

THE DIFFUSION OF CONSTRUCTIVIST IDEAS IN
PUBLICATIONS IN GERMANY, 1918-1925

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A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of PhD
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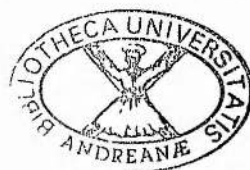
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A thesis submitted to the University of St. Andrews in application for the
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The University of St. Andrews
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St. Andrews, January 2001



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Abstract

After a long period of disrupted communication, the years 1918-21 saw a rapid infiltration of Russian post-revolutionary culture into German progressive circles. In the thriving book market of Berlin, resourceful apologists like El Lissitzky and Il'ya Erenburg found conditions favourable to the diffusion of their ideas and played a critical role in encouraging pro-Soviet sentiment among the local vanguard. Their cosmopolitan enthusiasm, shared by a number of artists throughout Europe, bolstered hopes for co-operation between the modernist forces of all countries. For a brief while, Constructivism became a rallying point for those artists who had faith in their ability to foster cultural transformation and felt a common purpose in creating an environment conducive to social harmony. Various initiatives were taken to lay the foundation for a truly cohesive effort but yielded only temporary alliances. Serving as alternative platforms from which to gain influence and individual recognition, periodicals and slim book publications ultimately provided the main element of continuity in the attempt to found a Constructivist International. By 1925, those who had devoted most energy to this collective project had distanced themselves from a strong identification as Constructivists on the Berlin art scene and struck out in new directions.

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Introduction

'The square is the signal of a new era. The square is to us what the cross was to early Christians'¹. So Theo van Doesburg allegedly declared upon meeting Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling near Berlin in December 1920. The messianic tone of this assertion, which elevated the emblem of the magazine *De Stijl* [The Style] to the symbol of a higher spiritual order, elicited a mixture of confusion and scepticism from the two artists. 'Yet we understood its content', Richter later reported in his book *Dada-Profile* [Dada Profiles]:

We felt like him. As if by magic a new unity in art had developed in Europe during the isolation of the war years. Now that the war was over, a kind of aesthetic brotherhood suddenly emerged [...] Whether or not the square was the symbol of this brotherhood seemed to us of less importance than the fundamental tasks on which we could all agree. These tasks were given different names in different countries and were pursued by different groups: *De Stijl*, *L'Esprit Nouveau*, *G*, *Veshch'*, *MA* and others. There was one common purpose [...]: to start from the beginning again by returning to the most elementary and basic concepts and to build something new upon the fundamentals, be it Gabo's Constructivism, Mies van der Rohe's 'New building', Werner Gräff's 'New technology', Eggeling and [Richter's] 'Universal language', Kiesler's 'New spatial theatre', Lissitzky's Suprematist 'Proun' [...] or Mondrian and Van Doesburg's 'Neo-plastic creative principles'².

¹ Hans Richter, *Dada-Profile* (Zurich: Die Arche Verlag, 1961), p.27.

² *Ibid.*

The names that appear in this passage, and keep cropping up in Richter's retrospective portrayal of the personalities with whom he was associated between 1914 and 1930, are those we encounter from 1923 in the journal *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung* [*G, Material for Elemental Formation*]. One of many art periodicals launched in Berlin in the early years of the Weimar Republic, *G* is often seen as a platform for the Constructivist ideas which permeated Germany through the intermediacy of such eminent Russian expatriates as El Lissitzky, Il'ya Erenburg and Naum Gabo; a view that is supported to some extent by Richter's own writings³. After a long period of disrupted communication due to the political situation caused by the First World War and ensuing revolutionary upheavals in Russia, the few years prior to *G*'s publication indeed saw a rapid infiltration of Soviet culture into Western progressive circles. Berlin, 'the hyphen between Paris and Moscow', for a brief while became a meeting ground for pioneering artists, writers and intellectuals from both West and East who casually defied tradition, championed an art in tune with the modern age and strove to bring about new patterns of order and renewal⁴. To 'embrace and integrate' these new tendencies was the purpose of *G*⁵. By juxtaposing them in all their ramifications, it hoped 'to clarify the general situation in art and life'⁶.

Summing up the unique historical conditions in which the founding of *G* took place, Richter wrote: 'The place of issue was Berlin-Friedenau, 7 Eschenstraße, but the outlook was international'⁷. The journal's inaugural issue ranks to this day as one of the most compelling of all manifestations of international artistic co-operation prompted by the recognition across avant-garde circles that a common campaign was being led in geographically removed lands. Reiterated in *Dada*

³ For instance, John Willett, *The New Sobriety 1917-1933: Art and Politics in the Weimar Period* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1978), p.81.

⁴ F.C. Weiskopf, 'Der Bindestrich zwischen Paris und Moskau. Gespräch mit dem Filmregisseur Abel Gance', *Berlin am Morgen*, Berlin, 30 April 1930; reprinted in Klaus Kändler, Helga Karolewski, Ilse Siebert (eds.), *Berliner Begegnungen: Ausländische Künstler in Berlin 1918 bis 1933. Aufsätze - Bilder - Dokumente* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1987), p.456.

⁵ Hans Richter, 'Introduction', *Form*, no.3, 15 December 1966, p.27.

⁶ *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923, n.p.

⁷ Hans Richter, *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe* (Zurich: Die Arche Verlag, 1967), p.67.

Profiles, this basic assumption provided rhetorical underpinning of much theoretical literature in the early 1920s. It is the starting point of the present study. Through selected contributions to this developing discourse, the following chapters consider the terms in which Constructivism diffused to Germany, how they were received by the artistic community, and how the powerful affinities that were perceived bolstered hopes for a successful collaboration between the progressive forces of all countries, stimulating not only gestures of solidarity, but also genuine efforts to unite artists under a single cause: the reconstruction of art and social life. Surviving photographs show some of the most influential members of the avant-garde assembled on such occasions, e.g. at the Congress of International Progressive Artists in Düsseldorf in May 1922, where Van Doesburg, Lissitzky and Richter announced the foundation of the *Internationale Fraktion der Konstruktivisten* [International Faction of Constructivists, I.F.d.K.]. These group portraits capture the sense of excitement which was felt by the various participants. They are testimony to their optimistic evaluation of the possibilities of individual creativity and to the idealism of these years.

It would be difficult to overestimate the significance of avant-garde publishing at this juncture. In 1925 Van Doesburg still felt the written word to be an essential adjunct to modern artistic practice. 'The fact that the artist writes and talks about his work is the natural outcome of the general misunderstanding of the manifestations of modern art on the part of the laity', he argued⁸. Ignited by the intellectual ferment which embraced Berlin, many felt compelled to express their convictions and aspirations verbally. As Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers later put it, the result was that 'periodicals sprouted like mushrooms [...], and like mushrooms they often had only a brief experience'⁹. There was evidently some opportunism in the artists' willingness to be in print and no medium was better suited to inform, persuade and recruit than the flexible format of these independent illustrated journals: they circulated images of key works, reported on the current artistic

⁸ Theo van Doesburg, *Principles of Neo-Plastic Art* (London: Lund Humphries, 1968), p.5.

scene, advertised strategic events, and provided evidence of connections and shared interests. Crippling financial problems frequently hindered the editors and restricted distribution. Yet the influence of these publications was far-reaching. As group efforts, they contributed substantially to the mechanisms of intercommunication that shaped the Berlin art world. This study favoured texts that started debate. Though Germany is at the heart of the discussion, the material dealt with will inevitably extend to other countries, for, as István Deák has noted, the famous Berlin of the 1920s was in large measure the product of 'talented outsiders' who relinquished provincialism in favour of a more cosmopolitan outlook and followed with interest advances in neighbouring cultural centres¹⁰.

* * *

The diffusion of Constructivist ideas on German soil cannot be confined to precise dates. The following account covers the period from the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk, ending Russia's participation in the First World War on 3 March 1918, to 1925, the date of publication of El Lissitzky and Hans Arp's survey *Die Kunstismen* [The Isms of Art]. Although diplomatic relations between Germany and Soviet Russia were not effectively restored until 1922, the year 1918 is commonly accepted as the beginning of an infiltration of Russian artistic ideas into Germany because of the opening of a limited dialogue between the revolutionary groups of both countries. By 1925, little collective enthusiasm was left in those who, stimulated by renewed international contact, had taken initiatives to sustain and develop it by drawing together the progressive forces of Europe. The prospect of common endeavours like the I.F.d.K. ever bringing about a radical change in society was remote. Having come to the conclusion that Paris was better suited to an international career, Van Doesburg left Weimar in early summer 1923, where

⁹ Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), p.27.

¹⁰ Istvan Deak, *Weimar Germany's Left-Wing Intellectuals. A Political History of the Weltbühne and its Circle* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1968), p.15.

he had been residing and editing *De Stijl* since spring 1921. Lissitzky, ill with pulmonary tuberculosis, moved to Switzerland in January 1924 and returned home the following year. 'I have passed through another stage of development during these past years in the West. I have learnt a lot and therefore have a great deal to offer here', he wrote back in Moscow¹¹. While Richter remained, his growing involvement in film relegated earlier concerns to a subordinate position.

Erenburg too departed from Berlin. Along with thousands of Russian émigrés, he relocated abroad after the monetary reform of October 1923. Recalling this moment in his memoirs, he explained: 'I had spent two years in Berlin, with the constant feeling of a gathering storm, and suddenly I realised that the wind had died down'¹². The art publishing scene as a whole accurately reflected this change in atmosphere. Of the five journals Richter mentioned in *Dada Profiles*, most were past their heyday when Arp and Lissitzky began collaborating on *The Isms of Art* in summer 1924. *Veshch'* had long ceased to appear, having survived for only two issues. *L'Esprit Nouveau* folded in January 1925, followed by *G* and *MA* in April and June 1926. *De Stijl* continued to be published until 1932, albeit intermittently and mainly as a podium for Van Doesburg's individual conceptions. The collective élan, which for a short time had been so intense, dissipated as similarities gave way to differences and artists shifted their energies elsewhere. There followed antagonism, strident mutual criticism and 'embittered proofs and counter-proofs of invention and influence' intended to draw clear lines of demarcation between the various camps¹³. Hence Van Doesburg, who in 1919 had enthusiastically greeted the arrival on the European scene of Russian post-revolutionary culture, in 1928 discredited its impact on young German artists in no uncertain terms: "Blind

¹¹ El Lissitzky, 'Letter to Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, Moscow, 20 June 1925', in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.63.

¹² Ilya Ehrenburg, *Men, Years - Life. Truce: 1921-33* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1963), vol.III, p.57.

¹³ László Moholy-Nagy, 'Letter to Erich Buchholz, Dessau, 3 April 1928', in Mo Buchholz, Eberhard Roters, *Erich Buchholz* (Berlin: Ars Nikolai, 1993), p.112.

prejudice and slavish reverence for everything coming out of Russia generated a whole generation of 'utility-romantics'"¹⁴.

This study will start by describing the context in which news of recent developments in Russia first reached Germany in 1918, so as to identify the main channels of communication and review the perspectives they offered on Russian avant-garde art. Two highly visible figures in this interchange will be examined in order to show their contribution to the spread of information and their crucial role in awakening pro-Soviet sentiment among the European vanguard. El Lissitzky, whose effectiveness as a propagandist and genuine talent for interacting with his Western counterparts has since earned him recognition as the 'father of International Constructivism', will be the subject of Chapter 2¹⁵. Il'ya Erenburg's location 'at the juncture of two cultures' and cosmopolitan optimism made him an equally influential cultural mediator¹⁶. His plea for European reconciliation and short-lived advocacy of Constructivism, as formulated in his 1921 book *Und sie bewegt sich doch* [And Yet the World Goes Round], will be discussed in Chapter 3.

These preliminaries will take us to 1922, a year of tremendous activity, when political and cultural factors combined to inspire landmark projects with widespread consequences. *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet* [Object], the journal Lissitzky and Erenburg founded together in Berlin, will occupy Chapter 4. The trilingual title and opening manifesto underlined the editors' intention of providing

¹⁴ Theo van Doesburg, 'Kunst- en architectuurvernieuwing in Sovjet-Rusland' [Artistic and architectural innovation in Soviet Russia], *Het Bouwbedrijf*, vol.V, no.22, October 1928, pp.436-41; translated in Theo van Doesburg, *On European Architecture. Complete Essays from Het Bouwbedrijf 1924-1931* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 1990), p.195.

¹⁵ Sima Ingberman, *ABC: International Constructivist Architecture, 1922-1939* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1994), p.4.

¹⁶ Joshua Rubenstein, *Tangled Loyalties: The Life and Times of Ilya Ehrenburg* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996), p.100.

a meeting point for Soviet and Western art communities, as well as a focus for debate and potential collaborative work. Notable for Lissitzky's dramatic use of typography, *Veshch'* rapidly secured a reputation as a mouthpiece for Constructivism on the European scene. Shortly after the appearance of the last issue, the *Erste russische Kunstausstellung* [First Russian Art Exhibition] opened a few doors from the Berlin Soviet embassy. Despite an increased availability of information concerning the Russian avant-garde, very few actual works had hitherto been seen by Western audiences. The wide range of artists represented afforded a unique opportunity to gain a perception of this new Soviet art which many in Germany believed to 'open up into an astonishing future'¹⁷. Chapter 5 will examine some of the items on display and consider the general effect of the show on Berlin's art world.

At stake in the final chapter is how, after a prolonged period of isolation, mutual awareness created a context that energised representatives of congenial avant-garde forces to argue for a concerted group effort. As evidenced by the tensions surrounding the international congresses of 1922, the various attempts to weld together a radical cell of progressive artists unified behind a single purpose were largely unsuccessful. Whatever the real motives behind these initiatives, their effect was to dramatise some basic differences between the participants. Exacerbated by personal ambitions, dissension in turn encouraged the creation of alternative forums, spawning a new generation of Constructivist periodicals, retrospective surveys and anthologies, exemplified by *G* and *The Isms of Art*.

¹⁷ *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung*, Dresden, vol.I, January 1919, p.214.

Chapter 1: 1918-21

The international exchange of art products, the mutual information about art, the immediate contact with the art and artists of other countries, such as is made possible today by the ever progressing culture and technology, have always been significant factors in the development of world art.

Konstantin Umanskii (1920).

With these words the Russian critic Konstantin Umanskii introduced his book, *Neue Kunst in Rußland 1914-1919* [New Art in Russia 1914-1919], published in Germany in 1920¹. Reflecting upon the climate which dominated post-war Europe, he continued: 'The 1914-19 war events have led to the absolute closure of the international traffic of ideas and to the national isolation of art'². Indications that a transformation was in process were however becoming perceptible. Soviet Russia was seeking contact with Germany, and German artists, for their part, were showing a great deal of interest in the revolutionary experiments of their Russian counterparts. For Umanskii, there was no question of the significance of such manifestations: they were 'positive symptoms' of a new era. In other words, the first outlines of a 'new international artistic life' had started to sketch themselves on the European map³.

Writing in Munich in February 1920, Umanskii was neither the first, nor by any means, the last critic to argue for a creative interaction between the progressive

¹ Konstantin Umanskij, *Neue Kunst in Rußland 1914-1919* (Potsdam: Gustav Kiepenheuer, Munich: Hans Goltz, 1920).

² *Ibid.*, p.1.

artists of all countries. After the shocks of the First World War and the revolutionary storms of 1917, the belief that the mobility of ideas across frontiers should be encouraged was commonly held among the intelligentsia of both Russia and Western Europe. Objectives differed widely. Yet, for a substantial part of the avant-garde, the true base for social reconstruction was the internationalism of its artistic horizons. As a result, avenues of exchange developed between countries and capitals.

At a time when travel and the circulation of works were at best difficult, publications such as Umanskii's served as an important source of information for the diverse community which formed the Berlin art scene. They contributed to implant a certain picture of the aesthetic and social issues at stake in revolutionary Russia in the Western avant-garde. Similarities in interests and artistic concerns then emerged which soon drew exponents of both sides to one another, and gave birth to a number of remarkable, albeit short-lived, joint ventures, like the Weimar Congress of Dadaists and Constructivists of September 1922 (fig.1.1). A discussion of the immediate post-war international atmosphere should help to understand how possibilities for such endeavours opened up.

* * *

1.1. National and international contexts

Umanskii's diagnosis of the artistic situation on the broad European scene at the very beginning of the 1920s drew attention to two distinct but related phenomena. First, the emergence of an internationalist aspiration and spirit of brotherhood among the avant-garde, resulting from a general disillusionment with

³ *Ibid.*, p.4.

the war and from a distrust of the values which were thought to have caused it. Secondly, the warming and intensification of Soviet-German relations in the months which followed the 1917 Bolshevik uprising in Russia. This *rapprochement* marked the beginning of more than a decade of almost uninterrupted friendly relations between the two countries. The motives behind it were largely and primarily political, being rooted in common interests and sealed by strained relations with the victorious Allied Powers. Its consequences, however, extended beyond the realm of politics. With this renewed communication an exchange of artistic ideas began that had significant repercussions on cultural development in the Western world. It is therefore worth examining the bases upon which this interaction took place.

A number of factors combined to bring Russia and Germany closer together. Immediately after seizing power in November 1917, the Bolsheviks worked to disengage Russia from the war, since it was with Lenin's conviction that peace alone would clear the way for the entry and subsequent spread of Bolshevism in Europe⁴. An armistice with the Central powers was signed in early December. Peace negotiations were started at Brest-Litovsk and a treaty was concluded by Trotsky on 3 March 1918. Following the collapse of German power six months later and the signing of the armistice of 11 November 1918, obstacles to the progress of the Revolution westward from Moscow seemed to dissipate. Germany yielded particularly favourable prospects. Strikes and mutinies agitated the fleet in Kiel, Lübeck, Bremen and Altona. Workers' and Soldiers' Councils were springing up and wielding effective power in many cities, including Cologne, Frankfurt, Hamburg and Munich. To all appearances, the country was steering a course parallel to that taken by Russia a year earlier. That the outcome could only be the same was doubted by none of the Soviet leaders. The birth of the *Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands* [German Communist Party, KPD] at the turn of 1918 and the

⁴ Edward Hallet Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923* (London: Penguin Books, 1966), vol.III, pp.15-21.

Spartacist revolt in Berlin in the early days of January 1919 only reinforced their confident belief that a proletarian revolution in Germany was imminent.

It was in this atmosphere that Lenin set out to realise an ambition he had nourished since the autumn of 1914. The Bolshevik leader repeatedly argued that the Revolution was international in its very essence. In April 1917 he reasserted the necessity of reinstating an international coalition such as had existed among the national Socialist parties and trade unions from a number of European countries prior to the First World War⁵. His efforts finally came to fruition in March 1919 when more than fifty delegates convened in Moscow for a conference. The assembly constituted itself as the first congress of the Communist International (Comintern) by a unanimous vote. The decision to set up a Third International was taken. A platform was adopted, a manifesto accepted, and an appeal 'To the workers of all countries' issued. The president Grigorii Zinoviev spelled out the purposes of such an organisation in January 1920: to foster alliances with foreign sympathisers and communists throughout Europe, to promote the cause of international revolution and help trigger revolutions in their respective countries. In other words, the Comintern was to function as a vehicle for channelling Soviet energies (in the form of messages, agents, propaganda material and cultural values) to potential followers outside Russia, so as to equip these to assume a revolutionary rôle and ultimately, to extend the might of Socialism and hence of the Soviets 'throughout the world'⁶.

On 21 March 1919, shortly after the end of the congress, a Soviet republic was declared in Budapest. It preceded by only a few days the formation of a *Räterepublik* [Republic of Councils] in Munich on 7 April. The occurrence of such uprisings produced a new flurry of hopes in Moscow. The fact that they coincided with sporadic outbreaks of revolutionary activity in other parts of Europe (Britain,

⁵ The Second or Social-Democratic International, founded in Paris in 1889, had split over the questions which the war posed for Socialists everywhere, George F. Kennan, *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1961), p.153.

⁶ *Manifesto of the First Congress of the Third International, 1919*; cited in Duncan Hallas, *The Comintern* (London: Bookmarks, 1985), p.11.

France and Italy) seemed to confirm that world revolution was on the way. This hope was quickly crushed. On 13 January 1919 the Berlin Communist rising had been suppressed by the German military. Two days later, the two Spartacist leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg were seized and brutally murdered by the troops of the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* [German Social-Democratic Party, SPD] minister Gustav Noske. In Munich suffered similar disturbances. After days of savage fighting in April, the newly created Bavarian Soviet Republic succumbed to overwhelming military opposition. Severely repressed by the *Reichswehr* [Imperial Army] and *Freikorps* [volunteer troops], it came to an end on 1 May 1919, giving way to reprisals and 'White Terror'. Exactly three months later in nearby Hungary, the Republic of Councils was besieged by domestic opponents and foreign military forces. Having bloodlessly seized power, the communist regime of Béla Kun capitulated to Rumanian troops entering Budapest on 1 August 1919.

The post-war revolutionary wave in Central Europe was visibly receding. Yet these successive defeats in no way dampened the enthusiasm of the founders of the Comintern. World revolution was kept to the fore at the second congress which opened on 19 July 1920⁷. At this juncture, Germany remained for the Soviet government the key to communist revolutions happening elsewhere. There, if anywhere in Europe, was a workers' movement of potentially revolutionary character. The German proletariat was not only politically well-organised and well-schooled in Marxism, having been exposed for a quarter of a century to indoctrination; but the socialist movement as a whole, including the left wing *Unabhängige sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschland* [German Independent Social-Democratic Party, USPD], the *Spartakistenbund* [Spartacus League] as well as the main SPD, was larger than anywhere else in the world. Moreover, following the slaughter of the war, many in defeated Germany looked towards Soviet Russia with a certain fascination and hoped that it would bring about the realisation of the

⁷ Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, vol.III, pp.192-200.

ideals of Socialism⁸. During the turbulence of 1918 and 1919 a German willingness to accommodate Bolshevik ideals had emerged. Though the ultimate collapse of the communist uprising caused a mood of discouragement and defeat to spread amongst the supporters of the revolution, this disposition persisted and became even more pronounced as the punitive terms of the Versailles peace agreement were handed to Germany.

The signing of the Versailles Treaty on 28 June 1919 immediately gave an entirely different aspect to Soviet relations with Germany. Collaboration was no longer merely convenient for Russia. It became mutually desirable. Germany was now totally disarmed, territorially confined and required to pay very high reparations. It needed an ally uncommitted to the peace settlement, unfavourably inclined towards it and willing to defy its terms, notably the prohibition on the manufacture of armaments on German soil⁹. The Soviet-Polish war of summer 1920 provided another link, adding to this common ground of ideological antipathies a general distaste for the new Polish state created from the former territories of Russia, Austria and Prussia¹⁰. Overlapping these external factors was the Kapp-putsch of 13 March 1920 which momentarily stirred Berlin and ousted anti-Bolshevik forces on the fringe of German politics. This nationalist action, led by the conqueror of the Spartacist rising Freiherr von Lüttwitz, was frustrated within a matter of days by a highly successful general strike mounted by the Social-Democrats and trade unions. Armed resistance developed in the Ruhr and fresh outbreaks of revolutionary activity occurred in Saxony and Thuringia, all of which were suppressed by military intervention. The overall result was a marked swing to the left amongst German workers, with nearly five million votes polled by the USPD in the subsequent elections of June 1920, and a powerful stimulus to the KPD, which won nearly 450,000 votes and became a legal organisation¹¹.

⁸ Francis Ludwig Carsten, *The Reichswehr and Politics: 1919-1933* (London and Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966), p.7.

⁹ Kennan, *Russia and the West*, pp.161-62.

¹⁰ Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, vol.III, pp.323-28.

¹¹ William Carr, *A History of Germany 1815-1990* (London: Edward Arnold, 1991), pp.263-64.

Hence, several forces matured slowly, which, in the face of every difference, spoke for the re-establishment of friendly relations between Weimar Germany and revolutionary Russia. By the end of 1920, both parties were more interested than ever in the possibilities of co-operation. Germany was faced with a solid front of rejection and punitive demands from the Allies. The government craved some flexibility of action. In Russia the appalling economic chaos, the incipient famine in the grain-growing regions, the frustration of the world revolutionary effort abroad and, a few months later, the Kronstadt uprising against the government, prompted a reassessment of both domestic and foreign policy. In effect, this meant Russia turning towards the West for trade, credits and recognition¹². Lenin announced the New Economic Policy (NEP) in March 1921. In the same month, an Anglo-Soviet Trade Agreement was signed, anticipating by a few weeks the conclusion of a provisional trade agreement between Germany and Soviet Russia on 6 May 1921. The consequences of the latter were minor and not truly felt until the autumn of 1921, except for the diplomatic privileges granted by each country to the accredited representatives of the other¹³. Nonetheless, this agreement opened the way for further negotiations. They culminated at Rapallo the following year and provided for the mutual renunciation of all financial claims, and the re-establishment of diplomatic and consular relations between the two countries.

1.2. Berlin, the crossroads

It is against this background that the general cross-fertilisation of artistic ideas which occurred between Russia and Germany in the early 1920s and, in particular, the introductory statement to *New Art in Russia 1914-1919*, must be seen. With the signing of the Treaty of Rapallo on 16 April 1922, the blockade which had isolated Russia from the outside world since the outbreak of the First World War came to an end. The road was now clear for the Russian avant-garde to step onto the

¹² Kennan, *Russia and the West*, pp.178-84.

Western artistic scene. More precisely, the stage was set for a multilateral exchange such as Umanskii desired in early 1920 to officially begin. Travel restrictions were eased, making it possible for numerous Russian intellectuals, scholars and cultural figures of the day to go abroad on Soviet visas. Many, though not all, left the country intending from the beginning to return, Vladimir Mayakovskii and Il'ya Erenburg among them. Others, like the philosopher Nikolai Berdiaev, were expelled by the new regime because of their anti-Bolshevik views and so joined the ranks of the pre-war and post-revolutionary political exiles and émigrés.

Most of this westbound traffic sooner or later stopped in Berlin. Germany had a long tradition and history of tolerance of political refugees. In the 1880s, a substantial number of Russian citizens had already filtered across the border in reaction to the Russification campaign of Alexander III and to the beginnings of industrialisation. With the war and the revolutionary storms of 1905 and 1917, masses of Russians flooded into Germany. Many settled in Berlin so that by the end of 1919 the capital alone was home to no fewer than 70,000 Russians out of a total population of 3.8 million. Month after month, another thousand arrived and established themselves amongst the large émigré community which crowded into the city's south-western neighbourhoods: Schöneberg, Friedenau, Wilmersdorf and Charlottenburg. This steady stream of individuals accounted for the presence of perhaps as many as 560,000 Russians in Germany by late 1920, including prisoners of war awaiting repatriation and refugees in transit to further destinations. Over half of these remained the following spring and nearly 250,000 were still there at the beginning of 1922¹⁴.

As the new ties created between the Weimar Republic and Soviet Russia in the winter of 1921-22 came into effect, Berlin's Russian population rose to another

¹³ Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution*, vol.III, p.339.

¹⁴ Robert C. Williams, *Culture in Exile: Russian Emigrés in Germany 1881-1941* (London: Ithaca Press, 1972), p.111.

peak. The Russian poet Lev Lunts, who first travelled to the city in mid-1923, recorded the peculiar impression that this strong presence made on a newcomer:

As I arrived in Berlin and stepped out of the station, I asked a young man at random: 'How does one get to this and that street?'. The lad looked at me stupidly and shook his head: 'No idea'. Then he asked sadly in good Russian: 'Are you by any chance a Russian?'. This was the first 'German' I met¹⁵.

Had Lunts come six months later, his experience might have been slightly different. Up to 1923 the low value of the Mark and relatively cheap cost of living meant that even modest savings brought into Berlin guaranteed a Russian national a comfortable life, not to mention payments from international émigré organisations in foreign currencies. The position of émigrés however became more difficult with the deterioration of the German economic and political situation in 1923. Prices rose drastically. Strikes and demonstrations became commonplace. The conditions that had once made the city so attractive gradually disappeared. The Russian colony began to disperse. Some returned home, others moved on to Prague or proceeded to France.

Paris eventually displaced the German capital as the centre of the Russian diaspora, but, for two brief years, Berlin was the artistic and literary showplace of the Russian-speaking world. The whole city, and its south-west corner in particular, was alive with the activities of the Russian colony. Signs of an independent, flourishing economic and cultural existence were so evident that Charlottenburg became for many Germans 'Charlottengrad' and the Kurfürstendamm, 'Kurfürsten-Prospekt'¹⁶. Many years later the novelist Il'ya Erenburg recalled the effervescence he observed upon his arrival in November 1921:

I do not know how many Russians there were in Berlin in those days; certainly a great many - at every step you could hear Russian spoken. Dozens

¹⁵ Lev Lunts, 'Reise auf meinem Krankenbett' (1923), in Fritz Mierau, *Russen in Berlin: Literatur, Malerei, Theater, Film 1918-1933* (Leipzig: Reklam Verlag, 1991), p.157.

of Russian restaurants were opened - with balalaikas, and zurnas, with gypsies, pancakes, shashlyks and, naturally, the inevitable heartbreak. There was a little theatre that put on sketches. Three daily newspapers and five weeklies appeared in Russian. In one year seventeen publishing firms were started. They published Fonvizin and Pilnyak, cookery books, works by the Fathers of the Church, technical reference books, memoirs, lampoons¹⁷.

By the winter of 1922-23, dozens of charitable organisations, private societies, professional groups and religious circles existed which represented the diverse interests of the Russian colony. Completing this highly developed infrastructure were a variety of émigré social centres: schools, libraries, a Scientific Institute, publishing houses, cafés etc. Hence members of the *Dom Iskusstv* [House of Arts] gathered periodically in the Landgraf Café on Kurfürstenstraße. Nearby on Nollendorfplatz, the second-floor rooms of the Café Léon hosted regular lectures and literary evenings under the aegis of both that institution and the rival *Klub Pisatelei* [Writers' Club]¹⁸. These sessions frequently turned into battlegrounds between the different factions of the colony and the endless, stormy discussions that stemmed from such assemblies fill the pages of many a contemporary account¹⁹.

Publishing houses were the other focus of this vibrant intellectual life. With over forty Russian firms active in 1922, Berlin offered exceptional opportunities for literary ventures of all kinds²⁰. The country's advances in printing, typesetting and distribution facilities were not only unparalleled, but the relatively low cost of the book trade and economic conditions meant that a wide array of émigré and

¹⁶ Andrei Belyi, 'Wie schön es in Berlin ist' (1924), in *ibid.*, p.56-57.

¹⁷ Ilya Ehrenburg, *Men, Years - Life. Truce: 1921-33* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1963), vol.III, p.18.

¹⁸ The House of Arts was founded on 21 November 1921 and the Writers' Club on 11 April 1922, Thomas R. Beyer, 'The House of Arts and the Writers' Club, Berlin 1921-1923', in Thomas R. Beyer, Gottfried Kratz, Xenia Werner, *Russische Autoren und Verlage in Berlin nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin: A. Spitz, 1987), pp.9-35.

¹⁹ For instance, Ilja Ehrenburg, "Die russische Dichterkolonie im Cafe 'Prager Diele' (1922-1923)" (1926), in Mierau, *Russen in Berlin*, pp.314-20.

Soviet businesses could open their doors or resume production. Helikon and the Scythian Press are just two examples. Between the end of 1921 and the summer of 1923, Berlin's book market was flooded with Russian publications and periodicals. Some, like the literary magazine *Novaya russkaya kniga* [The New Russian Book] and the daily pro-Soviet *Nakanune* [On the Eve], lasted a couple years until inflation and the subsequent currency stabilisation made their production prohibitively expensive. Others were more ephemeral and survived a few issues only, among them *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet* [Object]. Their importance, however, need not be overlooked. As shall be shown in Chapter 4, their pages provided one of the most significant spaces for the interaction of Soviet and Western avant-garde art in the early 1920s.

1.3. Early contacts

Together with the influx of individuals from Soviet Russia came a substantial amount of information. Russian expatriates not only spoke with authority of recent events and developments in their homeland, they wrote extensively on the subject in countless articles, reviews and essays. As a result, news reached Berlin fairly regularly. Being published in a language which had a limited currency outside the Russian colony, they remained more often than not inaccessible to a Western audience. This does not mean, however, that the Germans had no notion of the political and cultural situation in Russia. Information inevitably travelled by word of mouth, even if sporadic and coloured by personal viewpoints. *New Art in Russia 1914-1919* is one conspicuous evidence that some details were also available in print.

As has been noted, Russia's attempts to set up an effective infrastructure for communication with the outside world predated the Treaty of Rapallo. Several

²⁰ Hartmut Walravens, 'Russische Kunstverlage in Berlin', in *Europäische Moderne: Buch und Graphik aus Berliner Kunstverlagen 1890-1933* (Berlin: Dietrich Reimer Verlag, 1989), p.125.

appeals were issued in coordination with the diplomatic manoeuvres of the Comintern to incite the German people to make common cause with Soviet Russia²¹. In addition, direct contacts were established at a relatively early date through an exchange of state-authorised emissaries, some of whom went on to become pivotal figures in the development of Soviet-German relations. A case in point is the ex-German army officer and artist Dr. Ludwig Baehr who had joined the German diplomatic mission in Moscow shortly after the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk. Initially charged with maintaining contacts with the Russian intelligentsia, Baehr returned in December 1918 with a new assignment: to promote new links between German artists' organisations and the Russian avant-garde on behalf of the International Bureau which had been set up that same month in Moscow²². Within weeks of Baehr's return, first-hand documentation found its way into Berlin's progressive circles and such conventional art journals as *Das Kunstblatt* [The Art Paper]. This material, whose nature will be discussed in some detail later, provided Western observers with one of the earliest frames of reference within which to assess the post-revolutionary artistic situation in the Soviet Union.

The final paragraphs of *New Art in Russia 1914-1919* briefly mentioned Baehr's activities. Having reiterated the importance of international associations and Russia's commitment to instituting such ties, Umanskii publicised the pioneering work of the International Bureau and ended his presentation on a rousing note of uplift, wishing that it be positively received in the West, especially Germany²³. The International Bureau had from its inception turned to the German avant-garde for friendship and support. Vladimir Tatlin, Nikolai Punin, David Shterenberg and Sof'ya Dymshits-Tolstoya were on the governing committee. The Bureau's mission was to 'unite the leading fighters of the new art in the cause of

²¹ For instance, 'Alliance with Soviet Russia', *Die Rote Fahne*; cited in Carsten, *The Reichswehr and Politics*, p.325.

²² The establishment of the International Bureau was announced in *Iskusstvo. Vestnik otdela izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv NKP*, Moscow, no.1, 5 January 1919; see Troels Andersen, 'Some unpublished letters by Kandinsky', *Artes: Periodical of the Fine Arts*, Copenhagen, vol.II, no.3, 1966, p.109.

²³ Umanskij, *Neue Kunst in Rußland*, pp.55-56.

constructing a new universal culture²⁴. Several projects were launched to achieve this. To begin with, it was proposed to convene 'an international conference' that would 'discuss the progress and potentialities of the inventions which are not only required by the present but also by the future'²⁵. Kandinskii, whose knowledge of Germany best fitted the role, was entrusted with mobilising German forces via Alfred Baehr. Additional plans were subsequently made to send more 'artistic ambassadors' to the West, resulting in the departure of Umanskii for Germany in late 1919. A journal, *Internatsional iskusstva* [Art International], was also projected. Velimir Khlebnikov, Kazimir Malevich and a few others wrote declarations for the first issue, but they never went to press²⁶.

This was the context of the 'Aufruf der russischen fortschrittlichen bildenden Künstler an die deutschen Kollegen!' [Call from the Russian Progressive Painters and Sculptors to their German Colleagues!] which reached Germany at the turn of 1918²⁷. Issued by the International Bureau and handed over to Baehr for diffusion, this communiqué consisted of a comradely greeting and a proposal. It was published, among other places, in the February 1919 edition of *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung* [New Journal for Art and Poetry] (fig.1.2) and in the first issue of the Dadaist journal *Die Pleite* [The Bankrupt], where it appeared below a report on the foundation and first congress of the Third International²⁸. Calling for international unity and a collaborative effort from their closest neighbours, the Russians suggested that a Soviet-German artists' congress be organised that would initiate a 'commerce in the artistic sphere between two peoples, extensive

²⁴ Quoted in Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), p.56.

²⁵ El Lissitzky, 'New Russian art' (1922), in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), p.337.

²⁶ See for instance Vladimir Tatlin, 'The initiative individual in the creativity of the collective' (1919), in Larissa Alekseevna Zhadova, *Tatlin* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), pp. 237-38.

²⁷ *Aufruf der russischen fortschrittlichen bildenden Künstler an die deutschen Kollegen!* (Moscow, 30 November 1918), signed by David Shterenberg and endorsed by the rest of the International Bureau's committee; reprinted in Mierau, *Russen in Berlin*, p.186.

²⁸ *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung*, Dresden, vol.I, January 1919, pp.213-14 and *Die Pleite: Illustriert Halbmonatsschrift*, Berlin-Leipzig, vol.I, no.1, March 1919. The appeal was also publicised by Adolf Behne in 'Vorschlag einer brüderlichen Zusammenkunft der Künstler aller Länder', *Sozialistische Monatshefte*, Berlin, no.25, 3 March 1919, pp.155-57.

activities in the fields of exhibitions, publishing, the theatre, and music as well²⁹. In keeping with the Bureau's proposed plan of action, this was later to be extended to a first Congress of Representatives of All the Arts of All Countries. Kandinskii elaborated upon the latter project in an article printed in *Khudozhestvennaya zhizn'* [Artistic Life] in early 1920. The assembly was to be as diverse as possible. It was to comprise not only painters, sculptors and architects, but also musicians, dancers, writers and poets as well as theatrical, variety and circus artists. The idea, 'admittedly utopian [in] character', was to overcome the fragmentation of creative forces which existed both at national and international level between the different branches of the arts and to enable an unprecedented, 'thundering collision of ideas'. Kandinskii argued: 'Distant horizons will [then] open up for which we as yet have no name'³⁰.

While the projected conferences never took place, the International Bureau's efforts to muster backing from individuals of similar views in Germany were not completely fruitless. Details of the responses communicated by Baehr were recorded in a report published in early 1920³¹. According to Kandinskii, no less than nine answers had been sent to the Bureau. Only four had reached their destination as the report went to press. These mostly came from young radical artists' groups born of the revolutionary upheaval: the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* [Work Council for Art] and the *Novembergruppe* [November Group], both of which had been set up in Berlin between November and December 1918, the '*Organisation der bildenden Künste Badens*' [Baden Organisation for the Plastic Arts] and a '*West-Ost*' [West-East] group³². These societies optimistically united artists of

²⁹ *Aufruf der russischen fortschrittlichen Künstler.*

³⁰ Vasilii Kandinskii, "O 'velikoi utopii'" [Concerning the 'Great Utopia'], *Khudozhestvennaya zhizn'*, Moscow, no.3, 1920, pp.2-4; translated in Kenneth C. Lindsay, Peter Vergo, *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), vol.I, pp.444-48.

³¹ Vasilii Kandinskii, 'Shagi Otdela izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv v mezhdunarodnoi khudozhestvennoi politike' [Steps taken by the Department of Fine Arts in the realm of international art politics], *Khudozhestvennaya zhizn'*, Moscow, no.3, 1920, p.16; translated in *ibid.*, pp.448-54.

³² Kandinskii claimed that replies from the following had also been sent: the '*Neue Dresden Künstlerbund*' [New Dresden Artists' Association], the '*Staatliche Aufbau*' in Weimar (Walter Gropius) [Bauhaus], the '*Marées-Gesellschaft*' [Marées society] in Dresden (Julius Meier-Graefe)

various persuasions, most of whom accepted as axiomatic art's basic ability to act as a vehicle for revolutionary social transformation. Together they hoped to carry out in the sphere of the intellect what the Workers' and Soldiers' Councils strove to achieve in the political, economic and social spheres. The *West-Ost* group welcomed 'the hand that the Russians extended to them'. 'It [rejoiced] in the organisation and the success of consistently pursued leftist policies' and, in return, asked for recognition and further information 'that would serve as authoritative confirmation of [its] own activity'³³. Likewise, the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* sent a short greeting message signed by Walter Gropius, Bruno Taut, Cesar Klein and Max Pechstein, with the assurance that they were not merely prepared to 'work in unity' with their Russian comrades, but 'with all the artists of all as yet unaligned nations'³⁴. A programmatic statement by the *Novembergruppe*, dated 21 December 1918, and a letter by the Baden Organisation for the Plastic Arts were also received³⁵.

This early exchange yielded no immediate results. Still, it is remarkable because it indicates the terms of the first interaction between the artists of revolutionary Russia and Western Europe. Perhaps most interestingly, it is symptomatic of the great interest in Russian experiments which existed at the time in Germany and of the ideological receptivity of the cultural vanguard to them. Typical in this respect is the reply to the International Bureau's call published in the April 1919 edition of the liberal *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten* [Munich Latest News] by the *Aktionausschuß revolutionärer Künstler München* [Action Committee of the Revolutionary Artists of Munich]. Founded by the people's commissar for education Gustav Landauer as part of his programme of action for the new Bavarian *Räterepublik*, the *Aktionausschuß* fully endorsed the initiative of

and the '*Künstlerbund Worpswede*' [Worpswede Artists' Union] (Heinrich Vogeler and Hugo Zehder), *ibid.*, pp.453-54.

³³ See Kandinskii, 'Steps taken by the Department of Fine Arts', pp.449-50. The signatories were Walter Becker, Georg Scholtz, Vladimir Zabolin, Egon Itta, Rudolf Schlichter, Oskar Fischer and Eugen Segewitz, who together had founded the *Rih Gruppe* [Rih group] in 1919 in Karlsruhe.

³⁴ Cited in *ibid.*, pp.448-49.

