

polemic with Russian aestheticians such as Lazarev. Tarabukin used Spengler in order to gain a measure of critical distance from the Productivist platform as it was most typically theorized within the INKhUK—as the production of utilitarian objects. Spengler enabled Tarabukin to formulate and defend, instead, a theorization of the Constructivist's role in production in terms of a direct confrontation with industrial modernity's central paradox—the loss of the discrete object. In the place of that object, Tarabukin hypostatized the “laying bare” of the process of production itself as the essence of the Constructivist's future endeavor. It was thus in part the lessons of the OPOIAZ that drove Tarabukin's recourse to Spengler in support of his particular and dissenting formulation of Productivist theory. What better way for the critic to disguise his return to formalism—at the very moment of the INKhUK's *en masse* rejection of the analytical necrosis of modernism—than to bury it within a mis-citation of Oswald Spengler: “The concept of form [sic] is theorized as a completely impersonal and incorporeal center of force, whose influence radiates out to infinity.”

## Self-Portrait of the Artist as a Monkey-Hand\*

PAUL GALVEZ

On December 20, 1924, before sending a print of his recently completed photographic self-portrait to his partner, Sophie Küppers, El Lissitzky gave it a most curious description in an accompanying letter: “Enclosed is my self-portrait: my monkey-hand.”<sup>1</sup> The comment has gone largely unnoticed in the literature regarding the so-called *Self-Portrait of the Artist as Constructor*. This is partly due, no doubt, to the exclusion of the document from both the German and English editions of the artist's correspondence. But even had it been published, Lissitzky's comment would still probably suffer from the same kind of critical neglect, if only because its seeming absurdity makes it all too easy to dismiss as a mere amusement or inside joke.<sup>2</sup>

Art-historical readings of the image have had no place for trivialities like a monkey-hand. For instance, Traugott Schlacher wrote in 1928 that “The hand which seems to start from the brain between the eye and the brow, belongs, like the head, to an intellectual type . . . such is the character of this self-portrait; cool

\* This essay began as a conversation, both real and imagined, with Benjamin Buchloh. It has benefited since from the comments and criticisms of Yve-Alain Bois, Christina Kiaer, Jaleh Mansoor, and Scott Rothkopf. Finally, I owe special thanks to Nancy Perloff and Wim de Wit of the Getty Research Institute for introducing me to the rich holdings of the Institute's Lissitzky archive.

1. El Lissitzky to Sophie Küppers, December 12, 1924, El Lissitzky Letters and Photographs, Getty Research Institute. The words “my monkey-hand [*mein Affenhand*]” are in red type.

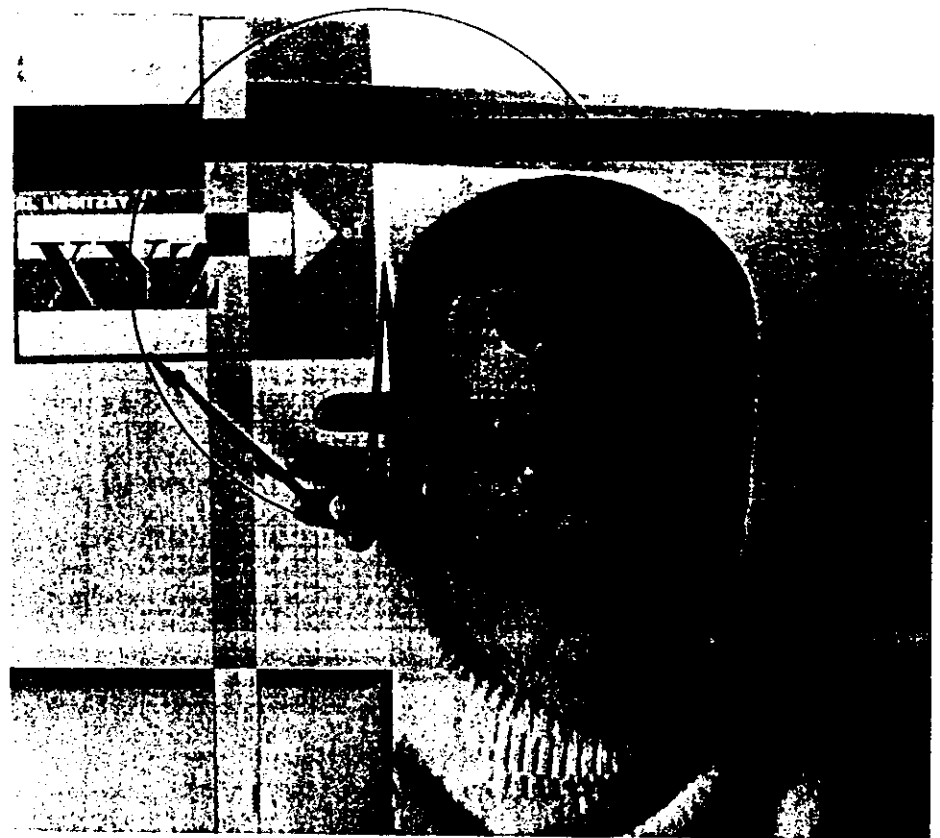
2. The only discussion I have encountered so far is a footnote in Peter Nisbet's dissertation, “El Lissitzky in the Proun Years: A Study of His Work and Thought, 1919–1927” (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1995), p. 317, note 29. I have consulted the following major catalogues on Lissitzky: *El Lissitzky 1890–1941* (Cambridge: Harvard University Art Museums, 1987); *El Lissitzky 1890–1941: Retrospektiv* (Hannover: Sprengel Museum, 1988); *El Lissitzky 1890–1941: Architect, Painter, Photographer, Typographer* (Eindhoven: Municipal Van Abbemuseum, 1990); Margarita Tupitsyn, *El Lissitzky: Jenseits der Abstraktion, Fotografie, Design, Kooperation* (Munich: Schirmer/Mosel, 1999). The two primary publications of the artist's writings are *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, ed. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968) and *El Lissitzky: Proun und Wolkenbügel, Schriften, Briefe, Dokumente*, ed. Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers and Jen Lissitzky (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1977).

consideration, mathematic speculation, combined with geometrical mysticism.<sup>3</sup> More recently, scholars have questioned the celebratory cant, but not the basic methodological premise, of Schlacher's observations. Instead of a rational, almost scientific dissection of self-portraiture into its elementary geometric forms, some have perceived a work pervaded with doubt regarding the very possibility of aesthetic invention, transforming the artist-as-constructor into a modern image of Melancholia.<sup>4</sup> What both optimistic and pessimistic views share, however, is a conventional notion of self-portraiture as a mere reflection of the artist's inner self. The myth of the camera's pure and unmediated access to the world is thus turned inward; technologically enhanced vision not only permits a clear picture of the natural world but also an immediate image of one's inner subjective state. In short, these interpretations of the self-portrait ultimately bind Lissitzky's use of the medium of photography to a typical enlightenment project of self-knowledge.

Nothing could be more antithetical to these analyses than the notion of a monkey-hand. This is because in the Western pictorial tradition the figure of the ape has often stood for man's ineptitude, stupidity, and bestial desire—all things that interfere with the process of rational self-inquiry. Lissitzky's nonsensical remark therefore suggests an insertion of irrationality into a work that has always been seen as the very embodiment of reason. A critique of reason is not what we have come to expect from an artist like Lissitzky, particularly in 1924, a year that despite the artist's bout with a severe case of tuberculosis was by all accounts an extraordinarily productive one, counting among its achievements the *Lenintribune* drawing, *Nasci*, the *Kunstismen* book, publicity designs for the Pelikan office supply company, the photographic self-portrait, and numerous articles, from "A. and Pangeometry" and "Typographical Facts" to "Element and Invention" and a translation of the writings of Kazimir Malevich. Yet I want to argue that a critique of rationality—and of its interiorized, self-knowing subject—is precisely one of his key accomplishments during this period, beginning specifically with the *Nasci* issue, continuing with the *Kunstismen*, and culminating with the photographic self-portrait.

3. Traugott Schlacher, "El Lissitzky, Moskau," *Gebrauchsgrafik* 5, no. 12 (December 1928), pp. 50–51, 56. I have used Nisbet's translation. See Nisbet, "El Lissitzky in the Proun Years," p. 319. Another translation has been published in *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 378.

4. Alan Birnholz, "El Lissitzky," (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1973), pp. 316–18. Peter Nisbet discusses the range of these positions at length in his dissertation, "El Lissitzky in the Proun Years," pp. 317–38. The 1999 retrospective, expanding upon insights from earlier articles by Nisbet and Margarita Tupitsyn, approached the photographic self-portrait from the vantage point of a medium-based survey of the artist's oeuvre. See Tupitsyn, *El Lissitzky: Jenseits der Abstraktion, Fotografie, Design, Kooperation*. See Nisbet, "Lissitzky and Photography," in *El Lissitzky 1890–1941: Architect, Painter, Photographer, Typographer*, pp. 66–69, and Tupitsyn, "Between *Fotofis* and Factography," in *El Lissitzky: Experiments in Photography* (New York: Houk Friedman, 1991), pp. 5–7. A re-interpretation of the self-portrait, also addressing the "irrationality" of the image, has been recently put forward by Leah Dickerman in her article, "Lissitzky's Camera Corpus," in *Interpreting El Lissitzky: The Current Debate*, eds. Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, forthcoming). Thanks to Carrie Lambert for calling this essay to my attention as my own was going to press.



