted up to the present day.

Clearly, there are some obvious parallels between Dorner's concept of history as a linear evolution of styles, and Barr's concept of history based on international movements. But it seems Dorner thought that there should be only one kind of museum that would show art from all times, including the present, and was not happy with the idea of the modern museum as a separate institution. As we can see today, with the mushrooming of modern and con-

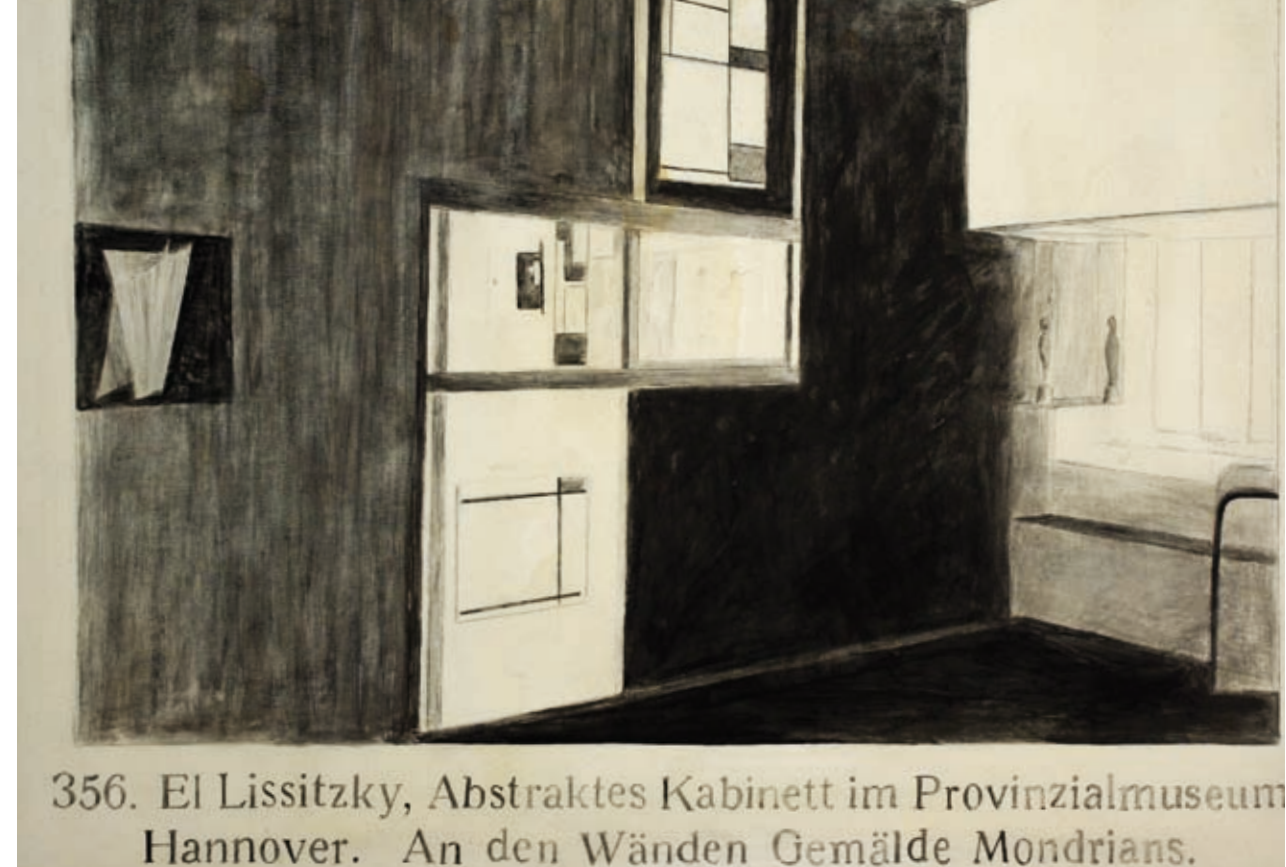


Alexander Dorner:  
*Kabinett der Abstrakten*, 2028  
acrylic on canvas, 140x100cm



Anonymous:  
*Hans Hildebrandt*, 1931  
acrylic on canvas, 110x80cm

temporary art museums throughout the world, Dorner's idea didn't gain much support. But if we expand it and, instead of one museum with many 'atmosphere rooms,' have a series of linearly connected museums, each devoted to a particular epoch or style then the *Museum of Modern Art* could be just one in a line of 'atmosphere museums,' providing, of course, that it closes its timeline on both ends. However, unlike the early museums, both Dorner's and Barr's museums not only historicize the past, but the present as well, and, furthermore, they are ever expanding by being open toward the future. The first obvious question regarding this concept is its practical sustainability, considering how much space we'll need at 'the end' for such museums, assuming their continual growth, and how much time we'll need to walk through them to see the exhibits. The growth of *MoMA* in the last 70 years is a good illustration of this (its first building opened in 1939). If it continues to expand at its current pace in the next couple of centuries, it will most likely have to occupy the entire block between 53rd and 54th Street. In addition to the physical limitations of space and time, there is a conceptual problem with the institution that is attempting to historicize the present and keep an open end toward the future. Can it be 'museum and modern' at the same time, as Gertrude Stein once asked Barr just before the opening of *MoMA*? Simply put, the things that *MoMA* is collecting today might turn out to be totally irrelevant for the dominant narrative