³⁵ They were reprinted in Kandinskii's article, *ibid.*, pp.451-53.

their 'Russian brethren', whose concerns and ambitions, they felt, 'coincided entirely' with their own. They accepted the invitation to collaborate in '[building] a new life' and looked forward to being notified of the time and place of the announced conference³⁶. The *Aktionausschuß* dissolved within a few weeks. Inside a few days the Munich Soviet collapsed and reprisals were taken against all known and suspected (e.g. the poet Rainer Maria Rilke) political activists, affecting the majority of the group's members. Even so, the internationalist aspiration emanating from the reply to the Russians' appeal was to remain a lasting preoccupation for some of the signatories. The case of the artist Hans Richter will illustrate this point in Chapter 6.

Common to Germany and Russia at this juncture were violent cravings for renewal and the idea that the avant-garde was the key to social, intellectual and spiritual regeneration. Both countries seemed to recognise that if artists were to have a practical effect upon individuals and society as a whole, that is if they were to achieve the transition which many felt was imperative, they needed to unite beyond national and stylistic affiliations in response to the exigencies of the moment. The manifestos of the *Novembergruppe* and the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* offer two examples. 'The future of art and the gravity of the present hour forces us revolutionaries of the spirit (Expressionists, Cubists, Futurists) to unification and close alliance', wrote the former group in a circular of 13 December 1918. 'We therefore direct an urgent call to all visual artists who have shattered the old forms in art to declare their membership of the *Novembergruppe* [...] Renewed contact with the like-minded in all countries is our duty. The creative instinct united us as

³⁶ *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*, Munich, no.162, 9 April 1919, p.3; reproduced in Justin Hoffmann, 'Hans Richter und die Münchener Räterepublik', *Hans Richter 1888-1976: Dadaist, Filmpionier, Maler-Theoretiker* (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1982), pp.23-24. The text of the Russians' appeal was printed immediately above the reply. The signatories were Heinrich Bachmair, Max Bethke, Friedrich Burschell, W. Ludwig Coellen, Georg Kaiser, Walt Laurent, Otto Lerchenfeld, Wilhelm Petersen, T.C. Pilartz, Hans Richter, Fritz Schaefer, Georg Schrimpf, Felix Stierner, Stanislaus Stückgold, Titus Tautz, E. Trautner, Aloys Wach and Alfred Wolfenstein.

brothers years ago³⁷. Similarly, the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* announced in a pamphlet of spring 1919:

[The *Arbeitsrat*] is striving for the concentration of all scattered and disunited forces, which, beyond the pursuit of self-centred business interests, want to contribute energetically to the rebuilding of our entire cultural life. In close contact with organisations of similar tendencies at other places in Germany, [it] hopes to be able to achieve its immediate objectives in the not too distant future³⁸.

In this context, it is not surprising that the Russians' appeal generated an enthusiastic response. Interaction and mutual awareness could provide a sounder basis and further encouragement for the global change the German vanguard proposed to effect on a domestic scale. A particular instance of this coincidence of aspiration is provided by the correspondence which took place in early 1919 between Moscow and the chairman of the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst*, Walter Gropius³⁹. As reconstruction became the watchword in late 1918, a radical remodelling of the existing art school system seemed essential. The *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* paid considerable attention to this sensitive issue⁴⁰. Its demands as such were never

³⁷ *Novembergruppe Rundschreiben vom 13. Dezember 1918* (Potsdamerstr. 113, Villa II), signed by 'The working Committee' (M. Pechstein, C. Klein, G. Tappert, Richter-Berlin, M. Melzer, B. Krauskopf, R. Bauer, R. Belling, H. Steiner, W. Schmid); translated in Rose-Carol Washton Long (ed.), *German Expressionism: Documents from the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p.213.

³⁸ *Arbeitsrat für Kunst-Flugblatt*; first published as 'Ein neues künstlerisches Programm', *Das Bauwelt*, Berlin, 26 December 1918, p.5; reprinted in *Der Cicerone*, Leipzig, vol.XI, no.1/2, January 1919, p.26 and translated in Ulrich Conrads, Hans G. Sperlich, *Fantastic Architecture* (London: The Architectural Press, 1963), pp.136-37. Basic to the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* was the conviction that 'one must take advantage of the political revolution to liberate art from decades of regimentation'. Three guiding principles were formulated to this end: 'Art and people must form an entity. Art shall no longer be a luxury for the few, but should be enjoyed and experienced by the broad masses. The aim is the alliance of the arts under the wing of a great architecture', *Arbeitsrat für Kunst-Flugblatt*.

³⁹ Gropius became chairman of the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* in early 1919, *Der Cicerone*, Leipzig, vol.XI, no.8, April 1919, p.230.

⁴⁰ The *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* called for a complete change of educational methods in the arts. Among its preliminary demands were the dissolution of existing art academies and 'the replacement of these bodies along with a narrowing of their field of activity, with others created out of the community of producing artists itself without state influence'. Gropius and his peers argued for the 'freeing of all training in architecture, sculpture, painting and handicrafts from top to bottom', and demanded that

fulfilled, but the ideas for the *Staatliches Bauhaus* [State Bauhaus] which opened its doors in Weimar in 1919 as a result of the amalgamation of the *Sächsischen Hochschule für bildende Kunst* [Saxon School of Fine Arts] and the *Sächsischen Kunstgewerbeschule* [Saxon School of Arts and Crafts] matured here. Gropius noted in a letter to Alfred Baehr forwarded by the latter to Moscow⁴¹:

Today I have once more with great interest studied the Russian artists' programme and given it much thought. Brilliant ideas are expressed in it. From the material that Taut has handed to you, you will be able to see for yourself that they essentially correspond with our efforts except for one point that has not been fully developed in the Russian programme and which we consider especially important, i.e. "the great association of all forms of art under the cloak of the 'great' architecture". This idea, which is an important characteristic feature of our movement, we should like you to pass on to the Russian artists⁴².

No less revealing of the pervading urge for communication, was the rallying call sounded by the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* in *Der Cicerone* in May 1919, which the Dutch magazine *De Stijl* reprinted in July. 'To All Artists of All Countries' was an ardent expression of sympathy with all progressive artistic forces outside Germany:

For over four years we have stood alone. Now that the spell is at last broken, we are pleased to get in touch with you all again. From east and west hands have already been stretched out to us ... we grasp them. At last we can greet our brothers again.

state funds be made available for this purpose and the training of master craftsmen in teaching workshops, *Arbeitsrat für Kunst-Flugblatt*.

⁴¹ A copy of IZO's programme was sent by Baehr to Gropius, Marcel Franciscono, *Walter Gropius and the Creation of the Bauhaus in Weimar: The Ideals and Artistic Theories of its Founding Years* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1971), p.150, n.54.

⁴² Extracts of Gropius' reply of 27 January 1919 appeared in a second article by Kandinskii for *Artistic Life*, 'Arkhitektura kak sinteticheskoe iskusstvo' [Architecture as a synthetic art], *Khudozhestvennaya zhizn'*, Moscow, no.4-5, 1920, pp.23-24; quoted in Andersen, 'Some unpublished letters by Kandinsky', p.102.

[...] We must all come together ... from every country to an international congress. An immense amount of work awaits us.

[...] It would be of great advantage to our cause if we would durably share our experiences⁴³.

That, then, was the ideal: the surrendering of a national, parochial view of art in favour of forming an effective international working community of artists anxious to exert a positive force in the construction of a new society.

It seems only befitting that such a message should be echoed in the pages of *De Stijl*. Theo van Doesburg had defined the purpose of the periodical in his introduction to the first issue of October 1917 (fig.1.3): 'to bring together present-day current of thoughts about new creative activities, currents of thought which, though similar in essence, have developed independently'⁴⁴. *De Stijl* was to provide a forum where progressive artists could encounter a wide range of theories and works of art. This was to help 'prepare the way for a deepened culture based on a collective embodiment of the new awareness of plastic art'⁴⁵. As later chapters will reveal, Van Doesburg's indefatigable activity was to be of crucial importance for the success of this enterprise. Travelling extensively, he established contacts with prominent figures all over Europe and did his utmost to draw like-minded individuals together. Adolf Behne, whom he met in Holland in autumn 1920, provided an important link with Germany⁴⁶. Further relationships were then developed with Van Doesburg's first visit to Berlin and the Bauhaus in late

⁴³ Adolf Behne, 'Aufruf!', *Der Cicerone*, Leipzig, vol.XI, no.9, May 1919, p.264 and Der Arbeitsrat für Kunst (Berlin), 'An alle Künstler aller Länder!', *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.II, no.9, July 1919, col.104-05.

⁴⁴ Theo van Doesburg, 'Ter inleiding' (Leiden, 16 April 1917), *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.I, no.1, October 1917, col.1-2; translated in H.L.C. Jaffé, *De Stijl 1917-1931: The Dutch Contribution to Modern Art* (Amsterdam: J.M. Heulenhoff, 1956), p.11.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ The German literary critic and *Die Aktion* contributor, Dr. Friedrich Markus Huebner, was *De Stijl* first contact with Germany. Resident in Holland since 1918-19, Huebner wrote to Van Doesburg on 24 March 1919 in reaction to the 'First De Stijl Manifesto' (*De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.II, no.1, November 1918, col.2-5). His letter of support for *De Stijl*'s international initiatives, was reprinted in the magazine along with the editor's reply (*De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.II, no.8, June 1919, col.94-95 and col.96). Huebner subsequently promoted the ideas of *De Stijl* in Germany, e.g. "Die holländische 'Stijl' Gruppe", *Feuer*, Weimar, April/May 1921, pp.267-68.

December 1920, and expanded the following April when he returned to settle in Weimar.

1.4. Images of Soviet Russia

As a contribution to mutual understanding, the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* proposed a multilateral exchange of works, touring exhibitions, hiring foreign artists and teaching staff by the government, and the creation of central offices to help diffuse the information gathered by artists through their travel and contact with colleagues from other countries⁴⁷. These projects were only partially realised. Genuine attempts to set up channels of exchange were nonetheless made. In June 1919 Adolf Behne listed fourteen artists' groups in Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Holland with whom the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* was in touch⁴⁸. However slight this may have been in comparison to the initial objectives, it was an indisputable sign of the broadness of the German avant-garde's intellectual perspective at this juncture and of its ideological openness to foreign theories and visual forms. This created a favourable reception for the news brought from Russia prior to 1922.

Clearly, there was some awareness in German progressive circles of what was happening in the East. Information about political developments was readily available in the press, as were several accounts of the latest realisations on the cultural front. As has been noted, a report on the reform of artistic institutions inaugurated by Anatolii Lunacharskii's People's Commissariat of Enlightenment [*Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniya - Narkompros*] after the Revolution appeared in *Das Kunstblatt* in March 1919, three months after Baehr's arrival. The article described in nine points some of the measures taken co-operatively by the Commissariat and 'young, radical artists'⁴⁹. It mentioned the establishment of a

⁴⁷ Behne, 'Aufruf!', p.264.

⁴⁸ Franciscono, *Walter Gropius*, p.151, n.56.

⁴⁹ 'Das Kunstprogramm des Kommissariats für Volksaufklärung in Russland', *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol.III, no.3, March 1919, pp.91-93; reprinted in *De Stijl* with an introduction by Van

museum of a new type dedicated to Russian and international modern art, announced the opening of State Free Art Studios all over the country and briefly expounded the artistic attitudes inspiring such projects. The bulk of the text though, was devoted to the foundation and activities of IZO [*Otdel izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv* - Department of Fine Arts]. It outlined the body's organisational structure, its tasks (including '5.b.: Contact with the artistic centres of the world') and listed its aims in the different branches of art along with the artists involved⁵⁰. Some sense of the practical work already under way could be gained from the survey of what had been accomplished so far, i.e. the organisation of exhibitions, the appointment of Commissars of art in all major towns and the publication of the periodical *Iskusstvo* [Art]⁵¹.

Complementing this, on 9 April 1919, the daily of the USPD, *Die Freiheit* [Freedom], printed a letter from Kandinskii to one of his German friends detailing IZO's latest achievements. He told enthusiastically of state purchases of works by avant-garde artists, monographs on individual figures already published, weekly lectures on art for workers 'involving good young art historians', and briefly reviewed the strategies developed by modern architects, sculptors, stage directors and others to align their practice with IZO's policies⁵². Erratic information on more specific questions was available too. Hence from March 1919 on, *Die Aktion* [Action] featured several discussions of the Proletarian Cultural Educational Organisations [*Proletarskaya kul'tura* - Proletkult] set up by Aleksandr Bogdanov in October 1917 in Petrograd in order to create a culture that would reflect the values and aspirations of the proletariat⁵³. More politically involved journals like *Russische Korrespondenz* [Russian Correspondence] and *Die Rote Fahne* [The

Doesburg: 'Algemeen kunstprogramma van het tegenwoordige Rusland', *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.II, no.6, April 1919, col.68-70.

⁵⁰ 'Das Kunstprogramm des Kommissariat für Volksaufklärung in Russland', p.91.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.92.

⁵² Kandinsky, 'Kunstfrühling in Russland' (Moscow, 2 February 1919), *Die Freiheit*, Berlin, vol.II, no.171, 9 April 1919; translated in Lindsay, Vergo, *Kandinsky*, vol.I, pp.428-30.

⁵³ A. Lunatscharski, 'Proletkult', *Die Aktion*, Berlin, vol.IX, no.10/11, 15 March 1919, col.145-53; A. Lunatscharski, 'Die kommunistische Propaganda und der Volksunterricht', vol.IX, no.28, 12 July

Red Flag] carried various features on the cultural situation⁵⁴. However, these were mainly ideological in content and revealed little of recent efforts on the artistic front. Considerably more informative were Konstantin Umanskii's articles in *Der Ararat* of early 1920, just before his *New Art in Russia 1914-1919* was published⁵⁵.

The first of these two essays, 'New art movements in Russia: Tatlinism or Machine Art', discussed the work of the artist Vladimir Tatlin who had turned away from painting after a visit to Picasso's studio in 1913 and begun to experiment with constructed reliefs⁵⁶. Tatlin's early assemblages employed banal, everyday materials. Often found at random, these were incorporated with the minimum of alteration into carefully balanced arrangements which underplayed the components' narrative value and stressed their intrinsic physical qualities: colour, tone, texture, scale and flexibility. Umanskii underscored the significance of such experimentation:

Vladimir Tatlin [...] has not only created a new word in the language of art, but a new art language. 'Tatlinism' maintains that the picture as such is dead. The picture surface is too narrow to contain the three-dimensional, and new problems require richer technical means for their solution. Moreover there is a disdain for the necessity to create 'pictures' and 'works of art' to entertain or, even better, repel the initiated. Art is dead - Long live art, the art of the machine, with its construction and logic, its rhythm, its components, its metaphysical spirit - the art of the Counter-Reliefs. This finds no material

1919, col.459-62 and "Der russische 'Proletkult', von einem russischen Genossen", vol.X, no.3/4, 24 January 1920, col.29-38.

⁵⁴ For instance, A. Lunatscharski, 'Die Ausgaben der sozialistischen Kultur', *Russische Korrespondenz*, Leipzig-Hamburg, no.10, 1920, pp.91-94, A. Lunatscharski, 'Der Proletkult und die kulturelle Sowjetarbeit', *ibid.*, pp.96-97 and 'Ein Aufruf des Exekutivkomitees des Provisorischen Internationalen Bureaus des proletarischen Kultur', *Die Rote Fahne*, Berlin, 23 September 1920, no.190; reprinted in *Ästhetik und Kommunikation: Beiträge zur politischen Erziehung*, no.5/6, February 1972, vol.2, pp.92-93; and Franz Jung, *Reise in Rußland* (Berlin: Verlag der KAPD, 1920).

⁵⁵ See Umanskij, *Neue Kunst in Rußland*, pp.19-20 and pp.32-33 respectively.

⁵⁶ Konstantin Umanski (aus Moskau), 'I. Neue Kunstrichtungen in Rußland', *Der Ararat*, Munich, no.4, January 1920, pp.12-14. A list of the important art exhibitions held in 1919 (identical to that which appeared in *Neue Kunst in Rußland*, p.60) followed the article.

unworthy of art: wood, glass, paper, metal sheeting, iron screws, nails, electrical fittings, slivers of glass scattered across the surface, the ability of parts to move etc. - all of these have been declared legitimate instruments of the new art language⁵⁷.

The impact of this particular reading of Tatlin's work upon the Berlin art world is widely acknowledged. There was nothing fundamentally new in the exploitation of hitherto non-artistic materials for anyone who had read the injunctions of Umberto Boccioni in the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture* (1912), heard them discussed or seen the assemblages exhibited by the Russian artist Jefym Golischeff as part of the April 1919 Dadaist exhibition at the I.B. Neumann Graphisches Kabinett⁵⁸. On the other hand, the predominance of the machine as a subject for art and a tool to produce it proclaimed by Umanskii was more startling and exciting. It was particularly relevant to the Berlin Dadaists' attempt to annihilate and subvert artistic conventions, and press the machine into the service of personal liberation for the individual. The assertion that 'the grammar and aesthetic of this [new artistic] language require the further mechanical training of the artist and a closer relationship to his omnipotent ally - the sovereign machine' dovetailed with the Dadaist demand for a new art in which traditional aestheticising processes played no part. Hence the placard held by George Grosz and John Heartfield at the *Erste internationale Dada-Messe* [First International Dada Fair] of June 1920 (fig.1.4) which proclaimed, along with Umanskii:

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁵⁸ Raoul Hausmann recalls: 'J. Golyscheff and I exhibited *mechanical drawings*, linocuts, cardboard sculptures (Hausmann) and compositions executed in heterogeneous materials, such as tin cans, glass, hair, paper frills (Golischeff)', Raoul Hausmann, *Courrier Dada* (Paris: Le Terrain Vague, 1958), p.46. See also Adolf Behne, 'Werkstattbesuche: Jefim Golyscheff', *Der Cicerone*, Berlin, vol.XI, no.22, November 1919, pp.722-26. An editorial note at the end of the article linked Tatlin's experiments to the work of Kurt Schwitters, i.e. the *Merzbilder* on display at the gallery *Der Sturm*. Like Umanskii in *Neue Kunst in Rußland* (p.19), the editors traced the former back to the Cubist explorations of Braque and Picasso (1913), and ensuing work of the Italian Futurists and the Dadaists.

Art is dead.
Long live the new machine art of
TATLIN⁵⁹

Umanskii's second article was more general in scope⁶⁰. It reported on monumental art, beginning with an examination of the statues of distinguished revolutionaries, scientists and cultural figures erected from April 1918 onwards as part of Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda. Umanskii deplored the uneven quality and traditional artistic forms of the works produced. He paid special attention to the slightly more innovative creations of Sergei Kononov and Boris Korolev (fig.1.5) and, more importantly for the diffusion of Russian avant-garde art westwards, to Tatlin's efforts at rectifying such a situation by creating a genuinely revolutionary monument, subsequently known as the *Model for a Monument to the Third International*. The article predated the building of the actual model (fig.1.6), which was not completed until October 1920. Yet Umanskii was able to divulge some of the ideas behind it, for they had been outlined by Nikolai Punin in *Iskusstvo kommuny* [Art of the Commune] in 1919⁶¹. Unlike Punin, Umanskii provided little information on the structure and working of the Tower, for instance the number, shape and functions of the glass chambers or their movements at different speeds. However, he mentioned the inclusion of a radio station, telegraph office, of cinemas and exhibitions rooms, and stressed Tatlin's

⁵⁹ Reproduced in Richard Huelsenbeck (ed.), *Dada Almanach. Im Auftrag des Zentralamts der deutschen Dada-Bewegung* (Berlin: Erich Reiss, 1920), with the caption 'Georg Grosz and John Heartfield demonstrate against art in favour of their Tatlinian theories (on the occasion of the Dada Exhibition of June 1920)'.

⁶⁰ Konstantin Umanski (aus Moskau), 'II. Die Monumentalskulptur in Rußland', *Der Ararat*, Munich, no.5-6, March 1920, pp.29-35, illustrated by the author's sketch of Boris Korolev's *Monument to Mikhail Bakunin* and two sculptures by Aleksandr Archipenko. Umanskii published another article in *Der Ararat* later that same year, 'IV. W. Kandinskijs Rolle im russischen Kunstleben', *Der Ararat*, Munich, zweites Sonderheft, 1920, pp.28-30.

⁶¹ Nikolai Punin, 'O pamyatnikakh' [About monuments], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, Petrograd, no.14, 9 March 1919, pp.3-4; translated in Hubertus Gaßner, Eckhardt Gillen, *Zwischen Revolutionskunst und Sozialistischem Realismus: Dokumente und Kommentare Kunstdebatten in der Sowjetunion von 1917 bis 1932* (Cologne: DuMont Verlag, 1979), pp.446-47. Both Umanskii's articles for *Der Ararat* and his book referred to a statement by Vladimir Tatlin published in the second issue of the Moscow journal *Iskusstvo* in 1919.

attempt to overcome the division between painting, sculpture and architecture, and between art and technology:

The monument should not be defined as an embellishment of the city or the claim of political ideas, but rationally and technically conditioned, serving utilitarian aims. This monument should be converted into a living machine [...] The rhythmic essence of this living machine should also be the most consistent embodiment of the *Zeitgeist* in the monument form⁶².

New Art in Russia 1914-1919 placed this valuable information within the context of a broad overview of artistic experimentation in the pre- and immediately post-revolutionary period. Umanskii chronicled the avant-garde's accomplishments, including Georgii Yakulov and Tatlin's designs of 1917-18 for the *Kafe Pittoresk* [Café Pittoresque] (fig.1.7) and Kazimir Malevich's Suprematist search for 'the zero of form', and explained the 'new ethics' which the turbulent changes of 1917 had prompted in progressive circles⁶³:

The artist is beginning to live socially as an active member of the community, is organically linked to his time, climbing down from the heights of Parnassus and into the depths of life, calling upon the bystander to experience intensively his creations and so [finds] a real application for his artistic ideals⁶⁴.

The book talked at length about agitation and street art, and quoted approvingly Mayakovskii's celebrated line 'The streets are our brushes, the squares our palettes' and the much-repeated slogan 'Art into the street'⁶⁵. 'The Russian revolution', Umanskii wrote, 'in its present - communist - phase in particular, has not only affected and influenced Russian artistic life, it has completely

⁶² Umanski, 'Die Monumentalskulptur in Rußland', p.32-33.

⁶³ Umanskij, *Neue Kunst in Rußland*, p.4.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ V. Mayakovskii, 'Prikaz po armii iskusstva' [Order to the army of the art], *Iskusstvo kommury*, Petrograd, no.1, 7 December 1918, p.1; translated in Wiktor Woroszyński, *The Life of Vladimir Mayakovsky* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1972), p.246.

transformed it'⁶⁶. He described the ensuing reforms, enumerating the different institutions set up and exposing their policies, objectives and achievements to date, e.g. IZO, the State Free Art Studios and the International Bureau⁶⁷. Additional details about these and other bodies, museums, new monuments, important exhibitions held in 1919, recent theatrical and publishing activity, and further aspects of the post-revolutionary art scene, appeared in sixteen brief appendices⁶⁸.

A list of 'leading left-wing artists' was printed at the end of *New Art in Russia 1914-1919*. It included Kandinskii, Archipenko, Taitin, Malevich, Natan Al'tman, David Burluk and Ol'ga Rozanova⁶⁹. A few other major avant-garde figures who were soon to play a key rôle in the development of Russian Constructivism, like Aleksandr Rodchenko, were mentioned in the main text. However, except for Tatlin and to a lesser extent Malevich, little or no information was given about the nature of their work aside from their involvement in government projects. No visual documentation was available for these⁷⁰. In fact, although Umanskii's book was reasonably well illustrated, the most recent work which the author was able to reproduce was that of Archipenko, Chagall and Kandinskii, already well-known to the German public from exhibitions at the Galerie De Sturm and illustrations in magazines⁷¹. This relative paucity of reproductions caused a certain amount of frustration, even if Umanskii's book was generally greeted with enthusiasm. For instance, Rosa Schapire in *Das Kunstblatt* welcomed the appearance of a book casting 'such new light' on the artistic trends from revolutionary Russia. Yet she deprecated the lack of convincing visual evidence to support Umanskii's arguments⁷². The author of the book's preface, Dr. Leopold Zahn, expressed a

⁶⁶ Umanskij, *Neue Kunst in Rußland*, p.43.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.46-55.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.57-67.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.57.

⁷⁰ The publisher noted in a postscript that the book was not intended as a history of Russian art, but rather as an informative collection of material. He deplored the absence of illustrations for the most recent works discussed, especially the abstract tendencies, and hoped that a second printing would be able remedy such a deficiency, p.68. Umanskii pointed to the impossibility of providing plates showing the work of Malevich in a note p.22.

⁷¹ The book contained 54 plates.

⁷² *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, September 1920, vol.IV, no.9, pp.286-87.

similar regret in *Der Ararat*, but pointed out the difficulty of circulating information between Russia and Germany⁷³.

Despite the increasing amount of material available to Western readers after 1920, the visual vacuum which had not been filled by *New Art in Russia 1914-1919* was not satisfied for another two years, until the Treaty of Rapallo allowed actual works and documents to cross the Russian border in greater quantity and the *Erste russische Kunstausstellung* [First Russian Art Exhibition] opened in Berlin⁷⁴. This partly accounts for the resonance Umanskii's early contribution found in Germany. The impact of his comments on Tatlin upon contemporary German artists, such as Grosz, Heartfield and Hausmann, was evinced in both the display of and catalogue to the *First International Dada-Fair*⁷⁵. A short article entitled 'Tatlinism' in *Freie deutsche Bühne* [Free German Stage] in late February 1920 confirms that Umanskii's views likewise permeated the critical discourse of the artistic establishment⁷⁶. In this text Frank Thieß discussed the phenomenon to which Umanskii had recently alerted the West and contrasted it to Expressionism:

Tatlinism makes clear the sovereignty of objects, the machine, materials [...] Art not only has the right but the duty to make these materials its 'material'; it must make use of wood, steel, glass, screws, electrical wire and mathematical formulas in exactly the same way as this age does; everything in the outside world has a right of domicile in art, which has given notice to the spirit to vacate its dwelling in order to establish the machine in its place [...] Tatlinism is the pace-maker of the total materialisation of our lives and sacrifices - like the Dadaists in Germany and the artists gathered around the

⁷³ *Der Ararat*, Munich, no.9/10, October 1920, pp.114-15.

⁷⁴ This event will form the subject of Chapter 5.

⁷⁵ Raoul Hausmann noted in the catalogue: "*Mechanisches Kunstwerk*" [Mechanical art] may be all right in Russia as a type of art - here it is talentless, unartistic mimicry, the utmost of snobism and insolence, at odds with serious criticism", 'Was der Kunstkritiker nach Ansicht des Dadasophen zur Dada-Ausstellung sagen wird', *Erste internationale Dada-Messe* (Berlin: Malik Verlag, June 1920), p.2; reprinted in Hanne Bergius (ed.), *Dada Berlin: Texte, Manifeste, Aktion* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1977), p.49.

⁷⁶ Frank Thieß, 'Der Tatlinismus', *Freie deutsche Bühne*, Berlin, 29 February 1920, vol.I, no.27, pp.644-45. *Maschinenkunst* and Tatlinism were also discussed in Fritz Karpfen, *Gegenwartskunst: I. Russland* (Vienna: Verlag Literaria, 1921), pp.21-22 and pp.37-38.

magazine *Valori Plastici* in Italy - the irrationality of the spirit and the soul to the rational, measurable object⁷⁷.

Interestingly, Thieß hinted that there were other sources of information about the new art being created in the Soviet Union⁷⁸. Some first-hand material indeed randomly reached Germany. Paul Westheim in the November 1920 issue of *Das Kunstblatt* stated that since the publication of Umanskii's book one of the journal's collaborators had brought back from Russia 'a few originals and a collection of photographs of the new Russian art, amongst them photographs of Tatlin's work', thereby giving him the first glimpse of this new art⁷⁹.

A few Germans travelled to Russia to see the situation for themselves and reported on their journeys upon their return. One of the first accounts was presented by the writer Arthur Holitscher in *Drei Monate in Sowjet-Rußland* [Three Months in Soviet Russia], published in Berlin in early 1921⁸⁰. A member of Franz Pfemfert's circle, Holitscher visited Soviet Russia from September to November 1920 at the invitation of Karl Radek and collected his impressions in a survey compiled for a Swiss-based agency⁸¹. The book covered subjects as diverse

⁷⁷ Thieß, 'Der Tatlinismus', p.645.

⁷⁸ Though published only a few weeks after Umanskii's first contribution to *Der Ararat*, Thieß's article made no acknowledgement of the Russian critic's writings. Rather it implied direct access to original sources ('if one may believe the reports of travellers to Russia or the new art periodicals in Moscow', *ibid.*, p.645). Thieß's terminology, however, was remarkably similar to Umanskii's. This attests, at the very least, to a familiarity with the Russian critic's arguments (incidentally, a brief note recording the publication of 'Tatlinismus' in *Der Ararat* later that year also drew attention to this conspicuous absence of reference to Umanskii, *Der Ararat*, Munich, no.9/10, October 1920, p.119).

⁷⁹ P.W., 'Nachdenkames aus Rußland', *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol. IV, no.11, November 1920, pp.348-49. Westheim was distinctly unimpressed and extremely critical of Tatlin's work ('a composition made of iron bars, bent and curved pieces of metal'): 'as a piece of engineering, it has none of the monumental splendour of, for instance, the Firth of Forth bridge; as an art work, it only gives the impression of a laborious, pedantic construction'.

⁸⁰ Arthur Holitscher, *Drei Monate in Sowjet-Rußland* (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 1921). Other examples include Alfons Paquet, the *Frankfurter Zeitung*'s correspondent in the early days of the revolution (Alfons Paquet, *Rußland von heute* (Berlin: 1920)), and Alfons Goldschmidt, the economist and editor of the ephemeral *Berlin Rätezeitung* (Alfons Goldschmidt, *Die Wirtschaftsorganisation Sowjetrußlands* (Berlin: 1920)).

⁸¹ Holitscher gave September 1919 as the original date for Radek's invitation. The latter was then still gaoled in the Berlin-Moabit prison, where he had been kept since his arrest after the failure of the initial Spartacist uprising in Berlin in January 1919. Departure was delayed by various complications and Holitscher finally left in September 1920 together with a commission of government representatives, Holitscher, *Drei Monate in Sowjet-Rußland*, p.7.

as the Russian proletariat, the Red Army, government propaganda, religion, Civil War and world revolution. A relatively large amount of space was devoted to *Proletkult* and to the situation on the general cultural and artistic front⁸². Holitscher discussed the statues erected as part of Lenin's Plan for Monumental Propaganda, the Futurist street decorations and exhibitions he had visited, including an exhibition of abstract paintings accompanied by a seven-page manifesto⁸³. He wrote more eagerly of his encounter with Tatlin at the Winter Palace, during which the artist spoke about his *Counter-Reliefs*:

Tatlin is a young artist who has had a brilliant idea in the true sense of the word: that in an age wherein the machine has outstripped, destroyed and crushed men, the machine must be as interesting as man himself [...] Tatlin is in fact the artist representative of this epoch⁸⁴.

An evocative and far more informative than Umanskii's (though not completely accurate) description of the *Model for a Monument to the Third International* followed⁸⁵:

The monument is to be approximately 300 meters high and to measure some 100 square meters at its base. Imagine that some Titan had grabbed the Eiffel Tower by the neck and, with one turn of the arm, twisted and re-twisted it into a spiral. Within the open space between the two spirals, Tatlin now suspends four enormous glass structures with ribs of iron and concrete on top of each other. The lowest, largest one is a cylinder approximately 80 metres in diameter which is to contain the conference hall of the Third

⁸² As has been seen, there was already a substantial coverage of the Proletkult. Additional documentation included Franz W. Seiwert, 'Offener Brief an den Genossen A. Bogdanow', *Die Aktion*, Berlin, vol.XI, no.27/28, 9 July 1921 and Richard A. Scheffer, 'Über proletarische Kunst (Rezension von A. Bogdanov, *Die Kunst und das Proletariat*)', *Die Rote Fahne*, Berlin, vol.IV, no.92, 24 February 1921.

⁸³ Holitscher, *Drei Monate in Sowjet-Rußland*, pp.109-115. It is not clear from the text what this exhibition was.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.117.

⁸⁵ Tatlin's model was exhibited in Petrograd in the studio in which it had been built from 8 November to 1 December 1920. It was then transported to Moscow, where it was re-erected in the Hall of the Eighth Congress of the Soviets.

International, as well as rooms for typists, readers, a theatre and a restaurant. Some 30 metres above this cylinder, a pyramid is erected: here executive assemblies are to take place. Above this again, a somewhat slimmer cylinder accommodates a radio station, a cinema and similar premises. High at the top is a hemisphere: the light and power station. These four structures of glass, iron and concrete revolve continuously around their axes: the conference hall of the Third International once per year, the executive room once per month, the radio station once per day and the uppermost hemisphere once per minute [sic]. All four volumes are heated according to the principle of the vacuum bottle⁸⁶.

Holitscher responded very favourably to the Tower. He recognised its social symbolism as well as the ideological programme with which Tatlin had endowed it. Appropriately, he highlighted the significance of the structure's dynamics in the context of socialist construction, as unfolded by one of Tatlin's assistants who cranked the model for him: 'the rotation is explained by the idea that the Third International is an organism in continual motion'⁸⁷. On the other hand, a clue was given about the problems confronting Russia's artistic community as a result of the profound changes affecting the country. The author described the acute shortage of food and materials. Perhaps most importantly, he echoed the frustrations which stemmed, on the one hand, from the difficult marriage of the avant-garde with government institutions, and on the other, from the impossibility of fostering regular and permanent contact with artists abroad in spite of the People's Commissariat of Enlightenment's efforts to overcome such a situation⁸⁸.

Writing almost a year later than Umanskii, Holitscher was obviously in a position to impart much more information on the Russian post-revolutionary avant-garde scene, as he did with regard to Tatlin's Tower. Umanskii had left prior to the emergence of Constructivism. Yet, in substance, *Three Months in Soviet*

⁸⁶ Holitscher, *Drei Monate in Sowjet-Rußland*, p.119.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.120.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.133 and p.144.

Russia did not radically alter or contradict the picture conveyed by Umanskii and other sources. Valuable though Holitscher's book was, it contained no illustrations. Consequently, it gave German artists no visual frame of reference within which to evaluate the work of their Russian colleagues or compare it with their own. Still, many artists and intellectuals in Germany remained under the spell of the news coming through from the East⁸⁹. This despite the fact that, as the revolutionary wave ebbed, so did the general enthusiasm, resulting in a polarisation between left and right in the avant-garde and many groups, notably the *Novembergruppe*. An instance of this is the talk Holitscher gave on his Russian journey at the *Berliner Sezession* [Berlin Secession] exhibition on 7 March 1921. From a review in the left-liberal journal *Das Tage-Buch* [The Diary], it seems that the writer's experiences were well received by the audience⁹⁰. This was in part due to sympathies for the social and political developments in Soviet Russia and, in part, because German artists themselves were involved in similar explorations.

1.5. The Hungarian factor

Halfway between Moscow and Paris, Berlin was well-positioned geographically to serve as a springboard from which to influence international progressive art. This was particularly appealing not only to young radical Russian individuals and enterprising *De Stijl* figures like Theo Van Doesburg, but also to influential Hungarians who were forced into exile. With the fall of the Hungarian Republic of Councils on 1 August 1919, avant-garde culture began a new phase of development. Artists and intellectuals who had played an active rôle in the

⁸⁹ See for instance George Grosz, 'Zu meiner neuen Bildern', *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol.V, no.1, January 1921, pp.11-14. Herwarth Walden was also well-disposed towards Communism and eventually emigrated from Hitler's Germany to Stalin's Russia in 1932, Ildiko Hajnal-Neukäter, 'Herwarth Walden und Lajos Kassák - ein Porträt', in Hubertus Gassner (ed.), *Wechselwirkungen: Ungarische Avantgarde in der Weimarer Republik* (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 1986), p.62.

⁹⁰ Stefan Grossmann, 'Arthur Holitscher der Leninist', *Das Tage-Buch*, Berlin, no.11, 1921, pp.334-36; quoted in Winfried Nerdinger, *Rudolf Belling und die Kunstströmungen in Berlin 1918-1923* (Berlin: Deutscher Verlag für Kunstwissenschaft, 1981), p.103.

communist regime, either by supporting it or filling positions of influence in the many academies, art schools and proletarian workshops created under the Kun government, were compelled to leave the country by the retributive forces of Admiral Miklós Horthy. It was not long before most of the Activists clustered around the periodical *MA* [Today] found themselves in neighbouring Vienna or Berlin. There they almost immediately entered the arena of international avant-garde art. A review of their activity is integral to any attempt to reconstruct the circumstances in which news of the artistic situation in Soviet Russia reached Berlin.

Hungarian Activism originated in Budapest during the First World War. Inspired by the socialist engagement of the Eight, the first truly avant-garde Hungarian movement, young revolutionary artists and writers of various stylistic allegiances banded together around *A Tett* [The Deed], the political and literary periodical launched by the poet and critic Lajos Kassák in November 1915 (fig.1.8)⁹¹. Among its foremost supporters were the painters László Moholy-Nagy, Sándor Bortnyik and Béla Uitz, the sculptor László Péri, and critics Alfréd Kemény and Ernő Kállai. More radical than their forebears, the Activists believed in the power of the political act. They had faith in the ability of art to initiate a comprehensive restructuring of the social fabric. Kassák explained in the *Manifesto of Pictorial Architecture* of September 1921:

The artist is one who does not command us to do anything but who makes us able to do the greatest things.

Art transforms us, and we become capable of transforming our surroundings⁹².

⁹¹ Organised in summer 1909, the Eight were Róbert Berény, Béla Czóbel, Dezső Czigány, Károly Kernstok, Ódön Márffy, Deszö Orbán, Bertalan Pór and Lajos Tihanyi.

⁹² Lajos Kassák, 'Képarchitektura manifesztum' [Manifesto of Pictorial Architecture] (Vienna: MA, 1921); translated in *The Hungarian Avant-Garde: The Eight and the Activists* (London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1980), pp.114-16. This text, first published as a separate booklet, was reprinted in full in *MA*, Vienna, vol.VII, no.4, 15 March 1922, pp.52-54, and then in a shorter German version in *MA*, Vienna, vol.VIII, no.1, 15 October 1922, p.6.

The October 1918 'Chrysanthemum' revolution and ensuing Republic of Councils gave the Activists the opportunity they sought to participate in political discourse. For a few brief euphoric months, the avant-garde collaborated with the new regime to demonstrate their revolutionary ideas and shape the social fabric of the future. Leading figures such as György Lukács and Károly Kernstok accepted official positions with the government. A thorough reform of artistic education was launched whereby Activist painters such as Béla Uitz and József Nemes Lampérth were offered key rôles in the new schools. Avant-garde works were also bought for public collections and institutions⁹³. In return, artists produced countless paintings and posters encouraging support for the Republic, e.g. Béla Uitz's *Red Soldiers, Forward!* (fig.1.9)⁹⁴. Some Activists however disapproved of the government's policies on the arts. Kassák, for instance, declared his opposition to Kun in no uncertain terms in an open letter 'in the name of art' published in *MA* in June 1919. Emphatically rejecting any form of institutional control, Kassák insisted that art be free from all interference⁹⁵. His journal was banned after the publication of one more issue in July. It reappeared in Vienna ten months later⁹⁶.

Kassák's statement of independence and the resulting demise of *MA* were not unprecedented. *A Tett* had also been shut down by the authorities less than a year after its appearance, ostensibly for compromising the war effort of the Habsburg Empire and insulting national honour⁹⁷. Named and modelled after the Berlin journal *Die Aktion*, *A Tett* was essentially a political organ, expounding pacifist

⁹³ Krisztina Passuth, 'Autonomie der Kunst und sozialistische Ideologie in der Ungarische Avantgardkunst', in Gassner (ed.), *Wechselwirkungen*, pp.12-14.

⁹⁴ Kassák urged the modern artist to embrace poster art as early as 1916, stressing its political function, Lajos Kassák, 'A plakát és az új festészet' [The poster and the new painting], *MA*, Budapest, vol.I, no.1, 15 November 1916, pp.2-4; translated in *The Hungarian Avant-Garde*, pp.112-13.

⁹⁵ Lajos Kassák, 'Levél Kun Bélához a művészet nevében' (Budapest, 14 June 1919) [Letter to Béla Kun in the name of art], *MA*, Budapest, vol.IV, no.7, 15 June 1919, pp.146-48; translated in Gassner (ed.), *Wechselwirkungen*, pp.33-34.

⁹⁶ The acute shortage of paper gave the government a reason for closing down periodicals, including the well-established literary monthly *Nyugat* [West], József Farkas, 'Révolution du prolétariat, avant-garde et culture de masse', in Charles Dautrey, Jean-Claude Guerlain (eds.), *L'Activisme Hongrois*, (Bayeux: Goutal-Darly, 1979), pp.52-53.

⁹⁷ Seventeen issues of *A Tett* appeared in Budapest between 1 November 1915 and 20 September 1916.

and anarchist ideas. Internationalism was therefore at its very basis. Kassák as editor not only argued uncompromisingly against his country's participation in World War I, but demonstrated an intense interest in non-Hungarian contemporary intellectual and artistic developments⁹⁸. *A Tett's* successor, *MA*, displayed an even more profound international orientation. Close ties with the German journal *Der Sturm* [The Storm] enabled the editor to keep abreast of the cultural situation abroad⁹⁹. Reproductions of works by German Expressionists, Italian Futurists, Picasso, Derain and others filled the pages of *MA* from 1917 onwards, along with translations of Guillaume Apollinaire's study of Cubism and further seminal documents of modern European art¹⁰⁰. The bilingual appeal 'To the Artists of All Countries!' (fig.1.10) which opened the very first issue of the Viennese series made this orientation most explicit¹⁰¹.

