El Lissitzky: Radical Reversibility

A small but many-sided Lissitzky exhibition showed that his revolutionary politics were best represented in the abstract language and space of his “Proun,” rather than in his later propagandistic photomontages.

BY YVE-ALAIN BOIS

Can we speak of more than one El Lissitzky? Lissitzky the Jewish militant, Lissitzky the Suprematist, the functionalist advisor, the advertisement designer, the Soviet propagandist, the theoretician of abstract art—these are only a few of his numerous identities. Should we regard this diversity as part of his message, as if Lissitzky were saying that the modern artist must be a protean kaleidoscope? Or should we, on the contrary, seek a common denominator beneath the multiple aspects of his work, and a continuity beneath the apparent discontinuity of his career? How can we make one “author” of Lissitzky? This is the essential question that was raised once again by the recent exhibition of his work presented by the Busch-Reisinger Museum at Harvard University.

Organized by Peter Nisbet, curator at the Busch-Reisinger, this was Lissitzky’s first one-man show in the United States. It brought together works from Harvard’s own extensive holdings, from North American public and private collections (more than one would have guessed) and from the Sprengel Museum in Hannover and the Staatsliche Galerie in Halle (the two museums, one in each of the Germanies, that co-organized the exhibition with Harvard). The diversity of these sources provided a rare anthology of Lissitzky’s works, many of which had never been shown before. Moreover, the exhibition was accompanied by a copiously illustrated catalogue that will surely become a landmark in Lissitzky studies. It contains a long, well-documented essay by Nisbet, as well as three texts by Lissitzky (previously unpublished in English), a catalogue raisonné of his typo.
In the exhibition, the abrupt passage from the abstract Suprematist works of the 1920s to the more overtly politicized works of the 1930s reinforced a theory of discontinuity in Lissitzky's oeuvre.

graphical work (much more profuse than is generally thought) and an annotated transcription of a list Lissitzky compiled of his Prouns (prepared for an exhibition of his works in Berlin in 1924).

The show, with its 83 pieces, was actually rather modest in size (more than half of the works were books and other typographical works designed by Lissitzky). And due to the closing of the old Busch-Reisinger building, the exhibition was held in the small ground-floor gallery of the new Sackler Museum. This venue in part determined the limited scale of the exhibition and presented Nisbet with a curatorial choice: to emphasize Lissitzky's traditional two-dimensional work (books, typography—that is, to Lissitzky's two-dimensional work).

Certainly concentrating on Lissitzky's more traditional two-dimensional work establishes an artificial coherence (one to which Lissitzky's work is particularly resistent), but this focus had at least one merit: it emphasized the crucial work of the early 1930s and the development of Lissitzky's major project, the Prouns. (Proun—pronounced “pro-oon”—a neologism coined by Lissitzky to refer to his abstract architecture, which is an acronym for the Russian equivalent of “Project for the Affirmation of the New.”) In a comprehensive way, the show allowed one to assess a decisive moment (if not the decisive moment) in Lissitzky's career (even more perhaps than an exhaustive presentation of his work would have allowed). Thus, it is not so much the choice of works that must be questioned, but the manner in which this choice was presented and “interpreted” by the exhibition.

How then, and according to what criteria, was Lissitzky's corpus divided up? As soon as one entered the exhibition, one could see at a glance that most of the space was dedicated to Lissitzky's pictorial work from 1919 to 1923. (His pictorial activity from 1924 to 1925 was documented only by a few Prouns.) This work was spread over two large walls, one with the Proun paintings, the other with his three-dimensional pictorial portfolios from 1921 and 1925. Including the lithographs from the First Proun Portfolio and the First Stierer Portfolio, the accompanying sketches and the paintings, the show comprised approximately 50 Prouns, which occupied three-quarters of the wall-space. By comparison, the presentation of his typographical work up until 1925 was much less spectacular. Aside from the inherent difficulties of adequately exhibiting books (a book must be manipulated in order to convey its volume—think of Mayakovsky's Dla glas, for example, with its thumb-index and palm-size format), the books were simply less imposing than the Prouns (though no less interesting). Although some effort was made to display the books as objects—by opening several copies in different places, by taking them apart and spreading the pages out on the wall, by showing them standing and fanned out—these techniques did not counteract the (false) impression that the Prouns greatly outnumbered the typographical works. This impression was due not only to the difference in scale, but also to a difference in status between that granted to the paintings (hanging vertically) and that granted to the books (documents, mostly presented horizontally in a showcase). It is this fundamental opposition which, as we shall see, Lissitzky's work attempted to subvert.

Finally, although we were given some information, however succinct, about Lissitzky's graphic work from the late 1920s to the middle of the 1930s, we were told virtually nothing about his exhibition designs of 1925-27 or about his architectural projects (even though the Busch-Reisinger owns several important sketches of Lissitzky's famous Abstract Cabinet in Hannover, 1926-27, these were not included in the exhibition). As a result, the exhibition moved almost without transition from walls and panels devoted to the Prouns and to Lissitzky's typographical experimentation of the 1920s, to his photomontages of the Stalin era and to the graphic work from the 1930s. It was a veritable photographic jump—the abrupt passage from an exhibition of Lissitzky's suprematist works of the early 1920s to the more politicized works of the late 1920s and 1930s—reinforced a theory of discontinuity in Lissitzky's work.

