

EL LISSITZKY TIRELESSLY TRAVELED—AND CROSS-POLLINATED. THIS INTENSE RUSSIAN CONSTRUCTIVIST SPURRED THE ONSLAUGHT OF AVANT-GARDE IDEAS SPREADING ACROSS EUROPE AND THE UNITED STATES IN THE EARLY 1920S. Denied entrance as a Jew to the art academy in Saint Petersburg, he went to Germany at the age of nineteen to study architecture. There he worked so relentlessly that his wife, Sophie, later connected his endless hours huddled over a drafting table to the “bent back and constricted chest” of his long struggle with tuberculosis.¹ During subsequent trips to Berlin, Lissitzky rubbed elbows with the luminaries of his time: Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Piet Mondrian, László Moholy-Nagy, and Theo Van Doesburg. He appears at every influential avant-garde turn: major exhibitions, lectures at the Bauhaus, guest editor of Schwitters’s journal, *Merz*. His drive produced influential paintings, exhibition design, photography, and typography. In “Our Book,” he explores the new material forms of book design in his own era while predicting the dematerialization of it in our own increasingly digital world.

¹ See Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, “Life and Letters,” in *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, trans. Helene Aldwinckle and Mary Whittall (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 16.

OUR BOOK

EL LISSITZKY | 1926

Every invention in art is a single event in time, has no evolution. With the passage of time different variations of the same theme are composed around the invention, sometimes more sharpened, sometimes more flattened, but seldom is the original power attained. So it goes on ‘til, after being performed over a long period, this work of art becomes so automatic-mechanical in its performance that the mind ceases to respond to the exhausted theme; then the time is ripe for a new invention. The so-called technical aspect is, however, inseparable from the so-called artistic aspect, and therefore we do not wish to dismiss close associations lightly, with a few catchwords. In any case, Gutenberg, the inventor of the system of printing from movable type, printed a few books by this method that stand as the highest achievement in book art. Then there follow a few centuries that produced no fundamental inventions in our field (up to the invention of photography). What we find, more or less, in the art of printing are masterly variations accompanied by technical improvement in the production of the instruments. The same thing happened with a second invention in the visual field—with photography. The moment we stop riding complacently on our high horse, we have to admit that the first daguerreotypes are not primitive rough-and-ready things but the highest achievements in the field of the photographic art. It is shortsighted to think that the machine alone, that is to say, the supplanting of manual processes by mechanical ones,

is fundamental to the changing of the appearance and form of things. In the first place it is the consumer who determines the change by his requirements; I refer to the stratum of society that furnishes the “commission.” Today it is not a narrow circle, a thin upper layer, but “All,” the masses.

The idea that moves the masses today is called “materialism,” but what precisely characterizes the present time is dematerialization. An example: correspondence grows, the number of letters increases, the amount of paper written on and material used up swells, then the telephone call relieves the strain. Then comes further growth of the communications network and increase in the volume of communications; then radio eases the burden. The amount of material used is decreasing, we are dematerializing, cumbersome masses of material are being supplanted by released energies. That is the sign of our time. What kind of conclusions can we draw from these observations, with reference to our field of activity?

I put forward the following analogies:

<i>Inventions in the Field of Thought-Communication</i>	<i>Inventions in the Field of General Communication</i>
Articulated speech	Upright walk
Writing	Wheel
Gutenberg's letterpress	Animal-drawn vehicle
?	Motor-car
?	Aeroplane

I submit these analogies in order to demonstrate that as long as the book is of necessity a handheld object, that is to say, not yet supplanted by sound recordings or talking pictures, we must wait from day to day for new fundamental inventions in the field of book production, so that here also we may reach the standard of the time.

Present indications are that this basic invention can be expected from the neighboring field of colotype. This process involves a machine that transfers the composed type-matter onto a film, and a printing machine that copies the negative onto sensitive paper. Thus the enormous weight of type and the bucket of ink disappear, and so here again we also have dematerialization. The most important aspect is that the production style for word and illustration is subject to one and the same process—to the colotype, to photography. Up to the present there has been no kind of representation as completely comprehensible to all people as photography. So we are faced with a book form in which representation is primary and the alphabet secondary.