In the new and unsettled Austrian republic, *MA* rapidly developed into an international, interdisciplinary avant-garde journal. It began to record the latest developments in neighbouring countries and, within six months, had formed links with nearly all brands of modernism. Between 1921 and 1922, there were reports on German Dadaism, Russian Suprematism and Constructivism, De Stijl, French art and progressive literature as well as many outstanding European avant-garde figures: Schwitters, Van Doesburg, Eggeling, Richter and others¹⁰². In addition, a

⁹⁸ *A Tett* published Walt Whitman (vol.I, no.4, 20 December 1915, p.62), Ludwig Rubiner (vol.II, international issue, 1 August 1916), Georges Duhamel (vol.II, no.9, 5 March 1916, p.148 and vol.II, international issue, 1 August 1916, p.296), and featured articles on Karl Liebknecht and other members of the international workers' movement (vol.I, no.6, 20 January 1916, pp.94-95).

⁹⁹ Kassák and Walden had known each other since 1913. See Hajnal-Neukäter, 'Herwarth Walden und Lajos Kassák', p.62.

¹⁰⁰ Among the artists given space during the magazine's Budapest days were Franz Marc (vol.II, no.5, 15 March 1917, p.65 and vol.IV, no.4, 10 April 1919, p.45), Max Pechstein (vol. II, no.8, 15 June 1918, p.117), Umberto Boccioni (vol.III, no.5, 1 May 1918, p.53 and vol.IV, no.5, 15 May 1919, p.91), Pablo Picasso (vol.II, no.11, 15 September 1917, p.173 and vol.IV, no.8, 1 July 1919, p.197) and André Derain (vol.IV, no.8, 1 July 1919, p.199). Guillaume Apollinaire's essay 'A kubizmus' appeared in vol.IV, no.2, 26 February 1919, pp.16-21.

¹⁰¹ Lajos Kassák, 'An die Künstler aller Länder!' (in *Namen der ungarischen Aktivisten*, Wien, am 15. April 1920), *MA*, Vienna, vol.V, no.1/2, 1 May 1920, pp.2-4.

¹⁰² Individual issues were devoted to specific artists, for instance, Kurt Schwitters (vol.VI, no.3, 1 January 1921), Archipenko (vol.VI, no.6, 25 April 1921), Viking Eggeling and Hans Richter (vol.VI, no.8, 1 August 1921), László Moholy-Nagy (vol.VI, no.9, 15 September 1921), George Grosz (vol.VI, no.7, 1 June 1921), Lajos Kassák (vol.VII, no.1, 15 November 1921), Ferdinand

number of events were organised to serve the broad intellectual community that the journal now represented, including small exhibitions, the publication of books and albums of prints, special forums and evenings. Hence on 13 November 1920 Umanskii was invited to speak on the new art, music and poetry from revolutionary Russia at the *MA* premises¹⁰³. He showed slides of recent works by Kandinskii, Malevich, Goncharova, Rodchenko, Tatlin and other pioneers. As a result, the Hungarians were exposed to images of the latest trends in Russian avant-garde art almost two years in advance of Germany and the rest of Europe. A summary report by Béla Uitz appeared in *MA* soon after, revealing an early understanding of both the formal and social issues at stake on the Soviet art scene and of some of the problems confronting the avant-garde¹⁰⁴.

Certainly an interest in Russian art had existed amid Hungarian artists, intellectuals and literary radicals before they had been forced into emigration. Common to them and the Russians in 1919 were the experiences of a revolution survived and the desire to overturn ossified social structures by artistic means. In both countries sympathy for the revolutionary forces had inspired an enthusiastic alignment of artistic practice with official interests, stimulating extensive propaganda work and giving most of the avant-garde an exhilarating sense of freedom. Following Kun's fall from power and the subsequent repression of the intelligentsia, the apparent prominence of modern art in Moscow could only fire the imagination of the Hungarians. It is therefore not surprising that some of the avant-garde who sought refuge abroad in 1919 later turned to that country. Alfréd Kemény and Béla Uitz were among many who felt a strong allegiance to Russia.

Léger (vol.VII, no.2, 1 January 1922), Ivan Puni (vol.VII, no.3, 1 February 1922), Hans Arp (vol.VII, no.4, 15 March 1922), Theo Van Doesburg and *De Stijl* (vol.VII, no.7, 1 July 1922).

¹⁰³ See Hubertus Gassner, "'Ersehnte Einheit' oder 'erpreßte Versöhnung': Zur Kontinuität und Diskontinuität ungarischer Konstruktivismus-Konzeption", in Gassner (ed.), *Wechselwirkungen*, p.196.

¹⁰⁴ For instance, the conflict between the avant-garde and *Proletkult*: 'in Russia the material and spiritual revolutions are undergoing a parallel development. This development has only one obstacle: *Proletkult*, a conception which seeks to serve the cause of the art by forcing [...] artists back into the old exhausted forms, while emphasising today's *Weltanschauung*', Béla Uitz, 'Jegyzetek a MA orosz estélyéhez' [Notes on MA's Russian evening], *MA*, Vienna, vol.VI, no.4, 15 February 1921,

Both were sent there by the Hungarian Communist Party (KMP). Uitz travelled with Sándor Ék and a few others in order in January 1921 to attend the Third Congress of the Comintern held in Moscow early that summer. Kemény, who had resided in Berlin since April 1920, followed shortly after as a delegate of the Communist Youth International.

Kemény was deeply impressed by what he saw of Russia's post-revolutionary artistic activity. The experimental work of the young radical artists gathered in the OBMOKhU group [*Obshchestvo molodykh khudozhnikov* - Society of Young Artists], which will be reviewed in Chapter 4, especially captivated him. Members included Konstantin Medunetskii, Karl Ioganson and the brothers Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg. Together with Varvara Stepanova, Aleksandr Rodchenko and the theorist Aleksei Gan they formed the backbone of the First Working Group of Constructivists, whose constitution within INKhUK [*Institut khudozhestvennoi kul'tury* - Institute of Artistic Culture] in spring 1921 marked the adoption of an explicitly utilitarian platform among the Moscow avant-garde and the renunciation of artistic activity in favour of productive work in industry and design¹⁰⁵. Kemény's enthusiasm was reflected in two papers he gave at INKhUK on 8 and 26 December 1921. Contrasting German Expressionism, 'the individual expression of the artist's subjective feelings', with the latest trends in modern Russian art, Kemény saluted Tatlin as 'the father of Russian material Constructivism'. Yet he identified the OBMOKhU artists as the most forward-looking representatives of Constructivism. 'Their constructions', Kemény argued, 'are material in the truest sense of the word, because they emerge from the inner nature of the material used' and 'are the first to have move from the plane into real space'. Where Rodchenko

p.52; cited in Krisztina Passuth, 'Contacts between the Hungarian and Russian avant-gardes in the 1920s', *The First Russian Show* (London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 1983), p.53-55.

¹⁰⁵ Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp.94-98.

and Tatlin still manifested 'naturalist tendencies', the forms of the OBMOKhU group embodied for Kemény 'agitation for the life of the future'¹⁰⁶.

Kemény and Uitz counted among the first foreign personalities to come in direct contact with the theoretical discussions which determined the evolution of the Russian Constructivist paradigm in 1921. The former encountered all the participants in the debate opposing the different tendencies when visiting INKhUK. Tatlin, Medunetskii, Ioganson, the Stenberg brothers, Gustav Klutis, Boris Arvatov, Mikhail Tarabukin, Lyubov' Popova and Aleksei Babichev were among the key figures who attended the Hungarian's lectures¹⁰⁷. According to Naum Gabo, Kemény was also introduced to the faculty of the recently established VKhUTEMAS [*Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvenno-tekhnicheskie masterskie* - Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops], and returned to Berlin with texts and photographs¹⁰⁸. Similar opportunities presented themselves to Uitz who likewise became acquainted with the most enthralling developments in the Moscow art world. He visited INKhUK and the VKhUTEMAS and, through student and fellow Hungarian Jolán Szigályi, met Lissitzky, Rodchenko, Malevich and other leading artists¹⁰⁹. The impact of these experiences was in both cases immediate and profound. As Chapter 5 will reveal, Kemény rapidly became critical of the OBMOKhU group and Russian Constructivism as a whole¹¹⁰. Uitz's fervour, on the other hand, never wavered; his political leanings leading him to take up residence in Russia in October 1926. The series of *Analyses* created upon his return to Austria via Berlin in the autumn of 1921 was no doubt a response to

¹⁰⁶ Alfréd Kemény, "Vorträge und Diskussionen am 'Institut für Künstlerische Kultur' (INChUK), Moskau 1921 (nach den Protokollen zusammengefaßt von Selim O. Chan-Magomedov)", in Gassner (ed.), *Wechselwirkungen*, pp.226-30.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁸ Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p.236.

¹⁰⁹ Oliver A.I. Botar, "From the avant-garde to 'Proletarian art': the émigré Hungarian journals *Egység* and *Askasztott Ember*, 1922-23", *Art Journal*, vol.52, spring 1993, pp.34-45.

¹¹⁰ See for example in his review of the First Russian Show at the Van Diemen gallery and joint declaration with László Moholy-Nagy, Ernő Kállai and László Péri, 'Nyilatkozat' [Declaration], *Egység*, Berlin, no.4, 10 February 1923, p.51; translated in Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p.288-89.

the post-revolutionary linear compositions of Rodchenko that Uitz had seen in Moscow.

In 1922 Uitz withdrew from *MA*'s editorial board to found *Egység* [Unity] (fig.1.11) with Aladár Komját, a former contributor to *A Tett*. Conceived as "a communist cultural organ [...] not a new direction [...] nor 'a school with a manifesto'", *Egység* was remarkable in several respects, not least for publishing documents collected during Uitz's Soviet sojourn¹¹¹. Hence the second issue included an overview of Soviet art since 1921, accompanied by reproductions of works by the Stenberg brothers, Ioganson, Ivan Klyun (under the title 'the UNOVIS group'), Gabo, the VKhUTEMAS student Nikolai Prusakov and a photograph of the Constructivist room at the OBMOKhU exhibition of May-June 1921 (fig.1.12)¹¹². Complementing this, there were translations of such important documents as *The Realistic Manifesto* of August 1920 by Gabo, the 'Programme of the First Working Group of Constructivists' of spring 1921 and a slightly modified version of Malevich's introduction to his album of lithographs of December 1920, *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*¹¹³. Five plates illustrated the latter (fig.1.13). None of this material had hitherto been published outside Russia¹¹⁴. The Hungarian language no doubt limited its accessibility, rendering the texts impenetrable to most of the Western readers who would have been sympathetic to their content.

Receptive interlocutors were plentiful in Berlin where both Uitz and Kemény were active in 1921-22. Moholy-Nagy, who in April 1921 became the German

¹¹¹ 'Az *Egység* útja és munkaprogramja' [The road and programme of *Egység*], *Egység*, Vienna, no.3, 16 September 1922, p.1; translated in Gassner (ed.), *Wechselwirkungen*, p.234. In all, five issues of *Egység* appeared. Numbers 1 (10 May 1922) to 3 (16 September 1922) were co-edited by Uitz in Vienna. The journal then ceased publication until 10 February 1923 when it was revived in Berlin under the sole editorship of Komját.

¹¹² Béla Uitz, 'Az orosz művészet helyzete 1921-ben' [The condition of Russian art in 1921], *Egység*, Vienna, no.2, 30 June 1922, pp.3-4; see Botar, "From the avant-garde to 'Proletarian art'", pp.37-38. Kassák had apparently rejected this material for *MA*.

¹¹³ The first two texts were published without the authors' names in *Egység*, Vienna, no.2, 30 June 1922. Malevich's work appeared *Egység*, Vienna, no.3, 16 September 1922.

¹¹⁴ Passuth, 'Contacts between the Hungarian and Russian avant-gardes in the 1920s', pp.58-59. An excerpt of Malevich's writings, translated by Lissitzky, later appeared in *Das Kunstblatt*: K. Malewitsch, "Lenin (Aus dem Buch 'Über das Ungegenständliche')", *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol.VIII, no.10, 1924, pp.289-93.

correspondent for *MA*, lived there since late January 1920 alongside a host of compatriots, including Péri and Kállai. Years later Erenburg wrote of 'Moholy-Nagy [arguing] with Lissitzky about Constructivism' amongst the turbulent and international clientele of the Romanisches Café¹¹⁵. Sándor Ék, for his part, recalled an unexpected encounter with Kemény at the Galerie Der Sturm at the turn of 1922: 'He was conversing actively with two gentlemen [...] He introduced me to the gentleman standing next to me [...] He said his name with poise, clear and loud: Kurt Schwitters. The second man [...] was familiar somehow [...] It was El Lissitzky'. Present too were Ivan Puni and Péri¹¹⁶. The productivity of these interactions is evinced by the number of joint declarations and manifestos published in art periodicals, e.g. the 'Call for Elemental Art' that Moholy-Nagy, Puni, Hausmann and Arp launched in *De Stijl* in October 1921¹¹⁷. 'All of [these]', Moholy-Nagy commented shortly before his death in 1946, 'gave us greater assurance in regard to our work and our artistic prospects'¹¹⁸.

* * *

By late 1920, attempts to overcome national isolation and establish effective channels of international communication had confirmed the avant-garde's belief in the common aims of the different artistic centres of Europe. Early publications had provided Western radical artists hungry for information a first insight into the work of their Russian colleagues. The resulting picture, whilst part of an incomplete frame of reference within which to gauge the actual situation on the Soviet scene, filled many with enthusiasm.

¹¹⁵ Ehrenburg, *Men, Years – Life. Truce: 1921-33*, vol.III, p.13.

¹¹⁶ Sándor Ék, 'Fünf Jahre in Berlin', in Klaus Kändler, Helga Karolewski, Ilse Siebert (eds.), *Berliner Begegnungen. Ausländische Künstler in Berlin 1918 bis 1933: Aufsätze-Bilder-Dokumente* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1987), pp.500-01.

¹¹⁷ R. Hausmann, Hans Arp, Iwan Puni, Maholy-Nagy, 'Aufruf zur elementaren Kunst' (Berlin, October 1921), *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.IV, no.10, 1921, col.156.

¹¹⁸ László Moholy-Nagy, 'Abstract of an artist' (Chicago, 1944), in Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, p.381.

As exchange increased through emigration and international travel, personal contacts slowly materialised and a reciprocity of influence began to develop that was to accelerate in the coming months. Those modernist journals which had alerted the West to the achievements of the Soviet avant-garde now became the spawning ground for action proposals and related efforts to effect an association of the progressive forces of all countries.

Weimar Germany seemed the most likely locale for such a project. Berlin was not only cosmopolitan but a major centre for virtually every form of creative endeavour. As Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers has written, it was 'the witches' caldron of Europe': it was a magnet to which those individuals who had faith in the possibility of building a new, more meaningful order were irresistibly drawn¹¹⁹.

¹¹⁹ Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.22.

Chapter 2: El Lissitzky

El Lissitzky's multifaceted career developed within extremely different contexts. Trained as an architect in Germany before the First World War, Lissitzky left revolutionary Russia in late 1921. He travelled to Berlin via Warsaw and began an extended stay in Europe, where he remained until May 1925. Thereafter Lissitzky was principally active in the Soviet Union but often returned to the West, although from 1927 his visits were more irregular and occasioned by the exhibitions he designed for the Soviet state.

While abroad, Lissitzky worked consistently to achieve collaboration between Western and Soviet avant-gardes. He encouraged cultural exchange, established numerous contacts and thus awakened a special interest in the artists and architects of Europe. Internationally known as an exponent of post-revolutionary Russian art, he acted effectively as an intermediary between individuals, groups and countries, and was recognised by his contemporaries as an exceptional figure among his fellow countrymen. The critic Traugott Schalcher commented in 1928: 'Compared with more typical representatives of the Russian spirit, Lissitzky is not really very Russian at all, but more of a modern Pan-European'¹.

This internationalist bias was highly conducive to the diffusion of Russian artistic ideas to the West. Lissitzky brought news of Russian art to his European colleagues. In doing so, he played a pivotal role in transmitting a specific image of Constructivism and had a definite impact on its reception and further development

¹ Traugott Schalcher, 'El Lissitzky, Moskau', *Gebrauchsgraphik*, Berlin, vol.V, no.12, 1928, pp.49-64; translated in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), p.378.

beyond the borders of Russia. It is thus appropriate to examine his position within the Russian avant-garde prior to and after his departure for the West.

* * *

2.1. Beginnings: Jewish illustrations

By 1918, Lissitzky's work as a book illustrator had already won him some renown. It was therefore not surprising that he was among the teachers Marc Chagall recruited for the People's Art Institute which opened under his directorship in January 1919, following his appointment as Commissar for the Arts for Vitebsk by Anatolii Lunacharskii in September 1918. Lissitzky, whom Chagall regarded as his 'most ardent disciple', moved from Kiev to Vitebsk to head the workshops for graphic and printing arts, and architecture in July 1919². Other members of the faculty included Mstislav Dobuzhinskii, Robert Falk, Ivan Puni and his wife Ksenia Boguslavskaya. On 5 November they were joined by Kazimir Malevich whose persuasive influence quickly spread in the school and came to dominate, eventually causing Chagall to resign and depart for Moscow. Surrounded by new followers, Malevich took over the Institute and began to elaborate a new curriculum with Vera Ermolaeva and Lissitzky's support. Together they established a new collective of artists on 14 February 1920 and called it UNOVIS [*Utverditeli novogo iskusstvo* - Affirmers of the New Art]³.

Prior to this, Lissitzky had been actively engaged in the Jewish renaissance which had begun in Russia in the 1870s and had come to full fruition with the removal of all Tsarist restrictions on national and religious groups after the 1917

² Marc Chagall, *My Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), p.140.

³ Aleksandra Shatskikh, 'Unovis: Epicenter of a new world', in *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde 1915-1932* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1992), p.56.

Revolution. Like other Jewish artists of his generation, such as Natan Al'tman, David Shterenberg, Iosif Chaikov and Issachar Ryback, Lissitzky applied himself to the building of a modern Jewish secular culture⁴. For a period of two years and occasionally thereafter, he undertook various jobs for Jewish publishing houses, designing covers, title pages, trademarks and collaborating with writers in the production of Yiddish picture books. Evidence of Chagall's influence is found in the elongated figures which framed the text of *A Prager Legende* [Legend of Prague], published in 1917⁵. Drawing on ancient Jewish motifs, Lissitzky adapted them to a modern idiom and fused them with the Hebrew script by means of a swirling calligraphic line (fig.2.1). Subsequent illustrations retained this representational style, in which the typography assumed an important part of the composition, and yet gradually took a stronger architectonic form⁶. Clean geometric motifs surfaced more noticeably in the colour lithographs for *Had Gadya* [One Goat] of 1919 (fig.2.2), betraying a propensity for abstraction and spatial experimentation⁷.

The same year these lithographs appeared, Lissitzky abandoned all figuration. Influenced by Suprematism, he developed the concept of the *Proun*, a neologistic acronym for 'Project for the affirmation of the new' [*Proekt utverzhdeniya novogo*] or 'For the school of the new art' [*Pro uchilishche novogo iskusstva*]. This apparently sudden conversion has inevitably given rise to much speculation. Some have identified constants in Lissitzky's production and interpreted the modernism of the *Prouns* as an effort to 'transcend' the Jewish tradition and 'insure its own vitality and progress'⁸. Others have seen in the Cubistic devices of *Had Gadya* an early reflection of ideas derived from Suprematism, having found

⁴ Seth L. Wolitz, 'The Jewish National Art Renaissance in Russia', in Ruth Apter-Gabriel (ed.), *Tradition and the Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art 1912-1928* (Jerusalem: The Israel Museum, 1987), pp.29-39.

⁵ Moshe Broderzon, *A Prager Legende* (Moscow: Shamir, 1917), also called *Sikhes Kholin* [Small Talk].

⁶ Ruth Apter-Gabriel, 'El Lissitzky's Jewish works', in Apter-Gabriel (ed.), *Tradition and the Revolution*, pp.101-18.

⁷ *Had Gadya* (Kiev: Kultur Lige, 1919).

evidence of a transitional moment between the two phases in the abstract forms of a dust jacket for that book executed in February 1919 (fig.2.3)⁹. A recently discovered Cubo-Futurist composition in the Museum of Ukrainian Art (fig.2.4), painted in the summer of 1919, indeed seems to confirm that Lissitzky was exposed to the influence of both Malevich and Aleksandra Ekster while working for the *Kultur Lige* [Culture League] in Kiev¹⁰. In any case, such arguments do not fully account for the radical move Lissitzky made in the winter of 1919. From the moment of Malevich's arrival at Vitebsk, he no doubt provided the essential impulse for a change of artistic direction.

Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers reported that Lissitzky 'scarcely mentioned' his Jewish book illustrations¹¹. They stemmed from a very brief period in his creative life, which he deemed completely unrelated to his subsequent artistic achievement. By 1923 he evidently saw them as belonging to the past: 'It was sometime between 19... and 1916. By the calendar, not so very long ago, and yet it seems like ages ago'. To be more specific, Lissitzky had become critical of the whole attempt to establish a distinct Jewish style by deliberately 'crawling back through [the] past'. He argued: 'That which is called art, is created when one is least conscious of creating it. Only then does it remain a monument of culture'¹². Certainly, his retreat from the Jewish artistic scene was not an isolated phenomenon. The year 1919 marked a turning point for Jewish culture in general. Ethnic concerns steadily disintegrated in the face of the changes and exciting new challenges brought about by the 1917 revolution, prompting the abandonment of a strictly national perspective¹³. For Lissitzky and other Jewish artists, Al'tman and Chaikov

⁸ Alan C. Birnholz, 'El Lissitzky and the Jewish tradition', *Studio International*, vol.186, no.959, October 1973, p.132.

⁹ John Bowlit, 'A child's topography of typography', *Art News*, vol.81, no.7, September 1982, pp.13-14, 17.

¹⁰ Alexander Kanzedikas, 'Ein unbekanntes Bild von Lissitzky', in *The Great Utopia*, p.148.

¹¹ Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.20.

¹² El Lissitzky, 'The Mohilev synagogue reminiscences', *Milgroim*, Berlin, no.3, 1923, pp.9-13; translated in *El Lissitzky 1890-1941* (Harvard: Busch-Reisinger Museum, 1987), pp.55-59.

¹³ Wolitz, 'The Jewish national art renaissance in Russia', pp.38-40.

among them, an artistic language stripped of all local connotations offered a more promising path.

2.2. A formative background

When Malevich arrived at Vitebsk, he had already freed painting from references to visible reality and evolved what he called a system of pure creation. First revealed at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Pictures 0.10 (Zero-Ten)* in Petrograd in December 1915, Suprematism set forth a new pictorial language, exemplified by *Suprematism* of 1915 (fig.2.5). Here planes of unmodulated colour were flatly painted against a neutral white ground. Arranged along several vertical, horizontal and diagonal axes, they navigated in an unstructured space, governed solely by the dynamics of '*weight, speed and the direction of movement*'¹⁴. The resultant effect was an image devoid of direct relations to the tangible world of objects that functioned autonomously, generating independent spatial and formal concerns. As Malevich saw it, paintings such as this embodied much more than a new formal vocabulary and syntax. They strove to express a universal truth of a spiritual order and make the world as non-objectivity visible. Suprematist elements, conceived by the artist's intuitive reason, stemmed from the most economical and essential expression of the material out of which they were made. Like elementary organic forms, they were 'forms [...] which were ends in themselves', 'not copies of living things in life [...] but themselves a living thing', and therefore generated a 'new realism in painting'¹⁵. With this 'philosophical colour system constructed in time and space, independently from all aesthetic beauty, experiences, or mood', Malevich believed to have found a distinctive

¹⁴ K.S. Malevich, 'Ot kubizma i futurizma do suprematizma. Novy zhivopisny realizm' [From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism. The new painterly realism] (Moscow: 1916, third edition); translated in Troels Andersen (ed.), *K.S. Malevich: Essays on Art 1915-1933* (London: Rapp & Whiting, 1969), vol.I, p.24.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.33.

'means of cognition', a new way of unravelling the workings, not merely of the world, but of the universe¹⁶. So he claimed that Suprematism heralded 'the beginning of a new culture', i.e. a transition to a new world of higher intuition¹⁷.

'It is absurd to force *our* age into the old forms of time past [...] in our art we should seek forms which correspond to modern life'¹⁸. Thus Malevich explained his departure from pictorial conventions. Like most of the literary and artistic Russian avant-garde in the 1910s, he was concerned with challenging the limits imposed by aesthetic tradition and thus permitting the inception of creative methods not previously thought of. Suprematism dispensed with subject matter and exposed the intrinsic attributes of pictorial material, analysing the possibilities offered by their interaction and mutual relationships. As has been noted in Chapter 1, Vladimir Tatlin had engaged in related pursuits. His abstract constructed reliefs focused on the structural properties of material, its handling [*faktura*] and ability to generate its own repertory of forms. One example is *Painterly Relief: Selection of Materials* of 1914 (fig.2.6), where a triangular piece of sheet metal, a flat wooden rod and a curving glass element set in a plaster ground were brought into an active relationship with each other and the surrounding space, revealing the variety of the constituent materials and testing their contrasts. The manipulation of 'real materials' in real space begun here, acted as an important stimulus on the Russian avant-garde, playing a critical part in the early formation of what was eventually to emerge as Constructivism¹⁹. Among those artists who responded to Tatlin's ideas and contributed in their own terms to the enlargement of the new formal vocabulary were Ivan Puni, Lev Bruni, Lyubov' Popova and the future member of the First Working Group of Constructivists, Aleksandr Rodchenko.

Hence, a thorough critique of creative practice, its essence and ontological status was underway in which no longer just an aesthetic conception of form was

¹⁶ Kazimir Malevich, 'Bespredmetnoye tvorchestvo i suprematizm' [Non-objective creation and Suprematism] (Moscow: 1919); translated in *ibid.*, p.120.

¹⁷ Malevich, 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism', p.37.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.21-22.

at stake but the re-evaluation of the notion of art itself beyond the confines of one particular medium, i.e. in relation to the material environment. By reconsidering and purifying the semantics of the language of art, that is to say its way of meaning through established rules and conventions, artists and theorists hoped to rediscover its fundamentals and thereby to forge new models for the interaction between the individual and his work and, more idealistically, between the individual and the world to which he belonged. The dismantling of the Tsarist autocracy and the establishment of the communist government of the Bolsheviks under Lenin gave this experimentation a new dimension. Now allowed to take positions in the freshly inaugurated government cultural institutions, 'leftist' artists were confronted with fundamental and concrete problems. Their practice had to be reassessed along broader, ideologically determined lines so as to acquire a significance reaching beyond aesthetic speculation, first to satisfy propaganda and agitational tasks in the service of the Revolution and, ultimately, to intervene in the construction of the society envisaged by Communism. The issue of precisely how the social dimension of art might be extended to move beyond the confines of a self-enclosed work and become a more integral part of everyday life was of paramount importance. Discussed in the pages of *Iskusstvo kommuny* [Art of the Commune] in the winter of 1918-19, it led to the development of a new theory of art, 'production art', which suggested that art should be stripped of its bourgeois individualistic and metaphysical values to become fused with industry and produce material objects²⁰. The notion of art's autonomy was thrown into question. Inspired by such arguments, a number of artists began to explore strategies embodying a more conscious attitude towards the production process.

With the exhibition of the *Model for a Monument to the Third International* in Moscow in December 1920, Tatlin's influence on his fellow artists reached new heights. As Lissitzky later pointed out, the most important characteristic of this

¹⁹ Vladimir Tatlin, 'The work ahead of us' (Moscow, 31 December 1920); translated in Larissa A. Zhadova (ed.), *Tatlin* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p.239.

²⁰ Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp.73-78.

project was its social implications. Combining political, artistic and technological themes into a complex structure, Tatlin's Tower served to demonstrate 'the systematic progression from painting along the path of work to materials, then on to construction, and leading finally to the creation of useful objects'²¹. This highly topical idea, together with the emancipation brought about by the clarity, economy and industrial resonance of Tatlin's forms and materials, established a crucial precedent for the formal experiments of Karl Ioganson, Konstantin Medunetskii, Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg, as included in the May 1921 exhibition of the OBMOKhU group in Moscow (fig.1.12). Their 'spatial constructions', 'spatial structures' and 'constructions for spatial structures' had a marked affinity with technical and engineering forms. Eschewing all idiosyncratic expressive qualities, they focused on structural problems. The declared intention was to demonstrate new methods and devices of construction using industrial processes of assembly and contemporary materials like glass and metal. This investigation was considered 'laboratory work', whereby artists could establish organisational principles which could then be put to a number of practical uses in the manufacture of utilitarian goods. With this research, a first step was taken away from experimentation with abstract form as a sphere of its own²².

Between January and April 1921, a series of debates concerning composition and construction were held at INKhUK. In the course of these terminological clarifications, a general tendency to systematise and rationalise artistic creation became apparent. Differences of opinion emerged between those participants who thought of construction as a purely aesthetic principle that could be manifested within a two-dimensional work, and those who felt it must be related to utilitarian work and ultimately industrial production²³. The proponents of the latter argument, formed the First Working Group of Constructivists on 18 March 1921, renounced 'artistic activity' as 'incompatible' with the new historical conditions, urging in its stead an art integrated into the overall production process and capable of

²¹ Lissitzky, 'New Russian art', p.338.

²² Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, pp.67-72.

accommodating the new socialist way of life²⁴. In their programme, they pledged allegiance to 'scientific communism based on the theory of historical materialism' and formulated an aesthetic doctrine that was to be equally applicable to 'all categories of intellectual production'. The three basic tenets were tectonics (*tektonika* - the socially and politically appropriate use of materials), construction (*konstruktsiya* - their organisation for a given purpose) and *faktura* (their conscious handling and manipulation). Defined within a new ideological context, these 'specific components of effectiveness' paved the way for a 'communist culture', whose creation the Constructivists viewed as their most basic task²⁵.

2.3. Proun

It was in this highly charged atmosphere that Lissitzky evolved his *Proun*, moving from Vitebsk to Moscow to teach at the newly opened VKhUTEMAS in early 1921²⁶. The need to make art permeate life and serve useful social ends to match the aspirations of the revolutionary state was widely acknowledged. Yet, for a significant section of the avant-garde, art was not to be subsumed in politics or utilitarian tasks. By the time Lissitzky departed for Berlin, however, such reservations were less powerful. Having discounted instinct and intuition as driving forces in creative practice, such as previously advocated by Malevich and Tatlin, the Constructivists and their supporters relinquished any self-sufficient pursuit of art in November 1921. They embraced 'production art as an absolute value and Constructivism as its only form of expression' and committed themselves to collaborating with industry for the purpose of producing useful

²³ *Ibid.*, pp.78-79.

²⁴ 'Programme of the First Working Group of Constructivists' (March 1921); translated in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932* (New York: Rizzoli International Inc., 1990), p.67.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Lissitzky later stated that he had been 'called to Moscow as head of the faculty of Architecture of the school VKhUTEMAS, the Russian Bauhaus', El Lissitzky, 'Autobiography' (June 1941), in *El Lissitzky* (Cologne: Galerie Gmzynska, 1976), p.88.

objects²⁷. Although Lissitzky did not at this point join the Constructivists' camp, he was not immune to the socialist impulses informing their agenda. In his recollections of 1928, he stressed the profound impact that the events of 1917 had had on his life and his identification with the new regime:

In Moscow in 1918 there flashed before my eyes the short-circuit which split the world in two. This single blow pushed the time we call the present like a wedge between yesterday and tomorrow. My efforts are now directed to driving the wedge deeper. One must belong on this side or on that - there is no midway²⁸.

This retrospective account, written three years after Lissitzky returned home, may admittedly be countered by more ambivalent, earlier statements. It is nevertheless significant, for it suggests a reading of the *Proun* as a direct response to the post-revolutionary challenge of rethinking the role of the aesthetic object, the method of its execution and distribution.

Lissitzky produced his first *Prouns* during the winter of 1919, though they were not identified as such until late 1920 or early 1921²⁹. These abstract works combined simple geometric forms derived from Suprematism in dynamic spatial configurations. *Proun 1D* of 1919-20 (fig.2.7) consists of a complex orthogonal arrangement of volumetric elements silhouetted against a large circular flat shape under which rectangular planes floated diagonally. Lissitzky implied symmetries and clear ratios, but deliberately disrupted them by inducing tensions which, further exacerbated by the multiple perspectives and contrasts of tone and texture, suggested movement. As revealed by a surviving installation photograph of *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10 (Zero-Ten)* of 1915, Malevich had already incorporated three-dimensional elements in at least one of his non-objective compositions, which contained a rectangular parallelepiped and a cube (fig.2.8). Yet such forms were rarely seen in his works. Mainly planimetric,

²⁷ Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p.90.

²⁸ El Lissitzky, 'The film of El's life' (1928); translated in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.325.

Malevich's Suprematist elements navigated freely along various orbits, unconfined by the horizon or points of convergence, and projected onto the canvas along several directions, creating an effect of inner mobility within the absolute planarity of the canvas surface.

The *Proun* built directly on this idea of a fluid and cosmic space. Extending Malevich's Suprematism into an implied third dimension, Lissitzky explored its 'infinite extensibility in the background and foreground'³⁰. Thereby he developed a new process of manipulation of forms, exemplified by *Proun R.V.N.2* of 1923 (fig.2.9). In this painting a large circular shape set in a light blue ground pushed against two tangent squares in the upper and lower left corners. Apparently signifying the picture surface, this structure was slightly overlapped by two other squares at the upper and lower right angles, and partly masked a black horizontal strip which seemed to advance and recede into deep space. Behind the black strip, a brighter and thus, according to the optical properties of colour, less distant element stretched in front of the upper left quadrilateral and destroyed the illusion of a picture plane, the location of which could not be established with certainty. Many of the forms suggested exact linearity at first, only to become less and less involved with truly parallel lines. The relationships between the components were further confused by the three parallelepipeds which floated parallel and perpendicular to the canvas surface. Projected along different axes, their volumes imparted additional dynamism to the composition.

The formal complexity of *Proun R.V.N.2* provides evidence of Lissitzky's training in architecture. Familiar with codified systems of spatial representation, Lissitzky adopted axonometry, a mode of projection based on parallel receding lines that excluded all reference to a particular vanishing point, to depict the tensions which arose between surface and depth within the two dimensions of the canvas. Axonometric forms projected simultaneously in front of and behind the

²⁹ Peter Nisbet, 'An introduction to El Lissitzky', in *El Lissitzky 1890-1941*, p.20.

picture plane by the very nature of their construction. Lissitzky exploited the ambiguity this generated in the visual field in conjunction with the inconsistent positioning of planimetric elements and created an elusive space which, being at odds with the Euclidean parallax, escaped fixation³¹. This 'parabolically bent' environment existed through the continuous shift in form relationships³². It refuted the rationalising unification of the monocular perspective and conveyed a sense of fluctuation in time. So Lissitzky announced that he had 'blasted aside the work of art [...] and turned it into a world floating in space'³³. With a rhetoric to match Malevich's, he argued: '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-à-vis the horizontal), and when it was hung any other way down, it looked as if it were sideways or upside down'³⁴. By contrast, the *Proun* was purportedly '*constructed* and brought into balance in space'³⁵.

Such remarks were slightly disingenuous³⁶. Made within the context of the diffusion of the *Proun* theory after Lissitzky's departure from Vitebsk, they supported his argument that the *Proun* was 'the last stage on the path to Suprematism' and ignored the fact that Suprematist space was intrinsically non-referential and thus had no implicit orientation³⁷. 'I have destroyed the ring of

³⁰ El Lissitzky, 'K. und Pangeometrie', in Carl Einstein, Paul Westheim (eds.), *Europa Almanach* (Potsdam: Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1925), vol.I, pp.103-13; translated in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.351.

³¹ Alan C. Birnholz, 'El Lissitzky [Book-Length Study of the Art of El Lissitzky 1890-1941]' (Yale University: Ph.D. dissertation, 1973), vol.I, p.78.

³² Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, 'Constructivism, from Kasimir Malevich to László Moholy-Nagy', *Arts and Architecture*, vol.83, no.5, June 1966, pp.24-25.

³³ El Lissitzky, 'Suprematism in world reconstruction' (1920); translated in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.327.

³⁴ El Lissitzky, 'Proun' (1920-21); translated in *El Lissitzky* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1976), p.65.

³⁵ Lissitzky, 'The conquest of art', p.61.

³⁶ Malevich in fact deliberately installed his works with a different orientation. For instance, two of the paintings shown the *Sixteenth State Exhibition: Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism*, which opened in Moscow in December 1919, were hung upside down compared to their initial orientation at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Pictures 0.10 (Zero-Ten)*, see Rainer Crone, David Moos, *Kazimir Malevich. The Climax of Disclosure* (London: Reaktion Books, 1991), pp.155-60.

³⁷ Lissitzky, 'Suprematism in world reconstruction', p.327.

horizon and stepped out of the circle things', Malevich wrote in 1916³⁸. The *Proun* too deliberately dispelled the notion of the horizon; in Lissitzky's own phrase, it 'assaulted space'³⁹. As a result, more than one visual field existed simultaneously in one single frame. The homogeneous but oscillating structure of *Proun GK* of 1922-23 (fig.2.10) eloquently illustrated this. As the eye focused on one of the elements, they all seemed to shift into a different configuration. By disrupting optical reflexes, Lissitzky hoped to jolt the viewer out of the inertia that governed his interaction with the work. He explained:

The surface of the *Proun* ceases to be a picture and turns into a structure round which we must circle, looking at it from all sides, peering down from above, investigating from below. The result is that the one axis of the picture which stood at right angles to the horizontal was destroyed. Circling round it, we screw ourselves into the space⁴⁰.

The possibility of such circumnavigation was highly dependent on the versatility of the *Proun*. Some canvases alluded to this potential, especially those enclosed in or based on a large central circular shape, e.g. *The Town (Proun 1E)* of 1919 (fig.2.11) and *Proun R.V.N.2*. Others made their 'reversibility' blatantly clear⁴¹. Two such cases were *Proun 1* of 1919-20 (fig.2.12), whose title was inscribed on all four sides, and the *8 Position Proun* of 1923 (fig.2.13) which, as its name indicated, could be hung in eight different ways, with any of its sides or corners functioning as a base. In more than one instance, the viewer was actually encouraged to rotate the work and experience multiple perspectives. Hence *Construction Floating in Space* of 1920 (fig.2.14) had no designated top versus bottom, nor left versus right side. Printed four times in four different orientations on the same sheet of paper, the composition was not subject to the rigid constraint

³⁸ Malevich, 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism', p.20.

³⁹ El Lissitzky, 'PROUN. Nicht Weltvisionen, SONDERN - Weltrealität' (Moscow, 1920), *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V, no.6, June 1922, col.81-85; translated in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.343.

⁴⁰ Lissitzky, 'PROUN. Not world visions, BUT - World reality', p.343.

⁴¹ Yve-Alain Bois, 'El Lissitzky: radical reversibility', *Art in America*, April 1988, p.170-74.

of the rectilinear dictates of the frame, but seemed to gently revolve around a focal point. Lissitzky noted in the margin:

Construction floating in space, propelled together with its spectator beyond the limits of earth, and in order to complete it, the spectator must turn it and himself around its axis like a planet. This plan is only a mechanical demonstration of entering the essence of the construction - only four phases⁴².

This strategy was soon to be taken to a more complex level in the architectural extensions of the *Proun*, the *Prounenraumen* [Proun Rooms], where a real spatial environment was constructed that could literally be entered into and responded directly to every one of the beholder's movements.

2.4. Theoretical justification

In 1922 Lissitzky wrote in the Polish journal *Ringen* [Links] that *Proun* 'describes nothing, but it *constructs* extensions, planes, lines for the purpose of creating a *system of new composition of the real world*'⁴³. In the same way as Malevich envisioned Suprematism as a laboratory capable of making a hidden world visible and opening it up to human experience, so the concept Lissitzky proposed was in his mind a positive instrument that could recast man's conception of the environment and thereby lay the foundation for a new order. He asserted in the essay 'A. and Pangeometry', published in Germany in 1925 and considered among his most seminal⁴⁴:

⁴² Cited in Andrei Nakov, 'Suprematism after 1919', *The Suprematist Line: Malevich, Suetin, Chashnik, Lissitzky* (London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 1977), p.25.

⁴³ El Lissitzky, 'The conquest of art', *Ringens*, Warsaw, no.10, 1922, pp.32-34; translated in *El Lissitzky 1890-1941*, p.61.

⁴⁴ Kenneth Frampton, 'The work and influence of El Lissitzky', in David Lewis (ed.), *Urban Structure (Architect's Year Book, vol.XII)* (London: Elek, 1968), p.262.

[Art] is a graduated glass. Every era pours in a certain quantity: for example, one puts 5 cm of Coty perfume, to titillate the nostrils of fashionable society; another throws 10 cm of sulphuric acid into the face of the ruling class; yet another pours in 15 cm of some kind of metallic solution which afterwards flares up as a *new source of light*⁴⁵.

Interestingly, Malevich had outlined a similar process of artistic evolution in the pamphlet *On New Systems in Art*, which Lissitzky printed on the lithographic presses at Vitebsk as their first joint venture in late 1919. 'Art advances inexorably', Malevich wrote; 'much was discovered since the Greeks and the Romans, is being discovered now, and will be after us. Life develops with new forms; a new art, medium and experience are necessary for every epoch'⁴⁶. Reviewing the historical changes artistic language had undergone, he insisted upon its singularity as a mode of cognition of the world, yet explicitly linked stylistic development to mutations in *Weltanschauung*. For instance, he contended with respect to the advent of monocular perspective:

When the laws of perspective were set up in imitative art, a bonding chain was established. A wall was set up in which the artist was expected to operate [...] Our consciousness revolved in a box beneath the blue sky, hitting its head on the sun, moon and stars that were sticking out; but there was no way out of the academic office making 'comprehensible' duplications [...] this was art's path; this was how the entire world was viewed⁴⁷.