Anonymous: *Hans Hildebrandt-Kabinett*, 1931, acrylic on canvas, 100x80cm

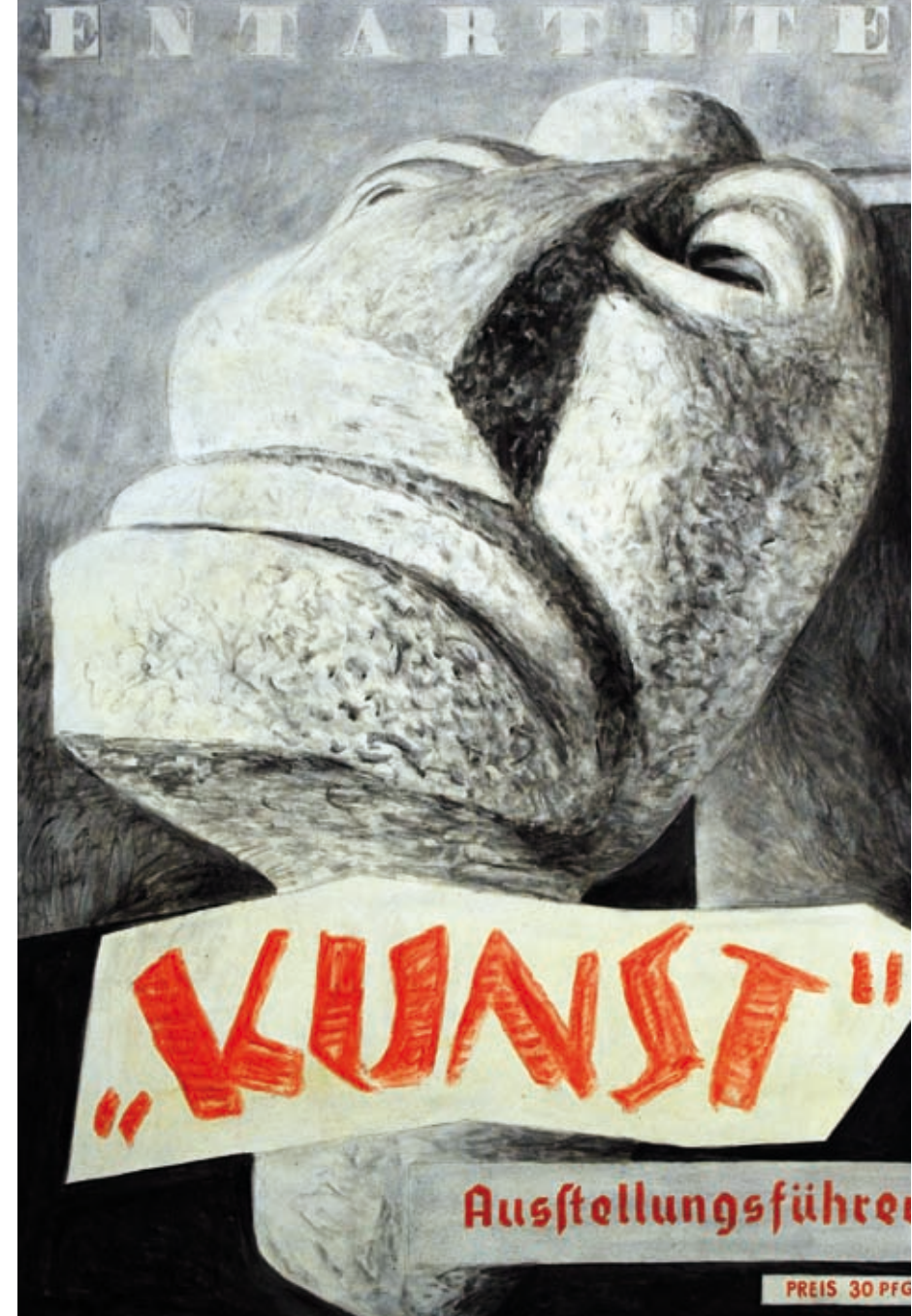
tomorrow. Where are all those great Geromes, Bourgeraus, Cabanels ... today? One can understand a museum's desire to attract more visitors by being actively involved in the present, but the underlying reason for the museum's interest in historicizing the present is a question of power exercised 'here and now' by 'immortalizing' certain phenomena of the present and, by doing that, increasing their market value and social importance in the immediate future.