There are at least two Lissitzkys, says Nisbet, and this exhibition Lissitzky the formalist creator of the Prouns, student of Malevich, sympathizing with the Revolution, who moved to politics, desirous of leaving a neutral territory to art and thus inclined toward abstraction; and Lissitzky the propagandist, creator of photomontages, the architect of a new society, the nation and Stalin, a Lissitzky who owed his survival to his hardy collaboration with the regime, his survival to his hardy collaboration with tyrrany (the catalogue informs us that the protection he received, notably from Beria, the organizer of the Stalinist purge). Between the two, the catalogue informs us that this exhibition dramatizes by its omission of Lissitzky's architecture and exhibition designs, and its almost total exclusion of the years 1925-27, which are crucial for several reasons.

Yet one must not be too quick to criticize and I believe that this omission is justified. The exhibition surfaces in the exhibition in a case that has nothing to do with the relation between art and...
politics in a kind of antechamber, off the main room of the exhibition, were displayed the pages of Khad Gadya, a small book for children. Life itself seems to reform it. Although he was profoundly committed to the new regime, Lissitzky left Russia in 1921 for Berlin—the center of intellectual immigration—and remained in Europe until 1925. His role as intermediary between the Western and Russian avant-gardes allowed him to return to Europe often until 1927, especially since his wife, Sophie Küppers, and her two sons, had remained behind for a time in Germany before rejouncing him in Moscow. From 1927 on, Lissitzky made only brief journeys on the occasion of his exhibition designs.

The transition from L.2 to L.3 of course did not occur precisely at the beginning of 1925, but it is easy to show that later in the 1920s, the less Lissitzky participated in the cosmopolitan German life in which he had previously been so active, the more his art became "readable." This direction was so strong that by the end of his life Lissitzky wound up producing a kind of conventional "monumental" neo-classicism. This simplification of Lissitzky's work is of course a cliché, but I do not reject it as easily as Marx Chagall, at least not without the idea that Lissitzky renounced artistic experimentation in order to save his skin. In fact, I (and others) expected him to remain the "architect" and to emphasize in the catalogue. But Lissitzky adopts another line of reasoning in order to exempt Lissitzky from political responsibility: Lissitzky never took political positions very seriously. According to this reasoning, it was a happy coincidence that led Lissitzky to expose the revolutionary ideal: "Lissitzky's reliance on ideas of development and change made it easy for him [and the other participants] to work with the Bolshevik government. Thus, despite the fact that he was never a member of the Communist party... he was content to work for and with the government in the massive task of modernizing Russia." Although we are told that Lissitzky "emotionally linked the future of his own son, born in October 1930, to the future of the Soviet State," the revolution is given here as an external event, "easy to cope with," and the State becomes a silent partner, for whom he was merely content to work.

This art-historical gambit is much subtler than the one that makes Lissitzky a martyr, since it accounts for the stylistic discontinuities in his work. Malveich, prior to this "Suprematist episode," Lissitzky had not yet found his true direction. It would certainly be unjust to see the Suprematist work as the work of a mere follower. If the Lissitzky who created Khad Gadya (incorporated Chagall's motifs in a rather servant manner) and the Lissitzky who remained to the end of his life Lissitzky's numerous "artistic" books and articles are our guides, we may understand that Lissitzky's own dismissal of these early Jewish book illustrations. As his wife reported, the "little books were put away and later scarcely mentioned by Lissitzky."

... the transition from between L.2 and L.3. In this case, Malveich's arrival at Kiev in September and the manner in which he replaced Chagall suggests that Malveich was not a merely 'outside influences, at least as evident in all his work before 1919, and there is no doubt that, as time went by, Lissitzky increasingly felt a certain specific cause to such an extent, and to reduce this enigma to a logical series of historical events: Malveich's arrival in Kiev at the beginning of November 1918, and the manner in which he replaced Chagall. In that case, Malveich's role as a catalyst for his work. But there is another way of looking at the question. It seems that it accounts for the stylistic discontinuity in his work. Malveich, prior to this "Suprematist episode," Lissitzky had not yet found his true direction. It would certainly be unjust to see the Suprematist work as the work of a mere follower. If the Lissitzky who created Khad Gadya (incorporated Chagall's motifs in a rather servant manner) and the Lissitzky who remained to the end of his life Lissitzky's numerous "artistic" books and articles are our guides, we may understand that Lissitzky's own dismissal of these early Jewish book illustrations. As his wife reported, the "little books were put away and later scarcely mentioned by Lissitzky."

Yet, there remains the question of the relation between L.2 and L.3; this is much more complex than the relation (or the non-relation) between L.1 and L.2. Were we to rely merely on sources that may or may not consult the catalogue, what Lissitzky did might seem quite traditional. As Benjamin suggests, Lissitzky's "suprematism" is based on Russian avant-garde artists of the 1920s who later worked for Stalin as "academic" in Lissitzky's psychological "lack of commitment," or rather, a mere acquiescence to the circumstances of the moment. Thus we are given, for example, only a biographical explanation for Lissitzky's return to Russia
Installation view of "Proun" exhibition, Cologne, 1922.