'A. and Pangeometry' argued along comparable lines that art evolved in natural response to man's apprehension of his experiential environment. In order to substantiate this claim, Lissitzky attempted a comparative morphology of systems

⁴⁵ Lissitzky, 'A. and Pangeometry', p.348. Lissitzky used the abbreviations 'K. = *Kunst*' [A. = art] and 'G. = *Gestaltung*' [F. = form] throughout the text. The italics are mine.

⁴⁶ Kazimir Malevich, *O novykh sistemakh v iskusstve* [On new systems in art] (Vitebsk: 11 July 1919); translated in Andersen, *K.S. Malevich*, vol.I, p.90.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.113.

of spatial representation through the ages and considered the corresponding forms of art, art being understood as 'a product of the union of the natural object with the object to which work is giving reality'⁴⁸.

Lissitzky placed the treatment of pictorial space into four broad categories, each of which he related to a distinct historical period and claimed to be 'fertilised' by an identifiable numbering system⁴⁹. 'Plastic Form begins, like elementary arithmetic, with counting. Its space is the physical two-dimensional flat plane. Its rhythm - the elementary harmony of the natural numerical progression 1, 2, 3, 4...' (fig.2.15)⁵⁰. Typical of Antiquity, planimetric space respected the integrity of the two-dimensional picture plane. The overlapping of forms alone, a spatial configuration parent to the numerical progression 1, 1½, 2, 2½..., suggested the presence of a third dimension as experienced in the everyday world. This way of rendering the distance existing between individual objects, he argued, had been superseded by the introduction of a vanishing point, consistently used in Western painting since the Renaissance. He elaborated:

Perspective has comprehended space according to the concept of Euclidean geometry as a constant three-dimensional state. It has fitted the world into a cube, which it has transformed in such a way that it appears as a pyramid [...] Perspective defined space and made it finite, then enclosed it [...] In perspective space we acquired a new geometric progression; here the objects stand in a relation: 1, 2, 4, 8, 16, 32...⁵¹.

Lissitzky condemned such a conception whose limitations the mathematical paradigms of Gauss, Lobachevsky and Riemann had plainly exposed. Science had recognised that fixed and separated concepts of space and time did not adequately address the actual workings of events in reality and so had undertaken 'fundamental reconstructions'. Commensurate with these, the Impressionists,

⁴⁸ Lissitzky, 'A. and Pangeometry', p.354.

⁴⁹ Lissitzky, 'Proun' (1920-21), p.60.

⁵⁰ Lissitzky, 'A. and Pangeometry', pp.348-49.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.349.

Cubists and Futurists had begun 'exploding the hereditary notion of perspectival space'⁵².

As Lissitzky saw it, Suprematism had taken forward this unfinished agenda. Malevich's canonical painting, *Black Quadrilateral* of 1915, had destroyed the illusion of depth and elaborated an 'irrational space', so-called because it resisted apprehension by the senses as hitherto afforded by the illusionism of perspective and instead postulated an order akin to the positional numbering system, 'with whole numbers and fractions, the 0, the negative and positive numbers, and the irrational numbers'⁵³:

In this space the distances are measured only by the intensity and the position of the strictly-defined colour areas. This space is arranged in the simplest directions - vertical, horizontal, or diagonal. It is a positional system. These distances cannot be measured by any finite measure [...] they cannot be represented as a determinate ratio of two whole numbers⁵⁴.

This mathematical interpretation equally applied to the *Proun*. Lissitzky in fact unambiguously referred to the latter in a diagram illustrating the opposition between monocular perspective and axonometrical projection, before concluding: 'Suprematism has advanced the ultimate tip of the visual pyramid of perspective into infinity'⁵⁵. The resultant expansion of the visual field was a significant breakthrough. Yet, however viable, the Suprematist alternative was itself bound to be supplanted by one capable of communicating the idea of the space-time continuum. Invoking Einstein's theories of relativity and the recent development of purely logical mathematical constructs beyond man's power of spatial visualisation, like the imaginary number $\sqrt{-1}$, Lissitzky indeed observed that there now remained to integrate time as an 'ingredient in the total complex of the

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.351.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.350.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

elements which are to build the new bodies'⁵⁶. He believed this next stage would devise '[Artistic Forms] which produce an effect on us through the apparatus of our senses', forms with no material reality outside time and real physical motion but 'generated by means of a material object': an 'a-material materiality'⁵⁷. Lissitzky saw this 'imaginary space' particularly well-reflected in the work of Viking Eggeling, whose cinematic experiments constituted a first step in the investigation of an art grounded in the properties of man's visual faculty. The article speculated: "This [Art Form] should effect the destruction of the old idea of art, that of 'monumentality'"⁵⁸.

As Peter Nisbet has pointed out, these arguments were in large measure derived from the first volume of Oswald Spengler's *Der Untergang des Abendland* [The Decline of the West]⁵⁹. Published in July 1918, just before the defeat of Germany's armies, this seminal book rapidly rose to fame, attracting the attention of laymen and scholars both in Germany and abroad⁶⁰. Although it was not translated into Russian until 1923, Spengler's metahistorical theories were widely discussed in Moscow before this date⁶¹. They evidently did not escape Lissitzky, who later recalled being made aware of them in summer 1920 at the Second Congress of the Comintern by a young German who also acquainted him with the work of Albert Einstein and Eggeling⁶². Three of Lissitzky's articles, including the aforementioned text in *Ringgen* and 'A. and Pangeometry', featured an abbreviated

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.353.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.351-53.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.353.

⁵⁹ Nisbet, 'An introduction to El Lissitzky', p.29.

⁶⁰ Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes* (Munich: C.H. Beck'sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1918-22); translated into English, *The Decline of the West* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1980). According to the author, the book was conceived before 1914 and fully worked out by 1917. It comprised two volumes under the respective subtitles *Gestalt und Wirklichkeit* [Form and Reality] and *Welthistorische Perspektiven* [Perspectives of World History]. The latter appeared in 1922.

⁶¹ Robert C. Williams, *Culture in Exile: Russian Emigrés in Germany, 1881-1941* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972), p.248.

⁶² El Lissitzky, 'Viking Eggeling', in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, Jen Lissitzky (eds.), *El Lissitzky, Proun und Wolkenbügel: Schriften, Briefe, Dokumente* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1977), p.205.

epitaph from *The Decline of the West*⁶³. With this work, Spengler claimed to be resisting the inappropriate notion that human history is a succession of units ordered in a rational or dialectical sequence. In place of this linear interpretation, he called for a morphological approach without centre or ultimate point of reference, based on the recognition that there existed an indefinite number of cultures, 'each in its deepest essence different from the others, each limited in duration and self-contained'⁶⁴. These cultures, whose members Spengler understood to be 'connected by a common world-feeling', developed independently according to a life-cycle of approximately one thousand years⁶⁵. Like biological organisms, they aged from birth to maturity to decline and death, and never returned. Each had a spiritual orientation of its own that was expressible in a distinctive concept of space⁶⁶. 'World-experience is bound up with the essence of *depth* (i.e., *far-ness* or *distance*)', Spengler asserted⁶⁷. Corresponding with every such experience, he found a 'type of number - each type fundamentally peculiar and unique [...], a principle of ordering the Become', which reflected the culture's mathematical advance and informed all the participants' activities: their art, religion and philosophy; their politics, laws and economics, and even warfare⁶⁸. Functioning as a 'prime symbol', this 'number' and the attendant concept of space

⁶³ 'All art is mortal, not merely the individual artifacts but the arts themselves. One day the last portrait by Rembrandt and the last bar of Mozart will have ceased to be - though possibly a coloured canvas and a sheet of notes may remain - because the last eye and the last ear accessible to their message will have gone', Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, vol.I, p.168.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.174.

⁶⁶ Hence, where the ancient Egyptians saw their world in one dimension, the Renaissance man conceived himself as living in a local, finite space. By contrast, modern Western man sees himself as part of a space of boundless extent. The Russians, whom Spengler classified as non-Western, have a flat-plane culture, *ibid.*, pp.162-80.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.168.

⁶⁸ "There is not, and cannot be, number as such. There are several numbers as there are several Cultures [...] Consequently, there are more mathematics than one. For indubitably the inner structure of the Euclidean geometry is something quite different from that of the Cartesian, the analysis of Archimedes is something other than the analysis of Gauss, and not merely in matters of form, intuition and method but above all in essence, in the intrinsic and obligatory meaning of number which they respectively develop and set forth. This number, the horizon within which it has been able to make phenomena self-explanatory, and therefore the whole of the 'nature' or world-extended that is confined in the given limits and amenable to its particular sort of mathematic, are not common to all mankind, but specific in each case to one definite sort of mankind", *ibid.*, p.59.

provided the key to understanding a culture's history⁶⁹. Their specificity however meant that they remained essentially incomprehensible to outsiders.

Adopting Spengler's mathematical relativism, Lissitzky inscribed the rejection of perspectival space effected in Suprematism in the broad context of historical development⁷⁰. This conceptual location in turn invited readers to regard the *Proun* as the herald of a new *Weltanschauung*. He argued in *Ringgen*:

Malevich believed that with the square he had taken painting to the end of its path, brought it to zero. But when we explored our subsequent works, we said: yes, the path of painterly culture has, narrowing, come to the square, but on the far side a new culture begins to blossom. Yes, we hail the bold one who hurled himself into the abyss in order to rise from the dead in a new form. Yes, if the painterly line use to descend as ... 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 until 0, then on the far side begins a new line 0, 1, 2, 3, 4,..., and we realised that the new painting which grows out of us is no longer a picture⁷¹.

The implication was all too plain. In venturing further 'on the road towards the annihilation of painting', the *Proun* became a sign of the material culture to come. Lissitzky explained: 'As a result of Suprematism, a canvas has been created which carries inner vitality. This canvas has grown out of the artist just as organically as a flower out of the soil, just as pure in colour, as exactly and clearly cut in all its parts as a plant. Every flat surface designed is a sign - not a mystical symbol, but a concrete sketch of reality'. So the *Prouns* arose as 'ground plans for further spatial construction', i.e. future architectonic experiences⁷². This potential was often implicit in their titles during the Vitebsk years, e.g. *The Town (Proun 1E)*, *Proun 1A (Brigde)* of 1919 (fig.2.16) and *House Above the Earth* (known as *Proun 1C*) of 1921 (fig.2.17). It was equally pervasive in Lissitzky's writings. Hence the much-

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.174.

⁷⁰ Lissitzky's borrowings were mainly from 'Ch.II.: The meaning of numbers', *ibid.*, pp.53-90, and 'Ch.V.: Makrokosmos (1) The symbolism of the word-picture and the problem of space', *ibid.*, pp.162-80.

⁷¹ Lissitzky, 'The conquest of art', pp.60-61.

⁷² Lissitzky, 'New Russian art', p.335.

quoted definition of 1925: '*Proun* is the interchange station between painting and architecture'⁷³.

Lissitzky consolidated this notion in an article published in the June 1922 issue of *De Stijl*, entitled 'PROUN. Nicht Weltvisionen, SONDERN - Weltrealität' [PROUN. Not world visions, BUT - world realities]: '*Proun* begins at level surface, turns into a model for three-dimensional space, and goes on to construct all the objects of everyday life'⁷⁴. Given Theo van Doesburg's often eccentric editorial policy, it is conceivable that he oversaw the final wording of this statement⁷⁵. A prior text however captured Lissitzky's idea unambiguously:

The *Proun* advances towards the creation of a new space, and by dividing it into the elements of its first, second and third dimensions passing through time, it (the *Proun*) constructs a polyhedral but uniform image of nature. We begin our work on the two-dimensional surface, we then pass on the three-dimensional, model constructions and to the needs of life. Life is now building a new, reinforced concrete, Communist foundation for the peoples of the earth. Through the *Proun*, we will come to build upon this universal foundation for a single world city - for all the people of the earthly globe⁷⁶.

In other words, the purpose was to indicate ways in which a language of pure form might be relevant to the volumetric structuring of the concrete world: 'TO BUILD FORMS CREATIVELY (consequently, to master space) VIA THE ECONOMIC CONSTRUCTION OF TRANSFORMED MATERIAL'⁷⁷.

⁷³ El Lissitzky, Hans Arp, *Die Kunstismen* (Erlenbach-Zurich, Munich and Leipzig: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925), p.xi.

⁷⁴ Lissitzky, 'PROUN. Not world visions, BUT - world reality', p.344.

⁷⁵ The use of the term *neue Gestaltung*, systematically translated in *De Stijl* as neo-plasticism, to describe the *Proun* clearly suggested an infusion of Van Doesburg's rhetoric.

⁷⁶ Lissitzky, 'Proun' (1920-21), p.70.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.67.

Colour was assigned a crucial role in this enterprise. As a structural- and ‘*Gestaltungsmaterial*’, it contributed directly to the exploration and definition of volume and space⁷⁸:

The forms with which the *Proun* makes its assault on space are constructed not from aesthetics but from material. In the initial stations of the *Prouns* this material is colour. It is taken as the purest aspect of the energetic state of matter in its material embodiment [...] We take the material of paints (earth colourings, powder paints) and put them on the canvas. The way in which we put them on and fix them (oil, egg-white, glue) gives them greater or lesser intensity [...] Colour for us now becomes the barometer of material. Strength of contrast or harmony between two-black, two white or two in-between colours provides us with the key for determining the correspondence or contrast between two industrial materials as, for example, with aluminium and granite, concrete and iron, diamond and paper, etc. In this manner colour directs material towards its subsequent transformations⁷⁹

How Lissitzky put this into practice is eloquently demonstrated in a work like *Proun 2C* of 1920 (fig.2.18), where the support, paint and collage elements, their colour and texture were so exploited as to evoke such raw materials. Carefully contrasted and handled, colour no longer expressed pure sensation, as in Suprematism, but gave Lissitzky’s forms a distinct architectonic quality, thereby helping the viewer to envision the formal model advanced on the picture plane transferred to three-dimensional reality.

2.5. Between world reconstruction and Constructivism

Lissitzky’s ambition to penetrate into the world of physical realities and his claim for the *Proun* as a system applicable to the actual planning of a future

⁷⁸ El Lissitzky, ‘Exhibition rooms’ (1923); translated in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.362.

environment set him at the centre of the Constructivist debate in the West. In theory at least, the *Proun* moved beyond the purely aesthetic dimension of art to become an influential actor before the social audience and, through the conquest of space, confronted the need to extend visual research to practical ends and align it with the imperatives of Communism. The rationale behind this was that the artist was not only capable of, but had a paramount responsibility to act as an agent of change. Malevich summed up this belief in 1915: 'An artist is given talent in order that he may give to life his share of creation and increase the flow of life. Only in creation will he acquire this right'⁸⁰. In a similar vein, Lissitzky submitted that since Suprematism the artist had become 'the foundation on which progress in the reconstruction of life could advance beyond the frontiers of the all-seeing-eye and the all-hearing ear', a 'promoter of a world which indeed already exists in man but which man has not yet been able to perceive'⁸¹. He declared in 1920:

When we have absorbed the total wealth of experience of painting [...] when we have grasped the aim and system of Suprematism, then we shall give a new face to this globe. We shall shape it so thoroughly that the sun will no longer recognise its satellite⁸².

This statement of intent was at one with Malevich's post-revolutionary rhetoric, as expounded in *Suprematism: 34 Drawings*. In this text, published in Vitebsk in December 1920, Malevich categorised the development of Suprematism into three separate colour phases. Each was said to hold specific meaning 'in the community' and to 'represent the establishment of definite types of *Weltanschauung* and world building': 'the black one as a sign of economy, the red one as the signal for revolution, and the white pure action'⁸³. Having established this sequence, Malevich presented Suprematism as a definite system whose forms, 'as an abstraction', had achieved 'utilitarian perfection' and constituted 'prototypes for

⁷⁹ Lissitzky, 'Proun' (1920-21), p.68.

⁸⁰ Malevich, 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism', p.25.

⁸¹ Lissitzky, 'Suprematism in world reconstruction', p.327 and p.330.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.328.

the technical organisms of the coming *Suprema*, a world he envisaged as a planetary satellite system under human control⁸⁴. The upshot, of course, was that Suprematist elements were to be construed as 'distant pointers to forms developing in three-dimensions' and prefiguring a new cosmic architecture for the universe⁸⁵:

At the present time, Suprematism is growing, as a new architectural construction in space and time [...] Suprematism is established in a link with earth, but, as a result of its economic constructions, changes the whole architecture of earthly things, in a broad sense, joining with the space of the monolithic masses moving in the planet system⁸⁶.

Malevich did not dedicate himself to the 'Suprematist art of volume formation' until 1923, with his *arkhitektoniki* [architectons - experimental three-dimensional architectural models in wood and plaster] and *planiti* [planits - projects for houses of the future]⁸⁷. Aware that architecture demanded specialised knowledge, he entrusted 'the further development of architectural Suprematism to young architects, in the broad sense of the word'⁸⁸. Lissitzky's training no doubt made him an obvious choice.

The translation of pictorial Suprematism into real space in order to respond to the practical demands of daily life formed the immediate backdrop to the *Proun* project. It was precisely such a context that Lissitzky established for his work when lecturing on the new Russian art a few months after he arrived in Berlin:

In 1917, the Revolution broke out in Russia, and not in Russia alone. The whole of the world stood against us, and thus we were completely isolated. Then it became clear to us that the world was only just coming into existence, and everything must be recreated from scratch, including art. At

⁸³ Malevich, 'Suprematism: 34 Drawings' (Vitebsk, 15 December 1920); translated in Andersen, *K.S. Malevich*, vol.I, pp.126-27.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.124.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.123.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.126.

⁸⁷ Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), p.94.

the same time the question arose as to whether art is really necessary; whether art is a self-contained, independent domain, or a part of the whole remaining pattern of life. The idea that art is a religion and the artist the priest of this religion we rejected forthwith. We went on to establish that expression and form are not eternal, and that no one epoch in art stands in any relationship with the following one⁸⁹.

This last argument was consistent with Spengler's postulate that 'arts [...] have an allotted span of life' and are 'attached to particular regions and particular types of mankind', and that therefore the total history of art was 'merely an additive compilation of separate developments, of special arts with no bond of union save the same name and some details of craft-technique'⁹⁰. Lissitzky continued:

In the new order of society, in which work will cease to be slavery, in which there will no longer be small groups producing luxuries for a restricted stratum of society, but where work is being done *by everyone and for everyone*, in such a society work is given free scope and everything which is produced is art. Thus the conception of art as something with its own separate existence is abolished. These views are the basis of the development which we have accomplished in recent years. We have stopped just rolling our eyes, we have turned our head round, to face quite a different direction. We witnessed a sudden decisive change in all life's relationships; a reorganisation of the State; of the economy, of science; a miraculous technology; the invention of things which even yesterday were still considered Utopian [...] Life posed questions and demanded immediate

⁸⁸ Malevich, 'Suprematism: 34 Drawings', pp.127-28.

⁸⁹ Lissitzky, 'New Russian art', p.331. First delivered in 1922 in Berlin, this talk was subsequently repeated in Amsterdam, where Lissitzky accompanied the *First Russian Art Exhibition* (see Chapter 5), and then at the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hanover in spring 1923.

⁹⁰ Spengler, *The Decline of the West*, vol.I, pp.20-21.

replies to them: what role does art play in the new society, in which the field of creative activity becomes common property?⁹¹.

Using the collective we, Lissitzky stressed his personal concern with such issues. Like many of his avant-garde colleagues in 1917, he enthusiastically embraced the revolutionary ideal and soon rallied to the cause of the new regime⁹². From his own account, he was a member of the cultural section of the Moscow Soviet shortly after the 1917 February Revolution and worked in IZO Narkompros⁹³. In 1930 Lissitzky also mentioned that he had been commissioned to design the first flag for the VTsIK [All-Union Central Executive Committee] which Sovnarkom [The Council of People's Commissars] carried across Red Square on 1 May 1918⁹⁴. No corroborating evidence for the latter claim has yet been found, but Lissitzky was engaged in kindred activities within UNOVIS. Hence he produced plans and sketches for the meeting of the Committee to Abolish Unemployment held in Vitebsk on 17 December 1919. The following year in that same town, together with Il'ya Chashnik and Nikolai Suetin, Lissitzky helped Malevich to paint Suprematist designs on building decorations for the May Day celebration⁹⁵. No less important, Lissitzky produced several agitational posters, including *The Factory Workbenches Await You* of 1919-20 (fig.2.19) and the famous *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (fig.2.20), issued by the Political Administration of the Western Front in 1920⁹⁶. In the latter, the point of a red triangle pierced a white circle enclosed in a black surface, opening the way for further small red triangles which forced themselves into the white zone and seemed to chase hatched geometric elements out of it, and even cause them to flee. Making use of Suprematist elements and compositional devices, Lissitzky combined them with typography into a dramatic action to convey an efficient, metaphorical image of the Bolshevik defeat of the counter-revolutionary forces.

⁹¹ Lissitzky, 'New Russian art', pp.331-35.

⁹² Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.20.

⁹³ Lissitzky, 'Autobiography' (June 1941), p.88.

⁹⁴ Nisbet, 'An introduction to El Lissitzky', p.15 and p.47.

⁹⁵ Zhadova, *Malevich*, p.79.

Agitation and propaganda in fact formed an essential facet of the activity of UNOVIS, be it the creation of monumental decorations to celebrate the new revolutionary festivals, the production of posters or the organisation of lectures and exhibitions. Such tasks figured prominently on the group's agenda, along with 'the organisation and implementation of design work for new types of useful structures and requirements'⁹⁷. In keeping with Malevich's philosophy and earlier involvement in the institutional reorganisation of Soviet cultural life, UNOVIS indeed nourished high ambitions. As a pedagogical structure, the collective aimed to formulate nothing less than a 'definite programme corresponding to or fulfilling the movement of present times'⁹⁸. An undated propaganda leaflet proudly announced:

The innovators in economic distribution, political rights and the freedoms of man came to the Commune as the great cradle of youth and liberated it from the old lumber of prejudices and oppressions. They brought it a new meaning which awaits a new form. We, the young, are that form. WE ARE THE SUPREMACY OF THE NEW. Only we can create it [...] We bring new cities. We bring the world new things. We will give them other names [...] we will create a new garb and meaning for the world, such as there never have been⁹⁹.

With this purpose in mind, Malevich and his followers 'proceeded multilaterally'. That is to say, they addressed 'the problems of painting without shutting themselves off from problems of architecture, the philosophy of the new art, the theatre etc.'¹⁰⁰. New forms were to be introduced into all types of creative endeavour in order to 'advance to the utilitarian and dynamically spiritual world of

⁹⁶ Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.20.

⁹⁷ 'Working schedule of the Council' (signed by the members of the Commission: K.S. Malevich, L. Lissitzky, V. Ermoleava, I. Kogan), *UNOVIS Almanac No.1*, Vitebsk, May 1920; translated in Zhadova, *Malevich*, p.317.

⁹⁸ 'For the programme', *UNOVIS Almanac No.1*, Vitebsk, May 1920; translated in *ibid.*, p.311.

⁹⁹ 'From UNOVIS - We want' (propaganda handbill signed by the Art Committee of UNOVIS); translated in *ibid.*, pp.297-98.

¹⁰⁰ 'For the programme', p.311.

things' which UNOVIS envisioned¹⁰¹. Accordingly, the group applied itself to the design of ceramics, textile, furniture, books and posters, as well as to theoretical and scientific experimentation, painting, sculpture and architecture. This last discipline was seen as an ideal vehicle for the transference of Suprematist schemes into life and consequently came at the top of all programmes.

'Our workshops no longer paint pictures, they construct the forms of life', UNOVIS declared in 1920¹⁰². Despite some fruitful work done in the field of book, stage and textile design, this all-embracing approach remained essentially idealistic and utopian. The reason for this was that UNOVIS's search was for 'creative production tools for thoughts and form', rather than rigorous design methods for the industrial production of objects for practical, everyday purposes¹⁰³. A sketch by Malevich reproduced in *UNOVIS Almanac No.1* (fig.2.21), after which a textile was produced in Vitebsk in the winter of 1919-20, illustrated this. Above it Malevich noted: 'Suprematist variations and equations of colour shaped for use in decorating a house, living unit, book, poster or speaker's platform'¹⁰⁴. Ignoring the requirements of manufacturing processes or materials, such indeterminacy with regard to function was anathema to the creative strategies championed by the proponents of production art. As a 'technical organism', a 'prototype' of the 'unified system of the world architecture of the earth', Malevich's proposed design contributed commendably to the coming of *Suprema*, but shared little with the objective reality the prevailing trend amongst the Moscow avant-garde hoped to create¹⁰⁵. This overall spirit had a tremendous impact on Lissitzky and, together with the cosmological aspirations which infused Malevich's work, clearly reverberated through the conceptualisation of the *Proun*. This is evident in Lissitzky's frequent insistence on intuition and creativity.

¹⁰¹ 'From UNOVIS - We want', p.298.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ Cited in Andrei Nakov, *Abstrait/Concret: Art Non-Objectif Russe et Polonais* (Paris: Transédition, 1981), p.63.

¹⁰⁵ Malevich, 'Suprematism: 34 Drawings', p.128.

Lissitzky's unpublished typescript 'Suprematism in world reconstruction', written in 1920, prophesied that, being a 'clear sign and plan for a definite new world never before experienced', Suprematism and the *Proun* would bring the world to a 'true model of perfection'¹⁰⁶. '[The] path into the future', Lissitzky wrote, 'is the path leading from creative intuition to the increased growth of foodstuffs [...] the artist nowadays is occupied with painting flags, posters, pots and pans, textiles and things like that'. He upheld the current opinion that 'such work now belongs to the duty of the artist as a citizen of the community who is clearing the field of its old rubbish in preparation for the new life', yet asserted that the 'artist must not strive to attain his title to creative activity by painting posters in the prescribed colour'¹⁰⁷. While Lissitzky considered the artist's work to be essential to the social and intellectual continuation of the political and economic revolution, creativity was at this early stage by no means to submit to the dictates of the state. This principle was one he regularly put forward while promoting Russian avant-garde art abroad, including his own. For instance in Berlin, when reading an extract of a radio message sent out to the world by the International Bureau in 1918: 'the world-wide social revolution [requires] a powerful impetus from art. We recognise the value of the *element* and of *invention* as being the only channel for this impetus'¹⁰⁸. This last idea actually provided the main thrust of at least two texts written for Western periodicals¹⁰⁹. Thus in 'Rad - Propeller und das folgende' [Wheel - Propeller and what follows], published in *G, Material zur elementare Gestaltung* in 1923 and reprinted in *ABC, Beiträge zum Bauen* three years later, Lissitzky considered man's cultural evolution in relation to the historical development of movement. He identified three different phases, each marked by the inception of a particular implement. First the wheel, then propeller and the screw were singled out for the radical innovations and new forms their

¹⁰⁶ Lissitzky, 'Suprematism in world reconstruction', p.327.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.329-30.

¹⁰⁸ Lissitzky, 'New Russian art', p.337.

¹⁰⁹ El Lissitzky, 'Rad - Propeller und das folgende', *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.2, September 1923, p.3 and *ABC, Beiträge zum Bauen*, Basle, series no.2, no.1, p.3; translated in

discovery brought about in daily life, e.g. the wheel and the rolling of the train ('moveable architecture'). From this evolutionary pattern Lissitzky derived the proposition: 'Only inventions will move us forward. Only inventions will determine design [*Gestaltung*]. Even for revolutions new forms must be invented'. He argued:

A new energy must be released, which provides us with a new system of movement (for example, a movement which is not based on friction, which offers the possibility of floating in space and remaining at rest)¹¹⁰.

This was where the *Proun* intervened, both metaphorically and literally. Aiming to explore precisely such a possibility, Lissitzky constructed a spatial paradigm that challenged man's sensory experience and expanded it to embrace new architectonic configurations. It was his assumption that, through the resulting growth of individual awareness, people would be first liberated and then mobilised by a heightening of their collective consciousness. The *Prouns* were in this regard no different than the *Model for a Monument to the Third International*. Tatlin and his assistants had stressed their commitment to creating 'models which give rise to discoveries serving the creation of a new world and which call producers to control the forms of the new life around us' in the manifesto which accompanied the Tower's exhibition in Moscow¹¹¹. As signifiers and blueprints of a cultural order outside contemporary lived experience, the *Proun* obviously posited a more abstract relationship with the instruments of production. The result of 'creative activity', Lissitzky argued when lecturing in Berlin, is 'a form through which we express phenomena. It can originate in two ways. Firstly: By agreement as to what meaning these signs shall have. We have the design for a mountain city, in all its diversity, drawn on a flat piece of paper in the form of a town-plan; we understand the sketch, because we had established the signs on it in advance [...] With these signs we have expressed what was there already in the world, what had already

Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.345; and 'Element und Erfindung', *ABC, Beiträge zum Bauen*, Basle, series no.1, no.1, 1924, p.3; translated in *ibid.*, pp.345-46.

¹¹⁰ Lissitzky, 'Wheel - Propeller and what follows', p.345.

been built'¹¹². By contrast, the *Proun* advanced along an unfamiliar and unexplored path:

Now the second possibility: a sign is designed, much later it is given its name, and later still its meaning becomes clear. So we do not understand the signs, the shapes, which the artist created, because man's brain has not yet reached the corresponding stage of development¹¹³.

Such arguments set Lissitzky far apart from the core of the Moscow Constructivists. UNOVIS worked hard to spread its influence and foster alliances with colleagues and Suprematist sympathisers elsewhere¹¹⁴. By the time of Lissitzky's move to Berlin, two UNOVIS exhibitions had been held in Moscow: in June 1920, in connection with the First All-Russian Conference of Teachers and Students, and in December 1921, when over two hundred works by the collective were displayed at INKhUK. *Prouns* were shown on both occasions and the ideas underpinning them disclosed by Lissitzky in a lecture given there on 23 September 1921¹¹⁵. Having declared the necessity of fusing ideological and practical imperatives, the Constructivists had by then renounced creative efforts other than those aligned with the manufacture of utilitarian values, including laboratory work. Lissitzky unquestionably felt the need to satisfy the mandate of revolutionary work too. Yet his understanding of his task as an artist at this particular juncture differed substantially. In the process of creating an art that would relate directly and universally to the collective, Lissitzky resisted materialist and instrumentalist principles. He acknowledged the value of engineering and avowed that 'the vitality, the uniformity, the monumental quality, the accuracy, and perhaps the beauty of the machine were an exhortation to the artist' and himself¹¹⁶. However, he refused to take these for granted, cautioning against such alluring beauty and

¹¹¹ Vladimir Tatlin, 'The work ahead of us' (1920), p.239.

¹¹² Lissitzky, 'New Russian art', p.334.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, p.335.

¹¹⁴ Shatskikh, 'Unovis: Epicenter of a new world', p.60.

¹¹⁵ Lissitzky-Küppers, Lissitzky (eds.), *El Lissitzky, Proun und Wolkenbügel*, p.6.

¹¹⁶ Lissitzky, 'New Russian art', p.333.

the 'romanticism' it occasioned. 'The merit of Tatlin and his colleagues lies in the fact that they accustomed the painter to working in actual space and on contemporary materials', Lissitzky wrote. 'They approached constructive art. But this group reached a kind of material-fetishism and forgot the necessity of creating a new plan. At times this reminds one of building a concrete railway-station from a Gothic design'¹¹⁷. Given Lissitzky's personal interests, such allegations may be perceived as a contradiction. His treatment of paint as an expression of real materials and the *Proun*'s play on textural properties dovetailed more readily with Tatlin's research into *faktura* than the Suprematist equation of colour with sensation. Lissitzky's analytical efforts equally distanced him from the metaphysics of Malevich, bringing him closer to the 'scientific' endeavours of the INKhUK Constructivists. Hence the premises Lissitzky advanced there for his *Proun* enterprise:

1. FORM OUTSIDE SPACE = 0
2. FORM OUTSIDE MATERIAL = 0
3. THE RELATIONSHIP OF FORM TO MATERIAL IS THE RELATIONSHIP OF MASS TO FORCE
4. MATERIAL ACQUIRES FORMS IN CONSTRUCTION
5. THE MEASURE BY WHICH THE GROWTH OF FORM IS LIMITED IS ECONOMY¹¹⁸

Suspicious of slavish functionalism, Lissitzky relegated the machine to the auxiliary role of one of many tools available in 'the crystallising of amorphous nature'¹¹⁹. He contended in 1920: 'If necessary we shall take machines in our hands as well, because in expressing our creative ability, paintbrush and ruler and compasses and machine are only extensions of the finger which points the way'¹²⁰. Four years later, he made it clear in a Western periodical that his position

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.333-34.

¹¹⁸ Lissitzky, 'Proun' (1920-21), p.67.

¹¹⁹ El Lissitzky, 'Nasci', *Merz*, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/July 1924; translated in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.347.

¹²⁰ Lissitzky, 'Suprematism in world reconstruction', p.329.

remained unchanged: 'We have had enough of perpetually hearing MACHINE, MACHINE, MACHINE, MACHINE when it comes to modern art-production. The machine is no more than a brush and a primitive one at that, which portrays a view of life on the canvas'¹²¹. Technological development, along with new scientific paradigms, afforded a more profound insight into the world, as a result of which the artist's standpoint was dramatically and positively altered: 'The machine has not separated us from nature, through it we have discovered a new nature before never surmised'¹²². Lissitzky considered it the artist's ethical duty to ensure that the subtleties thus revealed be experienced by the entire community. However, science, technology, their tools and processes were neither to undermine nor dictate invention; for, as he noted in the first lines of 'A. and Pangeometry' with respect to art and science, 'every time they overlap, it is fatal for [Art]'¹²³. At the base of such a perspective lay the idea that creative work partook of a broader process of social growth. Lissitzky saw the shaping [*Gestaltung*] of form, i.e. of space, as intertwined with the global evolution of man, an evolution he assumed advanced towards a more perfect future. So he could affirm that the artist's work 'lies beyond the boundaries of the useful and the useless', but nonetheless contains the seed of great utilitarian value¹²⁴. He argued in *De Stijl*: 'Purpose is what is behind us. Creation perfects the fact and then it becomes a necessity. When man invented the funeral pyre, the fire became the purpose of the heat. *Proun*'s power is to create aims. This is the artist's freedom, denied to the scientist'¹²⁵. He later expanded on this somewhat enigmatic idea in a brief introductory text accompanying the exhibition of his work at the Graphisches Kabinett J.B. Neumann in Berlin:

My aim - and this is not only my aim, this is the meaning of the new art - is not to represent, but to form something independent of any conditioning factor. To this thing I gave the independent name *Proun*. When its life is

¹²¹ Lissitzky, 'Nasci', p.347.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Lissitzky, 'A. and Pangeometry', p.348.

¹²⁴ Lissitzky, 'Suprematism in world construction', p.329.

fulfilled and it lies down gently in the history of art, only when will this idea be defined [...] The *Proun* creator concentrates in himself all the elements of modern knowledge and all the systems and methods and with these he forms *plastic elements*, which exist just like the elements of nature, such as H (hydrogen) and O (oxygen), and S (sulphur). He amalgamates these elements and obtains acids which bite into everything they touch, that is to say, they have an effect on all spheres of life. Perhaps all this is a piece of laboratory work: but it produces no scientific preparations which are only interesting and intelligible to a circle of specialists. It produces living bodies¹²⁶.

It is revealing that, whilst Lissitzky emphasised the social relevance of the *Proun*, he remained evasive as to how the system he had devised, to which he attributed universal value, was to confront daily life and act upon it. Such indeterminacy was symptomatic of a certain disjunction existing between Lissitzky's concept and his desire to harness his artistic skills to shaping a new order. This did not escape his critics. For instance, the Hungarian Ernst Kállai, who had praised Lissitzky's work in *Das Kunstblatt* in 1922, was visibly discomfited by some of his rhetoric¹²⁷. Kállai commented in *Der Cicerone* two years later, with particular reference to the editorial of *Veshch'*, which will be discussed at greater length in Chapter 4:

The desire to find objects which should be recognised as parts of real life, contributing to its organisation, drove him [Lissitzky] to strictly practical, exact, structural creation, to complex forms which could appear before the world unbroken, objective, complete. Not with the feeling of pleasure aroused by the experiences of the senses, the nerves of the soul, but with the clear-sighted, energetic, planned activity of the will that demands boundless expansion and the conquest of space [...] But Lissitzky does not want to compete with engineers and builders. He denounces what he calls this

¹²⁵ Lissitzky, 'PROUN. Not world visions, But - world reality', p.344.

¹²⁶ Lissitzky, 'From a letter', p.354.

¹²⁷ Ernst Kállai, 'Lissitzky', *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol.VI, no.7, July 1922, pp.296-98.

'primitive utilitarianism'. So what he's after is an aesthetic, after all. A modern, practical aesthetic, paraphrasing what is technically useful and intellectually calculated, but all the same a free and individual kind of beauty. In order to resolve this inner contradiction, the 'objects' painted by Lissitzky become the fictive constructions of fictive mechanisms. Modernist representations of technical Utopias [...] Fortunately, however, artists are not judged by the logical soundness of their theories and programmes, but by the quality of the forms they produce¹²⁸.

Addressing himself to the public through theory, Lissitzky explained his artistic propositions as a consequence of his activity. To use Van Doesburg's phrase, Lissitzky spoke '*from within art*'¹²⁹. Among his most significant attempts to elude such an 'intermediary' were the aforementioned *Proun Rooms*, devised between 1923 and 1927¹³⁰.

Although the conceptualisation of the *Proun* was paralleled by a search for immediate practical implementations, notably in graphic and architectural design, it was not until Lissitzky's arrival in Germany that he was able to demonstrate synoptically the spatial conception of the *Proun* by organising an actual collision with man¹³¹. The opportunity arose with the *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung* [Great Berlin Art Exhibition] of summer 1923. Allocated a separate room in the exhibition hall at the Lehrter Bahnhof, Lissitzky transformed the floor, four walls and ceiling to create an environment 'so organised that of itself it provides an inducement to walk around in it' (fig.2.22)¹³². On each surface, he painted geometric planes in sparse black, white and grey tones, placed raised wooden slats

¹²⁸ Ernst Kállai, 'El Lissitzky', *Der Cicerone*, Leipzig, vol.XVI, no.22, November 1924, pp.1058-63; translated in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.377.

¹²⁹ Theo van Doesburg, *Principles of Neo-Plastic Art* (London: Lund Humphries, 1969), p.5.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.9.

¹³¹ In *UNOVIS Almanac No.1* expressions such as 'projects for new forms of utilitarian structures', 'elaboration of tasks of the new architecture' and 'projects for monumental decorations' were used by Lissitzky to characterise his work, Shatskikh, 'Unovis: Epicenter of the world', p.58.

¹³² El Lissitzky, 'Prounenraum, Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung 1923' (Den Haag, May 1923), *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923; translated in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.361. Lissitzky indicated here that the floor could not be realised.

and boards, and suspended relief elements like a cube, a sphere and a bar. As the viewer entered the room, lines of forces guided him through the overlapping and interpenetrating components according to a pre-determined directional pattern which pulled the walls together into a single volumetric entity. By walking round, he became physically implicated in both the configuration and manipulation of space. A brief explanatory text in *G* in July 1923 explained Lissitzky's strategy:

I am designing an exhibition show-room, therefore to my mind a demonstration room. The organisation of the wall is not [...] to be conceived in terms of pictures [...] The new room neither needs nor desires pictures [...] The room is there for the human being - and not the human being for the room¹³³.

In a continual state of transformation, the *Proun Room* subverted the participant's expectations concerning the art object and his experience of phenomenal space. This disruption in turn was to put him in a position to recognise the new spatial paradigm Lissitzky purportedly advanced and, by the same token, to validate his claim that the *Proun* altered the 'accepted set up for the manufacture of art' and introduced 'the idea of plural creation'¹³⁴. At once maieutic and didactic, the *Proun Room* functioned on both an aesthetic and social level¹³⁵. It is remarkable in this sense that this work, along with the other exhibition spaces Lissitzky designed thereafter, should be repeatedly pinpointed by him as his most important¹³⁶. When applied to more pragmatic purposes, a *Proun* environment could indeed easily be turned into a tool of persuasive propaganda, and so move from the general goal of educating the viewer to that of inferring an ideological point¹³⁷. This potential was one Lissitzky was to exploit thoroughly in the ensuing years in order to inspire

¹³³ Lissitzky, 'Proun Room, Great Berlin Exhibition 1923', p.361.

¹³⁴ Lissitzky, 'PROUN. Not world visions, But - world reality', p.344.

¹³⁵ Noël Carroll, 'Avant-garde art and the problem of theory', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol.29, no.3, fall 1995, pp.7-11.

¹³⁶ El Lissitzky, 'Antwort auf eine Fragebogen' (1925), in Lissitzky-Küppers, Lissitzky (eds.), *El Lissitzky, Proun und Wolkenbügel*, p.193, and 'Autobiography' (June 1941), p.8.

¹³⁷ Myroslav M. Mudrak, Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, 'Environments of propaganda', in *The Avant-Garde Frontier: Russia Meets the West, 1919-1930* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 1992), pp.72-74.

support for the Soviet state at home and abroad, e.g. at the Cologne *Pressa* show of 1928.