The Museum is not an old invention. We can trace its origins to the early 16th century. The first public collection of Antiquities (*Antiquario dell' Statue*) was exhibited in the Cortile dell' Belvedere in the Vatican. This event represents the invention of both Antiquity and Modernity, and at the same time, the start of a departure from the millennium-old canon based on the Christian narrative. For the next three hundred years numerous public or semi-public collections of various kinds of objects and artifacts (antiquities, painting galleries, Wunderkammer, etc.) appeared throughout the Western world. These were collections of antiquities and other objects which were occasionally open to the public and could be considered the first museums. Those were the places that contained artifacts from the distant past, arranged by some 'aesthetic' display narrative, like a repository or 'visual library.' Although there were names and anecdotes attached to each particular object, in places like these one could just get

an overall sense of a distant past called Antiquity. It was Winckelmann who introduced the notions of chronology and development of styles to the collection of antiquities in the Vatican museums, and then the Musée Napoleon brought together under one roof Antiquario dell' Statue, picture galleries and contemporary sculpture. Finally, it was Vivant Denon who arranged all this according to chronology and national schools. That represented the birth of the modern Museum—the moment when Art History and the display narrative of the museum were brought together. Gradually, Art History became the story of how we remember the past, and the Museum became the place where this story was materialized. Following the original idea that a Museum should be concerned only with the past, curators were careful not to include artifacts originating too close to the present. Throughout the 19th century the museums that were established all over the Western world followed this rule, including the *Provinzial-Museum* in Hanover. The display narrative, display technology and display aesthetic looked the same everywhere and all the museums were telling the same story. That story became our common and unified narrative, both as a story and as a display. The past looked the same everywhere.



Anonymous: *Der Neue Weg*, 1936  
acrylic on canvas, 115x80cm



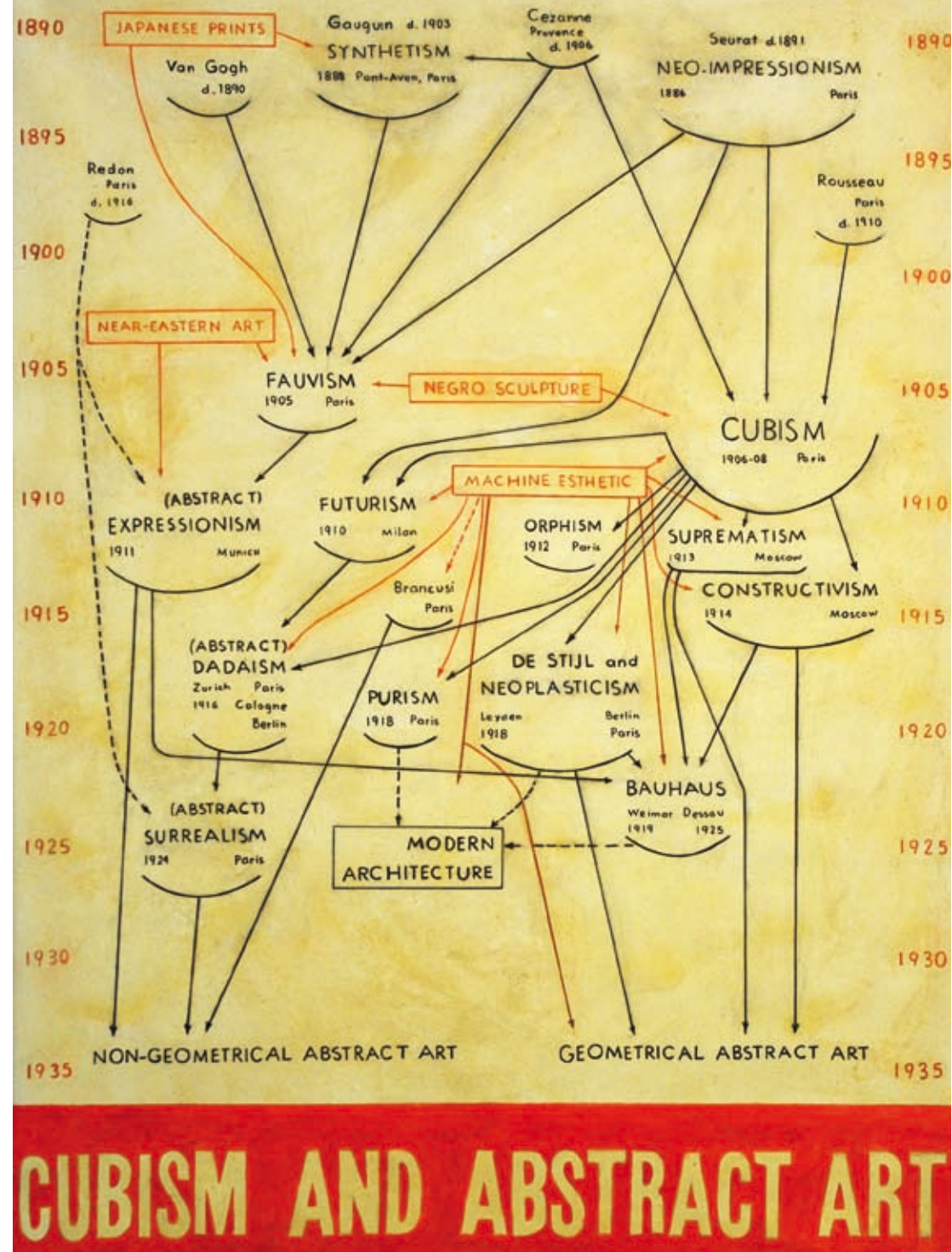
Anonymous: *Entartete Kunst*, 1937, acrylic on canvas, 115x80cm