El Lissitzky, Self-Portrait of the Artist as Constructor, 1924.

Es ist schon **GENUG** immer **MASCHINE MASCHINE MASCHINE.**

Wenn man bei der modernen Kunstproduktion anlangt.

Die Maschine ist nicht mehr als ein Stück, und sogar ein sehr primitiver, mit dem die Leistung des Weltbildes gestaltet wird. Alle Werkzeuge bringen Kräfte in Bewegung, die darauf gerichtet sind, die amorphe Natur zu kristallisieren, — das ist das Ziel der Natur selbst.

Es wäre zum mindesten unproduktiver Zeitverlust, wenn man heute bescheiden wollte, daß man nicht mit eigenem Blut und ohne Ökostoffe zu schreiben braucht, wenn die Schreibmaschine oder der Hebel zu benutzen, daß die Aufgabe jedes Schaffers, so auch der Kunst, nicht Darstellung, sondern Darstellen ist, ist ebenfalls unproduktiver Zeitverlust.

Die Maschine hat uns nicht von der Natur getrennt, Durch sie haben wir uns nicht von der Natur getrennt, sondern sie haben uns nicht von der Natur getrennt.

Die moderne Kunst ist auf ganz anderen und selbstständigen Wegen zu denselben Resultaten gekommen wie die moderne Wissenschaft. Sie hat, wie die Wissenschaft, die Form bis auf ihre Grundelemente zerlegt, um sie nach den unversetzten Besetzen der Natur wieder aufzubauen. Und dabei sind beide zu denselben Formel gekommen:

**JEDE FORM IST DAS ERSTARRETE MOMENT-BILD EINES PROZESSES.**

**ALSO IST DAS WERK HALTESTELLE ZWISCHEN WERDENS, UND NICHT ERSTARRTES ZIEL.**

Wir erkennen Werke an, die in sich ein System enthalten, aber ein System das nicht vor, sondern in der Arbeit bewirkt werden ist.

Wir wollen die Ruhe gestalten, die Ruhe der Natur, in der ungeheure Spannungen die gleichmäßige Rotation der Weltkörper im Gleichgewicht halten.

Unser Werk hat keine Philosophie und kein System der Naturerkenntnis, es ist ein Bild der Natur und es ist ein solches selbst nur Gegenstand der Erkenntnis sein.

**ASSEZ DE LA MACHINE MACHINE MACHINE, RIEN QUE MACHINE.**

On parait de la production artistique d'apprenti.

La machine n'est rien de plus qu'un morceau, même un des plus primitifs, avec lequel la tâche de la face du monde est peinte.

Tous les outils mettent un mouvement des forces dont le but est de former la nature amorphe, c'est le but de la nature même.

Ce serait une perte de temps que de chercher à prouver aujourd'hui qu'on n'a besoin ni de plume ni de feuille de sang pour écrire, quand on est en possession d'une machine à écrire. De même que ce serait une perte de temps que de chercher à prouver que le devoir de haute production, y compris dans l'art, n'est pas de représenter mais de mettre en évidence.

La machine ne nous a pas séparés de la nature. Par elle, nous avons découvert une nouvelle nature, jusqu'alors inconnue. L'art moderne est arrivé au même résultat que la science moderne par des voies indépendantes tracées par l'instinct. Comme la science, il a décomposé la forme en ses éléments fondamentaux, pour les recomposer d'après les lois universelles de la nature. Tous les deux sont arrivés à la même formule.

**TOUTE FORME EST UN MOMENT CONCRET D'UNE ÉVOLUTION.**

**CE QUI FAIT QUE L'ŒUVRE N'EST PAS LE BUT FIXÉ, MAIS UN POINT STATIONNAIRE DU DÉVELOPPEMENT.**

Nous reconnaissons comme œuvres, tout ce qui en soi, contient un système — mais un système qui a pris conscience de lui-même non avant mais dans l'opération.

Nous voulons représenter la calme, la calme de la nature, dans lequel des tensions incroyables tiennent en équilibre la rotation régulière des mondes.

Notre œuvre n'est ni une philosophie, ni un système de connaissance de la nature, c'est un membre de la nature et, par cela ne peut être elle-même qu'un objet de la révélation.

1924

IM JAHRE 1924 WIRD DIE WURZEL — √ — AUS DEM UNENDLICHEN — ∞ — GESCHENEN DAS ZWISCHEN SINNVOLL — + — UND SINNLOS — — — PENDELN. GENANNT NASCI.

EN 1924 LA RACINE — √ — DE TOUT CE QUI SE PASSE INCESSANMENT — ∞ —, DE TOUT CE QUI OSCILLE ENTRE LE SENSÉ, — + — ET L'INSENSÉ — — — SERA NOMMÉ: NASCI.

EL LISSITZKY  
OSCAR  
DORLAND

On February 24, 1924, Lissitzky sent to Küppers the first draft of his foreword to a special double issue of *Merz*, entitled *Nasci*, that he was editing in collaboration with the journal's founder, Hanover-based artist Kurt Schwitters.<sup>5</sup> The opening line of his preface encapsulates the crux of the polemic: "We have had enough of perpetually hearing MACHINE MACHINE MACHINE MACHINE."<sup>6</sup> In the repetition of the word MACHINE, we read the modern artist's ambivalent relationship to mechanical reproduction: on the one hand, the rigorous linear order and uniform application of ink presented by the thrice-repeated typewritten line celebrates seriality; on the other hand, the content of the sentence itself bemoans the transformation of this industrial paradigm into an aesthetic cliché. Unlike many of their peers, Schwitters and Lissitzky had discerned, perceptively but also sadly, that the much ballyhooed rallying cry of an entire generation of artists had devolved by 1924 into a type of empty slogan. To escape from the apparent dead end that this particular kind of technological utopianism had created for the avant-garde artist was one of the tasks *Nasci* presented to itself right from the start.

As many have noted, the publication was greatly inspired by contemporary debates concerning the interconnectedness of art and nature.<sup>7</sup> Drawing together ideas from a diverse group of writings, from Raoul Francé's popularizations of current scientific theories to the enigmatic essays of the Suprematist artist Kazimir Malevich to the gloomy tracts of Oswald Spengler, the two artists advocated an art that would be grounded in what one could call the techno-organic. Against the rigid, factory ideal of mass production, they proposed an artistic practice that would subject modern technological forms to the temporality of natural processes.

The variation in layout from page to page typographically conveys this model of biological growth. In contrast to the ordinary book, margins are never consistent, pictures float freely across the page, and the texts are almost always subordinate to the images. An almost cinematic effect is produced by the alternation of pages whose only visual element is a single reproduction of an art work with pages whose loud linear graphics traverse the entire sheet in addition to

Lissitzky and Kurt Schwitters. Foreword of *Nasci*. 1924.

5. Lissitzky to Küppers, in *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 39.  
 6. Lissitzky, foreword to *Nasci*, in *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 347.  
 7. *Nasci*'s intellectual and philosophical sources have been treated at length. See, for instance: John Elderfield, *Kurt Schwitters* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977) pp. 132–43; Nisbet, "An Introduction to El Lissitzky," in *El Lissitzky 1890–1941: Retrospektive*, pp. 28–30, and "El Lissitzky in the Proun Years," pp. 143–89; and Nancy Perloff, "Two Visions of the Universal: The Collaboration of Kurt Schwitters and El Lissitzky," in *Dada Cologne Hanover*, ed. Charlotte Stokes, (New York: G. K. Hall, 1997). The artists defined the Latin term on the issue's front cover: "Nature from the Latin NASCI, i.e., to become or develop, is everything which develops, moves, and forms itself out of itself, [and] through its own strength."

organizing the attendant words and images. There are even moments when the page itself seems to break the confines of its bound existence, as, for instance, when the lines of a Mondrian composition are extended beyond the edges of the sheet, or when visual material is distributed across the entire width of a double-page spread. *Nasci's* design, in short, seems to conform quite closely to its written dictum (paraphrased from Franc ): "Every form is the frozen instantaneous picture of a process. Thus a work is a stopping-place on the road of becoming and not the fixed goal."<sup>8</sup>

Although Lissitzky in the introduction claims that "our work is not a philosophy and not a system," *Nasci* nonetheless comes across as a rather dogmatic and idealistic exposition. One possible way to fight the standardization of art, so the *Nasci* foreword proposed, was to biologize it. But, as the scientific connotations of the word suggest, this would merely replace a discourse of the machine with one of evolution. A radical substitution at first glance, it ultimately does nothing to disrupt the manifesto's stubborn didacticism, its unwavering confidence in the logic of its prescriptions, its commitment to the thesis and progressive idea. So although *Nasci* ostensibly distances itself from the avant-garde's fetish for mechanical reproduction and the increasingly standardized claims made on its behalf, it communes with both these phenomena at a much deeper level. For what they all share is a profound faith in the over-determining, programmatic reason that is the language of the industrialist and the demagogue alike.