Just what is the place of politics in Lissitzky's work? Buchloh has attempted to give an answer by showing that a paradigm change was taking place in Russia throughout the 1920s, making obsolete the self-referentiality of the modernist position in art. Buchloh describes this paradigm change as the transition from faktura to factography. Faktura was a major pictorial concern of the pre-revolutionary Russian avant-garde. A positivist and modernist redefinition of the traditional notion of texture (which carried unacceptable connotations of subjectivity and the old masters), faktura emphasized the materiality of the pictorial process and mediums and conceived these aspects (e.g., the planarity of the canvas, the quality of the support, the thickness of the paint) as the "zero degree of painting." This new concept—although it was based on a belief in a sort of "science of pictorial facts," ultimately linked to the new, industrial division of labor—provided many Russian artists, Lissitzky included, with a justification for demonstrating their skills in the craft of painting. On the other hand, factography was a term first employed by the anti-propaganda writer Sergei Tretia-kov (Brecht's translator in Russia) to describe the kind of "objective-witness journalism" he advocated for demonstrating their skills in the craft of painting. After all, factography was a term first employed by the anti-propaganda writer Sergei Tretia-kov (Brecht's translator in Russia) to describe the kind of "objective-witness journalism" he advocated for demonstrating their skills in the craft of painting.

M y reference here to Brecht's term is not arbitrary, for although he was largely blind to the plastic arts of the 20th century, he always emphasized, in both his theory and his theater, the impossibility of conveying a revolutionary content by means of the cathartic illusion upon which the traditional (bourgeois) theater was based—a cathartic illusion at work in any art form that glorifies totalitarian regimes, including Lissitzky's last works. But while Lissitzky was struggling with the difficulties of adapting the modernist paradigm to the revolutionary situation—even before his adherence to factography—he was a true Brechtian. As we know, there was nothing worse for Brecht than bowing to the spectator with a political message, or designating a hero with whom the viewer must identify. On the contrary, he felt, one must present the spectator with a riddle, give him or her the theoretical means with which to solve it, and leave it at that. It is up to the audience to find the solution, to wake to a political consciousness (if the work is actually based on a political theme, which is not always the case).

What Brecht wanted his theater to produce was the active movement that constitutes this awakening: the audience should not be engrossed in the story, but must work (with pleasure) to construct the whole. Without the riddle they would not have the means to link the situation described in the play with their own situation in history. In other words, theater must not be an opiate, seducing its public. Rather, the concept of dissociation and all the discontinuities of language upon which Brecht's theater is founded, aim at the creation of a jolt that requires the viewer to constantly ask himself or herself questions, to doubt the assurance of his or her apprehension of the real.

In my opinion, all of the writings produced by L 2 (that is, by the modernist inventor of the Proun, the typographer and the exhibition designer, at least up to the middle of the 1920s) demonstrate a Brechtian position, and all of Lissitzky's work of this same period revolves around an eminently ideological goal, even if the political question is not directly addressed: to jar the spectator out of his or her age-old lethargy—whether by means of the Prouns' ambiguity, the kinetics of the exhibition designs, or the visual dynamism of the typography.

I therefore propose the following thesis: there is indeed a schism between L 2 and L 3, between the "Brechtian" Lissitzky and the "Stalinist" Lissitzky (let us not get involved here in the quite complex question of Two studies for 26 Two Squares, 1922. Above, graphite and black ink, 10 by 8 inches; Buch-Relling/Museum. Below, graphite and watercolor on cardboard, 14¾ by 8 inches; Museum of Modern Art.
of the relations between Brecht and Stalin). This discontinuity is not (as Nietzsche sug-
gests) found between a purely formalist position (the Proust as a version of art for
art’s sake) and a position that turns art into
an instrument of propaganda for the glory of
tyranny, but rather between two ways of
considering the relations between art and
ideology. The position of L. is perfectly
clear in the editorial Lissitzky wrote for
Veshok (Object), the magazine he created
in 1922 in Berlin with Lyra Ehrenburg:
Veshok stands equally aloof from all political
parties, because it is not occupied with the prob-
lem of art. This does not mean, however, that we are in favour of an art which
stands outside of life and is apolitical on prin-
ciple. On the contrary, we cannot imagine a crea-
tion of new forms in art unrelated to the change
in social form, and it is obvious that all those in
reality with Veshok belong to the new crea-
tive forces in Europe and in Russia who are
creating new “objects.”

In other words, it is through the explora-
tion of formal issues that art must first
apprehend its ideological task in times of
evolution. That task is first of all to retrans-
form the perceiving subject: any direct
presentation of a political content without this
attendant transformation is doomed to fail-
ure. This obviously does not mean that overt
political content is in itself reprehensible, as
the good old formalist doctrine would have
us believe, but that the dissociation of “form”
and “content” which is at the base of
“socialist realism”—to use the traditional
relations between art and
art history—appears
inadequate as soon as one pays attention to
the question of ideology.