* * *

'Every piece of work I did', Lissitzky wrote in 1932, 'was an invitation, not to make eyes at it, but to take it as a spur to action, to urge our feelings to follow the general line of forming a classless society'¹³⁸. This rhetoric of action did not always surface explicitly in his discourse before 1925. Nor did it restrict the range of projects he embraced. Unlike the statements and actions of his Constructivist counterparts in Moscow, Lissitzky's declarations often left room for vacillation, ambivalence or ambiguity. Although this may occasionally be construed as indeterminacy or even contradiction, it does not cast doubt upon his political commitment, which is clearly seen to infuse both his theory and practice. In more than one instance while abroad, Lissitzky argued that the revolutionary events of 1917 only 'liberated a latent energy accumulated in [Russia's] young generation of artists, which merely awaited a great mandate from the people to be released and deployed'¹³⁹. Nevertheless, there is no denying that it constituted an essential prelude for him, one that was definitely needed in the total transformation of man's cultural environment he spoke of achieving with the *Proun*. His return home in 1925, motivated by the desire to take part in the regeneration and collective reconstruction of his country, testified to this engagement. As he wrote to Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers in March 1924, further to a letter from his parents: 'He [Lissitzky's father] says I have had quite enough of roaming around the world, I have serious work to do in Russia. Maybe old Lissitzky is right'¹⁴⁰.

¹³⁸ El Lissitzky, 'Lissitzky speaks' (1932); translated in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.326.

¹³⁹ El Lissitzky, 'Unser Buch' (1927), *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch* (Mainz: 1927); translated in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.358; and 'New Russian art', p.331: 'But this youngest generation was not born in October 1917; the October Revolution in art originated much earlier'.

¹⁴⁰ El Lissitzky, 'Letter to Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, Orselino, 23 March 1924', in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.47.

In Berlin Lissitzky described the *Proun* as contributing 'to the general trend of constructive design resulting from the work of the two fundamental groups led by Tatlin and Malevich', thereby positioning himself somewhere in between the poles represented by these highly visible pioneers¹⁴¹. More specifically, the *Proun* was placed within the path of the emergence of 'productive art', which, responding to contemporary demands, sought to transfer 'the tasks of the painters from the studio to the factories and works'. Lissitzky noted appropriately enough that 'regrettably, the disorganisation of Russian industry and the lack of raw materials prevented the success of this campaign'. He argued: 'One was left with an intermediate space between studio and factory'¹⁴². In this 'interchange station', Lissitzky discerned two tendencies: the OBMOKhU group and UNOVIS, led by Malevich and Lissitzky¹⁴³. 'Both strove to attain the same result, namely the creation of the real object and of architecture' and, so he reported, claimed 'Constructivism'¹⁴⁴. Strictly speaking, neither group can be qualified as Constructivist, though the laboratory work of the former paved the way for the Constructivist paradigm formulated at INKhUK in spring 1921. It is significant, then, that Lissitzky should adopt such a label, since he displayed irreconcilable divergence of concern with those who coined the term in Russia immediately before his departure. As will be seen in Chapter 4, the members of the OBMOKhU group investigated new constructive approaches in art with a view to establishing the basis for all future production. The *Prouns*, if granted the semiological status Lissitzky assigned them, shared a common ambition: they partook of the same process of creating and mapping new possibilities for a more sane and salutary future.

Often regarded as an attempt to reconcile or throw 'a bridge between Suprematism and Constructivism', the *Proun* owed a debt to both¹⁴⁵. So did Lissitzky's writings. Yet Lissitzky at this point never completely adopted the extremism of the Constructivists. Nor could he accommodate the radical solutions

¹⁴¹ Lissitzky, 'New Russian art', p.335.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, p.336.

¹⁴³ Lissitzky, Arp, *Die Kunstismen*, p.xi.

¹⁴⁴ Lissitzky, 'New Russian art', p.336.

they posited in order to effect the fusion of art into life, although his later propaganda work for Stalin's government essentially exploited similar strategies¹⁴⁶. It is therefore crucial to assess Lissitzky's rhetoric in relation to the audience he addressed. Like a number of European artists, including Theo van Doesburg, Hans Richter and László Moholy-Nagy, Lissitzky optimistically believed in the impact art and human creativity in general could have on the perceptual, cognitive and spiritual emancipation of man. This coincidence of interest was no doubt an incentive to reposition his discourse, first to come up to the expectations of the Western vanguard as a representative of Russian revolutionary art and, then, to adjust it to their 'constructive' values. His publishing activity and work towards the creation of a Constructivist International both aptly demonstrate the revisions his standpoint underwent as his path crossed that of his Western colleagues. Concomitant with this placement within a pan-European perspective was an appropriation of a Constructivist terminology which, once outside its original context, became open to reinterpretation.

¹⁴⁵ For instance, John Elderfield, 'On Constructivism', *Artforum*, vol.IX, no.9, March 1971, p.61.

¹⁴⁶ Benjamin Buchloh, 'From *faktura* to factography', *October*, no.30, fall 1984, pp.87-93.

Chapter 3: Il'ya Erenburg

In the autumn of 1921 the Russian novelist Il'ya Erenburg completed the manuscript of *A vse-taki ona vertitsya* [And Yet the World Goes Round]¹. It was published in January 1922 and immediately translated into German under the title *Und sie bewegt sich doch*. Intended as a study of the latest trends in art and literature, *And Yet the World Goes Round* provided a valuable overview of the contemporary debate about the form and function of creative activity within society, which it considered in the broad European context.

The book promoted ideas discussed in post-revolutionary Russia, notably in the journal *Iskusstvo kommuny* [Art of the Commune], and championed the radical re-evaluation of artistic work carried out by avant-garde artists in response to the momentous political events of 1917. It celebrated their achievements, and enthusiastically endorsed the ideas of 'production art' and the theory of Constructivism which emerged in spring 1921. At the same time, however, Erenburg clearly insisted that such accomplishments be regarded as an integral part of a single international movement committed to a common spirit of construction and working collectively towards the definition of a new life.

This proposition later provided an essential framework for the concept of the journal *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet* and is seminal to understanding its programme. Thus it is apposite to investigate the contents of *And Yet the World Goes Round* and to clarify why, and under what terms, Erenburg established a kinship between

¹ Il'ya Erenburg, *A vse-taki ona vertitsya* (Berlin and Moscow: Helikon Verlag, 1922). All quotes from the reprint in German translation, Ilja Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch* (Baden: LIT Verlag Lars Müller, 1986).

Russian avant-garde endeavours and the parallel efforts of Western European artists.

* * *

3.1. Prologue: And Yet the World Goes Round!

Erenburg officially left Moscow on an artistic mission in March 1921. When he joined the large Russian émigré community in Berlin the following November, he had already finished writing *And Yet the World Goes Round*. Helikon Verlag advertised it as a book on 'the new style in art' and distributed it simultaneously in Moscow and Berlin². The cover carried a design by Fernand Léger composed from stencilled geometric and machine-like elements (fig.3.1). Inside, the text was interspersed with plates, photographic reproductions and tables. It adopted a dynamic typographical layout, with some words set in capitals and others underlined or given visual impact by using bold types four times the normal size (fig.3.2). The opening chapter confirmed the implications of this unconventional appearance: *And Yet the World Goes Round* was dedicated to the 'triumph of the new spirit'³.

From the very beginning Erenburg placed the origins of this new spirit in the 'disintegration' of the past and industrial development. Modern machinery and 'the magnificent successes of technology (aeroplanes, submarines, motor cars, metallurgy, etc.)' of the pre-war years had instituted new production processes and given birth to new models⁴. In turn this had given life a new rhythm. In the wake of these substantial changes, there arose the need for a new art. He declared with

² *Veshch' /Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.1/2, April/May 1922.

³ Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, p.15.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.68.

crushing finality: 'The old order and yesterday's culture must sooner or later GIVE WAY TO NEW ONES'⁵. This was both inexorable and irrevocable: 'There is no return! [...] It must go forward!'⁶. A perusal of the many avant-garde publications which had appeared in Russia and the West tangibly demonstrated that a comprehensive transformation was in process. 'Striving for a new world', they all resounded with the same message: 'The old art [...] is dead. Here comes the new art, the art which organises life. It exists in all the countries, it is international'⁷.

Erenburg listed fifty-five like-minded art periodicals from over ten countries, among them *Art of the Commune*, *Unovis Almanac*, *De Stijl*, *MA* and *L'Esprit Nouveau* [The New Spirit]. He noted that other titles unknown to him had doubtless appeared elsewhere, so that his selection, particularly detailed for the countries in which he had resided (Russia, France, Belgium and Germany), was not exhaustive. Nevertheless, it captured a general tendency, namely the existence of a common ground of aspirations between the avant-gardes from both West and East. To Erenburg, this was no coincidence:

Humanity is ripe for a new culture, for a new organisation. This is not a passing fashion, but a necessity. During the war we were all isolated from one another by barbed wire [...] In 1918, after four years of separation, painters and writers realised that, without their knowing it, they had reached the same stage⁸.

Overcoming 'artistic protectionism' and nationalism, 'the new art united into a single European stream'⁹. Any obstacles in the way of this collective, social and international movement could only 'delay the arrival of the inevitable'¹⁰.

Erenburg maintained: 'There are NO MORE traditions in Europe since the war. They are dead'¹¹. For this reason, he rejected the 'status quo' imposed on art by the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.164.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.100.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.48-51.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.51.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.43-46.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.42.

Academy¹². The idealism of its “unconscious ‘firemen’” was anachronistic and thus doomed to disappear with the pre-war social and cultural superstructure that succoured it¹³. In Russia, after the Revolution, the intelligentsia had successfully pulled art down from the pedestal on which it had been placed by the bourgeoisie. In the West, however, this process was met with fierce resistance from conservative forces. Such an interpretation was not unique to Erenburg. It is a recurrent theme in Russian literature of the first post-revolutionary decade. Many writers, including Anna Akhmatova, Nikolai Berdiaev and Andrei Belyi, contrasted the *passéiste* attitude of the reactionaries, usually associated with in Western Europe, with the progressive spirit of the avant-garde, best exemplified by the recent achievements of Russian artists. *And Yet the World Goes Round* allegedly championed the latter, but it is significant that these two antagonistic forces, reflecting the polarities of two vaguely articulated worlds (‘the obsolete West against the new Russia, poor and hungry but dynamic’), were never strictly defined¹⁴. Nor did they appear to be mutually exclusive. Rather, they betrayed a certain duality of feeling in Erenburg’s relationship to his native Russia, a duality to which the contradictions present throughout the book all attested.

In Erenburg’s estimation, the ‘blind and deaf Joshuas’ who clung to the past and made ‘titanic efforts’ to ‘bring the world to a standstill’, denying the significance of ‘the war, trenches and grenades’, would never succeed¹⁵. Stuck in the post-war gloom, they acted as a negative force but, like Joshua, the son of Nun, they could not stop the earth from moving. *And Yet the World Goes Round* mocked their staunch opposition to change and singled out France as a particularly extreme case. Having lived there before the First World War, Erenburg commented on his return to Paris in the spring of 1921: ‘[Only] a miserable square and an

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.134.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.53.

¹³ *Ibid.*, inside cover.

¹⁴ Victor Erlich, *Modernism and Revolution: Russian Literature in Transition* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1994), p.62.

¹⁵ Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, pp.17-18.

underground station remain of the storming of the Bastille'¹⁶. France, the country of the Revolution of 1789, was now satirised for her bourgeois attitudes and inability to comprehend the innovations of the Russian avant-garde, as represented by Sergei Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, Nataliya Goncharova's stage designs and the musical reduction and simplification explored by Igor Stravinsky. Formerly the 'capital of the world', Paris had become the centre of chauvinistic conservatism. Therefore, it was home to the least progressive elements in the Russian emigration. Erenburg wrote: 'Adding further to the antiquities of Paris which one must see - awarded little stars in the Baedeker - there is undoubtedly a new one, namely the Russian emigration'¹⁷.

Thomas Khun has argued that, in art as in science, the total reconstruction concomitant with a revolution necessarily entails a period of crisis, characterised by a firm resistance to novelty and reluctance to reject one paradigm in favour of another, incommensurable with the former because bringing about a completely new world view¹⁸. Erenburg submitted that Russia had successfully gone through such a transitional phase. Despite protestations to the contrary, changes of historical significance had taken place. Art had been thoroughly reassessed to respond to the demands of the new emerged social environment, rendering obsolete the precepts obstinately guarded by the Joshuas. So, like Galileo three centuries earlier, when urged to recant his beliefs, Erenburg loudly cried: 'and yet the world goes round!'¹⁹. Printed in ten languages on the inside cover, this legendary pronouncement not only gave the book its title, but regularly punctuated Erenburg's discourse. He later drew a parallel between 'scientific revolutions' and the development of art:

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.35. Travelling to France with a Soviet passport, Erenburg was refused permission to cross Germany and had to make his way through Danzig to Copenhagen and, from there, to London. He finally reached Paris on 8 May 1921 but was deported to Belgium under escort by the French police eighteen days later. This episode was related pp.61-62.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.35-37.

¹⁸ Thomas Khun, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), pp.92-135.

¹⁹ Julian L. Laychuck, *Ilya Ehrenburg: An Idealist in an Age of Realism* (Bern: Peter Lang, 1991), p.359.

Discoveries in the sphere of exact sciences are subject to proof and the question whether Einstein was right or wrong was decided by mathematicians, not by millions of people who can only remember their multiplication tables. New art forms have always entered the consciousness of people slowly and by devious ways; at the beginning, only a few understand and accept them²⁰.

And Yet the World Goes Round hailed Vladimir Tatlin's *Model for a Monument to the Third International* for inaugurating just such a process: 'Standing on the ruins of imperial St. Petersburg, the blond prophet in a casual shirt - judging by appearances, a factory worker - indicated a new direction'²¹.

Erenburg had already described Tatlin's project as heralding a new age in a survey of contemporary Russian art for the Parisian journal *L'Amour de l'Art*²². Published in November 1921, this article contained in an abridged form most of the arguments deployed in *And Yet the World Goes Round*. Both texts presented the young socialist state as the crux of the progressive tendency. The revolution, Erenburg argued, had produced a social shift and radically altered the relationship between art, daily labour and the people. Under the impact of these changes, Tatlin, Kazimir Malevich, Aleksandr Rodchenko and other pioneers had initiated the move of art into life. It could be seen in the lamps and constructions designed by the last-named and Lev Bruni for Filippov's Kafe Pittoresk (fig.1.7), the experimental work of the OBMOKhU group, the daring experiments of Aleksandr Tairov at the Kamernyi Theatre and the scenic productions of Vsevolod Meierkhol'd. None of these works appeared in *L'Amour de l'Art*. A letter from Erenburg's wife Lyubov Kozintseva to Rodchenko however reveals that the choice of illustrations rested with the magazine's editors, who rejected the photographic

²⁰ Ilya Ehrenburg, *Men, Years-Life. First Years of Revolution 1918-21* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1962), vol.II, p.57. *And Yet the World Goes Round* referred to Einstein on two occasions, p.16 and p.53.

²¹ Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, p.22.

²² Elie Ehrenbourg, 'L'art russe d'aujourd'hui', *L'Amour de l'Art*, Paris, November 1921, pp.367-370.

material Rodchenko had given her in favour of reproductions of more conservative works by 'Shevchenko, Shterenberg and company'²³. No such restrictions affected *And Yet the World Goes Round*. Reproduced in its pages were Tatlin's Tower, whose basic concepts and structure Erenburg outlined in the text, a design for a propaganda kiosk by Rodchenko of 1919-20 (fig.3.3), El Lissitzky's *Proun ID* (fig.2.7) and Aleksandr Vesnin's design for the Kamernyi Theatre's production of Paul Claudel's *Tidings Brought to Mary* of 1921²⁴.

To Erenburg, there could be no dispute about the significance of such works. Despite 'four years of complete and three years of nearly complete isolation' during which 'neither books nor journals nor letters circulated', Russia 'HAD LEARNT A LOT'²⁵. It was now a model on the international stage. "It is as plain as can be: today in the West, 'RUSSIA' sounds for the young artists like 'PARIS' sounded ten years ago for the Russians"²⁶. He wrote:

When I met PICASSO again after a long separation - we had not even greeted each other yet -, he exclaimed: 'I support Russia with all my heart' [...] RIVERA wants to go to Russia; he writes in Mexican magazines about the new art of our country. LEGER speaks of the new Russia with great sympathy [...] ISADORA DUNCAN is in Russia. CHARLOT (Charlie Chaplin) dreams of following her there, etc. etc. Does this mean that, from Picasso to Duncan, they all support the programme and tactics of the Russian Communist party? Of course not!²⁷

For them and the Western avant-garde in general, the appeal of Russia was primarily as an experimental laboratory in which patterns of renewal were being researched: 'The new style is being formulated in Russia, exceptionally well and

²³ Lioubov M. Kozintzéva, 'Lettre à Alexandre Rodtchenko, 10 Juillet 1922, Allemagne', in Alexandre Rodtchenko, *Ecrits Complets sur l'Art, l'Architecture et la Révolution* (Paris: Philippe Sers, 1988), p.203. The letter does not detail these photographs.

²⁴ Erenburg's description of Tatlin's Tower gave a height of 25 meters for the model, which appears to have been between 6 and 7 meters high only.

²⁵ Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, p.52.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.62.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.64.

almost without spelling mistakes. Details are being calculated, conscientiously, with a compass'²⁸. Yet Erenburg was not unrealistic about the practical situation. Wrecked by the First World War, the Revolution and ensuing Civil War, Russia was in no position to realise its projects on a large scale. Industry was exhausted. Artists and poets lacked materials. He commented: 'Not only the models of the locomotives would be elaborated, but also the timetables of the local lines. But there are neither locomotives nor lines. This is the tragedy of the new Russian art'²⁹.

3.2. An international agenda

In the opening pages of *And Yet the World Goes Round*, Erenburg warned: 'I know little about politics, and I do not have a clue about economy. For that reason, I impose upon myself self-restraint. I will attempt to define the essential features of the new in art. Since, however, the essence of the new is that it brings down the wall which used to separate art from life, my book is about life, everyday life'³⁰. In line with the appeal for the democratisation of art made by the Futurists Vladimir Mayakovskii, Vasilii Kamenskii and David Burlyuk soon after the October Revolution, Erenburg rejected art alienated from life'³¹. The idealistic interpretation of art as a distinct realm was a vestige of outdated structures. The new art did not divorce itself from contemporary life but moved beyond the confines of a self-enclosed work to interact with other areas of social experience like politics, economics and science. He stated: 'The painter lives together with common mortals, shares their passions and everyday reality'. Accordingly,

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.30.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.31.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, epigraph and p.20.

³¹ 'From this day forward, with the abolition of Tsardom, the domicile of art in the closets and sheds of human genius - palaces, galleries, salons, libraries, theatres - is abrogated. [...] All art - to all the people!', Vladimir Mayakovski, Vasilii Kamenskii and David Burlyuk, *Decree No.1 on the Democratisation of Art: The Hoarding of Literature and the Painting of Streets*; quoted in Wiktor Woroszylski, *The Life of Mayakovsky*, (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1972), p.194.

individual expression and solitary personal achievement were to be discarded in favour of a commitment to the collective: 'One idea. One will. One work'³².

Erenburg believed that the First World War had made this move not only possible, but essential. Initially a product of 'hypocritical ideas, narrow-minded nationalism and romantic heroism', the otherwise disastrous conflict had stimulated a new concern for the community and revealed the need for discipline, 'internationalism, genuine honesty and sober work'. Ultimately, it had taught those willing to learn from the experience 'an informative lesson of organisation' and a new credo. The latter consisted of the trinity 'WORK, CLARITY, ORGANISATION'³³. He contended: 'Here is the NAVEL of the new art. The explanation of what follows (evolution of the different art forms) and what precedes (internationalism, revolutionary attitude)³⁴. The slogans published in avant-garde periodicals in Europe and Russia clearly pointed to the spirit governing of this new 'faith'. Thus *L'Esprit Nouveau* announced: 'There is a new spirit: it is a spirit of CONSTRUCTION'. In a similar vein, *Unovis Almanac* declared: 'The basic principle is CONSTRUCTION'³⁵. *And Yet the World Goes Round* too identified construction as the key to restructuring material culture and bridging the gap between art and life. Yet Erenburg defined this term only metaphorically. It served to denote a new system of values that reflected the 'qualities of modern man' - 'health, clarity, proportion, sociality' - and triumphed over the negative terms of 'romanticism, mysticism, impressionism, individualism and symbolism'³⁶. Generally affiliated to a particular view of how art was to relate to a transformed and modernised society, the notion of construction evoked a method for transforming nature, rough 'building material', by essence chaotic and shapeless, into order³⁷.

³² Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, pp.52-53.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp.68-69.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.66.

³⁵ *Ibid.* In French in the text.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.70.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.114.

Such indeterminacy set *And Yet the World Goes Round* apart from the position it purported to represent in the West, i.e. Russian Constructivism. Just prior to Erenburg's departure from Moscow, a general formulation of the concept of construction had been arrived at during the INKhUK debates³⁸. It was admittedly not completely representative of all the participants' views, but was nevertheless symptomatic of an existing attempt to subject the work of art to scientific principles through the objective analysis of its basic elements and rigorous definition of their structural laws of organisation. Both in *And Yet the World Goes Round* and *L'Amour de l'Art*, Erenburg quoted a slogan by Rodchenko of 22 February 1921: 'Construction is the contemporary demand to organise a utilitarian deployment of materials. Constructive life is the art of the future. It is time for art to flow into the organisation of life'³⁹. However, this definition was not placed within the specific context of INKhUK's effort to systematise the creative process, out of which the theory of Constructivism developed in spring 1921. Instead, Rodchenko's dictum was affiliated with declarations by proponents of other, ideologically less committed standpoints, who, Erenburg maintained, professed kindred ideas and therefore fell into the same category of 'CONSTRUCTORS'. These were Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, Theo van Doesburg, Blaise Cendrars and Lissitzky, whose concept of the *Proun* Erenburg quoted approvingly:

PROUN - Project for the Affirmation of the New - is the name we have given to the station on the path to the construction of the new form. It grows out of the earth which is fertilised by the corpses of the painting

³⁸ 'Construction is the effective organisation of material elements. The indications of construction: i. the best use of materials, ii. the absence of any superfluous elements. The scheme of a construction is the combination of lines, and the planes and forms which they define; it is a system of forces. Composition is an arrangement according to a defined and conventional signification'; quoted in Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p.84.

³⁹ Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, p.103.

and its artist [...] The artist transforms himself from an imitator to a constructor of the new world of objects⁴⁰.

Endorsing ideas expounded in the pages of *Art of the Commune* in the immediate post-revolutionary period, Erenburg denied that art was related to 'divine moods'⁴¹. 'Art is simply work: know-how, craft, skill', Boris Kushner had stated in February 1919⁴². In a direct echo of this programmatic pronouncement, *And Yet the World Goes Round* argued: "Thanks to constructors, such *passéiste* concepts as 'artistry', 'inspiration' and others are gradually taken out of circulation and replaced with work, plan and skill". No longer 'a caste of initiated priests', artists and poets were becoming 'MEN OF ACTION'⁴³. There were concrete signs of this change in periodicals. Specialised journals were being succeeded by new cultural magazines that reached out towards larger audiences and promoted the cross-fertilisation artistic and social forms, e.g. *L'Esprit Nouveau* and *La Vida Americana*. Their external appearance was changing too. Sophisticated aestheticism was being replaced by resemblance to 'a price list, a technical review, a newspaper'⁴⁴.

'The new man needs neither myths nor symbols, but life', Erenburg asserted. 'He is profoundly realistic [...] His REALISM IS SYNTHETIC. In his search for synthesis, he does not waste time on excavations of his soul or formal analyses. His life is not the office of an archaeologist or a chemist, but the factory'⁴⁵. Erenburg endorsed Osip Brik's statement that 'art is like any other means of production', and rejected the existing division between art and industry⁴⁶. He

⁴⁰ *Ibid.* The text referred specifically to Amédée Ozenfant, Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, *Après le Cubisme* (Paris: Editions des Commentaires, 1918) and Theo van Doesburg, *Classique – Baroque – Moderne* (Antwerp: De Sikkel and Paris: Léonce Rosenberg, 1921).

⁴¹ Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, p.84.

⁴² Boris Kushner, 'Bozhestvennoe proizvedenie' [Divine work], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, Petrograd, no.9, 2 February 1919, p.1; translated in John Bowlit, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), pp.166-70.

⁴³ Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, pp.103-4.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp.70-71.

⁴⁶ Osip Brik, 'Drenazh iskusstvu' [A drain for art], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, Petrograd, no.1, 7 December 1918, p.1; quoted in Christina Lodder, 'Constructivism and Productivism in the 1920s', in

exhorted artists to participate actively in production and unreservedly accepted utility as the primary goal in art. The old art had degenerated and reached an impasse. It had lost contact with everyday life and, as a result, had no more power to influence people and affect the world beneficially. 'THE NEW ART CEASES TO BE ART [...] Our word is utilitarianism: if something is created, it shouldn't be a waste of time but of some use!'⁴⁷. The 'ornamental junk' which was being produced by applied art for a bourgeois minority who praised its uniqueness could not fulfil the demands of the age. It was without function and thus 'disgraceful nonsense'⁴⁸. He inferred:

A new era begins. The art of creating and constructing thousands of useful objects depends on finding the right form. No more applied arts, no more ornamental excrescences, no more gewgaws, no more mawkish flowers and clinging vine! Simplicity, solidity, the rationality of the object. The only institution that can inject art life into industry [...] Ivory towers are out. Instead of Parnassus: a factory; instead of Hippocrene: a quart of 'Piccolo' or a tankard of beer⁴⁹.

3.3. L'Esprit Nouveau: a model

Having argued that creative activity was evolving into a form of labour linked to the wider processes of social change, technological and industrial development, Ehrenburg stressed that art had adopted the strict laws governing the production of rationally designed objects and installations that were of use to mankind. Precision, mechanical calculation, functionalism, economy of material, efficiency, clear proportions, thought-out plans and meticulous execution constituted the

Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932 (New York: Rizzoli International Inc., 1990), p.99.

⁴⁷ Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, pp.22-24.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.79.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.27-28 and p.53.

fundamental principles of 'constructive' work. These qualities were there for all to see in the modern environment, as he observed during his journey out of Russia in 1921:

After four years of absence in Europe, I noticed practically nothing new in the arts, I was more impressed by the new dockside cranes in Copenhagen harbour, the *pissoirs* in London, shop windows etc.⁵⁰

Throughout *And Yet the World Goes Round*, photographic reproductions of advanced engineering structures, such as a snowplough on a locomotive (fig.3.4), aeroplanes (figs.3.5-6), a floating dock, a construction crane in Duisburg and a project for a bridge in New York, invited the reader to open his eyes to contemporary realities and share Erenburg's experience⁵¹. 'The new style will be created only through mass production', he maintained⁵². Manufactured commodities and utensils like Ford cars, typewriters, office furniture, Gillette safety razors, wardrobe trunks, lifts, raincoats, faience baths, fountain-pens, meters and neon signs encapsulated the standards of post-war reconstruction. Just as literature could not ignore the impact of the semi-literary discourse of the telegraph and journalism on verbal communication, so 'art had to draw the consequences'⁵³.

Interestingly, Erenburg insisted that the ideals of functional efficiency, clarity of construction and economy of means did not belong to machine age alone, but were inherent in the great art of any historical epoch. Hence a rigorous plan lay at the basis of the cathedrals of the Middle Ages. Evolved as a conscious product of aesthetic intentions as well as functional and technical ones, this plan answered religious needs and reflected the building's pivotal role within the social organism. 'What utilitarianism!', Erenburg cried. 'The cathedral is a handbook, an

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.74.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, pp.19, 21, 39, 41, 57, 59, 81 and 87.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.90.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp.93-94.

encyclopaedia in stone'⁵⁴. Like the Egyptian pyramids, the Parthenon, Andrei Rublev's icons, Nicolas Poussin's landscape painting, Æschylus' tragedies and the *Chanson de Roland* [Song of Roland], cathedrals were 'precise as mathematical formulas'. They obeyed 'stern LAWS' which Academic art had unfortunately 'forgotten', but whose existence 'industry [brought] to mind'⁵⁵. Erenburg continued:

The thirteenth century may be proud of the CATHEDRAL OF CHARTRES; the pride of the XXth century is the OCEANLINER AQUITANIA, which carries 3500 persons, is taller than the Louvre, seven times larger than Notre-Dame and perfectly harmonious in its massive size⁵⁶.

The rhetoric of this last remark unambiguously alluded to *L'Esprit Nouveau*. It referred directly to an illustration of May 1921 which showed four examples of French classical architecture, including Notre-Dame, the Arc de Triomphe and the Opéra Garnier, superimposed over the monumental silhouette of a liner with the caption 'The ocean liner *Aquitania*, Cumard Line, transports 3600 persons' (fig.3.7)⁵⁷.

L'Esprit Nouveau, published in twenty-eight issues between October 1920 and January 1925, was essentially the product of the collaboration of Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Edouard Jeanneret⁵⁸. Better known as Le Corbusier for his work as an architect, the latter argued in a series of essays entitled 'Des yeux qui ne voient pas...' [Eyes which do not see...], in the first of which the aforementioned montage appeared:

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 85-86

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

⁵⁷ *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no. 8, May 1921, n.p.

⁵⁸ The two theorists used several pseudonyms. Ozenfant wrote under the names of Saugnier, De Fayet, Vauvrecy, Julien Caron and Dr. St-Quentin. Jeanneret, for his part, occasionally signed Le Corbusier and Paul Boulard, Françoise Will-Levaillant, 'Norme et forme à travers *L'Esprit Nouveau*', in *Le Retour à L'Ordre dans les Arts Plastiques et l'Architecture, 1919-1925* (Saint-Etienne: Université de Saint-Etienne, 1975), pp. 241-76.

In the painful gestation of this age as it forms itself, a need for harmony becomes evident [...] Harmony has its causes; it is not in any way the effect of caprice, but is the result of a logical construction and congruous with the world around [...] There is harmony in the performances which come from the workshop or the factory⁵⁹.

This claim was given a historical foundation. Using a terminology derived from XIXth century social Darwinism, Le Corbusier argued that civilisations ineluctably advanced towards 'what is rightly called culture'. 'Culture is the flowering of the effort to select', he wrote. 'Selection means rejection, pruning, cleansing; the clear and naked emergence of the Essential'⁶⁰. The implication was that man-made objects obeyed the same laws as 'those elements in nature which excite our admiration' (man and organised beings): they evolved and became more purified as a result of a constant adaptation to functional needs⁶¹. Ozenfant and Jeanneret called this general tendency towards greater and greater economy of effort, towards perfection, '*sélection mécanique*' [mechanical selection]. As they saw it, it responded to a constant need of our minds to conceive order and of our senses to perceive harmony: 'The highest delectation of the human mind is the perception of order, and the greatest human satisfaction is the feeling of collaboration in that order'⁶².

In 'Eyes which do not see...', Le Corbusier insisted upon the importance of the First World War in making this universal need more acutely felt and forcing countries to industrialise efficiently:

The War was an insatiable 'client', never satisfied, always demanding better. The orders were to succeed at all costs and death followed a

⁵⁹ Le Corbusier, 'Des yeux qui ne voient pas...: 1. Les paquebots', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.8, May 1921, n.p. This article was followed by two others: '2. Les avions', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.9, June 1921, n.p., and '3. Les autos', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.10, July 1921, n.p.

⁶⁰ Le Corbusier, 'Des yeux qui ne voient pas...: 3. Les autos'.

⁶¹ Le Corbusier, 'Des yeux qui ne voient pas...: 1. Les paquebots'.

⁶² A. Ozenfant, Ch.-E. Jeanneret, 'Le Purisme', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.4, January 1921, p.386.

mistake remorselessly. We may then affirm that the aeroplane mobilised invention, intelligence and daring: *imagination* and *cold reason*⁶³.

Conditioned by economy, physical necessity and mathematical laws, the 'creations of mechanical technique' were models of rational work. Their lesson lay not so much in the forms they created as in the fact that they directly reflected the logic of their design and operation. In Le Corbusier's own words, they were 'solutions which spring from a problem that has been clearly stated - solutions needed in this age of mighty effort which has taken so gigantic a step forward'⁶⁴. He argued: 'If we forget for a moment that a steamship is a machine for transport, and look at it with a fresh eye, we shall feel that we are facing an important manifestation of temerity, of discipline, harmony, of a beauty that is calm, vital and strong'⁶⁵. Such qualities were by no means unique to extraordinary commodities like liners, planes and automobiles. Everyday utilitarian artefacts which 'associated themselves with the human organism and helped to complete it' revealed a similar order, e.g. containers (vases, glasses, bottles and plates)⁶⁶. So did all modern articles which included functional efficiency as an essential factor: "costumes, fountain pens, eversharp pencils, typewriters, telephone, office furniture, plate-glass, 'Innovation' trunks, safety razors, briar pipes and bowler hats", etc.⁶⁷.

It was Ozenfant and Jeanneret's belief that 'mechanical selection began with the earliest times and from these times provided objects whose general laws have endured; only the means of making them have changed, while the laws have endured'⁶⁸. This postulate in turn allowed them to see industrial products as classical. 'It is the same spirit that built the Parthenon', Le Corbusier stated⁶⁹. Included in this lineage were the pyramids, *Æschylus' Oedipus*, Racine's *Phædra*, the painting of Raphael, El Greco and of the French masters on view at the

⁶³ Le Corbusier, 'Des yeux qui ne voient pas...: 2: Les avions'.

⁶⁴ Le Corbusier, 'Des yeux qui ne voient pas...: 1. Les paquebots'.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Ozenfant, Jeanneret, 'Le Purisme', p.374.

⁶⁷ Le Corbusier, 'Des yeux qui ne voient pas...: 1. Les paquebots'.

⁶⁸ Ozenfant, Jeanneret, 'Le Purisme', p.374.

recently reopened Louvre: Poussin, Claude, Chardin, Ingres, Corot, Cézanne, Seurat and Signac⁷⁰. All these works, the two theorists argued, drew on a universal compositional factor. They relied upon some form of mathematical calculation, upon 'number' and proportion, i.e. upon the mathematical principle structuring our thoughts, our work and the work of nature. Therefore they were in harmony with the universal order. Illustrations were important in supporting this cultural discourse. For instance, in 'Eyes which do not see...' the section dealing with the evolution of the automobile opened with the image of a front brake of a Delage car (fig.3.8). Below it, a short explanatory text read:

This precision, this cleanliness in execution goes farther back than our reborn mechanical sense. Phidias felt in this way; the entablature of the Parthenon is a witness. So did the Egyptians when they polished the Pyramids. This at a time when Euclid and Pythagoras dictated to their contemporaries⁷¹.

The basic assertion here was that the Doric forms of ancient Greek architecture and the standardised components of early automobile design stemmed from a common creative process. The photographs in *And Yet the World Goes Round* - the railway snowplough, ocean liner and others - were clearly intended to be read in the same way, that is to say as a compelling reinforcement of the argument expounded in the text. In conjunction with the dynamic layout which highlighted critical passages by varying spacing, alternating capitals and lower case, they provided a running visual demonstration of the book's message. It is significant in this respect that two of the plates used by Erenburg - *Farman, Aeroplane 'Goliath'*

⁶⁹ Le Corbusier, 'Des yeux qui ne voient pas...: 1. Les paquebots'.

⁷⁰ Constantly invoked and celebrated by the writers of *L'Esprit Nouveau*, these key figures of the 'classical' tradition, which Purism (i.e. Ozenfant and Jeanneret) allegedly perpetuated, were analysed in depth in individual articles published in the magazine, including Vauvrecy, 'Vie de Domenico Theotocopuli El Greco', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.3, December 1920, pp.220-83; Bissière, 'Ingres', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.4, January 1921, pp.388-409; De Fayet, 'Nicolas Poussin', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.7, April 1921, pp.751-68; Bissière, 'Notes sur Corot', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.9, June 1921, pp.996-1009.

⁷¹ Le Corbusier, 'Des yeux qui ne voient pas...: 2. Les avions'.

and *Caproni Hydroplane (330PS)* (figs.3.9-10) - were first published in *L'Esprit Nouveau* with virtually interchangeable captions⁷².

Erenburg frequently referred to the French periodical, hailing it as the 'the best in Europe'⁷³. He specifically mentioned the 'eloquently entitled' series of articles 'Eyes which do not see...', the publication of which began the month he arrived in Paris and ended in July 1921, two months before the completion of *And Yet the World Goes Round*⁷⁴. As is evident from the examples chosen to demonstrate the power of the machine, his book was coloured by his readings in *L'Esprit Nouveau*. Le Corbusier's arguments had direct equivalents in Erenburg's text and were sometimes adopted *verbatim*. Such borrowings were by no means unique. The ideas propounded by *L'Esprit Nouveau* were widely diffused from 1921 onwards, due in no small part to its subscription policy and Jeanneret's efforts to establish contacts with artists and intellectuals outside France who professed similar views⁷⁵. Thus there was some interchange between *L'Esprit Nouveau* and magazines like *De Stijl*, *Mécano* and *MA*. These and other publications, including the Czech *Zivot*, *Devetsil* and *Stavba*, often published material from *L'Esprit Nouveau*, sometimes without mentioning the origin and in contexts that differed from the outlook defended by the Purists, i.e. as icons of modern technology *per se* rather than as standards to be emulated in the future. Such was the fate, for instance, of some of the photographs of American grain silos accompanying the article 'Trois rappels à MM. les architectes' [Three reminders to Mr. architects] in the inaugural issue of *L'Esprit Nouveau* (fig.3.11)⁷⁶. Originally provided by Henri-

⁷² Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, p.39 and p.41. The two photographs, which bore the mention 'Cliché Esprit Nouveau', appeared in Le Corbusier, 'Des yeux qui ne voient pas...: 2. Les avions' with the captions 'FARMAN Goliath, bombing machine' and 'Triple Hydroplane CAPRONI, 3.000 H.P., capable of carrying 100 passengers' respectively.

⁷³ Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, p.66

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.76. The book was dated 'Brussels, September 1921', *ibid.*, p.166.

⁷⁵ Gladys C. Fabre, 'L'Esprit Moderne dans la peinture figurative: De l'iconographie moderniste au modernisme de conception', in *Léger et l'Esprit Moderne: Une Alternative d'Avant-Garde à l'Esprit Moderne (1918-1931)* (Paris: Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris, 1982), pp.112-32.

⁷⁶ The text next to these photographs read: 'Thus we have the American grain silos and factories, the magnificent FIRST FRUITS of the new age. THE AMERICAN ENGINEERS OVERWHELM WITH THEIR CALCULATIONS OUR EXPIRING ARCHITECTURE', Le Corbusier-Saugnier, 'Trois rappels à MM. les architectes', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.1, October 1920, pp.90-95.

Pierre Roché, they were reprinted in *De Stijl* in April and June 1921, and in *MA* in 1923⁷⁷. Together with other plates from 'Eyes which do not see...', they were included in Lajos Kássak and László Moholy-Nagy's anthology of September 1922, *Buch neuer Künstler* [Book of New Artists] (fig.3.12)⁷⁸.

Personal ties were formed with Erenburg too. One month after his departure for Berlin, an overview of contemporary Russian theatre appeared in *L'Esprit Nouveau* in which he examined the radical innovations of Meierkhol'd and Tairov, and described, in terms similar to those of *And Yet the World Goes Round*, the change in audience engendered by the Revolution and the ensuing artistic renewal on the stage, in street art and circus⁷⁹. Ozenfant and Jeanneret printed no further contribution by Erenburg. Of interest, however, is the photograph of Tatlin's *Project for a Monument to the Third International* they reproduced in January 1922 (fig.3.13). The photograph, annotated 'thanks to a document provided by Erenburg', concretely demonstrates the novelist's crucial function in bringing Russian avant-garde art to the attention of the West⁸⁰. Erenburg later stated in his memoirs that when he left Moscow in 1921, he carried a suitcase containing copies of *Unovis Almanac*, *Art of the Commune* and *Khudozhestvennaya zhizn'* [Artistic Life], as well as books by Mayakovskii, Yesenin and Pasternak⁸¹. In *And Yet the World Goes Round* he recounted that, while in Belgium, he had shown photographs of works by the 'new Russian masters' to 'French, Belgian, American, German and Latvian progressive artists', whose reception had been very enthusiastic⁸². He claimed that part of the documentation he had brought with him, including photographs of scenic productions at the Kamernyi Theatre, was later circulated in the avant-garde circles of Europe⁸³. Lyubov Kozintseva confirmed

⁷⁷ *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.IV, no.4, April 1921, col.63 and vol.IV, no.6, June 1921, col.91; *MA*, Vienna, vol.VIII, no.5/6, 15 March 1923, n.p.

⁷⁸ Ludwig Kássak, László Moholy-Nagy, *Buch neuer Künstler* (Vienna: MA, 1922).

⁷⁹ Elie Ehrenbourg, 'Le théâtre russe pendant la Révolution', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.13, December 1921, n.p.

⁸⁰ *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.14, January 1922, pp.1683.

⁸¹ Erenburg, *Men, Years-Life*, vol.II, p.181.

⁸² Ehrenbourg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, p.47. See also p.62.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.134.

this when she stated in her abovementioned letter to Rodchenko that some of the photographs he had given her had been communicated to 'Hungarians' who had taken them for a book, presumably Kassák and Moholy-Nagy's *Book of New Artists*, and 'given one or two away to America, and two others to Germany'⁸⁴.

3.4. Constructivist posturing?

Although never a close associate of *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Erenburg was evidently regarded as an ally by Ozenfant and Jeanneret. Under the rubric 'Les idées d'Esprit Nouveau dans les livres et la presse' [Ideas of the new spirit in books and newspapers], a notice announced the forthcoming appearance of *And Yet the World Goes Round*, together with the reproduction of grain silos in *De Stijl*:

The poet Il'ya Erenburg will publish a book [...] which will be illustrated by examples taken from the products of industry and from contemporary architecture [...] *We commend these various symptoms which testify to the utility of our campaigns*⁸⁵.

Erenburg indeed believed in the advent of a new spirit that demanded order, organisation and impersonality. Like the French theorists, he was convinced that the functionality, economy, mathematical principles and construction inherent in industrial and mechanical design brought about a new aesthetic that was the expression of perennial laws and therefore was to be held up as an example for instituting new standards in daily life. 'Artist-constructors make objects (pictures, statues, poems, etc.)', he wrote. 'They regard objects made by technical constructors (machines, bridges, steamships) as not only closely related, but also as something that they can look ahead to on their way to the new style'⁸⁶.