Lissitzky's skepticism toward this type of thinking, and his understanding of the avant-garde's perhaps unwitting complicity with it, will grow over the course of the year. It already is hinted at in a letter to the Dutch architect J. J. P. Oud written within a month after the completion of the *Nasci* preface: "You know—I am a rationalist. But there are moments now when reason frightens me—perhaps it [reason] keeps me attracted to it like an electrical tension for as long as it needs me only to later throw me away."<sup>9</sup> What would our picture of Lissitzky's production in this period look like if we were to study the works from the standpoint of this dark underside of reason? That is, not the Ratio that stimulates and liberates the artist, but the kind that uses and exhausts him, as in the letter to Oud; not the Ratio that permits self-control, but the one that is itself controlling. The tension between the two types of reason could already be read between the lines of the *Nasci* foreword, in the opposition between the positive rationality of techno-organicism and the negative rationality of mechanophilia. There, Lissitzky was

8. Schwitters and Lissitzky's desire to replace the model of serial repetition with one of biological growth is most obvious in the publication when an image from the artistic sphere and one from the natural world are made to correspond, as when Mies van der Rohe's Glass Skyscraper is likened to a vertical cross section of a thigh bone, or a Schwitters collage to a leaf plant. Yet because of their ultra-formalism, these juxtapositions are the least interesting of *Nasci's* typographical strategies.

9. Lissitzky to Oud, March 26, 1924, in *El Lissitzky, Proun und Wolkenb ger*, p. 123. Thanks to Christine Mehring for help with this translation.

perhaps too wedded to avant-garde idealism to have been capable of considering for even a moment that the two might share a common ground. It will be only in the next typographic work of that year, the *Kunstismen*, that the artist will realize that even the most sophisticated of avant-garde projects can succumb to the fatigue produced by the onset of too much Ratio.

\*

The seeds of the *Kunstismen* were planted in Lissitzky's mind in February 1924, right around the same time that he was completing the *Nasci* foreword.<sup>10</sup> By March 30, 1924, he had come up with "an idea for the final

Merz issue of 1924: 'Last Parade of all the Isms from 1914–1924.'"<sup>11</sup> One can begin to get a better sense of the nature of the break the *Kunstismen* will make with its predecessor by attending to Lissitzky's preliminary title, a "last parade." Since the



Lissitzky and Hans Arp. Frontispiece to *Kunstismen*. 1925.

10. The occasion was the artist's visit to Zurich, Switzerland, the country where he would remain for over a year while recovering from his lung illness. Upon his arrival, he was greeted by the Dutch architect Mart Stam, and the artists Sophie Taeuber and Hans Arp. It is with the latter that Lissitzky was to conceive an exhibition of post-Cubist art, hopefully to open that autumn in the Zurich Kunsthaus. Though the plan for the show was eventually dropped, Nisbet has noted that the exhibition idea was still alive as late as October 1924 ("El Lissitzky in the Proun Years," p. 296). At any rate, it appears fairly certain that the idea got Lissitzky hooked on the possibility of doing other projects of a retrospective character. According to Sophie K ppers's later recollections concerning the book's genesis, Lissitzky's proposal for a publication was apparently rejected by Schwitters but found a sympathetic ear in the person of Hans Arp, who became his collaborator and soon enlisted Eugen Rentsch of Zurich as the book's publisher (see K ppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 52). The partnership, however, had deteriorated to such an extent by the end of the year that Lissitzky was perfectly happy to finish the project by himself. Since Lissitzky, not Arp, seems to have been in control of the final publication, I will refer to him as the book's sole designer, even though future research may one day prove otherwise.

11. Lissitzky to K ppers, in *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 48.

connotations of the original German phrasing are somewhat lost in translation, it is important to note its overtly militaristic overtones; a *Truppendschau* is not only a parade but also a show of troops. The fear that the avant-garde, like a bunch of retired militiamen, might be marching for the last time is raised elsewhere in direct reference to the *Kunstisten*. In a letter to Oud written later that year, Lissitzky reported that he was working on a "mass grave of all the isms of art."<sup>12</sup> The quote suggests that modern artists are not simply unfit for combat, but deserve to be laid to rest.

How does the *Kunstisten* present this condition visually? Flipping to the book's front cover, we find that *Nasci's* criticism of the avant-garde here receives a fuller, more spectacular treatment.<sup>13</sup> By employing the same letters over and over again—"ISM us us us, etc."—to signify artistic groups as diverse and contradictory as, for instance, Expressionism and Dada, the *Kunstisten's* front jacket suggests that the nomination of the avant-garde, like manifesto-writing in general, has

12. Lissitzky to Oud, September 8, 1924, in *El Lissitzky, Proun und Wolkenbügel*, p. 127.  
 13. El Lissitzky and Hans Arp, *Die Kunstisten/Les Ismes de l'Art/The Isms of Art* (New York: Arno Press, 1968), p. viii.

VI

DIE KÜNSTLER	LES ARTISTES	THE ARTISTS
42 ATSENER VON LIGHTERY	42	42
43 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	43	43
44 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	44	44
45 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	45	45
46 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	46	46
47 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	47	47
48 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	48	48
49 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	49	49
50 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	50	50
51 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	51	51
52 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	52	52
53 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	53	53
54 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	54	54
55 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	55	55
56 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	56	56
57 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	57	57
58 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	58	58
59 BALEWITSCH HANSEN (H)	59	59

VII

DIE ISMEN	LES ISMES	THE ISMS
ABSTRAKTER FILM	1	1
KONSTRUKTIVISMUS	2	2
VERISMUS	3-8	3-8
PROUN	9-9	9-9
KOMPRESSIONISMUS	10	10
WERZ	11	11
NEO-PLASTIZISMUS	12-14	12-14
PURISMUS	15	15
DADA	16-20	16-20
SIMULTANISMUS	21	21
SUPREMATISMUS	22-23	22-23
METAPHYSIKER	24-27	24-27
ABSTRAKTIVISMUS	28-29	28-29
KURISMUS	30-41	30-41
FUTURISMUS	42-48	42-48
EXPRESSIONISMUS	49-47	49-47

SCHRIFTEN

BOCCIONI: *Pittura, Scultura Futurista (dinamica plastica)* (deutsch) (deutsch)  
 CARRA: | *Valori plastici* (deutsch)  
 TATLIN: *Architektur* (deutsch)  
 EGGELOU: | *Architektur Über „Abstraktion Film“* (deutsch)  
 RICHTER: | *Architektur Über „Abstraktion Film“* (deutsch)  
 GLEIZES: *Kubismus* (deutsch)  
 GROSS: *Architektur* (deutsch)  
 GUNTERO DE TORRE: *Le pinure de Delaunay* (deutsch)  
 TRISTAN TZARA: *7 manifestes dada* (deutsch)  
 HUELSENBECK: *En avant Dada* (deutsch)  
 KANDINSKY: *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (deutsch)  
 LISSITZKY: *Über die Kunst* (deutsch)  
 MALEWITSCH: *Suprematismus (opusculum Realismus der Malerei)* (deutsch)  
 MONDRIAN: *Le Néoplasticisme* (deutsch)  
 OZENFANT-JEANERET: *Après le Cubisme* (deutsch)  
 SCHWITERS: *Morphe No. 10* (deutsch)  
 TATLIN: *Monographie von Proun* (deutsch)

taken on the serial qualities of mechanical reproduction. It should not surprise us that the loud typography recalls at both a conceptual and formal level the critique vented against the machine in the *Nasci* preface. But here Lissitzky has taken his already powerful critique one step further.

Regarding the artist's book designs, Nikolai Khardzhiev notes that "the covers closely resemble posters. The artist had in mind the visual effect of a display of a number of copies in a shop window."<sup>14</sup> Amplified by the multiplication of window-display, the listing of art movements produces an enticing repetitive rhythm at the level of form. But the costs are high in terms of content, since the various factions of the avant-garde are now reduced from historical actors to mere visual elements whose substantive differences have been largely eradicated. They have all become quite literally variants of one big ISM. And thus one could make the argument that what the *Kunstisten* really advertises is not the history of *Kunst*, but the modern *ism* itself as a kind of empty advertisement.

14. Nikolai Khardzhiev, "El Lissitzky: Book Designer," *Iskusstvo Knigi*, 1962, abridged and translated in *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 382. Lissitzky's later role as one of the Soviet Union's greatest propagandists has

VIII

<b>KURISMUS</b> Das ist der Kurismus... Der Kurismus ist... Der Kurismus ist... Der Kurismus ist...	<b>CURISM</b> Ce qui distingue le curisme... Le curisme est... Le curisme est... Le curisme est...	<b>CURISM</b> This distinguishes curism... Curism is... Curism is... Curism is...
<b>FUTURISMUS</b> Das ist der Futurismus... Der Futurismus ist... Der Futurismus ist... Der Futurismus ist...	<b>FUTURISME</b> C'est ce qui distingue le futurisme... Le futurisme est... Le futurisme est... Le futurisme est...	<b>FUTURISM</b> This distinguishes futurism... Futurism is... Futurism is... Futurism is...
<b>EXPRESSIONISMUS</b> Das ist der Expressionismus... Der Expressionismus ist... Der Expressionismus ist... Der Expressionismus ist...	<b>EXPRESSIONISME</b> C'est ce qui distingue l'expressionnisme... L'expressionnisme est... L'expressionnisme est... L'expressionnisme est...	<b>EXPRESSIONISM</b> This distinguishes expressionism... Expressionism is... Expressionism is... Expressionism is...