Nietzche raises two points in the catalogue
that demonstrate that it is not so easy to
break free of traditional art history’s
basic apoliticism. The first concerns Of Two
Squares, a small book for children illus-
trated by Lissitzky at Vithek in 1920, but
only printed in Berlin in 1922. It depicts a
red square and a black square arriving
on earth to abolish chaos and to
build red clarity. Nietzsche rightly opposes the
traditional interpretation of this “cartoon,”
which regards “the red square as positive
(embodifying the revolution) and the black
square as negative.” As he notes, “the
sequence of scenes makes it clear that both
squares participate in affirming the new
order.” But the alternative reading he pro-
poses seems to me equally erroneous: “The
black square probably stands for Suprema-
tism, the red for its development in a revo-
lutionary, Unovisian spirit.” I would pro-
pose another reading. If one accepts Lissitz-
ky’s Leninism as a given (which Nietzsche
thesis—thus Lissitzky had a “lack of
commitment” to Soviet politics—does not
allow), the black square that comes to help
the red square carry out the revolution and
is then expelled from the planet that has
been put in order, could be a reference to the
abruptly terminated anarchist move-
ment. Although the anarchists were essen-
tial at the beginning of the October Revolu-
tion, they were later driven out in a bloody
purge by the Red Army during the events of
Kronstadt in March 1921. Either way, it is
only after the red square that the figure of
caricatures which is interesting in Of
Two Squares, over and above the specif-
ically political situation to which it refers. In fact,
it is precisely because the scenario of this
“story” is known in advance—a characteris-
tic of the epic genre, where the emphasis is
the codes is enhanced by a previous know-
ledge of the depicted facts—that Lissitzky is
able to graft his ideological work onto the
fundamentally abstract level of his semi-
ological investigation.

My second example concerns the famous
poster of the Whites with the Red Wedge
(unfortunately not included in the exhibi-
tion, since it appears that no original copy
survives). Based on the
early catalogue—On the Polish Front—Nietz-
che argues that the poster was made during the
summer of 1920 under the influence of
Brecht’s response to the Western Front in the
Russian

War which directly threatened the
V-shaped wedge, the “plastic
space” was produced on the occasion of an alto-
ger cultural eventual, and does not require
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space” was produced on the occasion of an alto-
ger cultural eventual, and does not require

In response I would have to say that it
seems difficult to believe that the word “white”
had ceased to mean simply “reac-
tion” in the Russia of 1920— and, after
all, “With the red wedge, beat the whites” is
the inscription one can read on the poster.
In the second place, it would greatly limit
the political scope of the poster if one were to
interpret it solely in terms of one particu-
lar context. Not that this content dimin-
ishes the work politically (as Nietzsche
said), on the contrary, that it accentuates it
the association of the Polcs with the White
Army (which the white zones or experience
depth to the image), but only if we go one
step further. (In the same manner, the emblems of
Brecht or Lissitzky are sometimes
more or less than an adjective, of the figure, usually,
visible, but which directly
threatened the
V-shaped wedge, the “plastic
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ger cultural eventual, and does not require

In Europe and in

The Factory Workbenches, 1919–20, propaganda board in Vienna.

The political efficacy of Beat the Whites is not to be
sought in its political context, but in the way it subverts the
codes it uses, which are recep tacles of a certain ideological
investigation.

The Factory Workbenches, 1919–20, propaganda board in Vienna.

Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge, 1920, poster, approximately 20 x 26.

 Desire cannot lose itself in an object or in a
discourse where it can be fulfilled; it encounters a
screen and is reflected in it… The poster
returns desire back in upon itself as such, as an
area of rhythms, contours, colors. It fails to
objectify and identify the object. Plastic space
becomes a space of anguish. 3

It is not possible to quote here Lyotard’s
entire, very dense formal analysis, which
uses the Freudian concept of the death
drive to characterize the poster. Lyotard’s
“plastic space” can be summarized by saying that
the dissociation between the pleasure prin-
ciple and the reality principle operating in

Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge is characteristic of utopia, that is, of a radical
critique of the social order:

To beat the whites with the red wedge is not only
to win the civil war, improve the economy, and
build collective; it is also to force the wedge
to all the white zones of experience and ideol-
ogy, of the established. It is to submit all social,
political, moral and esthetic givens to the same
deformity that desire undergoes in the powers
of the wedges, the encompassing roundness of white
invest must everywhere be opened and pierced by red sharpness.

In other words, this poster’s political effi-
cacy is not to be sought in its explicit
content, but in the way it subverts the codes
it uses, which are receptacles of ideological
investigation and function as
receptacles of a certain ideological
type and as receptacles of a certain ideological
investigation and function as
receptacles of a certain ideological
For Lissitzky, axonometry eliminated all reference to the spectator's point of view. Liberating the viewer from gravity, he hoped, would lead to the foundering of the whole system of perception.

er, he merely reuses a composition from one of his first Prouns (The Town) onto which he literally overlays, in a static and perfunctory typography, the Leninist slogan about the return to work.

No utopic desire animates this factory board, and it remains ineffective. But its lack of conviction attests to the difficulty of the fundamental theoretical question Lissitzky was then trying to answer: is it possible to transmit something like a proposition exclusively by means of an image?

Alan Birnholz has proposed that military maps, still popular in Russia after the war years, played an important part in the development of Bateau l'âne. This example suggests how Lissitzky recuperated a certain modernist idea of a grammar of forms and radically subverted it. As it happens, the military map was also the very example that Mondrian chose when he wanted to demonstrate that "abstract representations can move us deeply." As he wrote in De Stijl in 1919, "An example I recollect was a film early in the war showing a large part of the world in map form. Upon this, the invading German forces suddenly appeared as small cubes. Likewise a counterforce appeared, the Allies, also as small cubes. In this way the worldwide cataclysm was actually expressed in all its vastness, rather than in parts or details as a naturalistic portrayal would have shown it." In a similar way, the (opposite) idea that the proposition can be an image came to Wittgenstein when he was looking at a diagram that was supposed to map out an automobile accident.