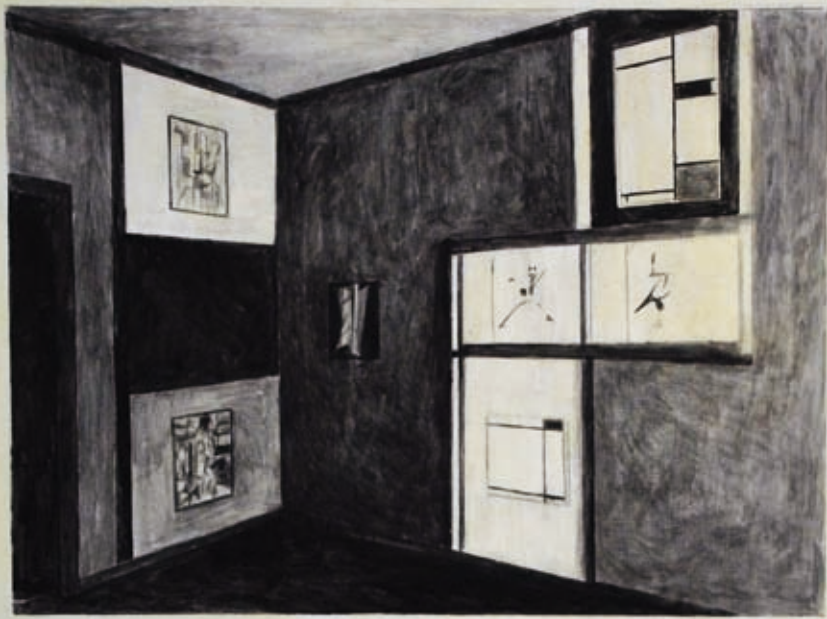
Anonymous:  
*Grosse Deutsche Kunstausstellung, 1937*  
 acrylic on canvas, 115x100cm

It is Dorner's introduction of the 'atmosphere rooms' that suggested displays which did not look homogeneous regardless of the epoch or style, instead offering a different visual and aesthetic experience, according to his vision. And this vision became a new picture of the past. It maintained the concept of chronology, but now enhanced with the notions of evolution and progress. In other words, the 'new past,' the past remembered through the new museum display, looked different from the past commemorated in the old museum.

This was in fact a different past. But this was a different past only for those visitors who had a chance to walk through both the old and the new type of museum. For the visitors who came to know only Dorner's museum, that was the only version of the past they knew. The museum is conceived to be the place where we can see and learn our collective past, the way it changes and evolves along the linear timeline called chronology. However, the museum itself is perceived as some kind of timeless place that does not change, since we assume there is only one (official) past, there is only one story we call History. But this is obviously not true. The museums are changing all the time and in many ways. Dorner's museum is just one such example, but an important one. If the museums are changing all the time, then the past is changing all the time as well.