IX

<b>ABSTRAKTE KUNST</b> Die abstrakte Kunst... Die abstrakte Kunst... Die abstrakte Kunst...	<b>ART ABSTRAIT</b> L'art abstrait... L'art abstrait... L'art abstrait...	<b>ABSTRACT ART</b> The abstract art... The abstract art... The abstract art...
<b>METAPHYSIKER</b> Die Metaphysiker... Die Metaphysiker... Die Metaphysiker...	<b>METAPHYSICIENS</b> Les métaphysiciens... Les métaphysiciens... Les métaphysiciens...	<b>METAPHYSICIANS</b> The metaphysicians... The metaphysicians... The metaphysicians...
<b>SUPREMATISMUS</b> Der Suprematismus... Der Suprematismus... Der Suprematismus...	<b>SUPREMATISME</b> Le suprématisme... Le suprématisme... Le suprématisme...	<b>SUPREMATISM</b> The suprematism... The suprematism... The suprematism...

This type of reduction continues inside the book, although in a somewhat different manner. In keeping with the change of context from exterior cover to interior contents, Lissitzky switches strategies and makes the archival inventory, not the forms of advertising, his new medium.<sup>15</sup> One could start with what is proper to all large collections of material: the index, or, in the case of the *Kunstismen*, the multiple indices. The three at the beginning of the book appear utterly conventional—that is, until you try to use them.<sup>16</sup> For a book designer known for economy of form and clarity of organization, Lissitzky has made his indices remarkably complicated, so much so that one begins to wonder if the artist wanted to encourage a certain sense of bewilderment. Is it really necessary to index both the movements and the works, and the writings on top of that, while at the same time making the reader struggle to find the information in which he or she is probably most interested, namely the page numbers of a given artist? Speaking of artists, is *Räumliche Malerei* by Nikolai Mituritsch or László Moholy-Nagy? The numbers are so oversized that it is difficult to match them up with their corresponding titles and names. This difficulty is exacerbated by the fact that the table of contents is poorly spaced typographically. Because the titles are in most cases equidistant from the artists above and below them in the table, it takes some effort to figure out to which artist a work has been attributed. It is almost as if historical understanding was purposefully scrapped in favor of easy and arbitrary organization.

The insatiable desire to codify and categorize also pervades the book's trilingual collection of quotations—in French, German, English, but notably, not in Russian—from each of the respective *isms*.<sup>17</sup> As one scans the short excerpts from various avant-garde texts, their very brevity begins to interfere with the process of comprehension. Expecting profound explications of revolutionary artistic ideas, the curious reader instead is overloaded with quotes that despite vast differences

perhaps made us forget that at this moment in his career he maintained a much more ambivalent relationship to capitalism: "The future belongs to photogravure printing and to all photomechanical processes. In this way the former fresco-painting is cut off from the new typography. E.g., advertisement pillars and poster-walls." El Lissitzky, "Typographical Facts," in *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 356. Thus, van Doesburg's criticism of the front cover as mere "ornamental typography" is not an altogether incorrect reading of Lissitzky's design, even if motivated in part by personal animosity. See Theo van Doesburg, "Das Buch und seine Gestaltung," *Die Form* 4 (1929), p. 568, quoted in Alan Birnholz, "El Lissitzky," p. 338.

15. On the artistic paradigm shift from forms of photomontage and collage to photographic practices based on the archive, see Benjamin Buchloh's essay "Gerhard Richter's *Atlas*: The Anomic Archive," *October* 88 (Spring 1999) pp. 117–45.

16. In the first table, each work is given a number; artists are listed in alphabetical order; page numbers are clearly arranged in their own column; even abbreviations for the various nationalities are carefully noted. In the second, the various groups are listed in reverse chronological order from Abstract Film to Expressionism. In the third, a list of authors and sources for the book's catalogue of quotations is given. See Lissitzky and Arp, *Die Kunstismen*, pp. v–vii.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. viii–xi.

in content share an abbreviated quality characteristic of the sound bite, catchphrase, or cliché. Conceptual differences among the *isms* are sacrificed for a more vivid presentation of their utter sameness. Typographically, this occurs as the wide black vertical stripes that divide each page into three equal columns make the diverse writings conform to a larger linear template. Though one could argue that such a tripartite division is necessary to accommodate the three different languages, the designer seems nonetheless to have gone to great lengths to create an experience of stark repetition that crosses linguistic boundaries: as opposed to the situation one finds in *Nasci*, margins are rigorously consistent, never reconfigured and never broken by fragments of text; subheadings always rest on the same horizontal axis, even when the discrepancies of translation make one quotation longer in one language than in another; the letters themselves are tiny yet at the same time in bold type and sans serif, making it easier to look at them as space-filling particles than as philosophizing texts. Like the bars of an accounting ledger, the solemn graphics have the overall effect of confining the history of avant-garde theory within an informational grid.

On the page introducing the book's pictorial section, Lissitzky enigmatically draws a bold stripe with the year 1925 at one end and a question mark at the other.<sup>18</sup> This punctuation mark had also appeared in *Nasci*, but at the end of the issue, as if to say that the future was still up for grabs. In contrast, the *Kunstismen's* question mark does not introduce the next stage of artistic production but rather its historical completion. Histories of art rarely move backward, and so the *Kunstismen's* reverse chronology, beginning in 1924 and ending in 1914, constitutes something of a unique statement. It seems to argue that the book's taxonomy, like all de-differentiating archival projects within modernity, has nothing to say about the future and so can only revisit the past, putting it in order, ruthlessly and relentlessly.<sup>19</sup>

Sometimes, this classification-gone-wild appears within the pictorial inventory itself, as when a Rodchenko line painting of 1920 is made to occupy the same category as a 1914 Kandinsky, or when nonexistent movements such as "Compressionism" and "Abstractivism" are arbitrarily created. Furthermore, each reproduced work is given a large "accession number" linking it to the tables at the front of the book. Finally, the photographic portraits, like all the other objects catalogued in the *Kunstismen*, have become so many items to be labeled and stored. What has succumbed to the archive is not just the image per se but the notion of

18. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

19. In a project by his contemporary László Moholy-Nagy, Lissitzky recognized that this type of ordering had become a form of self-propaganda: "By the way, I was told that Moholy is also preparing a book on 1914–1924, in which everything before 1920 is treated as mere fertilizer for the Bauhaus, which then accomplishes everything and surpasses all that has gone before." Lissitzky to Küppers, October 16, 1924, *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 53.

creative agency for which the artist's portrait has traditionally stood. It is as if the "Ratio" from Lissitzky's letter to Oud had never been turned off but rather taken to its logical extreme, not only tiring the artist but completely draining him of all his productive energies. One could say that the *Kunstismen* is Lissitzky's working-out of reason's worst-case scenario. The lessons Lissitzky learned from it will help him launch his great counteroffensive against reason, the so-called *Self-Portrait of the Artist as Constructor*.<sup>20</sup>

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In another perplexing—and equally unexamined—statement by the artist about his self-portrait, from a letter dated December 12, 1924, Lissitzky writes, "Am now working on a self-light-portrait [*Selbstlichtportrait*]. A colossal piece of nonsense, if it all goes according to plan."<sup>21</sup> The comment, unlike the earlier "monkey-hand" remark, is not so easily dismissed as a mere trifle. It does say, after all, that the work was to be executed "according to plan."<sup>22</sup>

So in what way is "nonsense" specifically employed in this image and why? At first glance, the self-portrait seems to pick up where the *Kunstismen* left off. The assorted objects strewn across the surface of the print are not there by happenstance; together they form a miniature collection of the artist's recent inventions: photographs, letterhead, stencils. In this sense something like a personal catalogue or inventory is assembled. A superficial reading would make it seem that Lissitzky was simply continuing the doomsday exercise of the *Kunstismen*, this time with his own oeuvre, and therefore that he was not being "nonsensical" but rather all too rational.

However, far from gathering works from the artistic sphere and registering them within an archive, the self-portrait performs, as we shall see, exactly the opposite procedure: it takes art objects already given over in some way to instrumentality and sets them up within an entirely different, much less ordered,

20. The image was first published with the title "constructor" in 1932 and the moniker has stuck ever since. Lissitzky himself never called the work a "constructor" (though perhaps he wouldn't have minded). At any rate, for convenience, I will refer to it as either the "self-portrait" or the "constructor." The problem of multiple prints is trickier, since the self-portrait exists in several versions. I will limit my comments to the Tretyakov photograph, not only because it has been well-reproduced in the most recent catalogue of Lissitzky's work, but also because a prolonged discussion of the cropping and possible further alteration done to some of the other versions would get us bogged down in issues which, though perhaps interesting, are not crucial for the purposes of this essay.