When Lissitzky compared his Prouns to geographical maps in 1921, he said, "When we saw that the content of our canvas was no longer a pictorial one, that it had now begun to rotate, even though, for the moment, it was like a geographical map... and remained hanging on the wall—we decided to give it an appropriate name. We called it PROUN." Two ideas meet here, and they must be analyzed more closely: the affirmation of the reversibility of the Prouns, and the consequent condom-

Above, 8 Position Proun, ca. 1933, metal foil, oil and gouache on canvas, 60 inches square. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa.

Right, Proun, India ink, gouache and graphite, 5½ by 5½ inches. Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto.


Opposite bottom, Construction Floating in Space, ca. 1929, lithograph with graphite annotations, 19½ by 20 inches. Collection Mr. and Mrs. Gerda Jimnez, Caracas.
Lissitzky moved from a simple intensification of the plus/minus effect of axonometry to the radical reversibility and spatial disorientation of works such as the cover that he designed for "Broom."

God is infinite), axonometry makes one reflect on (and no longer see) infinity; it suppresses and encompasses perspective as a limited possibility, just as white—sum total of the colors of the spectrum—embraces and suppresses blue.

Malevich, with very few exceptions, never used axonometry in his paintings and never concerned himself with representing volumes. His art is entirely planometric; the works he presented in the 1915 exhibition 0.10 (Suprematism's veritable birth date, for instance, have titles such as Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension, or Color Masses in the Second Dimension—that is, everything but the third dimension. If Lissitzky, then, invoked axonometry in relation to Suprematism, it was to refer to his personal contribution: axonometry was for him one of the occurrences of the zero that Malevich wanted to magnify in his art (Malevich's texts are filled with such statements as "I have transformed myself into the zero of forms").

Art and Pangometry presents itself in fact as an analysis of the links between mathematics (or rather, numbering systems) and art; and Lissitzky first and foremost related Suprematism to the positional numbering system. In this system, which we use today, but which was invented by Indian Buddhism, zero plays a major role. Lissitzky described Suprematism as a positional system whose principal element is the color plane: "New optical discoveries have taught us that two areas of different intensities, even when they are lying in one plane, are grasped by the mind as being at different distances from our eye." This first interpretation of the "Suprematist zero" is particularly astute: Malevich's paintings play on the optical properties of color and on the overlapping of planes to give the illusion of indefinite depth. The second interpretation Lissitzky offers is entirely orthodox. It is the typically modernist reading of the square as the zero degree or the irreducible essence of painting, as the apotheosis of flatness; it is the commonplace of the Black Square as the last painting, as the apotheosis of self-referentiality. But it is in his third way of conceiving the Malevichian zero that Lissitzky touches upon his own work, that is, bears upon axonometry and reversibility.

This is not the place to examine in detail Lissitzky's conception of the perspective/axonometry opposition. Let us say, for brevity's sake, that the latter system of spatial representation eliminated all reference to a spectator's point of view (corresponding specularly to a vanishing point) and that this liberation would lead to an overall floundering of perception. Not only would lines parallel one another endlessly as forwards and backwards, but the perceptual security that the illusionist system of perspective affords by suppressing the built ambiguity of any visual apprehension of depth would be deconstructed, giving way to an ambiguity that would force the spectator to make constant decisions about how to interpret what he or she sees: this is figure-hollow or in relief.

The transition/retention, or plus/minus effect of axonometry is intensified in almost all of the Prouns. In Lissitzky's Brechtian fight against the enraptured and the delusion of identification that, according to Lissitzky, characterized bourgeois art, axonometry appeared as an ideal weapon. He was aware of its formal possibilities gradually: his first Prouns are spare, and axonometry is used in an orthodox way (as in architectonic of the tradition that would have a map hung vertically on a wall, while it should be unfolded on a table in order to function as a working model.

Lissitzky's geographical metaphor demonstrates his very personal interpretation of Malevich's Suprematism, an interpretation which, it seems to me, allows us to perceive a trait common to Lissitzky's varied production of the early 1920s. As of 1921, Lissitzky criticized Suprematism in these terms: "For all its revolutionary force, the Suprematist canvas remained in the form of a picture. Like any canvas in a museum, it possessed one specific perpendicular axis (vis-a-vis the horizon), and when it was hung any other way it looked as if it were sideways or upside down."

Although this reproach is not entirely justified (the black square is completely reversible, and this accounts in part for its strength; and Malevich was sufficiently interested in the question to attempt new ways of hanging—on the ceiling, for example—it must be seen in light of another text of Lissitzky's. Written three years later, in 1924, Art and Pangometry has been cited by Kenneth Frampton as "the central text to [Lissitzky's] theoretical thought." In it, Lissitzky wrote:

Suprematism has advanced the ultimate tip of the visual pyramid of perspective to infinity. It has broken through the "blue lamplight of the firmament." For the colour of space, it has taken not the single blue ray of the spectrum, but the whole unity—the whole. Suprematist space may be formed not only forwards from the plane but also backwards in depth. If we indicate the flat surface of the picture as 0, we can describe the direction in depth by ϸ (negative) and the forward direction by ϩ (positive) or the other way around.