⁸⁴ Kozintzéva, 'Lettre à Alexandre Rodtchenko', p.203.

⁸⁵ E.N., 'Les idées d'Esprit Nouveau dans les livres et la presse', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.11/12, November 1921, n.p.

⁸⁶ Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, pp.104-105.

However, in defining artistic practice as the material creation of objects, Erenburg referred not so much to Le Corbusier's aesthetic appropriation of machine technology, as put forward in 'Eyes which do not see...', but rather to ideas introduced by early theorists of 'production art' such as Osip Brik and Nikolai Punin to redefine the role and function of artists after the October Revolution. The latter declared in the debate 'Temple or Factory', organised by IZO Narkompros at the Palace of Arts in Petrograd on 24 November 1918:

A new era in art will begin [...] It is not a matter of decoration but of creating new artistic objects. Art for the proletariat is not a sacred temple for lazy contemplation, but work, a factory which produces artistic objects for all⁸⁷.

Brik subsequently elaborated: 'Not ideas but a real object is the aim of true creativity'⁸⁸. Perusing Erenburg's book, one finds similar propositions. Thus the slogan 'ART IS THE CREATION OF OBJECTS', which ended the final chapter, related *And Yet the World Goes Round* to the emergence of Russian Constructivism⁸⁹. Because of the implications for Erenburg's concept of the object, it is interesting to note the anecdote he used to illustrate this point. Quoting a conversation between the French painter Albert Gleizes and a workman who was installing radiators, Erenburg wrote: "'Which of the exhibits do you like best?', asked Gleizes. The fitter pointed to sculptures by [Jacques] Lipchitz: 'Those over there. Those are well executed. These are objects'. Now you [...] may laugh at the fitter's opinion", Erenburg commented, "we need no higher praise"⁹⁰.

By the time Erenburg left Moscow, the notion of the artist's practical participation in the production process and the definition of his activity as the shaping of useful objects had gained broad acceptance within INKhUK. Having

⁸⁷ Cited in Christina Lodder, 'Art of the Commune: Politics and art in Soviet journals, 1917-20', *Art Journal*, vol.52, spring 1993, pp.24-32.

⁸⁸ Osip Brik, 'Drenazh iskusstvu' [A drain for art], *Iskusstvo kommuny*, Petrograd, no.1, 7 December 1918, p.1; translated in Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p.76.

⁸⁹ Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, p.165.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

resolved to 'make the transition from experimental activity divorced from life, to experimentation that has a base in reality', the Constructivists had renounced artistic experimentation⁹¹. In pursuit of an ideologically and socially significant practice, they had committed themselves to designing everyday items for industrial manufacture that would help to shape a specifically socialist way of life. By comparison, a certain disjointedness manifested itself in Erenburg's discourse. As has been noted, *And Yet the World Goes Round* vehemently denounced the elitist nature of both fine and applied art. More specifically, Erenburg urged the demystification of creative work and its integration into industry. In embracing such ideals, he insisted that their triumph would mean the annihilation and total disappearance of art. Yet he retreated somewhat from this uncompromising position in the closing lines of the book, where he concluded, rather paradoxically, that 'THE VICTORY OF PRODUCTION IDEOLOGY IS THE VICTORY OF ART'⁹².

Unlike the INKhUK Constructivists, who pronounced 'the legacy of the artistic value of the past [...] of no value', Erenburg could not eradicate a persistent attachment to art *per se*, be it past or present⁹³. The past remained invaluable as a monument to the distant time as well as a living experience for every new generation⁹⁴. So he spoke, in characteristically metaphorical terms, of the need to perform a 'supreme act of HARA-KIRI', the function of which was to reclaim a perception that had been clouded by tradition and convention, i.e. to allow intellectual and spiritual regeneration⁹⁵. Once again, Erenburg called upon his personal experience:

⁹¹ 'Programme of the First Working Group of Constructivists'; translated in *Art into Life*, p.67.

⁹² Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, p.165.

⁹³ 'Programme of the First Working Group of Constructivists', p.67.

⁹⁴ Viktor Shklovskii noted in 1923: 'I used to be angry with Erenburg because, in transforming himself from a Jewish Catholic or Slavophile into a European Constructivist, he failed to forget the past' Viktor Shklovsky, *Zoo or Letters Not about Love* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1971), p.92.

⁹⁵ Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, p.105.

I lived many years in Paris without perceiving the greatness that surrounded me. I knew every one of the churches devoted to Notre-Dame but scarcely spared a glance for the Eiffel Tower [...] Three times I travelled all over Italy, and explored the tabernacles of all its churches, yet never once saw the iron works of Piedmont and Lombardy [...] Then came the war. Rising from the first spilling of blood, justice called beauty to account. My eyes were not opened all at once. For five years I vacillated [...] Then, early in 1920, I began to see the light [...] I KILLED MYSELF in order to live. I rebelled [...] in order to struggle for organisation, rationality, justice and clarity⁹⁶

To grasp fully Erenburg's theoretical position, one must refer to his exposition of the task of the 'artist-constructors'. Having identified objects as the substance of creation, he stressed in the telegraphic language *And Yet the World Goes Round* championed:

Their short-term goal (MINIMUM PROGRAMME): to find the point where art and production intersect. To combine the FUNCTIONALISM and UTILITARIANISM of technology. Their long-term goal (MAXIMUM PROGRAMME): [...] To absorb individual art into general life. To turn all artists into constructors of beautiful objects. To transform life into an organised PROCESS OF CREATION and thus DESTROY ART⁹⁷.

This passage suggested that the border between aesthetic functionalism and real utilitarianism, namely the harnessing of creative energy to concrete problems for the collective benefit of society, was not clearly fixed in Erenburg's mind. On the one hand, the perfect adaptation of one object's form and material to the particular function it is pre-determined to fulfil formed an essential parameter, since it established the link with the methods and processes of industrial production and

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.159-60.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.105.

hence with society. On the other, despite the avowed abandonment of traditional criteria in favour of objective and rational ones, the idea of functionalism remained inextricably tied to aesthetic values: 'The beautiful is created by men who thought of usefulness, economic viability and proportion'⁹⁸. In words like those of Le Corbusier, Ehrenburg observed with reference to the aeroplane:

The task: to build a machine to fly. Perfect precision of calculations. Economy of material. Functionality of every individual part. Thought-out proportions. Careful execution. The result: a *truly beautiful object*⁹⁹.

Like the editors of *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Ehrenburg valued the implementation of a functional approach in art more than the adoption of practical purposes to meet the utilitarian demand, which he regarded as a lower priority. To him, functionality preceded utility in that it represented an answer to the basic needs of modern man. An object perfectly suited to its function would in due course be useful and efficient within the broader organism of society and within cultural production. Just as Lissitzky argued about the *Proun* in 1921, so Ehrenburg wrote: "Practical application comes later (fire was first 'discovered', and then used); utilitarianism comes after functionalism"¹⁰⁰. Underlying this perspective was the conviction of the ultimate importance of the creative act itself. That is, the 'energy' for the building of a new culture lay in the conception of new forms, "no matter whether 'functional' or utilitarian":

Temporarily, the constructor must construct new forms without thinking about immediate purposes. This is the theory and praxis of Lissitzky and his 'PROUN', and such are the constructions of Rodchenko and the experiments of the young Moscow artists of the OBMOKhU group [...] Today - we blow away the dust, throw away the junk, construct forms, TURN ART INTO LIFE. Tomorrow - we'll lead the

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.82.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.86, the italics are mine. Le Corbusier, 'Des yeux qui ne voient pas...: 2: Les avions'.

¹⁰⁰ Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich noch*, pp.109-10.

creative form through all our days and labours - MAKE ART OUT OF LIFE'¹⁰¹.

It is therefore not surprising that to the slogan 'ART IS THE CREATION OF OBJECTS' was appended a the note in lower case and brackets 'not necessarily utilitarian but always necessary'¹⁰². The obvious implication was that the category 'object', derived from the Constructivist ideal of production art, was not restricted to manufactured products determined exclusively by their practical exploitation in society, but also included items that were not directly subject to external requirements and did not contain the idea of an immediate application or utilisation, e.g. Lipchitz's sculpture. This line of reasoning was consonant with the view propounded in *L'Esprit Nouveau* that 'a constructive spirit is as necessary to create a picture or a poem as to build a bridge'¹⁰³. Reluctant to discount aesthetic considerations completely, Erenburg demanded that art be reassessed to express the spirit of the time and respond to the imperative for construction, but, although this affected the process of creation, it was neither to limit the range of products to which it could be applied, nor to imply a radical closure on the possibilities for artistic practice.

Hence, while *And Yet the World Goes Round* used a terminology that placed it within a conceptual framework suggestive of Productivist theory, the operative strategies posited by Erenburg to put this ideology into action diverged substantively from those adopted at INKhUK in the spring of 1921. Despite the ground shared, Erenburg's views were in practice at odds with the Constructivists' exclusive commitment to utilitarian work. His ideal of an art fused into life, at the core of which lay the relatively unspecified concept of the 'object', essentially postulated an art that was intellectually practical but remained disengaged from strict social, let alone utilitarian ends. As a result, the platform of *And Yet the World Goes Round* appeared fully compatible with that of influential members of

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, pp.110-13.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p.165.

¹⁰³ 'Programme de L'Esprit Nouveau', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.1, October 1920, n.p.

the European avant-garde, such as the leaders of *L'Esprit Nouveau* and *De Stijl*, who worked in radically differing contexts, yet believed in the emergence of a new spirit and proposed a new relationship between art, technology and social transformation. Transcending political differences, this strategic manoeuvring in turn reinforced Erenburg's assertion that there existed a unified avant-garde will which rendered possible and desirable the conflation of geographically removed progressive forces into a single working community.

It is difficult to ignore the inconsistencies which undermined this argument. Erenburg's irresoluteness about the fate of art and the vagueness of his terminology often entailed difficulties of interpretation, as demonstrated by his exposition of the precepts of Russian Constructivism. This ambivalence was arguably not apparent to a Western reader unaware of the unique character of the Russian context. However, it did not pass unnoticed by knowledgeable reviewers. For instance, Ivan Puni, a former contributor to *Art of the Commune*, deplored the confusion of Erenburg's thought in *Novaya russkaya kniga* [The new Russian book]. Blaming it on an ignorance of artistic matters, he concluded that the novelist could not be taken seriously¹⁰⁴. In a similar vein, Jean Epstein noted in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, albeit in a generally positive commentary, that Erenburg's attempt to be as up-to-date as possible with rapidly changing European life and to probe beyond the narrow confines of classical art genres gave rise to a certain amount of disorderly discussion:

Mr. Erenburg has collected into a massive dose all the newest articles of the last intellectual seasons: one finds there the snowplough locomotive, dada, skyscrapers, Charlot, the critique of the Treaty of Versailles, Farman and Van Dongen, Picasso and Caproni, ocean liners and theatre, bridges and film-making, the International and dockyards. Assuredly, this bird's eye-view of the current world is neither very

¹⁰⁴ Ivan Puni, 'A vse-taki ona vertitsya', *Novaya russkaya kniga*, no.2, 1922; quoted in Ewa Bérard, *La Vie Tumultueuse d'Ilya Ehrenbourg: Juif, Russe et Soviétique* (Paris: Ramsay, 1991), p.107.

thought-out nor well-ordered. So what! Il'ya Erenburg has so much to say¹⁰⁵.

Aleksei Gan, a cofounder of the First Working Group of Constructivists, elaborated this criticism in his theoretical treatise *Konstruktivizm* [Constructivism], published in late 1922. Quoting at length from *And Yet the World Goes Round*, he condemned Erenburg for not adequately representing the historical determinants of Russian Constructivism and lumping together artistic manifestations as distinct as Tairov's theatre, Charlie Chaplin's films, Meierkh'old's productions, the circus, Fernand Léger's paintings and others. Gan argued:

Constructivism [...] develops from living conditions which arise from the conditions of productive forces. And depending on the condition of the productive forces, i.e. depending on the different social forms, it adopts different inclinations [...] Our Constructivism is aggressive and uncompromising: it wages a severe battle with parasites, with left and right painters, in a word with all, who even slightly defend the speculative aesthetic activity of art¹⁰⁶.

At stake in this critique were the political choices of the Russian movement. This particular issue and the vaster question of how art was to accommodate the ideology that had emerged from the momentous events of 1917 were evidently problematic for Erenburg, whose orientation is often seen to change, reflecting a mixture of hope and apprehension concerning the forces influencing the future of Russia.

¹⁰⁵ Jean Epstein, 'Les livres', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.16, May 1922, pp.1924-25.

¹⁰⁶ Aleksei Gan, *Konstruktivizm* (Tver': 1922), translated in Gérard Conio, *Le Constructivisme Russe. Tome I: Le Constructivisme Russe dans les Arts Plastiques: Textes Théoriques, Manifestes, Documents* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1987), pp.443-44.

3.5. 'il'ya erenburg, constructor (specialised in turnings),¹⁰⁷

Drawn to politics while still in high school, Erenburg joined the Bolshevik underground in 1906. A couple of years later, after being arrested and detained in various Tsarist prisons for five months, he fled Russia and travelled to Paris, where he immediately resumed his revolutionary activities. Erenburg, however, soon tired of the endless arguments over Marxist doctrine which absorbed the narrow circles of the Russian emigration. Within a year, he produced a magazine in which he ridiculed Lenin and other activists, and withdrew from politics altogether¹⁰⁸. In June 1917, excited at the prospect of witnessing Russia's transformed situation and no longer restrained by political obstacles, Erenburg returned home. In 1921, almost a full year before other writers and intellectuals were permitted to travel, he was ready to leave again. Erenburg was not prepared for the violence unleashed by the Tsar's abdication and breakdown of political authority, let alone for the merciless struggles of the Revolution and ensuing Civil War. His collection of verse *A Prayer for Russia* (1918) shows that he was very confused by the turmoil he witnessed upon reaching Petrograd in July 1917. Therefore, it is perhaps important to note that while *And Yet the World Goes Round* portrayed these events as a positive rupture in historical continuity that had provided Russia with an arena for experiment impossible in war-weary Europe, Erenburg's early poetic response to the Revolution conveyed a substantially different picture. Until 1920 he repeatedly denounced the Bolsheviks, showing clear signs of utter contempt for all they stood for and even briefly supporting the Menshevik opposition.

Like many representatives of the Russian avant-garde, including the Constructivists, Erenburg strongly disapproved of the attitude of the new regime towards art. With reference to Marx, he wrote that the traditions of past generations weighed most heavily on those who were occupied with the most

¹⁰⁷ Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, p.157.

¹⁰⁸ *Byvshie Lyudi* [Yesterday's people], quoted in Joshua Rubenstein, *Tangled Loyalties: The Life and Times of Ilya Ehrenburg* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996), p.27.

fundamental changes¹⁰⁹. Politicians had always been people of conservative aesthetic tastes, whether 'Bolsheviks, Mensheviks, Social Revolutionaries or Anarchists'¹¹⁰. The recent upheaval had in no way altered this, as evinced by the plaster statues erected within the context of the Monumental Plan for Propaganda and the old-fashioned lyre depicted on the first official Soviet postal stamp, for which the designs submitted by Natan Altman's had been deemed 'too leftist'¹¹¹. The outcome, Erenburg argued, was 'hardly a comforting one':

In Russia:

- The revolutionaries in art are nothing in revolution (0, nought)
- The revolutionaries in society are reactionary in art (-, minus)¹¹².

This discrepancy between political and aesthetic radicalism, along with the shortages and technical insufficiencies of most sectors of industry, Erenburg saw not as only hindering cultural development, but effectively 'preparing a restoration of the Academy'¹¹³. According to him, the situation was better outside Russia: 'Without retreating into any sect, one can say with certainty that in the West the new art is closely linked to the construction of a new society, be it SOCIALIST, COMMUNIST OR SYNDICALIST'¹¹⁴.

To Erenburg, the fact that modernist trends were discouraged by the political vanguard was but an outward reflection of the spiritual lethargy and 'apathetic Russian conservatism' of the Communist party¹¹⁵. It demonstrated the revolutionaries' inaptitude for dealing with artistic matters:

Students at the Moscow School of Painting are taught 'the ABC of politics', but, alas, nobody has thought so far about organising a course in 'the ABC of art' for members of the Council of People's Commissars.

¹⁰⁹ Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, p.26.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.55.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.26.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p.58.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.60.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.64.

And, if you like, this is more necessary. Having completed their course, painters continue to paint pictures and do not compose decrees. But a member of the Council for People's Commissars, without having attended a course, decrees a struggle 'against the intrigues of the Futurists!'¹¹⁶.

This cynicism pervaded the whole book. Yet to restrict its object to Soviet realities alone is to neglect Erenburg's repeated attacks on the West. It is also to ignore the fact that in both cases criticism occasionally gave way to praise. The issue is in fact of a different order. What surfaces in *And Yet the World Goes Round*, as much as Erenburg's alienation from and refusal to be reconciled with the Bolsheviki, is a general disenchantment with and distrust of politics.

Erenburg repeatedly insisted that the value of art resided in its relationship to the community and demanded of the artist that he actively influence the restructuring of society. Yet the progressive practice *And Yet the World Goes Round* promoted was expressly dissociated from the specific context of revolutionary politics. "The new art has accepted the (fairly naïve) political label 'leftist' [...] Of course that does not mean that painters or poets are becoming 'politicians'. Love of work and respect for their craft prevent them from such dilettantism". Erenburg refused to make art accountable to a particular political programme, though he conceded that, being determined by a social impulse, the new art was definitely not 'apolitical'. He asserted in an attempt to eliminate contradiction:

The communism of a Vildrac or a Mayakovskii, Duhamel's socialism, Rivera's and Rodchenko's anarchism are not a profession but the umbilical cord which links the study of the individual to the street. The boys do their own things; they draw, they write, they build, they play.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.57-58.

They know that politics is also a craft - like architecture or play-writing - that temporarily still needs its own specialists¹¹⁷.

Convinced that the post-war era was an historical turning point heralding the breakdown of old values, Erenburg recognised the need for social revolution and a new artistic paradigm. In his view, the impetus for such changes could only come from revolutionary Russia. The entire edifice of Western culture and civilisation was weak and suffering a devastating collapse. Erenburg shared this sentiment with a large proportion of the Russian emigration, who, inspired by Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West*, believed in the cultural mission of the East to revive the West¹¹⁸. Nevertheless, Erenburg was sceptical of the Revolution achieving its professed aims. He recognised it had produced a social shift, yet denounced the train of destruction it had left in its wake. In particular, *And Yet the World Goes Round* drew attention to the fact that the new Soviet regime was intolerant and incapable of creating a new culture. On the question of whether art or politics, was to be most influential in such a task, the book unmistakably asserted the primacy of art.

As Erenburg commented on the veneration with which Russia's revolution was regarded abroad, he ascribed it to an attitude of rejection rather than approval. In other words, it was the radical break with institutionalised standards that Western intellectuals saluted in the Russian upheaval, not the internal goal informing it, i.e. the reorganisation of life on communist principles. This line of reasoning might easily be applied to *And Yet the World Goes Round*. The Moscow Constructivists' nihilistic attitude to art and political aspirations remained entirely foreign to Erenburg. His emphatic rallying to the movement's theoretical framework was primarily motivated by a reaction 'against' the old order of things, to which

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.54.

¹¹⁸ Erenburg noted in his memoirs about his arrival in Berlin in November 1921: 'Everybody talked about Stinnes and Spengler [...] Few read Spengler's books but all knew the title of one of his works - *The Decline of the West* (in Russian this was translated as *The Decline of Europe*) in which he lamented on the passing of a culture he cherished', Ilya Erenburg, *Men, Years - Life. Truce: 1921-33* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1963), vol.III, p.14.

Constructivism offered both a challenge and unprecedented alternative¹¹⁹. It is therefore not surprising that he recanted the arguments developed in *And Yet the World Goes Round* in his later memoirs:

I soon became an adherent of what was then known as Constructivism; but I must confess that the idea of art being dissolved into life both inspired and repelled me [...] The simple truth is that I was not entirely convinced of the death of the arts which was being proclaimed by my people, including myself [...] The use of art for utilitarian purposes, its decorative application, cannot be the artist's aim but only a natural by-product of his creative efforts. The reverse process is a sign of creative impoverishment¹²⁰.

* * *

As is evident from Erenburg's contributions to *L'Amour de l'Art* and *L'Esprit Nouveau*, the diffusion of his ideas was not restricted to *And Yet the World Goes Round*. Between November 1921 and the end of 1923, when the effervescence caused by the presence of the Russian émigré colony in Berlin was at its peak, Erenburg assumed a prominent role in the cultural life of that city. He tried, as long as he could, to act as a bridge between Western Europe and the new Soviet state. He published extensively on Soviet artistic life and Russian poetry, and frequently took part in discussions, including debates at the House of Arts where he delivered several papers, for instance on the new Russian art on 30 December 1921¹²¹.

¹¹⁹ Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, p.64.

¹²⁰ Erenburg, *Men, Years - Life*, vol.II, pp.57-59.

¹²¹ Thomas R. Beyer Jr, 'The House of Arts and the Writers' Club. Berlin 1921-1923', in Thomas R. Beyer Jr., Gottfried Kratz, Xenia Werner, *Russische Autoren und Verlag in Berlin nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin: A. Spitz, 1987), pp.35-38.

Erenburg's brief allegiance to Constructivism thus had important consequences, because his views permeated the dialogue between Russian and Western European avant-gardes at its most basic level. The ideas expounded in *And Yet the World Goes Round* were deeply imbued with his own concerns. Adopting concepts under discussion in Constructivist circles prior to his departure from Moscow, notably the notion of the object, Erenburg presented them as part of a theory that set aside the ideological bases of the Russian movement but preserved, often at the cost of theoretical contradiction, his attachment to art and unrelenting belief in the precedence of aesthetic over political matters.

Consistent with the necessity to adapt to the social climate of post-war Europe which confronted Erenburg upon his return to the West, this critical readjustment enabled him to draw a large group of creative practices into his discourse about Constructivism. At the same time, it left the term Constructivism open to appropriation by a wide array of individuals in Germany as an aesthetic which expressed the 'spirit' of contemporary industrial culture, transcended national barriers and signified, in a general way, a change in social form. In so doing, it not only anticipated the theoretical position put forward a few months later in *Veshch'*, but contributed directly to a more widespread use of the term by radical artists in the West to crystallise their shared aspiration for a new world order.

Chapter 4: *Veshch'*/Gegenstand/Objet

Early in 1922 Il'va Erenburg and El Lissitzky joined forces in Berlin to publish the trilingual art journal *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet* [Object]. It folded the same year after the second issue. Despite its extremely brief existence, *Veshch'* had enormous repercussions. It rapidly acquired a solid reputation both in the country of its publication and abroad, and continued to be a source of inspiration for all avant-garde publishing activity years after its demise. This fame has since led it to be regarded as the 'prototypical' art periodical of the 1920s¹.

Conceived as an open platform for the avant-garde, *Veshch'* acted as a diffuser of information on contemporary cultural tendencies. For a few months, it was the site of convergence of an intense traffic of ideas between Soviet Russia and the rest of Europe. For this reason, it is now common practice to link its appearance with a renewed exchange and cross-fertilisation of theoretical positions. More specifically, *Veshch'* is often credited with the spread of post-revolutionary Russian artistic ideas and Constructivist values into Western circles.

The terms of this interaction, however, have remained partly hidden. Doubtless the basic motivation behind Erenburg and Lissitzky's undertaking was to be a cultural mediator and to create a forum for serious debate on current intellectual and artistic issues. Yet *Veshch'* not merely acted as an organ of theoretical clarification of the ideas it expounded, but also constituted an unparalleled opportunity of self-definition and promotion on the European scene for its editors. It is therefore worth reviewing its contents and considering the nature of the

¹ Jörg Stürzebecher, 'ABC between review and trade journal: vanguard, contemporaries (1924-1928), and followers', in *ABC Beiträge zum Bauen 1924-1928. Reprint Kommentar/Commentary* (Baden: Lars Müller Verlag, 1993), p.39.

message it delivered in relation to the goals Erenburg and Lissitzky set for themselves.

* * *

4.1. An alternative

Veshch' was not a glossy journal, but it included black and white photographic reproductions and carried advertisements for several Berlin-based Russian bookstores and publishing houses. Its two issues contained an average of thirty pages and each embraced a wide variety of subjects under the general headings 'Art and Journalism', 'Literature', 'Painting', 'Sculpture', 'Architecture', 'Theatre and Circus', and 'Cinematography and Music'. The aims of the editors in creating the journal were made explicit in the subtitle: '*Veshch'. An International Survey of Contemporary Art*'. It set itself two tasks: to acquaint those engaged in creative work in Russia with the latest trends in Western art, and to inform Western Europe about Russian art and literature. In keeping with these intentions, part of the contents appeared in French and German, and it had an impressive list of forty-five collaborators².

Among the prominent avant-garde figures from both East and West encountered in *Veshch'* were Le Corbusier, Theo van Doesburg, Viking Eggeling, Fernand Léger, Vladimir Mayakovskii, Kazimir Malevich, Amédée Ozenfant, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin and Gino Severini. Not all these artists actually contributed to the journal. Considerable space was devoted to their views. Yet, overall, *Veshch'* remained essentially the vehicle of its two editors: Il'ya Erenburg and El Lissitzky. Both had been in Berlin only a few months when the first issue

was published: unable to live in France, Erenburg had arrived in November 1921, a few weeks before Lissitzky. Two unused drafts for the cover give February 1922 as the intended date of publication (figs.4.1-2), so their collaboration on *Veshch'* had begun very quickly after their arrival. The first double issue, no.1/2 of March/April 1922, was rapidly followed by no.3 in May. At least two more numbers were planned. The first of these, no.4, was to be devoted to artistic developments in Russia and Erenburg wrote to Vladimir Mayakovskii in June 1922, imploring him to help arrange material, 'poems, articles, new items'³. It was announced in the journal along with no.5, dedicated to art in America⁴.

Veshch''s second instalment was sadly its last. The journal came to an end because of a dispute between the editors and publishers. Named after the circle formed in Russia around R.V. Ivanov-Razumnik in 1917, the Scythian Press was one of forty émigré publishing houses supplying the enormous demand of the large Russian colony. Around it were gathered a loose coalition of extreme left-wing Slavophiles who saw the Revolution as the beginning of a messianic order but did not support the Bolsheviks. In Berlin the Scythian Press was mostly devoted to translating Russian Symbolists into German and disseminating the theories of the Social Revolutionaries. According to Erenburg and Lissitzky, it had offered to undertake the publication of *Veshch'* and had agreed not to meddle in editorial policy⁵. This 'marriage of convenience' did not last⁶. The internationalist ideas preached in *Veshch'* were 'alien' to the 'revolutionary Slavophiles' and, after the first issue, they publicly disassociated themselves from the journal⁷.

² *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922, inside cover. The list was omitted in the subsequent issue.

³ Ilya Erenburg, 'Letter to Mayakovskii, 3 June 1922'; cited in Joshua Rubenstein, *Tangled Loyalties: The Life and Times of Ilya Ehrenburg* (London and New York: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 1996), p.89.

⁴ *Veshch'*, Berlin, no.3, May 1922, p.22.

⁵ A statement declaring that the Scythian Press' editorial board was not involved in the compilation of *Veshch'* appeared in no.1/2, p.28, and no.3, p.22.

⁶ 'Krestiny *Veshchi*' [The baptism of *Veshch'*], *Veshch'*, Berlin, no.3, May 1922, p.21.

⁷ Ilya Ehrenburg, *Men, Years - Life. Truce: 1921-33* (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1963), vol.III, p.23.

The ideological antagonism emerged at the House of Arts, where *Veshch'* was introduced on 28 April 1922⁸. As a major meeting place of Russian writers and artists, the House of Arts attracted figures of widely divergent political and aesthetic views. Its meetings were often the scene of animated debates. Such was the discussion occasioned by the appearance of *Veshch'*. Following a review of the journal read aloud by one of the leading managers of the Scythian Press, Aleksandr Shreder, *Veshch'* was vigorously criticised by the audience. In particular, Andrei Belyi accused the editors of seeing only machines and called them 'faces of the Antichrist', though he finally admitted that he had never read nor even seen their publication⁹. The polemic later found expression in the journal and eventually led to its demise. The editors quoted a letter by Shreder in which he conceded that he had consented to publish *Veshch'* only because he thought this was the best way of fighting an ideology that was foreign to him. Erenburg and Lissitzky laconically thanked him for his 'publishing expertise' and commented: 'Incidentally: even if the Hottentots had wished to publish *Veshch'*, instead of the Scythian Press, [we] would not have declined'¹⁰.

Erenburg and Lissitzky launched their journal at a time of significant historical change. With the signing of the Treaty of Rapallo in April 1922, the political isolation of Bolshevik Russia came to an end. Communication with Germany was re-established and a policy of exchanges began that was to make this country the 'chief foreign outlet for the new Soviet art, literature and films'¹¹. Although there is no evidence of direct government involvement, *Veshch'* symbolised this *rapprochement*. It reflected a general effort on the part of Russia to create pro-Soviet sentiment among Europe's vanguard and thus extend Soviet representation abroad. To be more exact, Erenburg and Lissitzky's enterprise followed upon the contacts initiated in 1918 by IZO's International Bureau to unite radical artists

⁸ Thomas R. Beyer, 'The House of Arts and the Writers' Club, Berlin 1921-1923', in Thomas R. Beyer, Gottfried Kratz, Xenia Werner, *Russische Autoren und Verlage in Berlin nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin: A. Spitz, 1987), p.23.

⁹ The incident was reported in *Nakanune*, Berlin, no.29, 30 April 1922, p.5.

¹⁰ 'The baptism of *Veshch'*', p.21.

¹¹ John Willet, *The Weimar Years: A Culture Cutshort* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1984), p.40.

internationally in the creation of a universal culture. Lissitzky wrote to Rodchenko in March 1922: 'We have finally realised an idea that had already emerged a long time ago in Russia - the publication of an international magazine of modern art. Around it are gathered all those who want to establish or foster new values'¹². As such, *Veshch'* indeed had at least one precedent: the journal *Art International*, mentioned in Chapter 1, which the International Bureau had proposed to publish in seven languages in early 1919 to inform the West about post-revolutionary developments in art and literature¹³.

The first issue of *Veshch'* opened with the programmatic article 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end'. Printed in German, French and Russian, it bore the unmistakable stamp of Erenburg's style and aesthetic theory, as expounded in *And Yet the World Goes Round*. The editorial made it clear that the journal was concerned to answer a need for international artistic collaboration:

The appearance of *Veshch'* is another sign that the exchange of practical knowledge, realisations, and 'objects' between young Russian and West European artists has begun [...] Art is today INTERNATIONAL, though retaining all its local symptoms and particularities. The founders of the new artistic community are strengthening ties between Russia, in the aftermath of the mighty Revolution, and the West, in its wretched post-war Black Monday frame of mind; in so doing they are bypassing all artistic distinctions whether psychological, economic or racial. *Veshch'* is the meeting point of two adjacent lines of communication¹⁴.

Veshch' expressed a philosophy of idealistic optimism. It declared itself part of an avant-garde which believed in the 'maturing of humanity' and applied itself to

¹² El Lissitzky, 'Lettre à Alexandre Rodtchenko, 3 Mars 1922', in *Alexandre Rodtchenko. Ecrits Complètes sur l'Art, l'Architecture et la Révolution* (Paris: Philippe Sers, 1988), p.202.

¹³ A three to four pages publication with a 5000 run, *Art International* was to appear in Russian, English, French, German, Spanish, Chinese and Japanese; see Larissa A. Zhadova, *Malevich: Art and Revolution in Russia 1910-1930* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), n.56, p.124.

¹⁴ 'Blockada Rossii konchaetsya' [The blockade of Russia is coming to an end], *Veshch'*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922, p.1; translated in Stephen Bann (ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), pp.54-55.

the 'process of constructing new forms of existence and communal work'¹⁵. More specifically, Erenburg and Lissitzky presented their common endeavour as a viable and independent alternative to earlier Western European and Russian artistic trends. Dogmatic criticism and nihilistic attitudes, such as the Russian Futurists' famous appeal to throw the past masters of literature 'overboard from the steamer of the present time', were dismissed for being unsuited to the demands of the new era¹⁶. The editors affirmed: "The negative tactics of the 'dadaists', who are as the first futurists of the post-war period as two peas in a pod, appear anachronistic to us. Now is the time to build on a ground that has been cleared. What is dead will pass away without our help; land that is lying fallow does not require a programme or a school, it needs work"¹⁷.

Relying precisely on the '*tabula rasa*' which had resulted from the negation of tradition effected by Futurism and Dada in the past decade and from the radical questioning of artistic conventions which had accompanied it, *Veshch'* commended a new approach to the arts, detached from the past and at the same time deeply rooted in it¹⁸: '*Veshch'* does not condemn the past in the past. It appeals for the making of the present in the present'¹⁹. In accordance with the evolutionary interpretation of history posited by the editors, *Veshch'* asserted: "It is as laughable as it is naïve to talk nowadays of 'wanting to throw Pushkin overboard'. In the flux of forms binding laws do exist, and the classical models of the past need cause no alarm to the artists of the New Age. What we can learn from Pushkin and from Poussin is not how to animate forms that are ossified but the eternal laws of CLARITY, ECONOMY and PROPORTION". Together these

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.55.

¹⁶ 'We alone are the image of our Time. The horn of the time blows on us in the art of words / The past is narrow. The Academy and Pushkin - less intelligible than hieroglyphs / Pushkin, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, etc., etc., must be thrown overboard from the steamer of the Present Time', David Burlyuk, Aleksei Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovskii, Velimir Khlebnikov, *Slap to the Public's Taste* (Moscow: December 1912); cited in Wiktor Woroszyński, *The Life of Mayakovsky* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1972), pp.47-48.

¹⁷ 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end', p.55.

¹⁸ Paul Dermée, 'Qu'est-ce que Dada?', *Z*, Paris, no.1, March 1920, p.1.

¹⁹ 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end', p.55.

three essential principles combined to form the 'constructive method' the journal set out to defend and publicise²⁰.

This statement clearly reflected the influence of *L'Esprit Nouveau* on Erenburg. Behind the notion of 'binding laws' undoubtedly lay the proposition that, Le Corbusier and Ozenfant stated in their manifesto of 1918 *Après le Cubisme* [After Cubism], 'serious art is [...] the expression of Invariability', i.e. of constants²¹. This thesis provided the foundation for the Purists' campaign for order²². As has been highlighted in Chapter 3, numerous essays in *L'Esprit Nouveau* celebrated the economy, clarity and proportional harmony of the Classical tradition in art and architecture, and established a clear line from these ideals to the rationality, geometric order and precision of modern industrial technology. Drawing on this reasoning, *Veshch'* recognised the relevance of the art of the past to the present on account of its ability to transmit universal laws, yet condemned imitation - 'the epigones of the academy' - and regarded 'the immediate vestiges of yesterday's transitional phases [...] - symbolism, impressionism and the rest' - as 'inimical' to its concerns²³.

In tune with *L'Esprit Nouveau*, *Veshch'* held that the 'constructive method' shaped all modern activities, institutions and creations. 'We found it just as much in the new economics and the development of industry as in the psychology of our contemporaries in the world of art', Erenburg and Lissitzky stated. They recognised the importance of 'phenomena that lie outside the so-called pure arts' and defined their programme accordingly, making vast promises:

It is with the closest attention that *Veshch'* will follow the reciprocal relations between the new art and the present age in all its varied

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Amédée Ozenfant, Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, *Après le Cubisme* (Paris: Editions des Commentaires, 1918); cited in Susan L. Ball, *Ozenfant and Purism: The Evolution of a Style 1915-1930* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: UMI Research Press, 1981), p.38.

²² The inaugural issue of the magazine opened with the statement: 'We are a few aestheticians today, who believe that art has laws, like physiology or physics', 'Domaine de L'Esprit Nouveau', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.1, October 1920, n.p.

²³ 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end', p.55.

manifestations (science, politics, technology, customs, etc.) [...] *Veshch'* will [...] investigate examples of industrial products, new inventions, the language of everyday speech and the language of newspapers, the gesture of sport, etc. - in short, everything that is suitable as material for the conscious, creative artist of our time²⁴.

The first step in this direction had already been taken by *L'Esprit Nouveau*, which explored a broad spectrum of ideas and embraced fields as diverse as architecture, painting, sculpture, product design, music, literature, philosophy, politics and economics. Rooted in Ozenfant and Le Corbusier's faith in 'the possible organisation of the forces of progress', *L'Esprit Nouveau* pledged 'to offer a clear idea of the main currents of contemporary thought' and aimed to 'provide indispensable links' among what it called 'the cultural and technological elite', i.e. scientists, artists, intellectuals and industrials²⁵. Erenburg and Lissitzky likewise intended *Veshch'* to act as a positive reforming and unifying force by assisting all those who played a part in the development of 'constructive art'.

New in *Veshch'* was the explicitly internationalist orientation. Internationalism was by no means absent from *L'Esprit Nouveau*, as attested by the subtitle *Revue Internationale d'Esthétique* [International Survey of Aesthetics], but was often masked by a strong French focus, occasionally tending to patriotic pomposity. *L'Esprit Nouveau* served, above all, as a podium for the Purism of Ozenfant and Jeanneret. In this sense, *Veshch'* was closer to *De Stijl*. As early as November 1918, the Dutch magazine had expressed the ambition to be an international point of contact and stressed the need for co-operation and collective work. In the first *De Stijl* manifesto, published in Dutch, English, German and French, Van Doesburg and the other signatories had asserted: 'The artists of to-day have been driven the whole world over by the same consciousness [...] They therefore sympathise with all, who work for the formation of an international unity in Life,

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.55-56.

²⁵ La Direction, 'Ce que nous avons fait, et ce que nous ferons', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.11/12, November 1921, pp.1211-14.

Art, Culture, either intellectually or materially²⁶. The magazine's contents reflected this. Increasingly after 1921, *De Stijl* drew attention to ideas developing outside Holland, including Dadaism, late Futurism and the emerging trends in France, Germany and Russia.

Although *Veshch'* shared a number of basic premises with some Western avant-garde periodicals, it differed in important ways. Whereas positive example almost always took precedence over polemics in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, *Veshch'* adopted a more controversial and exhortatory tone. This was not so much of a deliberate attempt to be polemical as a reflection of the rhetoric and spirit which infected Russian periodical literature in the immediate post-revolutionary period, for instance *Art of the Commune*. Erenburg and Lissitzky's journal squared with Brik's conviction that 'art is not in ideas, but in actions, in deeds'²⁷. It rejected purely theoretical debates and declared:

Veshch' will take the part of constructive art, whose task is not to adorn life but to organise it [...] We are not founding any sects, we are not contenting ourselves with surrogates for the collective in the form of different trends and schools. We aim to co-ordinate the work of all those who really are anxious to work and do not wish to live merely on the investments of the previous generations²⁸.

The concluding sentences of the editorial expressly confirmed this agenda: 'There will be no philosophical orientation in *Veshch'*, or any elegant frivolities. *Veshch'* is a matter-of-fact organ'²⁹.

²⁶ Theo van Doesburg, Robt. van t'Hoff, Vilmos Huszar, Antony Kok, Piet Mondriaan, G. Vantongerloo, Jan Wills, "Manifest I of 'The Style'", *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.II, no.1, November 1918, col.4.

²⁷ Osip Brik, 'Khudozhnik i kommuna' [The artist and the commune], *Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo*, no.1, 1919, p.26; translated in Gérard Conio, *Le Constructivisme Russe. Tome I: Le Constructivisme Russe dans les Arts Plastiques: Textes Théoriques, Manifestes, Documents* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1987), p.241-42.

²⁸ 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end', pp.55-56.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.57.

In *Veshch'* as in *And Yet the World Goes Round*, the creation of 'objects' was defined as the only meaning in art - thus the journal's title: "The battle cry rings out : AN END TO ALL DECLARATIONS AND COUNTER-DECLARATIONS! MAKE 'OBJECTS'"³⁰. The journal's approach was formulated as follows: "Every organised work - whether it be a house, a poem or a picture - is an 'object' directed towards a particular end, which is calculated not to turn away people from life but to summon them to make their contribution toward life's organisation"³¹. This definition was extremely comprehensive, encompassing all forms of work congruent with the structural requirements and 'binding laws' of the 'constructive method', both artistic and industrial. It hinted at the notion of social purpose, yet ignored the distinction between artistic and useful, a distinction which had been made clear in the Soviet Union. As the split between the Constructivists and less radical members of INKhUK took place in spring 1921, the former indeed abandoned creative practice as the production of works of art. Turning to practical industrial design, they substituted for aesthetic purpose a social and primarily utilitarian one.

The editors stressed their position in opposition to this: 'No one should imagine in consequence that by objects, we mean expressly functional objects. Obviously, we consider that functional objects turned out in factories - aeroplanes, motorcars - are also the product of art. Yet we have no wish to confine artistic creation to these functional objects'³². In other words, an object's utilitarian value was not considered an essential determinant in its material formation. In line with the positive tactics Erenburg and Lissitzky proposed to adopt, they made clear what set them apart from other tendencies. They refused allegiance to any rigid theoretical framework, and objected to attitudes they felt had manifested their irrelevance and sterility in the face of contemporary demands:

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.56.

³² *Ibid.*

We have nothing in common with those poets who write in verse that verse should no longer be written, or painters who use painting as a means of propaganda for the abandonment of painting. Primitive utilitarianism is far from being our doctrine. *Veshch'* considers poetry, plastic form, theatre as 'objects' that cannot be dispensed with³³.