Anonymous: *Cubism and Abstract Art, 1936*, acrylic on canvas, 110x80cm

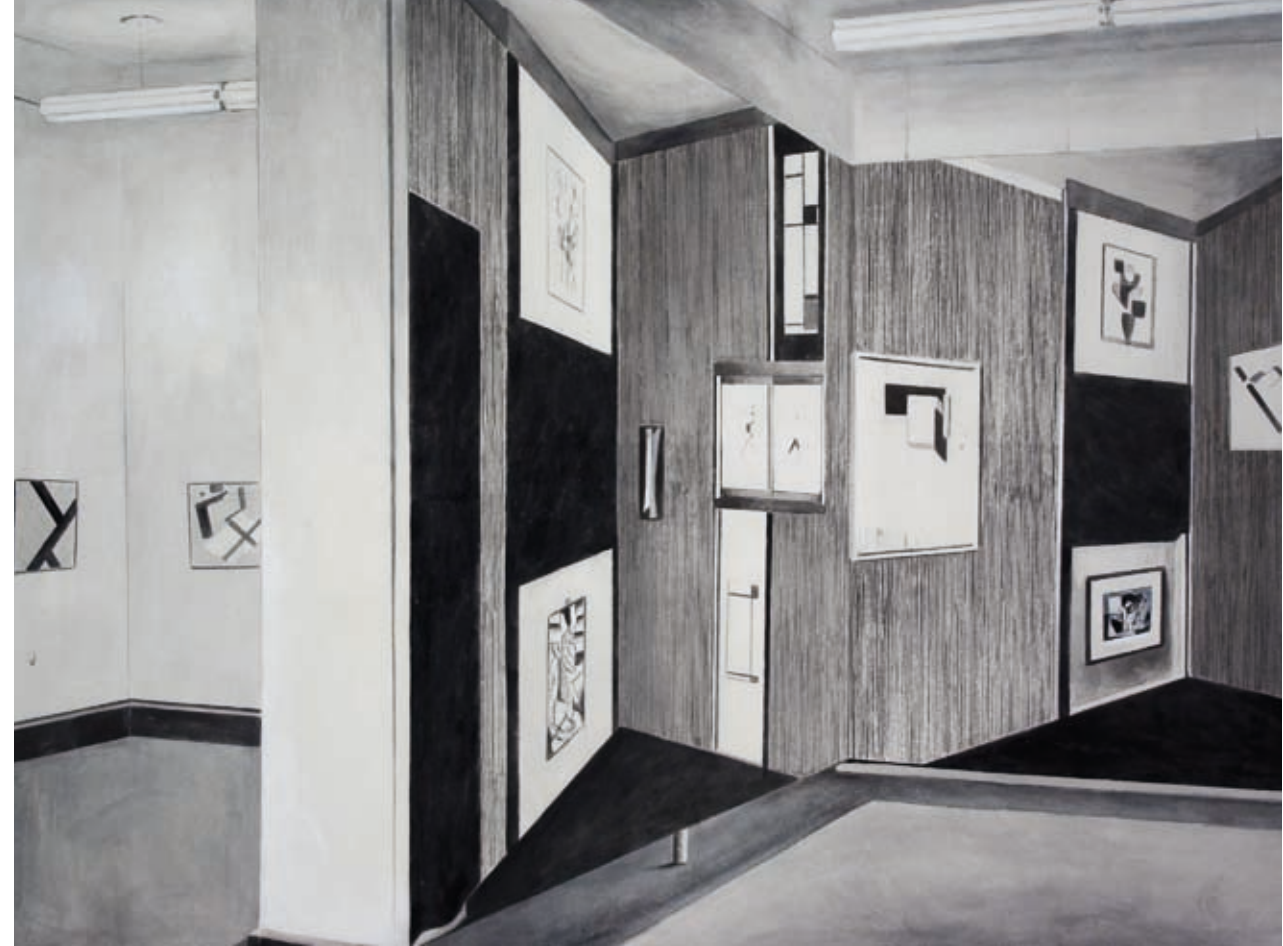


177 (302A) Lissitzky: Gallery for abstract painting. Art Museum, Hanover, c. 1925.  
 Works by Picasso, Mondrian, Moholy-Nagy, Lissitzky (?), Léger

Anonymous:  
*Cubism and Abstract Art—Cabinet*, 1936,  
 acrylic on canvas,  
 110x80cm

We could now ask ourselves, what might be the place where we would preserve memories of all the different ways that the past has been remembered since the emergence of the first museums? A Meta-Museum? And, what would be the narrative that will connect all the exhibits in the Meta-Museum? Meta-History?

Walter Benjamin  
 New York, October 2008



Alexander Dorner: *Die Zwanziger Jahre in Hannover*, 2062, acrylic on canvas, 150x200cm





Pablo Picasso: *The Spaniard*, 2008  
charcoal on paper, 63x47cm

### Letter

Thirty years ago the Gallery of Abstract Art in Hannover was probably the most famous single room of twentieth-century art in the world. It was achieved by the ingenious treatment of the walls. As one moved along, the walls appeared to change. Sliding panels made it possible to use the full height of the walls, and in front of the windows were two four-faced rotating cases. Canvases by Léger, Picasso, Mondrian (the first of his abstract paintings in any museum!), Kandinsky, Moholy, Lissitzky, Baumeister, Gabo, hung high and low. An Archipenko sculpture was placed in front of a mirror that reflected both the sculpture's back and the wall opposite. The designer of this handsome and ingenious installation was the Russian constructivist El

Lissitzky. The director of the Hannover Museum, whose imagination and courage made the gallery possible, was Alexander Dorner. The Nazi revolution was cultural as well as political. Like the rulers of the U.S.S.R., the Nazis felt that modern art, created in freedom, was subversive. They persecuted the modern artists, threw their work out of German museums, and attacked the museum directors who had shown or collected 'art bolshevism.' Some of the museum directors were discharged; some resigned; some stayed on to fight a rear-guard action. Among the last was Dr Dorner.

I last visited the Hannover Museum in 1935, two years after the Nazis seized power. The first thing I asked to see after being welcomed by Dr Dorner was the gallery of abstract art. Elsewhere in Germany modern painting had disappeared from museum walls, so I half-expected to find the famous room dismantled. Yet it was still there and accessible to the public, though to visit it may have been risky for a German, since there were spies even in the museums. Dr Dorner showed me the abstract gallery proudly. But it was the last redoubt. Within a year or so it was closed, its works of art dispersed, destroyed, or sold abroad, its director a voluntary 'cultural' refugee in the United States. Germany's loss was our gain.

Alfred H. Barr, Jr.  
Museum of Modern Art, New York

Fernand Léger: *Étude en Bleu*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 65x50cm





Alexander Archipenko:  
*Flat Torso*, 2008  
acrylic on canvas, 100x50cm

El Lissitzky: *Proun GK*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 65x50cm





El Lissitzky: *Neuer*, 2008, acrylic on paper, 51x43cm

*A Box in the Basement.*

*On the works of Kasimir Malevich loaned to the Provincial Museum of Hannover*

Kasimir Malevich only traveled outside of Russia once in his lifetime. In the spring of 1927 more than 70 of his paintings, gouaches, information boards, and architectural models were shown on the occasion of the Great Berlin Art Exhibition. Having traveled to Berlin for the exhibition, he was, however, disappointed by its results. Malevich was only able to sell a single work. Something else thwarted any further plans: After only two months he departed once again for Leningrad for unknown reasons. He subsequently landed a jail sentence, which marked the beginning of a defamation campaign that ultimately erased the name of the founder of Suprematism from the annals of artistic life in the Soviet Union. In addition, he soon fell ill with cancer. At the time of Malevich's death as a result of the disease in 1935 a representative selection of his work was in storage in the West—in a large crate, which had apparently been de-

signed by the artist himself. To be precise, this crate was sitting in Hannover's largest museum at the time, the former Provincial Museum, which had been renamed the State Museum in July of 1933.