The diagram that accompanies this passage opposes the monocentric perspective of the Renaissance to axonometric projection, frequently used in architecture today, in which receding lines remain parallel and do not meet in a vanishing point. In the kind of Hegelian dialectic taking place in this text, where different systems of space configuration successively negate and surpass one another throughout the ages, axonometry (affiliated here with Suprematism) is seen as the Augenblick (Instant) of monocentric perspective. Rather than the metaphorical representation, by means of a vanishing point, of an unrepresentable infinity (only..."
These efforts toward a radial reversibility of the monogram do not merely, as is traditional in the history of criticism, refer to a point of departure against the tradition of the museum. In a letter to Sophie, he wrote:

"You go on to enquire on which wall you should hang the pictures, but you clearly do not think of tiling one of these surfaces with yet another decorative patch. You should be treating the one you have as an integral part of a whole which is represented by a small sketch." Nisbet clearly understands Lisztisky's interest in the monogram because he did include several works which demonstrate it directly: 1) Lisztisky's 1920 graphic experiment in which he painted the same Lithograph four times on the same sheet of paper, but in four different positions, so that the image seems to be moving around in a central pivot; 2) the lithograph from the First Proun Portfolio, based on a series of images showing the Proun gallery and its preparation for the exhibition, which Lisztisky arranged in different positions; and 4) one of the multiple-exposure photographs mentioned above (In the Studio, ca. 1923), which groups together, head to foot, several figures, including Lisztisky, thus literally offering a paratactic view of his status he conceived for his Prouns. They were no longer paintings, but documents, and they should be conserved as such, that is, horizontally. This horizontality was of course another inversion of the bis-vís-á-vis relationship, which is the cause of the spectator's contemplative attitude in front of pictorial works. In order to conceive the painting as an object, as an allusion, as an allusion, as a spatial connection with the space of the world which is oriented around him and in which he wants to invert an object to take away its signification," says the phenomenologist Merleau­­-Ponty as the threshold of human perception.

Nowhere is the association of axonometry with this radical reversibility demonstrated so clearly as it is in the drawings that were meant to be a posteriori records of Lisztisky's exhibition designs (and one could show indeed that the question of the ambiguity of the projection designs, as if Lisztisky had attempted to work out in "real space" the problematic of the exhibition of the Proun, I will leave this topic at that, however, preferring to concentrate on the objects themselves. (Included in the Harvard show. In Proun Room, his wife, one of the lithographs from the First Kestner Portfolio, the walls of the room under such a topological transformation that the positive and negative spaces constantly reverse one another.) The same thing occurs in Lisztisky's representation of the concept of situation (nachtstil). This image must be turned upside down in order for the bottom to be up and vice versa. This representation of inversion, not only does the positive space become negative, but we also see just how Lisztisky's concept of situation and the ground is—this upside-down/right-side-up figure is incorporated in the representation (with photocollage). This oscillation of a plane in opposite directions, its change from bi- to tridimensionality and back, is fundamental. The motif of the Proun occurs in almost all of these presented in the exhibition. The effect is based, as Lisztisky himself put it, on the projection axes, which greatly increases the projection/retension effect characteristic of axonometry.

The diagram that accompanies this text refers to the Proun as a sign of the world to come, as an epistemological model of the new art, as the "real" form of Lisztisky's writings. If "infinity" refers to the absence of a point of view in the disembodied space of axonometry, "plus infinity" refers to the potentiality of the world to be invented, to the material out of which it is to be shaped. Lisztisky considered his Prouns documents because they were, for him, blueprints for action, cards for a larger ensemble. He therefore draws "flattens" that is, surfaces similar to "tabletops, studio floors, charts, bulletin boards, and noticeboards, that are objects scattered on, data is entered on, on which information may be per·

cussed, and in which the object of the work of art is made by photocopier or the like. "flattens" do not offer a "conception of the picture as representing a world, some sort of workplace which reads on the picture plane in correspondence with the erect human posture;" they are "no longer the analogue of a visual experience of nature but rather the potentiality of the bed relates to making as the vertical of the Renaissance picture plane relates to the horizon of seeing." Lisztisky wanted to assign to his Prouns.

In order to fully understand Lisztisky, one must return to his interpretation of the "Malvichievich zero," Lisztisky often used metaphors, for instance, in his texts. His 1922 exhibition lecture is a well-known example of this. In his lectures, he wrote:

"In 1923 Malevich exhibited a black square painted on a white canvas. Here a form was displayed which was opposed to everything that was understood by "pictures" or "painting" or "art." Its creator wanted to reduce all forms to paintings to zero. For us, however, this zero was the turning-point. When we have a series of surfaces that are one-dimensional... it comes right down to the zero, then begins the ascending line 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 5... These lines are ascending, but already from the other side of the picture.

This text continues, but a prior version, because it includes a diagram, makes Lisztisky's ideas clearer:

Certainly, this series ascends, but on the other side of the diagonal continuity to the space in which the painting is closed, the black square to the black square as the last painting, we have, if the slab of the square has blocked up the narrative, the transformation. For, a reference to perspective, its reverse serves as the foundation for a new, volumetric growth of the concrete world.