Following this line of thought, *Veshch'* did not adopt a firm political stand. It pleaded for the continued independence of art as an activity outside utilitarian concerns and industry, although not necessarily alien to them. The editors stated unequivocally their intention to resist commitment, let alone subordination, to any cause other than artistic:

Veshch' stands apart from all political parties, since it is concerned with problems of art and not of politics. But that does not mean that we are in favour of an art that keeps on the outside of life and is basically apolitical. Quite the opposite, WE ARE UNABLE TO IMAGINE ANY CREATION OF NEW FORMS IN ART THAT IS NOT LINKED TO THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIAL FORMS.

The implication was all too plain: art could be socially effective without submitting to any form of ideology. *Veshch'* did not elucidate, however, the exact relationship between the artistic and the social, i.e. how artists were to alter social forms if not through a political process. Not unlike *De Stijl*, it seemed to have assumed that the unification of the progressive forces which had been developing internationally, and to a great extent independently, would make social transformation possible and ultimately produce a better world.

'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end' crystallised ideas in evidence since 1920 in Erenburg and Lissitzky's writings. Although the text was not signed, Erenburg's input can not be doubted. The editorial referred to the wording of *And Yet the World Goes Round* reworded and the ideals of production art and theories

³³ *Ibid.*

Erenburg had adapted from *L'Esprit Nouveau*. As has been noted, the inconsistencies of his book left much to be desired. In comparison, *Veshch'* formulated a significantly more mature and coherent programme. This leads one to suppose that Erenburg's ideas benefited from both the constraints of a shorter format and his collaboration with Lissitzky.

The concordance of their perspectives at this juncture is striking. *And Yet the World Goes Round* implied and the editorial of *Veshch'* explicitly stated the precedence of artistic creativity over political and utilitarian concerns. Both texts did so in terms that were largely compatible with those of Lissitzky when confronting the issue of utilitarianism at INKhUK on 23 September 1921:

The creative path is the path of discoveries: they create the aim [...] The aim gives rise to the utilitarian factor - the distribution of qualitative depth within quantitative breadth. The utilitarian idea is justified when it augments the ultimate purpose on the agenda [...] As we discover aims, so we discover expediency and this bears within it the seeds of great utilitarian value³⁴.

Neither Lissitzky nor Erenburg could wholeheartedly support the platform of the Constructivists. Both gave more importance to the capacity of artistic work, of 'objects', to embody utopian ideals than to perform useful functions. This common ground provided the foundation for *Veshch'*.

4.2. A visual message

The intensively collaborative nature of *Veshch'* was immediately perceptible in its visual appearance. While Erenburg was responsible for the theoretical concept, *Veshch'*'s formal organisation lay entirely in Lissitzky's hands. Generally speaking, the journal relied upon a relatively consistent format and testified to a great care in typographical matters. The final version of the front cover (figs.4.3-4)

contained a minimum amount of information: the title, issue number, place and date of publication. Lissitzky nevertheless achieved a striking visual effect by making the most dramatic presentation of the descriptive and formal components with the utmost economy of means. Here, as in the *Prouns*, the interplay of several directional movements provided the dynamic structure and guided the viewer's eye from one composite element to another. A large black bar was slanted diagonally across the coloured page. Anchored to this base, the lettering combined with simple, free-floating geometric shapes to form an asymmetrical, spatially organised composition. The sparse application of colour, restrained to the basic contrasts of black and red (orange in no.3), at once reinforced the purity and solidity of the design and conveyed a great amount of tension.

Inside *Veshch'*, the typography and layout followed similar principles. No longer restricted by the technical limitations and inadequacies of Russian printing technology encountered at Vitebsk, where pamphlets had to be printed by lithographic processes from hand-written plates, Lissitzky enthusiastically embraced the superior resources of hot metal typesetting available in Germany³⁵. Throughout the journal, vertical and horizontal printed lines of varying thicknesses and lengths articulated the blocks of text. To judge from the trilingual part of the first double issue (fig.4.5), these lines fulfilled a twofold function. Becoming thinner and thinner, they dissolved gradually into the white field of the page. Thereby they rhythmically subdivided it and demarcated the different sections: they assumed both a decorative and contextual role. In conjunction with the alternate use of heavy and lightface print, the introduction of capitals in unlikely places and the rhythmic repetition of the boldly lettered word 'object', they lent contrast and dynamism to the relatively dense quality of printed information. In turn, this endowed the columns' content with immediate legibility.

³⁴ El Lissitzky, 'Proun' (1920-21); translated in *El Lissitzky* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1976), pp.67-68.

³⁵ 'Thanks to the high standard of German technology, we succeed in realising some of our book ideas', El Lissitzky, 'Unsere Buch' (1927), *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch 1927* (Mainz: 1927); translated in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), p.358.

Comparing the title pages of the journal's only two issues shows the effectiveness of such devices and how Lissitzky, who was still experimenting with their potential, gradually achieved better results. On both pages, the title information was enclosed in a box in the top left-hand corner of the page, in which the Russian word *veshch'* was diagonally laid out. Next to it were listed the contents (4.6). In no.3 Lissitzky radically altered the vertical-horizontal division of space pioneered in no.1/2 and placed more emphasis on elementary contrasts (fig.4.7). Instead of the trilingual text, a strong headline in bold lettering was printed horizontally across the page, underscored by a thick black line. Below this were reproduced two paintings by Kazimir Malevich and a photograph of a locomotive with a snowplough, the pointed profile of which echoed the diagonal vector force of the word *veshch'*. Making more use of negative space and paying more attention to the relative weights and sizes of lines and types, Lissitzky succeeded in creating a stunning design in which all the individual elements, both visual and textual, were treated as form in space and geometrically related to each.

This approach to the page surface startled the reader into attention and invited him to leaf through the journal. At the same time, it made the agenda of *Veshch'* brilliantly clear, skilfully fusing the complementary ideas of Lissitzky and Erenburg into a coherent and visually informative message. A case in point is the last page of 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end' (fig.4.8). A photograph of the stern of a ship captioned 'Parthenon and Apollo XX' figured at the bottom of the page³⁶. Showing the clean-cut engineered forms of the engine's propellers, it was flanked in the left margin by the slogan³⁷:

³⁶ The same photograph was subsequently used by Lajos Kassák and László Moholy-Nagy in *Buch neuer Künstler* (Vienna: MA, 1922). It also appeared in *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol.VIII, no.10, October 1924, p.316.

³⁷ Erenburg had used the propeller to illustrate the constructive approach adopted by progressive artists in contrast to the principles at work in 'decorative painting', Ilja Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch* (Baden: LIT Lars Müller Verlag, 1986), p.112. In 1923 Lissitzky further praised the value of the propeller, identifying its discovery with the advent of continuity ('continuous gliding'), i.e. of a new energy, El Lissitzky, 'Rad - Propeller und das folgende', *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.2, September 1923, n.p.; translated in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.345.

Not the rose / Not the machine / Are subjects / Of poetry / Or / Painting /
They teach the master / Structure / And / Composition³⁸.

The argument which linked this programmatic proposition to the picture was in essence identical to that used in *And Yet the World Goes Round*. There, Erenburg had adopted *L'Esprit Nouveau's* model of drawing parallels between modern machinery and the Classical tradition as a key to understanding the 'binding laws' of artistic creation; a strategy best illustrated by the double-page spread of Le Corbusier's series of articles of 1921 'Eyes which do not see', which pictured on one side, the Basilica at Paestum above a 1907 Humbert car and, on the opposite, the Parthenon above a 1921 Delage Grand-Sport (fig.4.9)³⁹. *Veshch'* followed suit and implied a similar connection between the Doric forms of Greek architecture and shipbuilding. The slogan supporting this visual comparison pointed unmistakably to *L'Esprit Nouveau* as a source of inspiration.

In a short article of January 1922 responding to repeated allegations of 'sectarianism' and 'technolatry', Ozenfant and Jeanneret clarified the view of the machine which informed the aesthetic of *L'Esprit Nouveau*. They distinguished Purism from an adulation or emulation of machinery:

The machine is not a subject for poetry; it is a lesson for the mind [...]
Natural phenomena and man-made creations are a *lesson in structure*, a lesson in creation; the lesson which can be learned from the machine is clearer than that which can be learned from the rose; to solve a problem, one must know how to enunciate it; machines are solutions to well-enunciated problems, lessons in method⁴⁰.

Considering the influence *L'Esprit Nouveau* had on Erenburg, the similarity can not be a coincidence. Like the French Purists, the editors of *Veshch'* acknowledged the importance of modern technology as an informative model of rational

³⁸ *Veshch'*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922, p.4.

³⁹ Le Corbusier, 'Des yeux qui ne voient pas...: 3. Les autos', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.10, July 1921, n.p.

manufacture and as an indication of a method for creating a harmonious, ordered environment; that is, in its power to direct human action.

In reply to the controversy unleashed at the House of Arts, Erenburg and Lissitzky insisted: 'the machine is primarily an object you can learn from, an object which serves mankind'⁴¹. The title page of the third issue, with its train with a snowplough and paintings by Malevich, reaffirmed this basic thesis. It also constituted by far the most conclusive evidence of the editors' fruitful artistic partnership. Previously published in *And Yet the World Goes Round*, the photograph of the locomotive now appeared side by side with the pure forms of Suprematism: a black square and a black circle. Both Suprematist symbols had already been used in 1919 on the cover of Malevich's pamphlet, *On New Systems in Art* (fig.4.10), whose design Lissitzky was probably responsible for as the head of the Vitebsk printing workshop. In *Veshch'* these three elements were united by the equation 'Technical object = Economy = Suprematist object' and coupled with the statement: 'Representing a machine is like painting a nude. Human beings have not proven to be sensible creators of their bodies. The machine: doctrine of precision and economy'⁴².

The presence of Malevich's *Black Quadrilateral*, 'the embryo of all potentials', clearly indicated the purpose of *Veshch'*⁴³. A decisive break with old pictorial traditions, the *Black Quadrilateral* stood as an icon of both destruction and construction: it represented the necessity to recreate form upon a minimal yet firm basis. The combination with a 'technical object' cogently suggested a method for undertaking such a task. At the same time, it advanced the journal's argument that industrial and artistic artefacts possessed structural laws that linked them together and could assist the artist in the great task of reconstruction that awaited him, notably the law of Economy. In *On New Systems in Art* Malevich defined

⁴⁰ *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.14, January 1922, p.1576. The italics are mine.

⁴¹ 'The baptism of *Veshch'*', p.21.

⁴² *Veshch'*, Berlin, no.3, May 1922, p.1.

⁴³ Kazimir Malevich, cited in Evgenii Kovtun, 'The beginning of Suprematism', *Malevitsch: Zum 100. Geburtstag* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1978), p.204.

Economy as the 'fifth dimension' in art: 'All the creative systems of engineering, machinery, and construction come under its control, as do those of the arts of painting, music and poetry for they are systems of expressing that inner movement which is an illusion of the tangible world'. Malevich argued that Economy formed the criterion according to which 'all creative inventions, their building, construction and system had to be developed'⁴⁴. This idea was certainly not inimical to *L'Esprit Nouveau*, though differently interpreted. Indeed, the precept of Economy lay at the root of the pseudo-Darwinian law of mechanical selection posited by Purism⁴⁵.

Lissitzky's apt manipulation of text and visuals assisted the message of *Veshch'* and made a statement of its own. He wrote in a letter to Malevich of 12 September 1919:

I think it is necessary that we should pour the thoughts, which are to be drunk from the book with the eyes, over everything. The letters and the punctuation marks, which impose order on our thoughts, must be included in our calculations; the way the lines are set out can lead to particular concentrations of thought, they must be concentrated for the benefit of the eye, too⁴⁶.

Veshch' complied with this demand. Throughout the two issues, various means were used to dramatise, supplement or complement the flow of printed information. Contrasts of types and heavy underlining activated the blocks of text and focused the reader's attention. Margins supplied summaries, explanations or gave nuance to certain sections. In no.1/2, for instance, a marginal note 'open for discussion' and a bold question mark pointed out that the editors regarded as debatable the claims put forward by the Russian poet Aleksandr Kusikov in the

⁴⁴ Kazimir S. Malevich, 'On new systems in art' (11 July 1919); translated in Troels Andersen (ed.), *K.S. Malevich: Essays on Art 1915-1933* (London: Rapp & Whiting, 1969), vol.I, p.83.

⁴⁵ 'ECONOMY is the law of natural selection. The fact that it is also the great law controlling what we term *mechanical selection* is easily measured', A. Ozenfant, Ch.-E. Jeanneret, 'Le Purisme', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.4, January 1921, p.374.

⁴⁶ Cited in N. Khardzhiev, 'El Lissitzky, book designer', in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.380.

article 'Mama and Papa of Imaginism' (fig.4.11)⁴⁷. Corresponding to 'the strains and stresses of the content', these typographical variations created a highly intelligible structure that was entirely consistent with the editors' declared commitment to clarity, economy and proportion⁴⁸. So *Veshch'* was given a visual form in keeping with its purpose. As Lissitzky later wrote, the ideas expounded in the journal 'found their channel to the brain through the eye' as well as 'through the ear'⁴⁹.

This approach had widespread repercussions in the graphic production of contemporary artists such as László Moholy-Nagy, Karel Teige and Jan Tschichold. Lissitzky's careful balancing of the text and white areas, his integrated use of visual material and liberties with the old, static conventions of book design in general rapidly became an important point of reference in both the West and Soviet Union. Offering stimulating ideas for the development of original typographical practices, they contributed significantly to the emergence of new standards for book design and advertising in the years 1922-23⁵⁰. No less remarkable, *Veshch'*'s innovative format opened up a new path for serial publication. The vacuum left by its demise in May 1922 was soon to be filled by a new generation of Western avant-garde periodicals, starting with Hans Richter's *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*.

4.3. Contents

In order to unravel the alleged innovative nature of *Veshch'* and its importance in Germany in the early 1920s, it is necessary to examine its contents. The long list of names printed on the inside cover of the first issue promised an international

⁴⁷ Aleksandr Kusikov, 'Mama i Papa imazhinizma' [Mama and Papa of Imaginism], *Veshch'*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922, pp.10-11.

⁴⁸ El Lissitzky, 'Topographie der Typographie', *Merz*, Hanover, no.4, July 1923, p.47; translated in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.355.

⁴⁹ El Lissitzky, 'Our book', p.358.

cross-section of contemporary artistic and literary ideas. Appropriately enough, the pages of *Veshch'* were filled with articles by authors of various provenance and persuasions. As befitted a journal aspiring to be a 'matter-of-fact organ', their widely differing views were published without comment⁵¹. Notable exceptions to this rule included the aforementioned text by Kusikov and an article on novel writing by Marcello Fabri in no.3⁵². The remaining space was occupied by advertisements, announcements, reviews and short critical discussions by the editors.

Lissitzky and Erenburg also published a considerable quantity of translations of articles from other avant-garde publications. As many as six features in the first issue were revised or abridged versions of essays from *L'Esprit Nouveau*: John [sic] Epstein's article 'Jules Romains' and its counterpart, 'Europe' by Jules Romains (p.8); Le Corbusier-Saugnier's programmatic text on mass-production housing, 'Prefabricated housing' (pp.22-23), and Albert Jeanneret's essay 'Music and the machine' (p.27)⁵³. Among the articles which reformulated ideas first printed in *L'Esprit Nouveau* were Fernand Divoire's contribution on the Parisian theatrical scene, 'New productions in Paris' (p.23, divided in two parts: Cocteau's *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel* and Crommelynck's *Le Cocu Magnifique*), Céline

⁵⁰ Claude Leclanche-Boulé, *Le Constructivisme Russe: Typographies et Photomontages* (Paris: Flammarion, 1984), pp.12-13.

⁵¹ 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end', p.57.

⁵² Marcello Fabri, 'O romane bez personnazhei' [About a novel without character], *Veshch'*, Berlin, no.3, May 1922, p.8. The text was annotated in the margin: "The editors of *Veshch'* consider it necessary to point out that the general image of the recent French novel demonstrates precisely the opposite, particularly in terms of the increasing importance of 'subject treatment'. Articles by Mac Orlan and Cendrars can be expected in future issues, which will present a different point of view about the contemporary novel".

⁵³ Jean Epstein, 'Le phénomène littéraire', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.8-13, May-December 1921. The article published in *Veshch'* borrowed material from the final section in no.13, pp.1431-43 (pp.1438-39 for Jules Romains' poem). Le Corbusier-Saugnier, 'Les maisons en série', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.13, December 1921, pp.1525-42. Albert Jeanneret, 'Musique', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.11/12, November 1921, pp.1294-96.

Arnaud's essay, 'Circus' (p.25), and the unsigned text 'Glyptocinematography' which concluded the issue⁵⁴.

Veshch's second issue contained no such translations. The links with *L'Esprit Nouveau* nevertheless remained strong. A relatively large amount of space was assigned to the circle of its contributors who found there yet another opportunity to air their views⁵⁵. Ozenfant and Jeanneret's article on Purism was accompanied by two reproductions of still-life paintings⁵⁶. Succinctly summarising the theory developed in the Purist manifesto of January 1921, the essay outlined the programme and fundamental concerns of the French movement⁵⁷. The emphasis was on the immutable laws governing pictorial space, the contemporary necessity for impersonality and collectivism, the principle of economy, the ethics of precision and clarity, and the new awareness that was attendant on the new mechanical age. The authors underscored the starting point for their philosophy:

Art is indispensable and must fulfil modern's man need for poetry, the pinnacle of art. Seen in this light, art is a social inevitability - the food and satisfaction of the spirit [...] One of the highest sources of pleasure of the human spirit is the ability to appreciate nature's design and the feeling of

⁵⁴ Fernand Divoire, 'Des éléments nouveaux...', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.11/12, November 1921, pp.1290-93; Céline Arnaud, 'Le cirque, art nouveau', no.1, October 1920, pp.97-98, and Paul Recht, 'La Glyptocinématographie', no.11/12, pp.1375-76.

⁵⁵ For instance, Nicolas Beaudouin developed a similar argument in 'On the new poetic technique (Some aspects of the synchronous poem)', *Veshch*', Berlin, no.3, May 1922, p.6, as in 'Quelques aspects du lyrisme moderne', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.15, February 1922, pp.1714-16. Gino Severini's essay 'Cézanne and Cézannism' (pp.14-15) summed up thoughts the Italian painter had expressed in a twofold article in *L'Esprit Nouveau* the previous year: 'Cézanne et le Cézannisme', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.11/12, November 1921, pp.1257-67, and 'Cézanne et le Cézannisme: Cézanne et le véritable Esprit Classique', no.13, December 1921, pp.1462-66. While Fernand Divoire's contribution, 'Theatre in France', did not appear as such in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, it was undoubtedly based upon his critical work for the French magazine. In much the same way, the article "Louis Delluc's views on 'Photogénie'" (p.19) was akin to a short text in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, no.5, February 1921, pp.589-90, which quoted extracts of Delluc's recently published book, *Photogénie* (Paris: Editions M. de Brunoff, 1920).

⁵⁶ Amédée Ozenfant, Charles-Edouard Jeanneret, "Po povodu 'Purizma'" [On 'Purism'], *Veshch*', Berlin, no.3, May 1922, pp.9-11; translated in *Vešč' Objekt Gegenstand, Berlin 1922, Il'ja Erenburg/Ei Lisickij, Reprint 1994, Kommentar und Übertragungen/Commentary and Translations* (Baden: Verlag Lars Müller, 1994), pp.154-55.

⁵⁷ A. Ozenfant, Ch.-E. Jeanneret, 'Le Purisme', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.4, January 1921, pp.369-86.

being part of it; similarly, we see a work of art as creating an order - a *chef d'œuvre* of human organisation⁵⁸.

Beliefs such as these were in total agreement with the outlook of *Veshch*'. It is therefore hardly surprising to find the Parisian journal praised as 'the best in Europe, wide ranging, with a large number of reproductions. It is aiming for a universal aesthetic of the new consciousness'⁵⁹.

Erenburg was undoubtedly responsible for the fact that *Veshch*'s foreign orientation was directed predominantly towards France. Although there is evidence of personal contact with *L'Esprit Nouveau* from 1924, Lissitzky's knowledge of French was limited⁶⁰. Although he had trained as an architect in Darmstadt from 1909 to 1914, during which time he had travelled extensively in Europe and visited Paris, Lissitzky was less acquainted with recent Western artistic and literary trends than Erenburg, who had been active in Parisian avant-garde circles until July 1917. The novelist ranked among *L'Esprit Nouveau*'s occasional contributors and must have acted as a go-between, securing contributions from the French scene where he had manifold contacts⁶¹. In fact, the material shared by the two periodicals and *Veshch*'s extensive treatment of literature reflected Erenburg's interests and sympathies as expressed in *And Yet the World Goes Round*, e.g. his admiration for the work of Boris Pasternak, Vladimir Mayakovskii, Jules Romains and Louis Delluc⁶².

The editors seemed to have relied on translated texts and Erenburg's personal friendships in order to launch the magazine while further contacts were being

⁵⁸ Ozenfant, Jeanneret, "On 'Purism'", p.154-55.

⁵⁹ *Veshch*', Berlin, no.3, May 1922, p.9.

⁶⁰ In 1924 Lissitzky wrote: 'Did you take out a subscription to *L'Esprit Nouveau*? When I am finished with Malevich, I shall start learning French. It really is stupid that I have to be content with looking at it', El Lissitzky, 'Letter to Sophie Küppers, Orsalino, 21 March 1924', in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), p.47. When Lissitzky met Piet Mondrian in Paris in 1927, he still could speak no French, *ibid.*, p.87.

⁶¹ From 1911 Erenburg spent much time working the Café La Rotonde in Paris, which attracted an international assortment of artists, writers and others. Among the crowd Erenburg regularly met there were Pablo Picasso, Guillaume Apollinaire, Diego Riviera, Juan Gris, Jean Cocteau, Amadeo Modigliani and Marc Chagall.

⁶² Erenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, pp.124-28.

established. Indeed, the arrangements made for subsequent editions suggest that reprints would soon have proved unnecessary. On 3 March 1922 Lissitzky wrote to Rodchenko asking for material and an answer to a questionnaire about the current state of contemporary art which had already been sent to 'a number of Western artists'⁶³. Replies from Albert Gleizes, Theo van Doesburg, Fernand Léger, Gino Severini and Jacques Lipschitz were printed in the first issue, which also promised responses from 'Picasso, Lark, Gris, Vlaminck, Feininger, Archipenko, Tatlin, Malevich, Udal'tsova, Rodchenko, Le Corbusier-Saugnier, Ekster, Riviera etc.'⁶⁴. Of these, only two by Archipenko and Juan Gris eventually appeared. As relative as this might seem in relation to the initial plan, the significance of this project should not be overlooked, for its scope demonstrates that Erenburg and Lissitzky envisaged *Veshch'* as a venture of independent and relatively large scale. Had the journal had a chance to develop, its ambitious goals might have materialised to a greater extent.

This raises the question of the audience for which *Veshch'* was intended. 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end' was the only article printed in three languages. Western languages were not absent, yet most texts were written in Russian. Thus the first edition comprised forty entries, including three in German and two in French. This meagre proportion of reading matter accessible to non-Russian speakers decreased in the next issue, with only three entries out of twenty-nine in French and none in German⁶⁵. Given Erenburg and Lissitzky's declared intention of throwing a bridge between two artistic fronts, such linguistic disparity and prevalence of Russian seriously call into question the efficacy of their periodical as a vehicle for East/West exchange.

Veshch''s two issues chiefly carried information on the latest developments in French, German and Dutch art and literature. Several articles on Russian artistic

⁶³ Lissitzky, 'Lettre à Alexandre Rodtchenko, 3 Mars 1922', p.202.

⁶⁴ *Veshch'*, Berlin, no.3, May 1922, p.15.

⁶⁵ In French in *Veshch'*, no.1/2: Charles Vildrac, 'Le jardin' (p.6) and Jules Romains, 'Europe' (p.8); and in German, Ivan Goll, 'Mittag' (p.7), Ulen, 'Die Ausstellungen in Russland' (pp.18-19) and Igor

matters were announced which suggest that *Veshch'* might have eventually become more truly bilateral in its contents, among them 'A survey of art policy under the Soviet powers from 1918 to 1922' and 'The rôle of artists' syndicates in art organisation'⁶⁶. The fact nonetheless remains that Erenburg and Lissitzky's journal addressed a predominantly Russian-speaking audience, i.e. readers in Soviet Russia and émigrés living in Western Europe. This is confirmed, on the one hand, by the numerous advertisements for Berlin-based Russian publishing houses at the end of both issues and, on the other, by the subscription and purchase details printed in no.1/2 which listed the outlets handling the journal in Russia⁶⁷. There is evidence, however, that custom duties constituted a major obstacle to *Veshch'*'s distribution. In letters to David Shterenberg dated 29 and 31 May 1922, Erenburg expressed his anxiety about the 1500 copies of the first issue intended for export to Russia by the Kniga agency. Concerned that these would not reach their destination, he asked Shterenberg to help with the custom authorities⁶⁸. Large-scale exports of *Veshch'*, no.3, were apparently undermined by such difficulties and eventually abandoned. Details of purchase for Russia no longer appeared in the May 1922 issue.

Although *Veshch'* acted mainly as a 'Western cultural courier to Russia', several articles provided readers with news about the East⁶⁹. In no.1/2 two paragraphs by Nikolai Punin conveyed the essential ideas behind Tatlin's *Model*

Glebov, 'Sergey Prokof'ev' (p.28). And in no.3: André Salmon, 'Prikaz' (p.3), Vladimir Mayakovskii, 'Ecoutez, canailles' (p.5) and Aleksandr Tairov, 'Atmosphère scénique' (p.15).

⁶⁶ *Veshch'*, Berlin, no.1/2, April/May 1922, p.5. In the same issue, Ulen's article 'Die Ausstellungen in Rußland' (p.19) promised a feature on Malevich and Suprematism for the next edition. Articles on 'the Russian circus during the years of revolution' and Russian contemporary music were also announced in *Veshch'*, Berlin, no.3, May 1922, p.25 and p.27 respectively.

⁶⁷ *Veshch'* is available in the main agency for all countries, in the Obrazovanie book centre in Berlin. In Russia: in the Znamiya and Nash Put' bookshops, (in Moscow) in all departments of the Kniga cooperative and the Izvestiya of the V.C.I.K. book centre', *Veshch'*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922, p.29.

⁶⁸ M.P. Lazarev, *David Shterenberg* (Moscow: Galaktika, 1992), p.167; cited in *Vešč' Objekt Gegenstand*, p.54.

⁶⁹ Paul Ketsukis Zygas, 'The magazine *Veshch'*/Gegenstand/Objet: Commentary, bibliography and translations', *Oppositions*, no.5, fall 1976, p.113.

for a Monument to the Third International⁷⁰. Accompanied by a photograph, they succinctly summed up the description the critic had published in the pamphlet of 1920, *Pamyatnik III Internatsionala* [The Monument to the Third International]⁷¹. By the time the *Veshch'* text went to press, commentaries on Tatlin's Tower had already been published in the West. As has been seen, Erenburg had dealt with it in *L'Amour de l'Art* in November 1921. This feature predated and formed the basis for further essays on Soviet artistic life by the novelist published in Germany between 1921 and 1923, including *And Yet the World Goes Round*, which also reproduced the Tower⁷². Prior to this, less detailed accounts of Tatlin's work had appeared in Konstantin Umanskii's *New Art in Russia 1914-1919* and second article for *Der Ararat*. Arthur Holitscher too, had enthusiastically discussed the Tower in *Three Months in Soviet Russia*⁷³. Thus Punin's contribution did not in essence contain any information that was not already available in print to a German audience.

Of greater significance was the report 'Die Ausstellungen in Rußland' [The exhibitions in Russia]⁷⁴. Signed Ulen and probably written by Lissitzky, this article outlined the development of Soviet art since 1910 and compared the art scene before and after the Revolution through a brief survey of exhibitions, activities and attitudes. It pinpointed the upheaval of 1917 as a dramatic change whereby 'art as such', which had 'subsided and become petrified', 'began again to force a way back to the world and to life' and artists 'stepped into the ranks of those organising life, and not into the ranks of those embellishing it'⁷⁵. The author explained:

⁷⁰ Nikolai Punin, 'Tatlinova bashnya' [The Tatlin Tower], *Veshch'*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922, p.22.

⁷¹ Nikolai Punin, *Pamyatnik III Internatsionala* (Petrograd: 1920)

⁷² Elie Ehrenbourg, 'L'art russe d'aujourd'hui', *L'Amour de l'Art*, Paris, November 1921, pp.368-69, and Ehrenbourg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, pp.23-24. Other articles included E. Ehrenbourg, 'Ein Entwurf Tatlins', *Frühlicht*, vol.I, no.3, 1921-22, pp.92-93.

⁷³ Konstantin Umanskij, *Neue Kunst in Russland* (Potsdam: Gustav Kiepenheuer and Munich: Hans Goltz, 1920), pp.32-33 and 'Russland: II. Die neue Monumentalskulptur in Rußland', *Der Ararat*, Munich, no.5/6, March 1920, pp.32-33; and Arthur Holitscher, *Drei Monate in Sowjetrußland* (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 1921), pp.119-20.

⁷⁴ Ulen, 'Die Ausstellungen in Russland', *Veshch'*, Berlin, no.1/2, pp.18-19; translated in Zygas, 'The magazine *Veshch'*/Gegenstand/Objet', pp.125-27.

⁷⁵ Ulen, 'The exhibitions in Russia', p.125.

All this [...] played itself out in artists' garrets before the start of the Revolution⁷⁶. The fire of the Revolution consumed everything. Suddenly the opportunities expanded enormously [...] Art ceased being merely an exhibition supplier, whose work large and small was bought as cosy room decor [...] The first task became very clear: that art must assert itself as a viable manifestation of palpable human culture. It must display the unity of its development with that of the overall culture; its activity is to demonstrate and prove once and for all what in it is revolutionary and what is counter-revolutionary. That is the *life* of art itself⁷⁷.

Ulen mentioned the early efforts of the Russian Futurists in this direction within the context of political agitation 'in the streets and squares of Petrograd and Moscow' during the Civil War period⁷⁸. He then proceeded to highlight the respective breakthroughs of the avant-garde in these two cities from 1919 onwards. Making reference to Malevich's 'white on white' paintings and Rodchenko's 'black on black' canvases, he identified the *Tenth State Exhibition* which opened in Moscow on 27 April 1919 as a 'swing to a new materiality', marking the end of composition ('painting as such') and the dawning of construction:

Aesthetic was still in abundance, but to be sure, craftsmen were there who manipulated the vital material and sought to fashion it into new forms. One could clearly sense the underlying strength which had been trained on the construction of painting, and which was ready to start on the construction of objects. In this way old easel painting drew in a breath of fresh air and produced concrete *images* of things⁷⁹.

Within the subsequent search for exhibition formats appropriate to the new tasks, the article noted the open-air display of the works of Naum Gabo, Anton Pevsner

⁷⁶ As has been highlighted in Chapter 2, the view that the October revolution in art originated much earlier was repeatedly put forward by Lissitzky during the 1920s.

⁷⁷ Ulen, 'The exhibitions in Russia', p. 125.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 126-27.

and Gustav Klucis on Moscow's Tverskoi Boulevard in August 1920. More successful in bridging the gap between the creators and the public was, according to the author, the presentation of Tatlin's model for his 'tower-like monument' at the Eighth Congress of the Soviets in that city in late December 1920⁸⁰.

What held Ulen's attention, above all, was the work of the OBMOKhU group and UNOVIS. The former was documented by an installation photograph of the May-June 1921 OBMOKhU exhibition in Moscow (fig.4.12) showing paintings and spatial works by Konstantin Medunetskii, the brothers Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg, Aleksandr Rodchenko and Karl Ioganson. In these three-dimensional constructions, pictorial references were completely eliminated and sculptural means were reduced to an absolute minimum. Diverse material elements such as wooden pieces, iron rods and glass components were assembled into abstract structures with strong geometrical and technological resonances. Rodchenko's *Hanging Constructions* of 1920-21, for example, explored the development in space of five planar geometrical figures: a square, a hexagon, a triangle, an oval and a circle (fig.4.13). Built from concentric shapes cut into a single sheet of plywood and rotated in depth to create three-dimensional volumes, these constructions were the product of a rational method that laid bare the process of production.

A similar approach was apparent in the works of Ioganson. Mounted on a triangular base, his *Study in Balance* of ca. 1920 (fig.4.14) combined three uniform metal rods. These were maintained in space through the tension of a connecting string. By adjusting its slack, one could alter the entire structure of the work and re-arrange it in different configurations⁸¹. As in Rodchenko's suspended sculptures, the means of construction were revealed. In turn, this suggested the work's its potential reproducibility, and hence lowered barriers between art and life. Also visible on the photograph were constructions by the Stenberg brothers

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.127.

⁸¹ László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision: From Material to Architecture* (New York: Brewer Warren and Putnam Inc., 1930), fig.93, p.109.

executed from industrially processed metal beams and glass components, such as Vladimir's *Spatial Construction KPS 42 N IV* of 1919 (fig.4.15). Wired, bolted or welded together, these free-standing skeletal structures were set on unconventional pedestals that formed an integral part of the sculpture. Their precisely defined and clearly articulated forms suggested the language of technical and engineering design, and evoked modern constructions such as bridges and cranes. In the background, one could vaguely discern the sharp, interlocked metallic shapes of Medunetskii's polychrome *Spatial Construction* of 1920-21 (fig.4.16).

None of these works was discussed in detail. Ulen commented in more general terms:

'Obmokhu' exhibitions were new in form. There we looked not only at the art works hanging on the walls, but particularly at the ones that filled out the space of the wall. These young artists assimilated the experience of past generations, worked hard, acutely perceived the specific natures of materials and constructed spatial works. They attempted to press forward in between the skill of the engineers and the 'aimless purposefulness' tossing art now here, now there⁸².

Implicit in this description were a pronounced emphasis on construction and a new attitude to technology, its materials, principles and processes of production, as well as the ambition to create artistic forms reaching beyond the sphere of conventional aesthetic appreciation. No clue was given, however, as to the immediate backdrop to these works.

From the formation of the OBMOKhU group in autumn 1919, its members had paid great attention to agitational tasks. They were concerned to serve the needs of the state and had actively engaged in the design of stencils, slogan boards, monumental panels and ornaments, including posters commissioned by the All-Russian Special Committee for the Abolition of Illiteracy. Underlying their collective undertakings was a distinct utilitarian commitment. Admittedly, this

element was present in the exhibits of the 1921 show too. The items on display, so their creators claimed, were neither intended nor to be construed as art objects, but were the product of formal research into the basic elements of construction whose results were to provide a theoretical basis for the implementation of real utilitarian tasks. Although such experiments were not subject to immediate functional requirements, they represented a preliminary stage in the creation of a totally new socialist environment. As Vladimir Stenberg argued at INKhUK in December 1921, they aimed to 'show practical ways of working and using new materials'⁸³.

As has been noted in Chapter 2, the constructions displayed at the 1921 OBMOKhU exhibition, presented to the public for the first time in the wake of the INKhUK debates over composition and construction, marked a pivotal moment in the development of Constructivism. They reflected a period of intense analytical experimentation within the Moscow avant-garde and, at the same time, signified the culmination of it and transition towards a utilitarian stance. In their programme the First Working Group of Constructivists declared their intention to relegate such activity to the status of 'laboratory work' and to apply their artistic knowledge to practical purposes⁸⁴. Signatories comprised Ioganson, the founding members Rodchenko, Stepanova and Gan, and the OBMOKhU artists Medunetskii, Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg. This exclusive commitment to utilitarian purpose to the detriment of art was later reiterated by Medunetskii and the Stenberg brothers in the declaration opening the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition of their work at the 'Constructivists' show at the Kafe Poetov in Moscow in January 1922⁸⁵.

⁸² Ulen, 'The exhibitions in Russia', p.127.

⁸³ Cited in Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), p.96.

⁸⁴ 'Programme of the First Working Group of Constructivists (March 1921)'; translated in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932* (New York: Rizzoli International Inc., 1990), p.67.

⁸⁵ 'To the factory where a gigantic trampoline is being created for the leap into universal human culture - the name of this way is *Constructivism* [...] / After weighting the facts on the scales of honest attitude to the earth's inhabitants, the constructivists declare art and its priests illegal', K. Medunetskii, V. Stenberg, G. Stenberg (Moscow, January 1922), 'The Constructivists address the world', *Constructivists: K.K. Medunetskii, V.A. Stenberg, G.A. Stenberg* (Moscow: 1922); translated in *ibid.*, p.81.

Just as Ulen mentioned this last exhibition without naming it, so he acclaimed the OBMOKhU artists for their concern with technology, clarity and economy, but revealed little of the ideas underpinning their constructions. The photograph reproduced in *Veshch'* documented only a few of the items on display at the 1921 OBMOKhU event, all of which were by members of the First Working Group of Constructivists⁸⁶. Rodchenko, Ioganson, Medunetskii and the Stenberg brothers had all taken an active part in the spring 1921 discussions and had agreed with the agenda drafted by Gan. Ulen however gave no indication of the sharp turn taken at INKhUK. The article alluded to a general endeavour 'in the direction of Production Art' after the Revolution and quoted slogans such as "'Art into Life' (and not outside it)" and 'Art is one with production', but evaded questions of ideology and social utility⁸⁷. As a result, it failed to provide the intellectual details required of a full appreciation and understanding of the Russian Constructivists' decision to enter the sphere of production⁸⁸.

Ulen's account was most favourable to the work of UNOVIS who 'grasped the essence of the problem'. Their greatest merit lay in the appreciation of the 'boundaries of science and those of art', and most substantial contribution in the '[forging] of a new method'. He elaborated:

[UNOVIS] demonstrated how the new constructive system manifesting itself within us was to be understood, and how, hand in hand with it, we could proceed afresh through life. In this way, the art of painting became like a preparatory exercise in the course of organised participation in life⁸⁹.

This interpretation, together with Ulen's estimate of the achievements of the OBMOKhU group, showed many thematic parallels with Lissitzky's contemporary writings. Lissitzky took a similar stand when speaking on the new Russian art in

⁸⁶ The work of Ioganson, Medunetskii, Rodchenko and the Stenberg brothers were exhibited in a separate room, Aleksandra Shatshikh, 'A brief history of the OBMOKhU', *The Great Utopia: Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde 1915-1932* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum of Modern Art, 1992), p.263.

⁸⁷ Ulen, 'The exhibitions in Russia', p.127.

⁸⁸ Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, pp.228-29.

Berlin in 1922. He acknowledged the existence of a common goal between the OBMOKhU and UNOVIS, but was careful to point out their decidedly different orientation, disparaging the former group's decision to forgo pure art:

They are opposed to each other in their concepts of the practicality and utility of created things. Some members of the OBMOKhU group (Ioganson, supporter of the idea of direct usefulness) went as far as a complete disavowal of art and, in their urge to be inventors, devoted their energies to pure technology. Unovis distinguished between the concept of functionality, *meaning the necessity for the creation of new forms*, and the question of direct serviceableness. They represented the view that the new form is the lever which sets life in motion, if it is based on the suitability of the material and on economy⁹⁰.

Significantly enough, this last view was consonant with the rhetoric of both 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end' and Lissitzky's *Proun* project. As models for future architectonic experiences, the *Prouns* were instruments to herald new ideas. They were conceived of as a preparation for something to come, as 'a part of the social vital process' that 'goes on to influence the intentions which are forming'⁹¹. Their function was to point to new forms applicable to the volumetric restructuring of the concrete world, both literally and metaphorically. The rationale behind this was that, as Lissitzky put it later:

The work of art has no value 'in itself', it is not an end in itself, has no inherent beauty; all this it acquires through its relationship with the community [...] In the creation of any great work [...] the community's part is latent⁹².

⁸⁹ Ulen, 'The exhibitions in Russia', p.127.

⁹⁰ El Lissitzky, 'New Russian art' (1922); translated in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.334. The italics are mine.

⁹¹ El Lissitzky, *Neues Bauen in der Welt: I, Russland* (Vienna: 1930); translated in *ibid.*, p.372.

⁹² *Ibid.*, pp.371-72.

Such was *Proun's* route to the social, and ultimately, utilitarian demand. In this sense it was no different than the trajectory mapped out by the 'laboratory work' displayed at the 1921 OBMOKhU show.

4.4. *Veshch'* and Constructivism

Ulen's article was informative on more than one level, not least because it gave the terms of the message conveyed by *Veshch'* to its readers. As Paul Zygas has observed, 'for the amount of text, the information is about just as much as one could hope for'⁹³. The author addressed central issues of the artistic debate that had emerged from the revolutionary experience in Russia, such as the exploration of the formal and material elements of construction, the re-evaluation of art's social dimension and the attempt to fuse it with life. His account had enough truth in it not to be straightforwardly misleading, but did not adequately expose the ideological context of these developments. This is particularly important with regard to the installation photograph of the OBMOKhU exhibition, which, together with the one published in *Egység* two months later, is one of the only two known⁹⁴. Introducing the work of the OBMOKhU group to the West, the photograph delivered in conjunction with the text a primarily visual message, i.e. that of a new kind of abstract, constructed sculpture with strong geometric, material and mechanical connotations which was being explored in Soviet Russia.

The term 'Constructivism' never appeared in 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end', where 'constructive' alone was used. Neither did it occur in the other statements endorsed by the editors. Still, there is no specific ground for doubting that *Veshch'* presented itself as part of the Constructivist phenomenon. Given the editors' respective positions, this affiliation might be deemed somewhat discordant, its overall effect being to evade the ideological content of

⁹³ Zygas, 'The magazine *Veshch'*/Gegenstand/Objet', p.116.

⁹⁴ *Egység*, Vienna, no.2, 30 June 1922, p.9.

Constructivism and thus misrepresent it. It is necessary, however, to pay attention to the intentions of Erenburg and Lissitzky in bringing out *Veshch'*. As emerges from the selection of articles and the periodical's visual form, they not only aspired to draw attention to and ratify similarities between the efforts of the Russian and Western avant-gardes, but also meant to link this common ground to the ideals promoted in the editorial and thereby to validate and give additional weight to their personal views on the European scene.