Why in Hannover? Up until now nothing has suggested that Kasimir Malevich had ever been in this city. Nevertheless, the artist and the director of the Hannover Museum certainly knew about each other's work, even if only through the mediation of El Lissitzky, who had lived in Hannover from 1922 to 1927, where he had been working on a book about his artist colleague. Through El Lissitzky, Malevich was also in contact with the Kestner Society, which planned to present an exhibition of his works in 1924, although this never came to fruition. One year later the Provincial Museum showed interest in purchasing one work by the Leningrad artist.

The mid-1920s was a favorable period: Alexander Dorner, who had been appointed to a position at Hannover's oldest museum in 1919, had recently become both a member of the board of the Kestner Society and also the Director of Art at the Provincial Museum. Through his competence and willingness to take risks he had worked himself into a position of respect. Based on his beliefs about the historical evolution of tendencies and movements in art, Dorner had redesigned his section of the museum through the use of color and new hangings into so-called atmosphere rooms that were intended to emanate the mood of a specific period. His work benefited both from the general desire for change that permeated the early Weimar Republic and, in Hannover, the acute need for action to be taken in terms of what was up to that point an outdated and crowded gallery. The reorganization concluded with the so-



El Lissitzky: *Zankstifter*, 2008  
acrylic on paper, 51x43cm



El Lissitzky, *Proun 1C*, 2008  
acrylic on canvas, 100x67cm

called Abstract Cabinet, which was completed in 1927 and which Dorner had commissioned El Lissitzky to design as the highlight of his new art gallery. In this dynamic, constantly changing space he subsequently presented the most contemporary art of the 1920s. In quick succession he purchased works from artists who today are among the most important representatives of the classic modernist period: works by Heckel, Kirchner and Nolde were entered into the inventory lists as well as those by Schlemmer, Kandinsky, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy and Baumeister. The planned acquisition of a work by Kasimir Malevich did not take place, however. Nevertheless, from May 1930 to approximately the fall of 1936 the museum did house the box of Malevich's works.

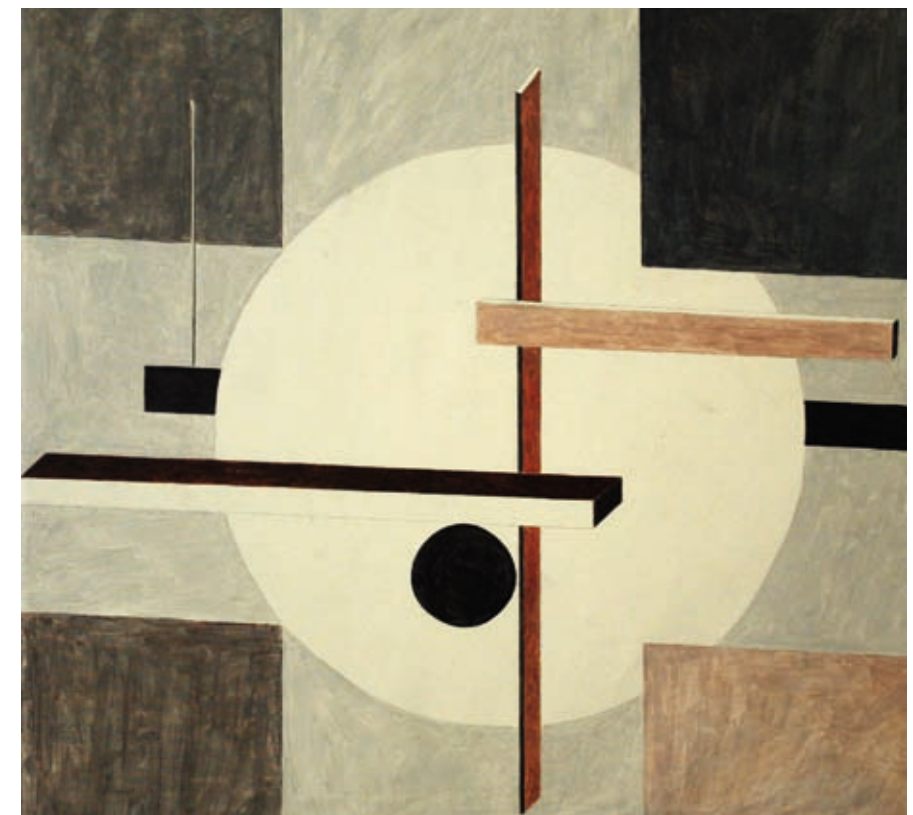
This is how it came about: In the fall of 1929 Alexander Dorner asked the architect Hugo Häring, a German friend of the artist, to send him a selection of works for review, since he was considering a purchase. It is still uncertain today whether Häring had the right to sell works to Dorner. There is, however, clear evidence that a crate of paintings was sent to the Provincial Museum of Hannover at the order of Häring in May 1930. When asked a year and a half later whether he had come to a decision about a purchase, Dorner replied that he currently saw few chances for an acquisition but that the works could gladly remain at the museum. Häring agreed, since he did not have comparable storage facilities: Dorner should freely take his time with any decision. According to Häring, it had been agreed with Malevich that the proceedings from any sales should for the moment remain in the West, until the artist would have time to return. As previously mentioned, it never came to that, and so the