We know two kinds of writing: a symbol for each idea = hieroglyph (in China today) and a symbol for each sound = letter. The progress of the letter in relation to the hieroglyph is relative. The hieroglyph is international: that is to say, if a Russian, a German, or an American impresses the symbols (pictures) of the ideas on his memory, he can read Chinese or Egyptian (silently), without acquiring a knowledge of the language, for language and writing are each patterns in themselves. This is an advantage that the letter book has lost. So I believe that the next book form will be plastic-representational.

We can say that

- (1) the hieroglyph book is international (at least in its potentiality),
- (2) the letter book is national, and
- (3) the coming book will be a-national: for in order to understand it, one must at least learn.

Today we have two dimensions for the word. As a sound it is a function of time, and as a representation it is a function of space. The coming book must be both. In this way the automatism of the present-day book will be overcome; for a view of life that has come about automatically is no longer conceivable to our minds, and we are left suffocating in a vacuum. The energetic task that art must accomplish is to transmute the emptiness into space, that is, into something that our minds can grasp as an organized unity.

With changes in the language, in construction and style, the visual aspect of the book changes also. Before the war, European printed matter looked much the same in all countries. In America there was a new optimistic mentality, concerned with the day in hand, focused on immediate impressions, and this began to create a new form of printed matter. It was there that they first started to shift the emphasis and make the word be the illustration of the picture, instead of the other way round, as in Europe. Moreover, the highly developed technique of the process block made a particular contribution; and so photomontage was invented.

Postwar Europe, skeptical and bewildered, is cultivating a shrieking, bellowing language; one must hold one's own and keep up with everything. Words like "attraction" and "trick" are becoming the catchwords of the time. The appearance of the book is characterized by (1) fragmented type panel and (2) photomontage and typomontage.

All these facts are like an airplane. Before the war and our revolution it was carrying us along the runway to the take-off point. We are now becoming airborne, and our faith for the future is in the airplane—that is to say, in these facts.

The idea of the “simultaneous” book also originated in the prewar era and was realized after a fashion. I refer to a poem by Blaise Cendrars, typographically designed by Sonia Delaunay-Terk, which is on a folding strip of paper, 1.5 meters in length; so it was an experiment with a new book form for poetry. The lines of the poem are printed in colors, according to content, so that they go over from one color to another following the changes in meaning.

In England during the war, the Vortex Group published its work *BLAST*, large and elementary in presentation, set almost exclusively in block letters; today this has become the feature of all modern international printed matter. In Germany, the prospectus for the small Grosz portfolio *Neue Jugend*, produced in 1917, is an important document of the new typography.

With us in Russia the new movement began in 1908, and from its very first day linked painters and poets closely together; practically no book of poetry appeared that had not had the collaboration of a painter. The poems were written and illustrated with the lithographic crayon, or engraved in wood. The poets themselves typeset whole pages. Among those who worked in this way were the poets Khlebnikov, Kruchenykh, Mayakovsky, Asseyev, together with the painters Rozanova, Goncharova, Malevich, Popova, Burlyuk, etc. These were not numbered, deluxe copies; they were cheap, unbound, paperbacked books, which we must consider today, in spite of their urbanity, as popular art.

During the period of the Revolution a latent energy accumulated in our young generation of artists, which merely awaited the great mandate from the people for it to be released and deployed. It is the great masses, the semiliterate masses, who have become the audience. The Revolution in our country accomplished an enormous educational and propagandistic task. The traditional book was torn into separate pages, enlarged a hundredfold, colored for greater intensity, and brought into the street as a poster. By contrast with the American poster, created for people who will catch a momentary glimpse whilst speeding past in their automobiles, ours was meant for people who would stand quite close and read it over and make sense out of it. If today a number of posters were to be reproduced in the size of a manageable book, then arranged according to theme and bound, the result could be the most original book. Because of the need for speed and the great lack of possibilities for printing, the best work was mostly done by hand; it was standardized, concise in its text, and most suited to the simplest mechanical method of duplication. State laws were printed in the same way as folding picture books, army orders in the same way as paperbacked brochures.