21. Letter to Küppers, December 12, 1924, in *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 56.

22. Furthermore, the artist's original German, which reads, not, as one would expect, "*Ein kolossaler Blödsinn*," but "*Ein kolossaler Blödsinnus*," suggests a connection between the *Kunstismen* and the self-portrait. The original letter is in the El Lissitzky Letters and Photographs archive, Getty Research Institute.

discursive space. This process of reorganization attempts to take back from instrumental reason what the latter had so easily consumed, namely, the possibility of future aesthetic experience. Needless to say, this practice of "nonsense" is not cut from the same cloth as more nihilistic and anarchic critiques of reason. Nowhere in the self-portrait will one find the infantile, absurd, or psychosexual subversion of meaning that marks other avant-garde endeavors such as those of Dada. For lack of a better term, I will use the word "anti-reason" to refer to Lissitzky's notion of "nonsense," mostly because it seems to best encapsulate the dialectical, oppositional nature of his project.

One can begin to get a sense of the self-portrait as an antidote to reason by looking at the upper left corner of the image. The labels—*EL LISSITZKY* and *el*—play upon the artist's penchant for spelling games. We are drawn away from the boldfaced block letters of the full name and pointed toward a typescript abbreviation, *el*. The passage from block type to typescript is the graphic equivalent of Lissitzky's own nominative switch from *Lazar Markovich Lissitzky* to *El Lissitzky* to *el*. The changing of names and fonts thus literalizes the artist's own shifting identity. In and of itself, this is nothing new; the creation of alternative personae was a common practice among avant-garde artists from Marcel Duchamp to the various Berlin Dadaists. However, with Lissitzky, the typographic moniker had begun to approach the status of a trademark.

No one knew this better than his collaborator on the *Kunstismen*, Hans Arp, who in the fall of 1924 was sent a print of his own portrait that Lissitzky had made that summer. In the bottom left corner, an *el* had been inscribed as a sort of personal signature. After receiving the print, Arp, who most likely interpreted the insignia as an unbearable visible trace of his colleague's authorship, erased the letters. Lissitzky recounted the situation to Sophie Küppers: "you know how pleased we all were (Arp included) with the portrait of him which I did. I was proud to put my sign (eL) on the print I gave to Arp, to get a block made (you know I do that very rarely). The block proofs have arrived: and on this particular proof there is no trace of eL, and on the photograph itself the eL has been neatly scratched out. What is this scratching out supposed to signify?"<sup>23</sup> It is surprising that Lissitzky should ask himself this question, for he, perhaps more than any other artist of the time, should have been well aware of the avant-garde insignia's dual status as an abstract, modernist graphic and as a personalized logo. This is because he had encountered precisely this problem in his publicity work for the Pelikan office supply company. For the most part, this aspect of Lissitzky's career has been discussed solely from the vantage point of utility. Scandalized perhaps by the notion that an artist of Lissitzky's socialist credentials may have interacted in any serious way with capitalist advertising, art historians have been reluctant to

23. Lissitzky to Küppers, November 1, 1924, *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 54.



Lissitzky. Advertisement for Pelikan Ink, Typewriter Ribbon, and Carbon Paper. 1924.

the advertisement's visual force comes from the entertaining display of various kinds of script, from fake handwriting to typewriter font. But the poster also communicates to us through the signed guarantee of its founder, as if he were personally authenticating it.

This visual guarantee also informs the design of Pelikan's official letterhead, in which a miniature version of a poster for some of the firm's main products—ink, typewriter ribbons, and carbon paper—occupies the top right corner of the sheet. By having an unmistakable company image as its official imprimatur, the letter proves to its recipient that the message it is delivering comes directly from the source. And, as if any more reassurance were needed, Günther Wagner's name is prominently displayed across the top.

24. The great exception is the three-dimensional advertising relief for Pelikan typewriter ribbons, an object for which we have much documentation (unlike the other publicity designs). See Nisbet's discussion in his "El Lissitzky in the Proun Years," pp. 340–44. Schwitters's designs for Pelikan, some of which were published in a special issue of *Merz* devoted to advertising, are discussed by Maud Lavin in her essay "Advertising Utopia: Schwitters as Commercial Designer," *Art in America* 73 (October 1985), pp. 135–39, 169.

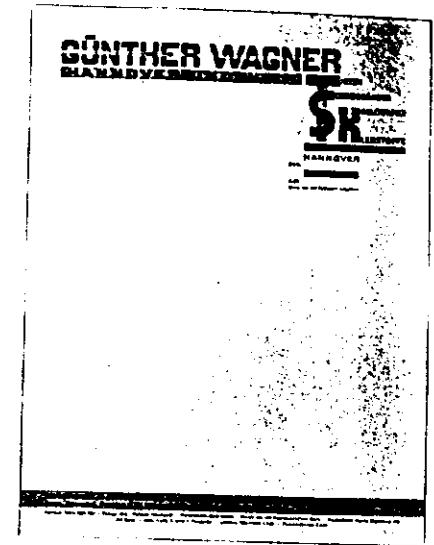
look at the Pelikan commissions as anything more than a way for an artist to pay the bills.<sup>24</sup>

While a steady supply of reichsmarks certainly made it possible for Lissitzky to afford his expensive convalescence, one should be weary of dismissing the Pelikan projects too quickly. Not only does the artist in his letters often express genuine excitement over his Pelikan work, but he often responds to it, both positively and negatively, in his more "serious" work, as the cover of the *Kunstisimen* had shown.

We should therefore consider the *el* insignia in relation to some Pelikan designs that deal quite explicitly with issues of creative property and the authorial signature. In a poster for typewriter ribbons, the signature of the company's founder, Günther Wagner, runs along the edge of a large, thick arrow, which are perpendicularly arranged three other textual fragments.



Above: Lissitzky. Advertisement for Pelikan Typewriter Ribbon. 1924.  
Above right: Pelikan Letterhead. 1924.

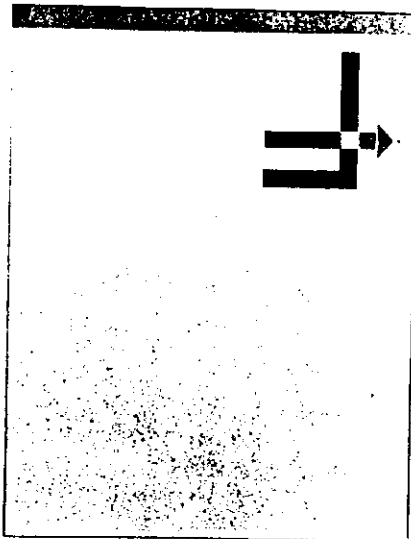


Name, advertisement, and letter thus generate a sort of circuit of authenticity in which each mutually authenticates the others. We know that around the time that Lissitzky was making the self-portrait he had become particularly exasperated by the falsity of this chain of reference. He complained vociferously to Sophie Küppers that "This is the man who provides my livelihood, 'my most esteemed Herr Günther Wagner,' who isn't a person at all and has been dead a long time."<sup>25</sup> He intuitively realized that what lay at the heart of Pelikan's imagery was the fraudulent claim of the signed guarantee.

It is therefore significant that the transition from *El Lissitzky* to *el* that transpires in the self-portrait is taken from none other than the artist's own personal stationery that he began using that December (although he had used a drawn version as early as May). The artist's fascination with his own insignia, as Arp had perceptively discerned, was bringing him closer and closer to the authenticating

25. Lissitzky to Küppers, December 1, 1924, *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 54.





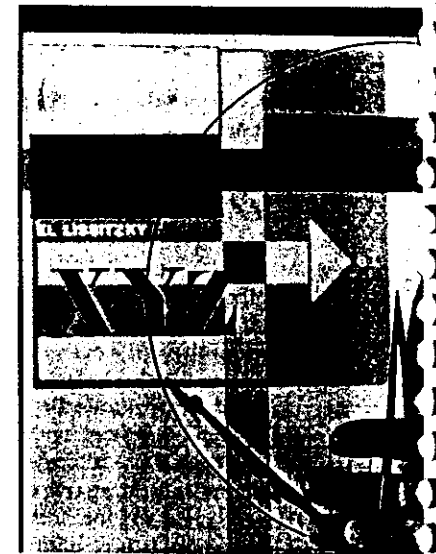
Lissitzky. *Personal Letterhead*. 1924.

XYZ are placed in such close proximity to the *el* in the self-portrait. Yet why XYZ? Much ink has been spilled over the hidden meaning of these three letters: do they refer to algebraic variables? radioactive waves? the axes of a three-dimensional grid? or maybe it is some kind of veiled reference to *ABC*? The search for any single, definitive meaning becomes a moot point once one considers them less as enigmatic symbols than as indicators of an artistic strategy, like the letterhead. For if the alphabet had been the source of much of Lissitzky's modernist nomenclature, and if he had tended to draw upon the alpha as opposed to the omega end of it, the appearance of the last letters in the series suggests that the supply of letters had been entirely used up. In fact, if one peruses the other work produced in 1924, it seems that the only purpose for which stenciling was still useful was the making of advertisements.