box remained in the Hannover Provincial Museum, where Dorner occasionally exhibited the work. According to a letter from Dorner to Sigfried Giedion, dating from October 1934, the Cabinet was still intact and exhibiting pictures by, among others, Malevich.

One of the idiosyncrasies in the history of the arts in Hannover in the 1930s is that artworks that had long since been declared 'degenerate' elsewhere continued to be exhibited in the art gallery of the State Museum. This occurred with the assent of Dorner's superiors, and it can be explained both by his exhibition policies and his ability to combine lip service to party politics and a belief in the evolutionary trajectory of art in such a way that, for example, abstract art—including also the works of Kasimir Malevich—was viewed as the representative art of the new German state, thus continued to be shown.

Up through the end of his life Dorner considered himself a defender of modernism, who assumed the risk of keeping the Malevich loans in his museum. Why else, he asked his friend Walter Gropius in retrospect in 1942, would he have 'assumed the personal risk' of smuggling the works of Malevich 'secretly from the museum and out of the country, partly under my name,' if not 'to fight the Nazis with their own weapons?' Everyone else lacked the courage. Playing on Gropius' stance in the 1930s he asked, 'Walter, didn't you ... also at first try to save and preserve what you could before you gave up?' But in the face of increasing pressure, Dorner too found himself forced to give up. In

El Lissitzky: *R.V.N.2*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 100x100cm



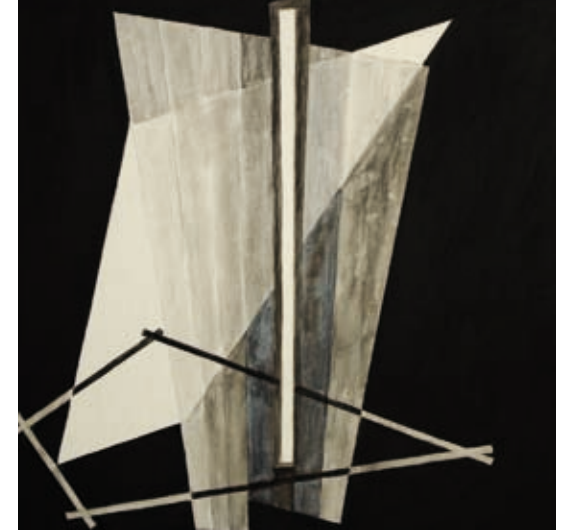
the beginning of February 1937 he submitted his resignation to the State Museum.

When Dorner and his wife arrived in New York five months later in order to start a new life in the USA, two works loaned by Kasimir Malevich were in his luggage. Permission had not been granted that he take these works. It can be proved, however, that Dorner did not intend to use the works to improve his lot in the USA. Namely, he ordered that 'as soon as the political-cultural situation has changed to the extent that the Malevitch heirs [sic!] are in a position to take the painting and the drawing back to Russia,' their property should be returned. And also: 'This drawing should go to a public Institute—in case I die before I have taken care of this trust.' The Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard University, to which Dorner's widow gave the drawing, has honored this request of holding the drawing for the legal heirs of the loan for over six decades.

Other museums that had similarly come in contact with works from the Malevich box were less transparent about the origin of the pieces. One of these was the New York Museum of Modern Art. Its founding director, Alfred H. Barr, had been hosted at the Hannover State Museum with his wife in 1935, where Dorner had shown him the Malevich box. Four works were handed to the enthusiastic director of the MoMA on the spot for \$160 (a value corresponding to 600 Reichsmark). Dorner sent an additional 17 works to New York in Sep-