At the end of the Civil War (1920) we were given the opportunity, using primitive mechanical means, of personally realizing our aims in the field of new book design. In Vitebsk we produced a work entitled *Unovis* in five copies, using typewriter, lithography, etching, and linocuts. I wrote in it: "Gutenberg's Bible was printed with letters only; but the Bible of our time cannot be just presented in letters alone. The book finds its channel to the brain through the eye, not through the ear; in this channel the waves rush through with much greater speed and pressure than in the acoustic channel. One can speak out only through the mouth, but the book's facilities for expression take many more forms."

With the start of the reconstruction period about 1922, book production also increases rapidly. Our best artists take up the problem of book design. At the beginning of 1922 we publish, with the poet Ilya Ehrenburg, the periodical *Veshch* (*Object*), which is printed in Berlin. Thanks to the high standard of German technology we succeed in realizing some of our book ideas. So the picture book *Of Two Squares*, which was completed in our creative period of 1920, is also printed, and also the Mayakovsky book, where the book form itself is given a functional shape in keeping with its specific purpose. In the same period our artists obtain the technical facilities for printing. The State Publishing House and other printing establishments publish books, which have since been seen and appreciated at several international exhibitions in Europe. Comrades Popova, Rodchenko, Klutskis, Syenkin, Stepanova, and Gan devote themselves to the book. Some of them (Gan and several others) work in the printing works itself, along with the compositor and the machine. The degree of respect for the actual art of printing, which is acquired by doing this, is shown by the fact that all the names of the compositors and feeders of any particular book are listed in it, on a special page. Thus in the printing works there comes to be a select number of workers who cultivate a very conscious relationship with their art.

Most artists make montages, that is to say, with photographs and the inscriptions belonging to them they piece together whole pages, which are then photographically reproduced for printing. In this way there develops a technique of simple effectiveness, which appears to be very easy to operate and for that reason can easily develop into dull routine, but which in powerful hands turns out to be the most successful method of achieving visual poetry.

At the very beginning we said that the expressive power of every invention in art is an isolated phenomenon and has no evolution. The invention of easel pictures produced great works of art, but their effectiveness has been lost.

The cinema and the illustrated weekly magazine have triumphed. We rejoice at the new media that technology has placed at our disposal. We know that being in close contact with worldwide events and keeping pace with the progress of social development, that with the perpetual sharpening of our optic nerve, with the mastery of plastic material, with construction of the plane and its space, with the force that keeps inventiveness at a boiling point, with all these new assets, we know that finally we shall give a new effectiveness to the book as a work of art.

Yet in this present day and age we still have no new shape for the book as a body; it continues to be a cover with a jacket, and a spine, and pages 1, 2, 3... We still have the same thing in the theater also. Up to now in our country, even the newest theatrical productions have been performed in the picture-frame style of theater, with the public accommodated in the stalls, in boxes, in the circles, all in front of the curtain. The stage, however, has been cleared of the painted scenery; the painted-in-perspective stage area has become extinct. In the same picture frame a three-dimensional physical space has been born, for the maximum development of the fourth dimension, living movement. This newborn theater explodes the old theater-building. Perhaps the new work in the inside of the book is not yet at the stage of exploding the traditional book form, but we should have learned by now to recognize the tendency.

Notwithstanding the crises that book production is suffering, in common with other areas of production, the book glacier is growing year by year. The book is becoming the most monumental work of art: no longer is it something caressed only by the delicate hands of a few bibliophiles; on the contrary, it is already being grasped by hundreds of thousands of poor people. This also explains the dominance, in our transition period, of the illustrated weekly magazine. Moreover, in our country a stream of children's picture books has appeared, to swell the inundation of illustrated periodicals. By reading, our children are already acquiring a new plastic language; they are growing up with a different relationship to the world and to space, to shape, and to color; they will surely also create another book. We, however, are satisfied if in our book the lyric and epic evolution of our times is given shape.

EL LISSITZKY Cover
for *Veshch (Object)*, 1922.