26. In an unpublished memo to Küppers written around the same time, Lissitzky instructs her not to show anyone, even Schwitters, a new design for the Pelikan relief until a photograph of it has been taken and stamped with his logo. "If the photograph is taken well, I beg you to place the company name [*Firma*] by inserting an *el*." Instructions to Küppers, dated January 1, 1925. *El Lissitzky Letters and Photographs*, Getty Research Institute. In the document, the *el* is typed in red ink for emphasis, just as it is in the bottom left corner of the print of the self-portrait which he sent to Jan Tschichold (also in the Getty Institute archives).

logic of the Pelikan poster and letterhead.<sup>26</sup> Thus, the *el* in the self-portrait is simultaneously a modernist emblem and a "corporate" trademark. While the former could be said to celebrate the indeterminacy of the artist's self, the latter over-determines the identity of the artist by situating him within an institutional framework of intellectual property and official correspondence.

But Lissitzky's letterhead is not the only instance in the self-portrait of an avant-garde strategy exhausted by commercial use. It is no coincidence that two of the journals with which Lissitzky had at some point been associated, *ABC* and *G*, had names that, like his insignia, were alphabetical abbreviations. Since the alphabet was a kind of toolkit for the artist's name games, it seems hardly accidental that the stenciled letters



Above: *Self-Portrait of the Artist as Constructor*, detail.

Left: *Advertisement for Pelikan Ink*. 1924.

For instance, the letters XYZ in the self-portrait share an uncanny resemblance to the word *TINTE* in a particularly elegant Pelikan photogram. In this ink advertisement, a bottle of the black writing fluid disappears into the grain of the paper, an act almost as magical as the bottlecap levitating above it. In what appears to be its shadow, cast onto an invisible ground plane, the word Pelikan is traced by an equally intangible pen. The strangeness of the image, and thus its powerful hold on the viewer as potential customer, is bound up with the tension between mechanical reproduction (the mass-produced Pelikan logo, the photogram technique itself) and traditional writing (manual instrument, writing fluid). And yet the clarity one associates with graphic printing, on the one hand, and the sureness of handwriting, on the other, are both here literally effaced by photographic blurring. Like the sheet of stationery, the stencil set is emblematic of an aesthetic practice that has gone fully commercial.

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So far we have only concerned ourselves with the upper left corner of the self-portrait. But turning our attention beyond this quadrant, we notice that the entire corner area itself rests between the two-pronged span of a compass. This instrument was first presented by Lissitzky in his "Tatlin at Work" illustration for Ilia Ehrenburg's *Six Stories with Easy Endings*. The substitution of the compass for the artist's eye, created by collaging a drawing of the instrument onto a photograph of Tatlin in his studio, makes Tatlin's revolutionary vision a function of his engineer-like precision.

Lissitzky's self-portrait takes much from this precursor. The compass, now superimposed on the artist's face, is likewise a supplement to artistic vision, though now the connection between compass and cornea is mediated by Lissitzky's own hand. The instrument also is conjoined to a circle, inscribed on a flat surface that surrounds the artist's head. But the two portraits are as noteworthy for their differences as for their similarities. If Tatlin's compass was a surrogate eye, for Lissitzky it is a disembodied limb. Moreover, the hand guiding the compass is anatomically incapable of drawing the arc that it appears to subtend. The link between artist's vision, instrument, and drawn curve, so prominent in the *Six Stories* illustration, is here entirely dismantled. In fact, the compass, far from displaying the constructor's careful precision, is poised gingerly, like a precious jewel, between the artist's outstretched fingers.

As demonstrated by a comparison of the self-portrait with a particularly telling English-language Pelikan advertisement, the artist's skill is now an object up for sale. In this countertop ad, the artist's disembodied hand has now become the friendly handshake of your local salesman, complete with cuff links, white shirt, and plaid jacket. The central object is no longer Lissitzky's serious countenance but a bottle of waterproof drawing ink. The compass that once stood for the artist's skill can now only circumscribe the arc of the Pelikan logo, which in the advertisement declares itself four times: on the bottle's label which reads, "Only



Lissitzky. Illustration from *Six Stories with Easy Endings*. 1921-22.

genuine when bearing the Pelikan trademark"; around the neck of the bottle attached to a string; in the corner as impressed seal and mark of authentication that tells us to "Note the Trademark"; and behind the hand as formal backdrop. Like the self-portrait, the Pelikan image is a compendium of various artistic media—typography, phototransfer, drawing. But now, unlike the unstable components of the Constructor self-portrait, each is anchored onto the vibrant yellow ground of the advertising image. Finally, Lissitzky's own *el* insignia sits in the bottom right corner.

In almost the same breath in which he had complained about "dear Günther Wagner," Lissitzky protests the increasing instrumentalization of his own creativity: "Isn't it madness? I can't just weigh out on the apothecary scales what I produce. No, I am beginning to loathe the whole business. This is the face of capitalism . . . when they have sucked all they want out of me, they will spit me out on the street."<sup>27</sup> By the end of 1924, Lissitzky's exasperation had reached critical mass. His growing disdain for certain avant-garde artists, such as Arp and Moholy, as well as his souring relationship with Pelikan, is well-documented in letter after letter from this period. Judging from the overall pessimism of his correspondence at

27. Lissitzky to Küppers, December 1, 1924, *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 54.



Lissitzky. Advertisement for Pelikan Drawing Ink. 1925.

this time, one could say generally that were it not for the group around the journal *ABC* ("the 'Nasci idea' is bearing fruit") and the ASNOVA group of architects, there would have been seemingly little to convince the artist that the dour prophecy of the *Kunstisten* had not already been fulfilled.<sup>28</sup>

The making of the self-portrait thus occurs at a moment when artistic re-energization and reinvention, particularly of his own work, was foremost on Lissitzky's mind. In his words, "I have never in my life been economical with my energy. Now that I have reached its limit, I know how 'beautiful,' 'strong,' 'dynamic' pictures are to be created. Inside me a conundrum must again be posed."<sup>29</sup>

The conundrum posed in the self-portrait, I think, is how to rescue art from its own instrumentalization. Each of the elements discussed so far—stencils, letterhead, compass—is indexically wrenched from a previous use or context without, however, being badly disfigured or debased. That said, something *does* happen to the objects of the self-portrait—they are superimposed. During the making of the work, several individual images were allowed to accumulate on a single sheet during the development process. The artist's use of the techniques of multiple exposure, photogram, and contact printing results in a blurry temporal collapse in which shots taken at different times are now made to coinhabit the same image.<sup>30</sup> Lissitzky had ample opportunity to practice the production of such disorienting effects, as an entire series of photograms to be used as Pelikan carbon-paper ads makes evident. In each example, typescript, logo, and stencil all compete with their negative mirages in a layered space no longer limited to the flat surface of the sheet.

It is the ability of the direct impression to introduce ambiguity and instability into the image that motivates both the advertisements and the self-portrait. For

28. For Lissitzky's opinion of *ABC*, see his letter to Oud, September 8, 1924: "You are right that neither *G* nor *ABC* says anything new. But I am helping *ABC* to lead a half-underground propaganda in its daily cultural work and that, in the reactionary central European lands. Judging from the first issue, *G* is still a pretty snobby studio affair. We hope that it will be better (i.e., a proper American weekly)." *El Lissitzky, Proun und Wolkenbügel*, p. 126. Lissitzky's reservations about the German scene at this time are perhaps best expressed by the following passage: "Please forget the idea of the International Exhibition in Germany now. I very much hope I'm mistaken, but we shall yet live to see how Burchartz, Schlemmer, and Röhl will come forward representing national Constructivism and national Bauhaus. I am not even confident for Kurtchen. And you want to publicize Mondrian and Malevich in this Germany. Give that up. Zurich is also lost. But we shall make our own way, in fact I prefer it that way: it means that the new art hasn't got its Academy yet, as I sometimes actually think. Get yourself *Europe*. It is a document typical of this anti-Deutschland *über alles* sentiment, seeking to conceal its true value behind a cheap shoddy exterior (Lissitzky to Küppers, December 12, 1924, in *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 56). For disparaging comments about van Doesburg, see p. 56; on Moholy's "filching," see pp. 66–67. On the "art politics" of the Bauhaus, see *El Lissitzky, Proun und Wolkenbügel* pp. 124–25, and on his general "mistrust of people," see *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 57.

29. Lissitzky to Küppers, April 2, 1924, *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 48.

30. We are still lacking a comprehensive discussion of the techniques used in the self-portrait as well as their order of implementation. The most recent attempt is Klaus Pollmeier's essay "Der Konstrukteur" von El Lissitzky: Anmerkungen zur Technik," in Tupitsyn, *El Lissitzky*, pp. 238–39.

instance, looking at the upper left corner of the artist-as-constructor, one cannot tell which element was introduced first: the letterhead seems to rest on top of a semi-transparent dark block, while at the same time below the *XYZ* and the arc of the circle; the dark block itself hovers between a larger sheet of paper behind it and a now disintegrating rectangular piece of paper above it. Needless to say, nothing could be further from the operation performed in the *Kunstisten*, where, in contrast, every object is assigned a definitive date and inserted into proper chronological order.