This shift, from the verticality of the painting to the horizontality of the document, is where I would locate the paradigmatic change in Lisztisky's work. This change is identical to the transformation of Leo Stein­­ewald's "progression of order" to the horizon, of Baushenbach. This same shift, I believe, is essential to many radical experiments of this century, including Cubism, the works of Mondrian and Pollock, and the best Minimalist works. 1) I would even say that the splendid colour of the Proun and the position of the ground is—this upside-down/right-side-up figure is incorporated in the representation (with photocollage). This oscillation of a plane in opposite directions, its change from bi- to tridimensionality and back, is fundamental. The motif of the Proun occurs in almost all of these presented in the exhibition. The effect is based, as Lisztisky himself put it, on the projection axes, which greatly increases the projection/retension effect characteristic of axonometry."

One last word about the exhibition: the semiotic status that Lisztisky gave to his pictorial works could be seen in the show as well as in his ideas. Lisztisky's use of what Buchloh has called faktau (an aspect of Lisztisky's production which is less visible in the both painted and lithographed versions of the same Proun). Although he condemned "romanticism," Lisztisky in his writings (and especially in his artistic practice) often evokes the idea of "faktau" (materialist), there is no point in denying the pleasure Lisztisky must have had in seeking a means to epitomize real materials.

One of this exhibition's merits is that it shows us what we have missed in the reproduction of his works can hardly achieve. Who knew, for example, that Lisztisky had his own "original" paintings? (This is true even of the lithographs: the central black circle of one of the prints from the First Kestner Portfolio is a collage..."

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Lisztisky saw a changing status for the "Prouns": from being treated as paintings, documents to be used horizontally. This shift from vertical to horizontal is where the paradigm changes.
This passage is important because it reveals how Lissitzky moved from a single interpretation of phenomena, seen peering down from above, investigating from below. The result is that the one axis of the picture, having entered the horizon of forms, "as Malevich would have seen it, we screw the ground, to our submission to the law or viewing position: facing the painting, racing the ground to this."

The result is that there is a certain ontological status of the ground is this even as a student, when he began drawing on an architect's table."

This shift, from the verticality of the painting to the horizon of the document, is where I would locate the paradigmatic change in Lissitzky's work. This change is identical to the transformation Leo Steinberg saw 20 years later."

But in the 1920s, Lissitzky understood that many of the problems he had set forth in his Prouns. They were no longer paintings, but documents, and they should be considered as such, that is, horizontally."

Lissitzky's critique, which on the surface relates to museum practices, involves some important shifts in the understanding of status he conceived for his Prouns. They were no longer paintings, but documents, and they should be considered as such, that is, horizontally."

This text continues, but a prior version, because it includes a diagram, makes Lissitzky's ideas clearer:

Certainly, this series extends, but on the other side of the divide between an object—this one had brought painting to the square in order to perish there! This is the theme of the negative, for Lissitzky, even if he preferred to concentrate on the objects which were presented in the Harvard Berger basin as a form of Lissitzky's own exhibition designs (both of which were eventually turned upside down)."

The fact that magazines frequently lie on the table with their titles upside down gave Lissitzky the idea of turning paintings upside down."

This shift, from the verticality of the painting to the horizon of the document, is where I would locate the paradigmatic change in Lissitzky's work. This change is identical to the transformation Leo Steinberg saw 20 years later.

The diagram that accompanies this text refers to the Proun "First Keyston Portfolio," as an epistemological model of the society to be built (the subject of Lissitzky's writings)."
All Lissitzky’s writings emphasize the semiotic status of the “Prouns”—not as fully realizable architectural projects, but investigations for rethinking future practice.

of shiny paper.) Who would have suspected from a simple reproduction, even in color, the textural diversity of Proun 2C (ca. 1920), in which the wooden support sometimes appears as wood, and sometimes is treated to look like dust; in which glued pieces of paper or metal adopt all the characteristics of construction materials (the friable dullness of plaster, cement bubbles, the roughness of concrete, etc.)?  

Lissitzky stated his position on this role he assigned to this materiological investigation in an enigmatic passage from the preface to the portfolio Victory over the Sun:  

The colours of the individual sections of these pages are to be regarded in the same way as in my Proun works, as equivalent to materials; that is to say, when the designs are put into effect, the red, yellow or black parts of the puppets are not painted correspondingly, but rather are made in corresponding material, for example bright copper, dull iron, and so on."

Obviously we must not take Lissitzky literally here. The Prouns were not made like this. The colors, as signs of materials, are in fact signs in the second degree, signs of signs (the materials they “represent” are the signs of the possibility of the transition from pictorial culture to material culture, not a preliminary representation of its actualization). Lissitzky’s genius as a craftsman, his obvious interest in supports of all kinds (for example, the grains of sandpaper that are dyed the color of lead on the invitation to one of his Berlin exhibitions) were not diminished when he adhered to the codes of “socialist realism”: the cover of the report of the Seventh Congress of Soviets, mentioned above, is a masterpiece of binding in which a metallic imprint of a machine design frames a photomontage of glorified workers. But by their abandonment of any distinction between the sign and its referent (the color of metal referring directly to metallurgy and thus to heavy industry), these late technical virtuosties become mere exercises of style, whose connotations of luxury were meant to mask the terrible economic difficulties Russia was facing at the time. Material lost the richness of its connotative possibilities when it was subjected to the monolithic nature of Stalinist...
Lissitzky must have taken pleasure in representing real materials; his genius as a craftsman and his interest in "faktura" were not diminished even by the codes of socialist realism.

discourse. As Buchloh points out, much work remains to be done on the way the Russian avant-garde was progressively engaged in the service of the totalitarian cause, and an analysis of the "rationalist" evolution of Lissitzky's materiality—as this exhibition teaches us—will have to play a vital role in this work.