Oskar Schlemmer: *Figur*, 2008  
acrylic on paper, 56x41cm

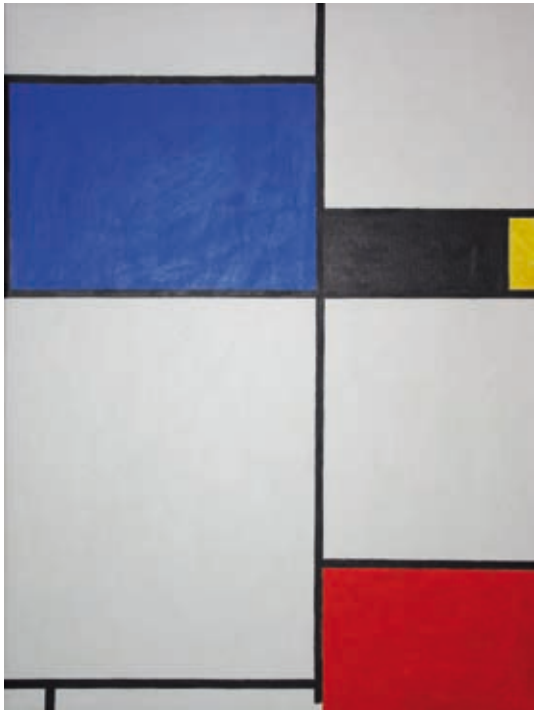


László Moholy-Nagy:  
*Konstruktives Bild*, 2008  
acrylic on canvas, 50x52cm

tember 1935. The correspondence provides proof that at the time it was not intended to leave the works there. Instead, Barr was supposed to send them back to Hannover after the conclusion of the exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*. However, it became increasingly dangerous for Dorner to continue his work. Ultimately the works remained in New York. Over the course of Alfred Barr's long directorship they were labeled as anonymous loans and exhibited. After the Barr era the museum silently incorporated the works into museum property. Only with the shift in the political system in the 1990s did this practice come to an end. When sued by the heirs for the return of the loans, MoMA approved the payment of a one-time sum of a suspected 5 million dollars and the return of one work, which the heirs could use at their discretion. From this point on, the remaining works have been in the possession of the MoMA.

Eight years later the book finally closed on the last chapter in the story of the loans from the Malevich crate: In April 2008 after many years of legal battles the Malevich heirs came to an agreement with the city of Amsterdam about the return of 5 of a total of 14 works from the collection of the Stedelijk Museum. How did these works reach the Netherlands? At the end of the 1950s—when almost everyone who had known about the Malevich crate had died—the Stedelijk purchased 84 works from the crate. Two decades before, in the fall of 1936, Dorner had sent the remaining works in the crate back to Hugo Häring, who initially continued to hold the works in trust. Then, a heightened interest in the works of Kasimir Malevich developed in the years after the war. In addition, Häring's health rapidly declined; he needed money. In May 1956 he drew up an affidavit, which stated that he himself had been named the sole custodian of the loans by the artist in 1927, and in accordance with valid law he was now their owner. Although there were doubts from the very start about the legality of this act, the Stedelijk increased the pressure on Häring to sell the works at a price way below their value—with success. This step was taken in the fall of 1958 and—not surprisingly—well out of sight of the public eye.

*Ines Katenbusen*



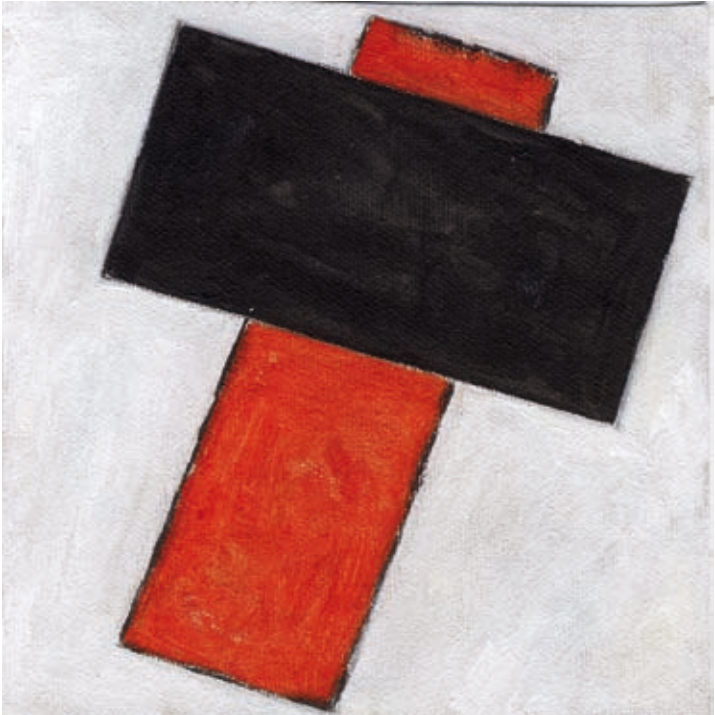
Piet Mondrian: *Composition*, 2008  
acrylic on canvas, 80x60cm



Piet Mondrian: *Composition*, 2008  
acrylic on canvas, 42x49cm



Kazimir Malevich:  
*White on White*, 2008  
acrylic on canvas, 15x15cm



Kazimir Malevich:  
*Suprematism*, 2008  
acrylic on canvas, 15x15cm



*Kabinett der Abstrakten*, Halle fuer Kunst, Lueneburg, 2009, this and following pages.







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Inner Cover: El Lissitzky: *Alexander Dorner*, 2008, acrylic on canvas, 100x80cm

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To create a complex space of memory, the exhibition worked with various kinds of reference material and display techniques including paintings, books, catalogs, film footage, and sound. 'The artifacts at this exhibition are not works of art. These are rather souvenirs, selected specimens of our collective memory.' (Walter Benjamin)

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