Yet what about the bold geometric graphics that apparently organize the self-portrait's proportions? Can't we say that they insert the individual parts back into some kind of clear compositional grid? This return to order resonates well with Traugott Schlacher's 1928 analysis: "The background consists of a sheet of paper with a pattern of squares drawn on it. The pattern extends over the face too. The forehead and cheeks are covered with thin vertical and horizontal lines. Or is it that the lines have spread from the face on to the paper? Whichever it is, we can see, on and around the face with its fascinating eyes and pointed nose, squares, rectangles, and a triangle even, thrown into relief by half-tone shading."<sup>31</sup>

Schlacher's dismissal of the ambiguity produced by photographic superimposition leads him quite easily to a reading of the self-portrait as a sort of abstract painting, in which geometric figures are arranged on a pictorial ground, with even a slight hint of illusionistic volume (e.g., the triangle "thrown into relief"). This sanitizing interpretation of the artist-as-constructor refuses to acknowledge the clumsiness of the supposed abstract shapes. The self-portrait has been so often presented as a hygienic masterpiece that it has become all too easy to overlook its technical awkwardness.<sup>32</sup> Unless we reluctantly accept that Lissitzky was simply inept in the medium, a fact that is contradicted by the sophistication of his work for Pelikan as well as his early photograms and photographic portraits, then we must assume that such idiosyncrasies are in fact part of the intended effect.

Lissitzky makes no attempt to hide the various cracks and fissures of the overlapping process. Edges, such as the ones floating above the artist's head, never quite match up; what appear to be right angles, upon closer inspection, are often not perfectly square; even the darkest of lines (for example, the horizontal segment across the top and the letters *XYZ*) are nonetheless transparent; finally, as if to squash any lingering doubts as to the image's utter artificiality, the large vertical stripe that traverses the entire field is replaced at the bottom of the frame by a collaged piece of paper (visible because of its noticeable texture, echoing another in the top-left corner). Thus, even graphic clarity—and therefore the

31. Schlacher, "El Lissitzky, Moskau," in *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 378.

32. The observations of the typographer Jan Tschichold echo Schlacher's: "El Lissitzky ensured his place in the history of photography once and for all with his self-portrait, composed in Switzerland in 1924, in which he used simultaneously several different processes (multiple copying, the photogram technique, drawing the circle). Here the intention, the technique, and the final form coincide perfectly." ("Jan Tschichold: El Lissitzky," *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 386).



Lissitzky, Hans Arp. 1924.

ideal of rational economy that is its driving impulse—is invoked only to be photographically destabilized.

But what about Lissitzky's own image? This poses the most serious challenge to my argument about Lissitzky's stand against reason, for the artist's ability to picture himself, to represent himself as an object in the world, presumes a distance between subject and object that at least since Descartes has been one of the defining features of the transcendental, rational ego. In this sense, the very act of self-portraiture seems to recuperate the "colossal piece of nonsense" back for reason.<sup>33</sup>

33. From the Tatlin photomontage of the *Six Stories* to the portrait of Lenin in his tribune to the various photographs of avant-garde artists in the *Kunstmen*, the photographic portrait in Lissitzky's earlier



Kurt Schwitters. 1924.

works often tried to guarantee the sitter's presence by literalizing, through the material form and semiological status of the photograph itself, the connection of the central figure to the real world. At the same time, he was exploring a rather different mode of photographic practice, the double-portrait. Lissitzky's experimentation with this kind of image began with the untitled photogram of 1923 in which the headshots of Lissitzky and the artist Vilmos Huszár are fastened onto the photosensitive sheet along with other objects during the development process. In *the Studio* of 1924 superimposes repeated images of, among others, Lissitzky, Küppers, Schwitters, and Käthe Steinitz, in various spatial orientations. (I am following here the identifications made by Nisbet in "El Lissitzky in the Proun Years," p. 306.) In the first case, the photogram technique, rather than the identity of either artist, seems to be the primary focus. In the latter, the repetition of overlapping bodies in all directions diffuses the encounter with the subjects of the portrait to such an extent that we no longer experience the image as portraiture per se, but rather, like a *proun*, as a rotating, horizontally oriented object. On Lissitzky's use of "horizontalité," see Yve-Alain Bois, "Radical Reversibility," *Art in America* 76 (April 1988), pp. 160–81, and "From  $-\infty$  to 0- : Axonometry or Lissitzky's Mathematical Paradigm," in *El Lissitzky 1890–1941: Architect, Painter, Photographer, Typographer*, pp. 27–34. See also Leo Steinberg's discussion of Rauschenberg and the "flatted picture plane" in "Other Criteria," *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), pp. 55–91.

However, the two famous photographic portraits of Schwitters and Arp propose a different way of reading Lissitzky's self-image. In the former, the Hanoverian addresses the viewer with two superimposed, yet opposing, gestures. In the face on the left, the artist looks at us in what appears to be a state of either shock or terror. Schwitters's frazzled hair, gaping mouth, and bulging eyes bespeak a moment of full outward expression; it is the visage of exclamation. In the right-hand portrait, he has collapsed inward—hair matted to the scalp, eyes subdued, and mouth plugged up with a parrot: the artist as silent introvert. Lissitzky's portrayal of Arp, in contrast, figures the artist and his double as a man who looks while looking away. Confronted with frontal and profile simultaneously, one experiences Arp, as Lissitzky did, as a two-timing crook, a literal two-face.

The bifurcation of artistic identity has special relevance in the cases of Schwitters and Arp, beyond that of either man's personal relationship with Lissitzky; each man possessed a split-personality, so to speak, as both worked simultaneously as poet and artist. And so when we try to look at either artist straight in the eye, we discover that this normally most reassuring of facial features is lost in the haze of photographic blurring. The uneasy doubling of the central eye signifies the broader splitting of the artists' selves into two *I*s; refusing to let one identity subsume the other, Lissitzky's portraits insist that the subject is never fully there, but always split into two.

How does this doubling operation work itself out in Lissitzky's own image, where nothing at first glance appears to exist in pairs? In the earlier artists' portraits, it was the central eye that had mediated the act of splitting. Looking at the same anatomical feature in the self-portrait, one notices that Lissitzky's eye is not shared by two faces but rather is co-substantial with his own hand. At one level, the artist is indeed doubled: the eye as instrument of rational vision complements the compass as instrument of skilled construction, as if the artistic subject was perpetually vacillating between contemplative insight and manual labor, between seeing and doing. However, this binding of the eye to the hand under the all-inclusive yoke of reason gives back to the subject, despite the disruptive effects of photographic intervention, a final stability and cohesiveness. It was precisely this notion of a stable, unified ego that had been challenged by the doubly fractured portraits of Schwitters and Arp. Therefore, in order to link the self-portrait to these two artists' portraits from the standpoint of a similar splitting of subjectivity, it is necessary to show how the compass-in-hand is *not* the mind's obedient servant and *not* the mere executor of a predetermined thought.

For, one could ask, what preconceived idea is this hand acting out? Although the compass appears to trace the circumference of a circle and thus to diagram the most ideal of geometric forms, the hand as photographed is physically incapable of drawing such a figure (except by means of severe anatomical contortion). Far from the image of efficient and skilled execution, this hand is not actively constructing with the compass so much as passively presenting it. The doubling

that the self-portrait stages, then, is not a classic mind-body dualism that preserves the transcendental ego, as posited by rationalizing interpretations of the image. It is instead a more contradictory and contestatory affair in which the seat of reason is undermined by a body part that disobeys its commands. The manual does not affirm the mental but rather goes against sense, literally playing dumb. At the heart of this strange pairing therefore lies a more fundamental antithesis pitting intelligence versus stupidity, reason versus nonsense, or, all-seeing eye versus monkey-hand. And it is this battle against reason, finally, that could be said to motivate the formal operations of the self-portrait, where all objects have been transported away from some kind of earlier instrumental use and disordered, both spatially and temporally, by means of various photographic processes.<sup>34</sup>

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One last part of the self-portrait remains to be considered: the enigmatic semicircle that seems to connect all the major components of the image from the artist's balding head (itself a kind of circle), to the piece of personal stationery, to the stenciled letters XYZ, to the compass in hand. As the only element that does not immediately register as a mechanically reproduced image (indeed the clarity of the bold line could only mean that it was drawn directly onto the sheet sometime toward the end of the work's making), the dark curve seems to rise above the dialectics of the self-portrait. Whereas the other objects could be said to suffer perpetually from photographic displacement, the circle seems unaffected by the spatiotemporal blurring that surrounds it and is therefore given a certain permanence and spatial definition that is missing from the rest of the self-portrait. Are we, then, looking at a total about-face, at reason sneaking in through the back door, following the curving path of its most idealized Platonic form, the circle?