1. It is true that two of the plates of the First Keister Portfolio refer to the famous (22) Prus Room, and that the Prus Room itself, as well as the exhibition scenes of Dresden and Hanover, were mentioned in a wall text. In addition, Die Kunstformen, an anthology on the art of 1914-34 that Lissitzky compiled with A. P. Venkov and published, was judiciously displayed open to a reproduction of the well-known Louis Firmin of 1920-24. Finally, in the catalogue, conceived as a supplement to the exhibition, Nebel touches upon the question of Lissitzky's "environmental" and architectural works.

2. Peter Nebel, "An Introduction to El Lissitzky," in El Lissitzky (1906-1941), exhibition catalogue, Cambridge, Mass., Raut-Breininger Museum, 1987, p. 52, note 13. In addition, Christina Lodder has informed me that Naum Gabo, who despised Lissitzky to the point of denying him the paternity of one of his typographical masterpieces, the cover of the Erste Russische Kunstausstellung catalogue (Galerie von der Heydt, Dusseldorf, 1921), believed him to be a Cheka agent. (This is hardly conceivable if only, paradoxically, because of Lissitzky's longevity.)

3. The contract is emphasized in the exhibition by the inclusion, in the Jewish room, near the door that leads into the big hall, of one of Lissitzky's earliest lithographed Prus, accompanied by one of his clearest demonstrations of the reversibility of Prus space. (I will come back to this graphic experiment in which the same lithograph is printed four times on the same page, but in four different positions.)


7. Buchloh's argument in favor of the "political sincerity" of three artists in their support of the Stalinist regime, "so evident from the fact that an artist such as Tatlin, who did not work for the state agencies, continued to live his private, economically miserable existence without harassment" (ibid.) in, I believe, beside the point for two reasons. First, because Tatlin's not being imprisoned could be taken as an exception rather than by error of Stalinist bureaucracy or because he was protected by someone in this bureaucracy's second, because the question of "sincerity" in this way alters the fact, amply demonstrated by Buchloh, that photomontage develops in just a few years from "cartography" to the "short adulation of totalitarian power."
If the factography of the later photomontages turned into "sheer adulation of totalitarian power," it is perhaps because Lissitzky attempted to turn his art into a non-critical tool.

As Sophia Lissitzky-Klipper writes, "Now it suddenly became clear that he must return home, not only for the sake of his sorrowing parents, but also because of his own function as a creative artist, for the fulfillment of which there were tasks of a special kind awaiting him. He was needed in his homeland; the Soviet Union needed all his knowledge, his experience, his art." Lissitzky-Klipper, El Lissitzky, p. 54.

In order to substantiate his argument, Nibert refers to several unpublished notes of 1918 in which Lissitzky writes "a little bycokendly concerning food as a kitchen phase", which would clearly be overcome in the process of society "to do". But it seems obvious that Lissitzky is referring to the spontaneous experiments in communal living of the first days of the revolution which were then taken up by architects after 1921, that is, at the very moment when Lenin's NEP (New Economic Policy) was rehabilitating income from private property and private capital. The fact that numerous architectural projects resulted in very few actual constructions shows that the viability of such undertakings was seriously challenged. Although Lissitzky does not address these failures in his 1939 book on Soviet architecture (in fact, he makes direct reference to communal cooking as a question worthy of being considered), it seems obvious that he did not believe in a purely "economic" solution to the problems that Soviet society faced, housing included. In this sense, it seems to me, that one must interpret his irony with regard to the "kitchen phase". Now it seems clear that it is not only the utopian attitude of the young artist, but also the satisfaction of young communists, to find a new type of apartment, in which Lissitzky was interested in 1920, see Selin 0. Kagan-Moshein, Pioneers of Soviet Architecture, New York, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1977, pp. 41-98.

11. Ibid, p. 54.


17. I mention here only Krenklewich (which occurred after the creation of O'Keeffe-Squier) because it is the best known of the events of the terrible flight begun by the Bohockshevskis against the anarchists in 1916, after having courted them during the period preceding the October uprising, in which they had played a major role. In the subjects of the relationship between anarchism and Bolsheviki, and on Lenin's almost lubricating position in the 1917 The State of Revolution, followed by a clearer and cleaner dissolution of these positions after taking power, see Marcel Liebman, Les Lumières sous Lénine, Paris, 1972, p. 1, 279-284, and vol. 1, pp. 63-73. About Lissitzky's "Lenism," which Nibert obviously doubts, I refer to my article, "Lissitzky, return to the Marx", in Marta, n. 5-4, 1975, p. 190-211.

18. In his catalogue raisonné of Lissitzky's typographical work, Nibert denounces an entry in this poster and would obviously have included it in the exhibition had he found an original copy. Nevertheless, such homen-