This would be the conclusion of a certain type of art history schooled on classical treatises in which geometry is given pride of place because of its supposedly intimate connection with the pure and perfect idea. But Lissitzky had a

34. One final example should be mentioned here: the graph-paper grids. In contrast to the portrait of Arp, where his *doppelgänger* is secured against the backdrop of a journal, 391, that announces his presence ("Here comes the great Pra"), Lissitzky's own photograph hovers over, or, following Schlacher's observation, between two pages of graph paper. But instead of defining the picture plane as a modular grid (as one might expect given the self-portrait's Mondrian-esque composition), the ruled-line sheets subvert this formal paradigm in three ways: first, it shifts the axis of orientation from the vertical plane of the image to the horizontal field of the drafting table; secondly, the grids are themselves no longer experienced as a kind of metaphysical ground (indeed they are, like the portraits, already doubled), but only as scraps of paper gathered during the printing process, like the letterhead and paper blocks; finally, as a result of the horizontal accumulation of transparent layers, it is never clear what lies above the grids and what lies below them, as if they existed in some kind of nebulous matrix.

rather different conception of the circle. In a letter to Oud, protesting a statement of Theo van Doesburg's, he writes:

'The Universal = the Straight + the Perpendicular' does not correspond to the universe, which knows only curves and *not straight lines*. Thus is the sphere (not the cube) the crystal of the universe. However, we do not know how to start anything with it (the sphere), for it is the perfected state (Death). That is why we concentrate on the elements of the cube which always let themselves be reassembled and destroyed (Life). The modern machine needs round things, for circular-movement is its advantage over the 'rectilinear' movement of human hand and foot. If the apartment, the house are apparati for the accommodation of our bodies (like clothing), why should it not then have the round?<sup>35</sup>

Given that Lissitzky had written these words at the same time that he was working on the *Kunstisemen*, it is easy to see why he would object to van Doesburg's reduction of aesthetic experience to the straight line and the right angle. For it was the fatal shortcomings of just this sort of rigid, formulaic thinking that the artist had been at pains to expose in his catalog of *isms*.

I can think of no better contrast to van Doesburg's universal solution than the equation at the end of the *Nasci* preface, where Lissitzky turns reason on its head by taking the square root of the plus sign, infinity, and the minus sign. Whereas van Doesburg had allied himself with the precision of mathematical language, Lissitzky makes a purposeful travesty of it. Significantly, this graphic is accompanied by a text whose conception of artistic invention is slightly different from the one advocated in the rest of the foreword: "in the year 1924 will be found the square root of infinity that swings between meaningful and meaningless; its name *Nasci*."<sup>36</sup> It is the antithesis between the "meaningful" and the "meaningless" that explains the placement of the plus and minus signs at opposite ends of the square root symbol. Both statement and graphic therefore propose an alternative to *Nasci*'s unidirectional ethos of progress.<sup>37</sup>

The destiny of the circle is not limited to art theory; it also is meant to challenge the narrow logic of instrumentalized living: "the modern machine needs round things, for circular-movement is its advantage over the 'rectilinear' movement of human hand and foot." Though in this passage Lissitzky is more partially dis-

35. Lissitzky to Oud, June 30, 1924, in *El Lissitzky* (Köln: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1976), p. 73, translation slightly modified. The version printed in this catalogue is more faithful to the original letter than the one in *El Lissitzky, Prun und Wolkenbügel*, p. 125.

36. Lissitzky, *Nasci* foreword, *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 347.

37. Perhaps it is this contradiction that caused Schwitters to argue with Lissitzky about the last section of the preface. See Lissitzky to Küppers, March 6, 1924, *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 45.

posed to the machine than he was in the *Nasci* preface (i.e., the machine is still a viable option), he only approves of the mechanical device on the condition that it (and other facets of modern life such as the apartment) be made more amenable to human experience by getting rid of "rectilinear movement." The circle is not so much a formative artistic element as a conceptual framework, a kind of meta-element that forms the necessary antidote to theories of art and forms of modern life that have fallen under the sway of all-too-linear thinking. In this sense, the circle, though perfect in its geometry, really is directed against reason, as a figure of anti-reason, like *Nasci*'s "nonsensical" mathematical equation.

I use quotation marks to remind the reader that nonsense for Lissitzky is never chaotic, anarchic, or nihilistic, but dialectical. Instead of suspending meaning altogether, the *Nasci* formula sets the stage for a confrontation between the "meaningful" and the "meaningless." There seems to be no other way, for instance, to explain the letter to Oud's paradoxical coupling of destruction with life, and of perfection with death. It is almost as if Lissitzky is arguing for the necessity of upheaval and irrationality as a way to prevent art from resting too comfortably on its laurels. Artists are allowed to begin the creative process with linear elements, but only if they are eventually destroyed: "That is why we concentrate on the elements of the cube which always let themselves be reassembled and destroyed (Life)." Only then can art truly exist, or in Lissitzky's words, have "Life." Conversely, to begin with the overarching principle—the circle—would be to finish the art work before it even had a chance of being destroyed: "We do not know how to start anything with it (the sphere), for it is the perfected state (Death)."<sup>38</sup>

The letter to Oud is not as lucid a piece of expository writing as Lissitzky's more famous essays of the same year. Yet it helps us to understand, in a way the other writings do not, why Lissitzky added the circle to his self-portrait toward the end of the photographic process. The curve could only have been added once the more linear parts of the composition—as "elements of the cube"—had been gathered: the graph-paper grids, the orthogonal graphics of the letterhead, the blocks of paper inserted in the corners, the broad perpendicular stripes that traverse the image, and even, finally, the head and hand (which could be said to be linear in the sense that they align themselves quite rigidly along the vertical and horizontal axes, respectively).

But, following Lissitzky's observations, these elements must then be

38. The coexistence of radical opposites becomes something of a mantra for the artist in this period, as is demonstrated by other examples in his writings of the same plus-minus terminology. According to Sophie Küppers, he declared that "we are living in a field of force which is being generated between two poles: Minus: one society which is destroying itself, plus: one which is building itself up." Küppers, *Life, Letters, Texts*, p. 60. It is important to note that the arena of activity, what the artist calls the "field of force," is not exclusive to either of the two poles but is generated by the tension between them. The same principle of antithesis appears to motivate the artist's notion of the circle.

"destroyed" if they are to have any artistic purchase. Though none of the objects are physically mangled, effaced, or broken, all have been "destroyed" in at least two ways. First, each component has been divested of its original rationalized purpose: the letterhead is not written upon, the stenciled letters spell no words, the linear graphics are neither solid nor perfectly square, the compass cannot trace, the grids are not lined up, the artist's self-image is not reflecting a cohesive ego. Secondly, each has been photographically manipulated so as to blur into, onto, and between its neighbors on the surface of the sheet, creating a semi-transparent web in which nothing (except the circle) is ever truly localizable. The creator's recent accomplishments, as "elements of the cube," only "live" as art once they have "died" as instrumentalized objects. Only then can the circle be incorporated on top of the other components of the self-portrait as a kind of final grand summation.

However, it is important to note that if this figure is a conclusion of sorts, it is a necessarily open-ended one. Looking at the image one last time, one notices that the two ends of the circle are never drawn together and thus that the shape is never fully closed. Though one might surmise that Lissitzky had wanted the viewer to imagine the circle continuing behind the head and hand, such a reading would presume a certain state of completion that I think the artist was trying to avoid. Barely visible in the bold horizontal band and in the space between it and the artist's scalp lies the remnant of a circular curve that does not quite match up with the darker line segment descending from above. The subtle mismatch of dark and faint lines is reminiscent of the act of tracing, in which the final application of ink often veers ever so slightly from its predetermined penciled path. We could say then that the circle is not simply unfinished or in a state of incompleteness but appears to be in the process of tracing itself.

The value Lissitzky attributed to process has not been lost upon his present-day critics. Indeed, it is incessantly invoked with every citation of the famous phrase "*Proun* is the interchange station between painting and architecture." Not surprisingly, this brief sentence has been used to bolster the argument for a smooth and steady progression in Lissitzky's oeuvre from the paintings of the early 1920s to the photographs and typographic works of the mid-'20s to the architectural projects and exhibition designs at decade's end. However, the words are not taken, as one might expect, from a manifesto written in Vitebsk when Lissitzky was actually making *proun* paintings, but from the catalogue of quotations in the *Kunstismen*.

When considered in light of this publication, the phrase should give pause to anyone wanting to find in it the ultimate guiding principle of Lissitzky's art: first, its catchiness, like that of the sales pitch or campaign slogan, speaks to the convergence of avant-garde and commercial cultures, as advertised on the cover of the *Kunstismen* and as displayed in its collection of manifesto sound bites; secondly, its message of linear development, remarkably similar to the logic of van Doesburg's equation defining the "universal," partakes of the same kind of rational

telos that drives the *Kunstismen's* rigid typographical organization, relentless indexing, and chronological division. In contrast, process for Lissitzky, or so his self-portrait maintains, should be simultaneously productive *and* destructive, a perpetual battle between reason and anti-reason, a pendulum that swings between the meaningful and the meaningless. Or, put another way, it proposes that the intelligence of every artist-as-constructor must be challenged continually by the stupidity of his own monkey-hand.