Despite Ulen's declared intention 'merely to trace the events and not to evaluate' the facts presented, the author's personal viewpoint distinctly surfaced in 'The exhibitions in Russia'. If, as is most likely, Lissitzky wrote the article, it is interesting to compare it with its counterpart 'Exhibitions in Berlin', published in Russian in *Veshch'*'s third issue and signed with Lissitzky's first name, 'El.'⁹⁵. Different in tone, the two texts shared a common perspective. The latter reviewed the modern tendencies on display in the German capital and contrasted them with the merging of art into life undertaken in Russia, outlined in the previous issue for the benefit of a Western audience:

In Berlin there are a great many art-dealers, shops, salons and studios. Art is exhibited everywhere. To the openings of such exhibitions people come flocking in families; but afterwards - half a white Negro per day⁹⁶.

The implication was obviously that in Germany, where the revolution had been defeated, art was still the appendage of a minority, remote from and arousing limited interest in the masses. Lissitzky referred to the Galerie Der Sturm, which had been a showcase of the most daring innovations of the avant-garde since its foundation in 1912, as an indication of the general trend. His verdict was final: 'this giant ocean liner has changed into a shabby little tramp'⁹⁷.

⁹⁵ El., 'Vystavki v Berline' [Exhibitions in Berlin], *Veshch'*, Berlin, no.3, May 1922, p.14; translated in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.341.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

Of the artists reviewed, few escaped Lissitzky's biting criticism, be it the metaphysically inspired canvases of Willi Baumeister, Archipenko's sculpture or Vasilii Kandinskii's abstract paintings. Lissitzky acknowledged the value of Fernand Léger's most recent work, but found little to praise in his classical Cubist period. More impressed by Kurt Schwitters' exploration of materials, Lissitzky nevertheless regretted that 'Schwitters is not advancing beyond what he achieved in his earlier works'⁹⁸. As a useful corrective, the article commended to its readers the new art coming out of Eastern Europe, as represented by the metallic constructions, wooden and concrete reliefs exhibited by László Moholy-Nagy and László Péri in February 1922 at the Galerie Der Sturm:

Begotten of the Revolution in Russia, along with us they have become productive in their art [...] Against the background of jellyfish-like German non-objective painting, the clear geometry of Moholy and Péri stand out in relief. They are changing over from compositions on canvas to constructions in space and material⁹⁹.

To Lissitzky, such works were conspicuous signs that, facing the ongoing but decreasing influence of German Expressionism and of the Parisian avant-garde, a new 'organised approach' akin to that developed on the Soviet scene was gaining currency. He concluded: 'a Russian artistic culture is beginning to emerge'¹⁰⁰.

In both articles, the Russian experience was used to suggest the collective working of a unified vanguard towards a new Constructivist art with a broad social significance. Directed at a Russian-speaking readership, 'Exhibitions in Berlin' reinforced this image by placing it within a discourse wherein it made sense to claim the pioneering nature of the work achieved on Soviet territory. Thus, alongside the critical analysis of Western accomplishments, charges of 'prettification' and 'confusion' were levelled against international figures of

⁹⁸ Lissitzky referred to the joint exhibition of Schwitters and Erenburg's wife, Lyubov Mikhailovna Kozintseva. Understandably, he did not comment on the latter, *ibid.*, p.342.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.341.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.342.

Russian origin like Archipenko or Kandinskii who were estranged from the preoccupations of their colleagues in the Soviet Union. Lissitzky wrote of the former, who had moved to the West in 1908:

It is a pity that Archipenko was not in Russia during these years. The great tasks which presented themselves in our country would have inspired this noteworthy artist to valuable achievements; whereas now the guilt of the Salons is rubbing off on his works¹⁰¹.

This last passage raised questions about the strategies underpinning *Veshch'* and the homogeneity of the image conveyed. By its very nature, the journal drew into its discourse two distinct but, so it argued, related groups. On the one hand, *Veshch'* carried a particular vision of Russian post-revolutionary culture to the European intelligentsia. On the other, it offered an overview of the most recent developments in Western and Russian art to Russian-speaking readers. Considering the difficulties impeding distribution, the vast majority of these must have been Russians living in emigration in Germany. This dual function entailed some flexibility as well as an aptitude for critical adjustment, which the difference in content between 'The exhibitions in Russia' and 'Exhibitions in Berlin' aptly demonstrated. This adaptability was very much in evidence in the attitude *Veshch'* adopted towards Russia.

In more than one instance, *Veshch'* presented itself as an organ of left-wing art¹⁰². Carrying no specific political orientation, this very loose label seemed particularly suited to the editors' determination 'to be the meeting-point of two adjacent lines of communication' and not to espouse a political line¹⁰³. Erenburg and Lissitzky closely identified with Soviet Russia and proudly stood as defenders of its new art in Berlin. They supported endeavours of a kindred revolutionary spirit such as Hungary's, and countered attacks launched against the Soviet

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² For instance, '*Veshch'* is not an organ of just any old school, but of left-wing art', 'The Baptism of *Veshch'*', p.22.

¹⁰³ 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end', p.55.

vanguard in the Western and Russian émigré press, e.g. in the Parisian magazines *Clarté* [Clarity] and *Udar* [The Blow]¹⁰⁴. However, juxtaposed with such denunciations was an undisguised critique of the political system ushered in by the October Revolution, the terms of which were very close to those of *And Yet the World Goes Round*.

The opening article of *Veshch*'s third issue, 'Onto the bandwagon triumphant', stressed that the avant-garde was being dislodged by conservative forces whose resurgence coincided with the setting up of Lenin's NEP:

The hangers-on rule. Art that has capitulated is alive and flourishing in place of revolutionary art [...] The bourgeoisie - new and old -, its chums and aestheticising communists are fostering academic art [...] The skinny, emaciated, heroic proletariat cannot get on its feet and develop a style under the prevailing conditions. The art of the 'left' - and *Veshch*' is one of its mouthpieces - is reverting to the status of a semi-legal sect after the illusory attempt to create a new aesthetic culture in a vacuum¹⁰⁵.

The journal did not oppose NEP, 'provided that it can get production moving', but condemned Lunacharskii's cultural policy and vehemently objected to the involvement of incapable officials in art: '[The *Veshch*' representatives] do not want art to be transformed into TEO, IZO, MUZO, etc.'. So the confession by Lenin, 'I have to say that I am not competent in the field of poetry', was met with the greatest of approval: 'What a magnificent differentiation of functions!'¹⁰⁶. Like *And Yet the World Goes Round*, *Veshch*' deplored the existing discrepancy between political and aesthetic radicalism, and the devastating effect this had on the avant-garde both in Russia and the West¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰⁴ 'Udar' and 'Articles about Russian poetry in Russia magazines', *Veshch*', Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922, p.5 and p.12 respectively. The repression of the avant-garde by the Horthy government in Hungary was denounced p.5.

¹⁰⁵ 'Torzhestvuyuschii oboz' [On the bandwagon triumphant], *Veshch*', Berlin, no.3, May 1922, p.2.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Similar examples were used to illustrate this, e.g. the old-fashioned design of the first official Soviet postal stamp of August 1921, *ibid.* and Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch*, p.26.

The editors nonetheless remained confident that circumstances in Russia could change. 'There are examples in the history books that give grounds for hope', they asserted. Overall, the work achieved on Soviet soil was presented in slightly more positive terms than the parallel efforts of Western progressive groups¹⁰⁸. Yet Erenburg and Lissitzky were cautious not to encourage one-sided attitudes in the 'decay of the West/rise of the East' dispute that divided the Russian émigré colony. Thus they declared in reply to the polemical assertions of Kusikov in no.1/2: "Of course, readers should not assume that the editors agree with an author who slings around liberal quantities of aphorisms like 'we imaginists couldn't care less about the West'"¹⁰⁹. As has been seen in the previous chapters, both editors occasionally appeared split in their allegiance to Russia. Doubts regarding the success of the revolutionary enterprise and strong criticism of the Bolsheviks pervaded Erenburg's contemporary writings, as did a constant ridicule of the endless arguments over ideological issues and the future of Russia that animated émigré circles in Paris and Berlin. Lissitzky, for his part, showed clear signs of appreciation of the West alongside a genuine and lifelong commitment to Russia. As evinced by *Veshch*'s typography, the advance and high standard of Western technology served his purposes, meaning a greater possibility to realise what he aspired to.

Given the very mixed community which constituted the Berlin art scene, an attitude of tolerance was required to promote intellectual contacts and allow cultural exchange. *Veshch*'s stated intention to provide a forum for the international avant-garde and to prompt its exponents to unite regardless of national, political and aesthetic differences implied such an approach. This, as much as the attempt to foster communication between Soviet Russia and Germany, was the context of the periodical. While Erenburg and Lissitzky's backgrounds and first-hand knowledge of the work carried out in Russia might have endowed their joint venture with a truly revolutionary quality in the eyes of Western observers

¹⁰⁸ 'On the bandwagon triumphant', p.2.

¹⁰⁹ 'Baptism of *Veshch*', p.22.

and some elements of the Russian emigration, their rhetoric was not entirely representative of the Soviet cultural realities. However, it was relevant and appropriate to the ends they had in mind, i.e. to elaborate an artistic programme that might be received with interest by virtually every shade of the European avant-garde, at the same time, establish their own presence amongst these.

This is clearly reflected in the critical reception of the journal. Following a survey of avant-garde attitudes in the West in *Pechat' i revolyutsiya* [Press and revolution], leading Productivist Boris Arvatov compared them with post-revolutionary Soviet concerns, pondered and eventually praised the message disseminated by *Veshch'*¹¹⁰. Taking the part of an art 'whose task is not to adorn life but to organise it', the periodical addressed fundamental issues such as the link existing between art and social reform, and the crucial function objects were to fulfil in this reform¹¹¹. Such ideas, he argued, were no doubt revolutionary in the West. Yet Arvatov blamed Erenburg and Lissitzky for the 'opportunism' of their undertaking, regretting that their journal did not coincide with the ideology its promising title embodied. He contended:

Veshch' refuses to understand that Malevich's little square is not a useful thing (like the locomotive), in fact, it is not a thing at all but rather a naked, visual form. The opportunism of *Veshch'* is an opportunism of social conditions seething with unrest but not overcome by a revolution [...] *Veshch'* is a phenomenon of transition, and as such it is necessary but it is only the first step.

What Arvatov reproached Erenburg and Lissitzky with was their politically and socially unspecified approach to the concept of the object and the technological discourse which informed it. More specifically, Arvatov accused them, perhaps undeservedly, of seeing in the machine an end rather than a means. He urged them

¹¹⁰ Boris Arvatov, 'Veshch'', *Pechat' i Revolyutsiya*, Moscow, no.7, June 1922, pp.341-42; translated in Hubertus Gassner, Eckhardt Gillen (eds.), *Zwischen Revolutionskunst und Sozialistischen Realismus. Dokumente und Kommentare. Kunstdebatten in der Sowjetunion von 1917 bis 1924* (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1971), p.129.

to radicalise their position so as to align it with the abrogation of art and the move into industrial production decided by the Constructivists in Russia. In the final section of *Constructivism* Aleksei Gan pointed to a similar discrepancy between the ideas *Veshch'* represented, i.e. Constructivism, and the phenomenon taking place under that name in Russia. The theorist acknowledged the existence of parallel tendencies in the West, as manifest for instance in *De Stijl* and *L'Esprit Nouveau*, but identified *Veshch'*, together with its precedent *And Yet the World Goes Round*, as the locus of a semantic drift which tempered, if not completely obliterated, the socially and historically determined premises of the Russian paradigm:

Our Constructivism has declared uncompromising war on art, because the means and properties of art are not powerful enough to systematise the feelings of the Revolutionary milieu. It is cemented by the real success of the Revolution and its feelings are expressed by intellectual and material production¹¹².

Gan diagnosed what he called 'the West's chronic malady' in the rhetoric of *Veshch'*. In other words, he blamed Erenburg and Lissitzky for practising 'conciliatory politics'. Unwilling and unable to 'tear themselves away from art', they merely called 'the new art' Constructivism, contributing to a general misrepresentation of the Russian movement abroad¹¹³.

Conversely, it is significant that *Veshch'* was welcomed and eulogised by periodicals such as *L'Esprit Nouveau*. In a direct echo of 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end', the editors wrote in a rather characteristic self-centred way:

Object, a Russian journal edited by El Lissitzky and our collaborator Il'ya Erenburg, is the first organ capable of making Russia understand that France is not as ossified as one seems to believe it is in the land of the Soviets: the

¹¹¹ 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end', p.2.

¹¹² Aleksei Gan, *Konstruktivizm* (Tver': 1922), translated in Conio, *Le Constructivisme Russe. Tome I*, p.444.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

upshot of the artificial isolation of this great nation from the rest of the world¹¹⁴.

This passage suggests that *Veshch'* was primarily perceived as opening the door to a new, wider audience by the Western European avant-garde community, that is to say, as an opportunity to expose its work and theoretical views to the East. In actual fact, it is not difficult to agree. Whether reprinted from other periodicals or translated from original texts produced especially for *Veshch'*, the essays contributed by influential artists like Le Corbusier, Severini and Van Doesburg figure among the first appearances of their writings in Russian. *L'Esprit Nouveau* did not comment on the specifically Russian contents of *Veshch'*. There is evidence that both the written and visual material contained in the journal were being circulated by Western progressive publications. Thus an article on Russian revolutionary art in the September 1922 edition of *De Stijl* used an extract from Ulen's article 'Exhibitions in Russia'¹¹⁵. Another example is the aforementioned *Book of New Artists* which appeared that same month with several photographs from the Russian periodical. Whatever information *Veshch'* disseminated, it did not pass unnoticed.

* * *

'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end' set two distinct but related goals for *Veshch'*: to foster a two-way communication and inaugurate an active exchange of artistic and social visions between Russian and Western avant-gardes, and to establish a basis for artistic collaboration on an international scale. Within

¹¹⁴ 'L'Objet', *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.17, June 1922, n.p. The reference was to 'What we can learn from Pushkin and from Poussin is not how to animate forms that are ossified but the eternal laws of clarity, economy, and proportion', 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end', p.55.

¹¹⁵ 'Beeldend Rusland', *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V, no.9, September 1922, col.133. The article followed remarks on Revolution and art in Russia and Hungary published in vol.V, no.7, July 1922, col.108-09.

the limitations of its lifetime and the external factors that inflected the selection of material, *Veshch'* fell short of the first objective. The journal cannot be regarded as truly bilateral, witness the paucity of information on Russian art it made readily accessible to Western readers. It was equally unsuccessful in giving exposure to the theoretical tenets of Russian Constructivism, notably to its utilitarian base. Given the second end the editors had in mind and their respective convictions, it is doubtful, however, whether this was ever their intention.

In spite of its linguistic orientation, *Veshch'* drew attention to stylistic and ideological links between all the parties involved. This is confirmed by the observations of contemporaries. Reflecting on *Veshch'* some fifty years later, Hans Richter described it as a periodical 'that confronted the problems of our modern art and underscored the affinity between our artistic efforts and those in Russia'¹¹⁶. The recognition of such kinship in the fertile context of Berlin was an incentive to collective action and, in this connection, *Veshch'* was exemplary. As will be shown in Chapter 6, it anticipated further efforts to acknowledge coincidences in social thinking and frame a common policy between the modern trends that had been developing internationally.

It is no contradiction to say that *Veshch'* was not really homogeneous in its content as a result of the diversity of temperaments and dispositions of the contributors, but also of the editors' adaptation to the demands and realities of the different audiences their journal addressed. Because *Veshch'* acted as a megaphone and optical condenser for the various constructive tendencies it dealt with, it rapidly asserted its presence as a mouthpiece of Constructivism on the European scene. By the same token, it secured Lissitzky and Erenburg's reputation as defenders of the Constructivist cause in the West. As such, *Veshch'*'s significance is beyond doubt.

¹¹⁶ Hans Richter, *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe* (Zürich: Die Arche Verlag, 1967), p.81.

Chapter 5: The First Russian Art Exhibition

In October 1922, four months after the demise of *Veshch'*, the *Erste russische Kunstausstellung* [First Russian Art Exhibition] opened in Berlin (fig.5.1). The exhibition was the result of a joint effort by Anatolii Lunacharskii's People's Commissariat for Enlightenment and the *Auslandskomitee zur Organisierung der Arbeiterhilfe für die Hungernden in Rußland* [Foreign Committee for the Organisation of the Workers' Aid to the Starving in Russia]. Its contents, on view in the premises of the Van Diemen gallery at 21 Unter der Linden, included an impressive number of works by modern and contemporary Russian artists, many of whom were unknown to the Western public.

The impact that the show made on the Berlin art world was second to none. Vivid impressions of it are found forty-five years later in the reminiscences of Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers and other distinguished visitors such as Hans Richter¹. For them, as for the vast majority of the intellectual and cultural vanguard in the German capital, the Van Diemen display was an unparalleled opportunity to experience at first-hand the artistic developments in post-revolutionary Russia. Recent efforts to establish communication and publish early documentary material, along with El Lissitzky and Il'ya Erenburg's publicising manoeuvres, had drawn great attention to such developments but had provided only limited visual access. With the *First Russian Art Exhibition* all was revealed.

This has ensured the Van Diemen show a place of great importance in the history of modern art and especially Constructivism. In order to understand the

¹ Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Texts, Letters* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967), pp.11-12, and Hans Richter, *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe* (Zurich: Die Arche Verlag, 1967), pp.97-98.

significance of this landmark event, it is useful to inquire into its origins, examine a selection of exhibits and determine how they were received critically in Germany. The *First Russian Art Exhibition* not only heralded the entry of Russian avant-garde art onto the Western stage; but, combined with the international activity taking place in the previous months, it helped to accelerate significant changes in Berlin's progressive art circles.

* * *

5.1. Antecedents

In the foreword to the catalogue of the *First Russian Art Exhibition*, David Shterenberg, the head of IZO and commissar for the exhibition, described it as 'the first real step' taken to bring Russian artists and their Western counterparts together². To a certain extent he was right. As a large-scale showing of modern Russian art intended for a foreign audience, the Van Diemen exhibition was indeed unprecedented. This is not to say, however, that there had been no other attempts to arrange events of this kind. Chapter I has highlighted how Russian artists had urged German progressive painters and sculptors to 'join in consultations and an exchange of views within the scope of the artistically possible' after the 1917 Revolution³. Encouraged by this very prospect of international collaboration, the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* had proposed organising travelling exhibitions as one practical means to foster mutual awareness between

² David Sterenberg, 'Vorwort: I.' (Moscow, October 1922), p.3, *Erste russische Kunstausstellung* (Berlin: Galerie van Diemen & Co. Gemälde Neuer Meister, Unter der Linden 21, 1922); translated in Stephen Bann (ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), pp.70-72.

the German and Soviet avant-gardes⁴. As long as the blockade isolating Russia from the rest of the world lasted, it was evidently difficult to implement such measures. Political antagonism hindered physical movement. As a result, endeavours to circulate artistic material often failed. For instance, in a report of late 1919 Vasilii Kandinskii regretted that 'fourteen cases of pictures, graphics and art books sent to [Russia] by Baehr', which he hoped to be 'the first of a constant series of *envois*, a continuous exchange of the results of artistic work by the internationally united forces of East and West', had been seized by the Lithuanian government⁵.

Following the Treaty of Rapallo, conditions were far more conducive to cultural exchange. In this respect, the Van Diemen show was very much a sign of the times. As has been seen, the years 1920-21 had witnessed considerable diplomatic efforts to restore outwardly normal official relations between Russia and Germany. Both countries had an interest in collaborating, albeit for divergent motives. The major famine which began to afflict the Volga basin in spring 1921, in conjunction with the appalling economic crisis of the previous winter, compelled Russia to accept aid from international organisations like the Red Cross and the American Relief Administration, and prompted the creation of a new body, the *Internationale Arbeiterhilfe für Sowjet-Rußland* [International Workers' Aid for Soviet-Russia, IAH]⁶. Set up by Willi Münzenberg in Berlin on 12 August 1921, the IAH included figures as diverse as Alfons Paquet, Käthe Kollwitz, George Bernard Shaw, Henri Barbusse and Anatole France. The avowed purpose was to

³ *Aufruf der russischen fortschrittlichen bildenden Künstler and die deutschen Kollegen!* (Moscow, 30 November 1918); reprinted in Fritz Mierau, *Russen in Berlin: Literatur, Malerei, Theater, Film 1918-1933* (Leipzig: Reklam Verlag, 1991), p.186..

⁴ Adolf Behne, 'Aufruf', *Der Cicerone*, Leipzig, vol.XI, no.9, May 1919, p.264.

⁵ Vasilii Kandinskii, 'Shagi Otdela izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv v mezhdunarodnoi khudozhestvennoi politike' [Steps taken by the Department of Fine Arts in the realm of international art politics], *Khudozhestvennaya zhizn'*, Moscow, no.3, 1920, pp.2-4; translated in Kenneth C. Lindsay, Peter Vergo (eds.), *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), vol.I, p.454.

⁶ George F. Kennan, *Russia and the West under Lenin and Stalin* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1961), pp.179-81.

solicit help for famine sufferers⁷. Almost immediately, a number of artists gave full support to this cause and a *Komitee Künstlerhilfe für die Hungernden in Rußland* [Committee for the Artists' Aid to the Starving in Russia] was constituted with Erwin Piscator as secretary, George Grosz, Wieland Herzfelde, Arthur Holitscher, Käthe Kollwitz and Max Barthel as members. A series of propaganda actions were launched. Posters by Otto Nagel, Rudolf Schlichter and others were printed. Appeals were widely distributed and several types of cultural events (concerts, lectures, exhibitions etc.) organised to raise funds and gather food⁸.

It was in this context that the *First Russian Art Exhibition* eventually materialised: sponsored by the IAH and Narkompros, the proceeds were to alleviate starvation in Russia⁹. The show, however, was not the result of one single action but of several initiatives. Early in March 1921, Kandinskii, whose background as a leader of *Der blaue Reiter* [The Blue Rider] and familiarity with the German scene made him an ideal cultural ambassador for Soviet Russia, had offered the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* 'an extensive exhibition of recent Russian art [...], including selected examples of the new art schools'¹⁰. Ludwig Baehr had conveyed the proposal and it had been warmly received by Adolf Behne and Walter Gropius. A provisional venue had been agreed and several official steps taken to prepare the ground. Victor Kopp, the informal Soviet representative who had replaced Karl Radek in Berlin in November 1919, had written to the German government on 21 March 1921 to clarify the plans of Narkompros. The idea, he argued, was to 'give the German public an exhaustive sight into creativity in Russia during 1914-1921,

⁷ *Bruder hilf!, Aufruf an die Arbeiter und Werktätigen aller Länder zur Zeichnung der 1. Arbeiteranleihe für Sowjetrußland* (Berlin: Verlag der Internationalen Arbeiterhilfe für Sowjet-Rußland, 1922), p.3. Equivalent bodies were formed in Belgium, Brazil, Bulgaria, Denmark, France, UK, Holland, Ireland, Italy, Yugoslavia, Luxembourg, Norway, Austria, Poland, South Africa, the USA and Argentina, *ibid.*, p.23.

⁸ Heinz Sommer, 'Internationale Arbeiterhilfe und ausländische Kulturshaffende in Berlin', in Klaus Kändler, Helga Karolewski, Ilse Siebert (eds.), *Berliner Begegnungen. Ausländische Künstler in Berlin 1918 bis 1933: Aufsätze-Bilder-Dokumente* (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1987), pp.400-02. Appeals for the starving in Russia are found, for instance, in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.15, February 1922, p.1812 and no.16, May 1922, p.1965.

⁹ *Erste russische Kunstausstellung*, colophon.

with special emphasis on the last three years'¹¹. Two hundred and fifty items were to be selected, comprising paintings, sculptures, decorative art, works from the recently reformed art schools, books and reproductions. The collection was to travel to all the major German cities. Unfortunately, it was hardly a propitious time for such an undertaking. Internal problems in Weimar Germany, such as the widespread strike action of March 1921, offset for some time the general pro-Soviet mood in foreign policy and over six months passed before the scheme was revived.

In November 1921, on the heels of the creation of the IAH, Willi Münzenberg approached Lenin to obtain support for a large-scale exhibition in Berlin and other German cities¹². The propaganda effect that such an event could have in Berlin and its appropriateness within the individual agenda of the IAH both spoke in favour of the request: Lenin approved Münzenberg's idea. Special conditions for the mounting of a Soviet exhibit were thereupon drafted by the Foreign Office in Berlin. The show was not to be propagandist in content and its choice of exhibits was to be subject to a German jury. The different venues were to be announced in advance to allow for the necessary arrangements. Finally, the event ought to be officially organised by the Soviet government¹³. Although works were collected immediately, the *First Russian Art Exhibition* was not to materialise for almost a year. Several wagon loads of exhibition material reached Germany in early February 1922, but the overtly propagandist nature of most pieces did not meet the criteria set by the German Foreign office. In consequence, an import licence was not granted. This brought the entire project to a halt. There was little prospect of such obstacles disappearing until the Treaty of Rapallo. Once it was signed, hopes

¹⁰ Adolf Behne, 'Brief an Walter Gropius, 3. März 1921', in *Arbeitsrat für Kunst, Berlin 1918-1921* (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1980), p.123.

¹¹ Cited in Peter Nisbet, 'Some facts on the organizational history of the Van Diemen exhibition', in *The First Russian Show: A Commemoration of the Van Diemen Exhibition Berlin 1922* (London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 1983), p.68.

¹² Willi Münzenberg, 'Brief an Lenin (Moskau, den 26. Nov. 1921)'; reprinted in *Berliner Begegnungen*, p.64.

¹³ Helen Adkins, 'Erste russische Kunstausstellung', in *Stationen der Moderne: die bedeutenden Kunstausstellungen des 20. Jahrhunderts in Deutschland* (Berlin: Berlinische Galerie, 1988), p.186.

ran high again in Russia and a new exhibition was assembled by Narkompros. This time it included works which had been acquired as part of IZO's purchasing policy in the post-revolutionary period. They were sent over to Germany in August¹⁴.

In autumn 1922 the *First Russian Art Exhibition* was formally announced in *Der Cicerone* and elsewhere¹⁵. Organised by Shterenberg, with the probable assistance of Naum Gabo and Natan Al'tman, the show was housed in the recently opened Unter den Linden branch of the renowned Galerie für alte Kunst van Diemen & Co.¹⁶. The doors opened on 15 October in the presence of Münzenberg, officials from the Foreign Office, representatives of the Weimar Republic, the Russian government and Russian Red Cross, and 'countless guests' (fig.5.2)¹⁷. Speeches stressed the significance of the event as 'an attempt to throw a new bridge between the Russian artists, long isolated from the world by the blockade, and the German artists'¹⁸. The exhibition later travelled to Amsterdam, where it was shown from 29 April to 28 May 1923. Additions and omissions were listed in a printed supplement to the German catalogue¹⁹. Lissitzky accompanied the show to Holland and lectured on modern Russian art, using a large number of slides to support his talk and developing new contacts, among them J.J.P. Oud. Other showings had been scheduled in Paris, Prague, London, Brussels and even the United States. None of these materialised. Despite the support of influential critics such as Waldemar George and Maurice Raynal, endeavours to show the *First*

¹⁴ Nisbet, 'Some facts on the organizational history of the Van Diemen exhibition', pp.70-71.

¹⁵ Curt Bauer, 'Berliner Kunstausstellungen', *Der Cicerone*, Leipzig, vol.XIV, no.20, October 1922, p.803. It was also announced in *Kunstchronik und Kunstmarkt*, no.49/50, 8-15 September 1922, p.868 and no.51/52, 22-29 September 1922.

¹⁶ Gabo repeatedly asserted that El Lissitzky was in no way involved in the organisation of the Van Diemen show and even denied him the otherwise widely acknowledged authorship of the catalogue cover design, e.g. Naum Gabo, 'The 1922 Soviet exhibition', *Studio International*, vol.182, no.938, November 1971, p.171.

¹⁷ G.G.L., 'Die erste russische Kunstausstellung', *Die Rote Fahne*, Berlin, 17 October 1922, p.3; reprinted in *Berliner Begegnungen*, pp.62-63.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.62.

¹⁹ Shterenberg went back to Moscow between the two presentations to collect new works. According to his records, 19 artists and 193 items were added to the show, including works by Popova, Udal'tsova and a quantity of porcelain, W. Lapschin, 'Die erste Ausstellung russischer Kunst 1922 in Berlin', *Kunst und Literatur*, vol.33, no.4, July/August 1985, p.567.

Russian Art Exhibition in Paris failed and the exhibits were returned to Moscow from Amsterdam²⁰.

5.2. The exhibition

'In this exhibition', wrote Shterenberg in the catalogue, 'our aim has been to show Western Europe everything that depicts the story of Russian art during the Revolution and the war years [...] We hope that this first visit will not be the last and that our Western comrades, whom we would like to see in Moscow and Petrograd, will not be long in coming'²¹. Shterenberg was not to be disappointed. On 18 October 1924 the *First Universal German Art Exhibition* [*Pervaya vseobshchaya germanskaya khudozhestvennaya vystavka*] opened in Moscow²².

There is no doubt about the impulse which inspired this two-way traffic. Exhibitions provided a sound substructure for the 'international co-operation in art' to which Kandinskii and the International Bureau had committed themselves²³. Just as important, cultural exchange was integral to the diplomatic objectives of Soviet Russia. The *First Russian Art Exhibition* was inseparable from the strenuous efforts to promote Communism in order to ensure its survival on Soviet soil and its expansion westward²⁴. The fact that the IAH reported directly to the Comintern attests to this. The Russians were eager to inspire sympathy in the West. Commercial interest played a substantial role: material help was desperately needed to restart Russia's shattered economy²⁵. Germany was the leading industrial power in Europe, yet the Germans' general enthusiasm for Russian

²⁰ Maurice Raynal, 'Les arts', *L'Intransigeant*, Paris, 1 November 1922; cited in J.H. Martin, C. Naggar, 'Paris-Moscou: artistes et trajets de l'avant-garde', *Paris-Moscou 1900-1930* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1979), p.34.

²¹ Shterenberg, 'Vorwort: I.', pp.3-4.

²² Organised by the IAH and supervised by Otto Nagel, it contained 501 works by 126 artists and travelled from Moscow to Saratov and Leningrad.

²³ Kandinskii, 'Steps taken by the Department of Fine Arts', p.454.

²⁴ Edward Hallet Carr, *The Bolshevik Revolution 1917-1923* (London: Penguin Books, 1966), vol.III, p.29.

things was tempered by a mistrust of the Soviet regime. There was therefore a need to foster the acceptance of revolutionary Russia as a new culture, especially as anti-Bolshevik elements in the Russian emigration repeatedly denounced the revolution²⁶. Such factors clearly carried some weight on the overall conception of the Van Diemen display and the selection of contributors. Hence Willi Münzenberg insisted in his opening speech that the exhibition was 'proof that not just destructive and destabilising elements were at work in Russia'²⁷.

A large number and variety of works were on view. The catalogue listed artists alphabetically and provided generic titles in German, mostly without dates. A total of 594 exhibits by at least 159 authors were recorded, separated by medium: 'paintings'; 'watercolours, drawings, woodcuts, etchings, prints, posters, architecture and stage designs', 'sculptures', and 'porcelain, glass, decorative works and semiprecious stones'. Some entries however included whole series of works. For instance, no.249 designated 4 costume studies by Natan Al'tman, no.479 contained 24 non-objective compositions by the UNOVIS group, and no.447 referred to 11 non-objective prints by Aleksandr Rodchenko²⁸. While certain items were very small-scale, this brought their complete number to approximately one thousand. The format of the exhibition was highly eclectic, featuring works from traditional artistic disciplines, examples of applied art and design, as well as pieces by students at the newly reformed art schools and 'experiments with mass-produced objects closely connected with art' in the form of tea pots, cups and other products from the state porcelain and engraving factories²⁹. As a whole, the show had relatively little visual homogeneity. Spanning two decades, it included all shades of artistic endeavour from traditional approaches to avant-garde developments. Thus Abram Arkhipov, member of the

²⁵ Kennan, *Russia and the West*, p.209.

²⁶ Criticism of such conservative attitudes in the émigré press is found in *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922, p.12.

²⁷ G.G.L., 'Die erste russische Kunstausstellung', p.62.

²⁸ *Erste russische Kunstausstellung*, p.22 and p.27.

²⁹ 'Zur Einführung', *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung*, p.14; translated in Bann (ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, pp.75-76.

'Wanderers' and leading representative of the Realist school, was represented alongside Russian Impressionists, like Konstantin Korovin, and artists of *Mir Iskusstva* [World of Art] and *Bubovny Valet* [Knaves of Diamonds], e.g. Il'ya Mashkov. Painters as stylistically diverse as Marc Chagall, David Burlyuk and Pavel Filonov lent a number of works; as did Nadezhda Udal'tsova, Vladimir Baranov-Rossine and many leading figures of the pre-revolutionary avant-garde.

Of particular significance in the present context is the 'leftist' art which had come to the fore after the revolution. Despite the preponderance of other trends, the 'leftist groups (Cubists, Suprematists, and Constructivists)', as Shterenberg called them in his foreword, were given reasonable coverage on the second floor of the Van Diemen gallery³⁰. Moreover, according to one eyewitness, they were displayed to advantage: "All the more or less 'rightist' painters are assigned to almost completely dark rooms (or some sort of corridor or hallway)"³¹. On show for the first time ever outside Russia were the non-objective forms of Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism. Particularly striking among the six pieces contributed by the artist was *White on White* of 1918 (no.126, fig.5.3). Here was the visual counterpart of the *Black Quadrilateral on a White Background* (1915) printed on the title page of *Veshch*'s third issue four months earlier: a white square placed at an angle against a background of the same colour in a slightly different tone. Dispensing with colour completely, Malevich attained with this canvas the final stage of pictorial Suprematism, the last step before the move into real space³².

Of course, Malevich's Suprematist paintings were not unknown in Germany. Konstantin Umanskii had referred to *White on White* in *New Art in Russia 1914-1919* and described it as the manifestation of 'the most extreme nihilism in

³⁰ Shterenberg, 'Vorwort: I.', p.4.

³¹ Simon Karlinsky, Jean-Claude Marcadé, 'Boris Poplavski: unpublished notes', *Art International: The Lugano Review*, vol.XVIII, no.5, May 1974, p.63.

³² So he argued in the catalogue of the *Tenth State Exhibition* where white Suprematism was first shown in April 1919: 'I have torn the blue lampshade of colour limitations, and come out into the white; after me, comrades aviators sail into the chasm - I have set up semaphores of Suprematism', Kazimir Malevich, 'Non-objective creation and Suprematism' (1919), in Troels Andersen (ed.), *K.S.*

Russian art'³³. Still, the response of some well-informed Western reviewers suggests that Malevich's canvases were a sensation. Paul Westheim, for instance, commented on the uncompromising and irreversible process of reduction implemented in the Suprematist system:

More and more is eliminated from the picture plane. Anything representational, of course. Then colour itself. There remains just a contrast of black and white: an abstract form, a black square or a black cross on a white background. But this is not the final simplification. Malevich also dispenses with black and paints his 'famous' picture: 'White in [sic] white'. White alone is left on the white background. 'Simplification' has been taken so far that nothing more than an empty white field remains in the white frame. Surely, such intellectual experiment cannot be taken any further³⁴.

Earlier works by Malevich were also on view, such as *The Knife-grinder: Principles of Glittering* of 1912 (no.127, fig.5.4), inspired by Cubism and Futurism, and three Suprematist compositions. In *Suprematism* of 1917 (no.123, 124 or 125, fig.5.5), dynamic coloured forms floated free of gravity in a boundless cosmic space. A sense of how this pictorial language had been harnessed to agitational ends in the post-revolutionary period could be grasped from a cover designed by Malevich for a portfolio for the Congress of Committees on Rural Poverty in October 1918 (no.400, fig.5.6).

A large and prominent Suprematist display accompanied Malevich's canvases. It featured his pupils, like Lev Yudin, Nina Kogan, Vera Ermolaeva, Ivan Klyun and Gustav Klutskis, as well as other Vitebsk students and members of UNOVIS whose names the catalogue did not record. Early followers of Suprematism who had since adapted Malevich's ideas to ends of their own were present too. They

Malevich: Essays on Art 1915-1933 (London: Rapp & Whiting), vol.I, p.122. For Malevich's evolutionary diagram of Suprematism, see Chapter 2.

³³ Konstantin Umanskij, *Neue Kunst in Rußland 1914-1919* (Potsdam: Gustav Kiepenheuer, Munich: Hans Goltz, 1920), p.22.

included Lyubov' Popova, Aleksandr Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova and artists who were already familiar in German circles, e.g. Ivan Puni and El Lissitzky. A close collaborator of Malevich, the former had played a significant rôle in the development of Russian avant-garde art. He had organised the *Tramway V* exhibition of 1915 and financed the show which marked the public debut of Suprematism, *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Pictures 0.10 (Zero-Ten)*. He had left Vitebsk in early 1920, having arrived there as a teacher in January 1919 at the invitation of Chagall. Puni reached in Berlin on 21 October 1920 with his wife, the painter Ksenia Boguslavskaya³⁵. Besides an experience of agitation, he brought with him a substantial knowledge of Suprematism, which won him recognition as a pioneer of Russia's 'radical' art³⁶. Puni's *Composition* of 1920/21 (no.157, fig.5.7) was one of the three paintings and drawings he contributed to the *First Russian Art Exhibition*. Produced in Berlin, it bore less the imprint of Malevich than of Cubism and testified to his gradual return to representational art. Nevertheless, it is perhaps important to note here that in February 1921 Puni's solo exhibition at the Galerie Der Sturm contained 52 non-objective works. The influence of Suprematism, which Puni dismissed as a superficial and transitory movement in 1922, pervaded the drawings, sketches and few reliefs with which he had covered the walls of Herwarth Walden's gallery (fig.5.8). *Sculpture* of 1915 (fig.5.9), whose abstract forms developed in relief from a painted board, is but one example.

By the time the Van Diemen exhibit opened, Lissitzky was no longer an alien in Berlin's art scene. Thanks to his unflagging activity, he had begun to make a name for himself. A few weeks before, six of his works, including four *Prouns*, had been hung in the *Novembergruppe* section of the *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung*

³⁴ P.W., 'Die Ausstellung der Russen', *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol.VI, no.11, November 1922, p.494.

³⁵ Herman Berninger, Jean-Albert Cartier, *Pougny: Catalogue de l'Oeuvre. Les Années d'Avant-Garde, Russie-Berlin, 1910-1923* (Tübingen: 1972), vol.I, p.119.

³⁶ W.E. Groeger, 'Vorwort', *Jwan Puni Petersburg. Gemälde/Aquarelle, Zeichnungen* (Berlin: Der Sturm, 1921), p.2. Puni had actively participated in the street decorations of Petrograd for the 1918 celebrations of May Day and the anniversary of the revolution.

[Great Berlin Art Exhibition]. Texts were now appearing which expounded the theoretical underpinnings of his work³⁷. Critical support was also forthcoming. Thus in September 1922 Ernst Kállai mapped out *Proun's* emergence in *Das Kunstblatt*. Placing Lissitzky within the tradition of 'Constructivism', 'the first shoots [of which] are already to be seen in the works of Cézanne', he explained the main tenets of the *Proun* concept and emphasised its 'tectonic values'³⁸. The *First Russian Art Exhibition* was yet another occasion for exposure. Lissitzky showed ten *Proun* lithographs of 1921 (no.397) and three canvases: *The Town (Proun 1E)* (no.120) and *Proun 2C* (no.121), both of which have been discussed (figs.2.11 and 2.18), and *Proun 19D* of 1921 (no.122, fig.5.10). The use of transparency in the latter painting evoked forms made in plastic and enhanced the ambiguity of the spatial construction. This demonstrated the 'tendency towards an outward movement of form into actual space' underpinning the *Proun* system, as expounded by Kállai³⁹. The malleability of that system and its applicability to various tasks surfaced in ten watercolours (no.399) documenting Lissitzky's designs for Aleksei Kruchenykh's famous Futurist opera, *Victory Over the Sun* (1913); a project which Lissitzky later expanded into a global theory of 'electro-mechanical' theatre⁴⁰.

The anonymous introductory text in the catalogue for the *First Russian Art Exhibition* surveyed the tendencies on view and pointed out that the work of Rodchenko embodied a slightly different approach:

The artistic movements of the left branch out even further: the representatives of one group, completely renouncing the use of canvas, are moving towards *production art* and are producing a whole range of non-objective constructional forms that display no utilitarian characteristics.

³⁷ El Lissitzky, 'PROUN. Nicht Weltvisionen, SONDERN - Weltrealität' (Moscow, 1920), *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V, no.6, June 1922, col.82-85; translated in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, pp.343-44.

³⁸ Ernst Kállai, 'Lissitzky', *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol.VI, no.7, September 1922, pp.296-98; translated in *ibid.*, pp.375-76. The article was illustrated with two *Prouns*.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.376.

Rodchenko belong to this group, and he is represented by his strong Suprematist and Constructivist works⁴¹.

Evidence of the impact of Suprematism on the artist could be seen in the formal vocabulary of *Composition no.66/86* of 1919 (no.163, fig.5.11). At the same time, Rodchenko's early efforts to move beyond Malevich's metaphysical aesthetic were reflected in a painting from the 'black on black' series (no.165). Vying with Malevich's 'white on white' canvases in the momentous *Tenth State Exhibition* of 1919, the black paintings concentrated on purely painterly effects. *Non-Objective Painting: Black on Black* of 1918 (fig.5.12), for example, explored the relationships of highly textured black shapes to the exclusion of every other element, including colour. The painting derived its power solely from the variety of the surface. The canvas *Pure Red Colour* (no.166, fig.5.13), simply covered with the primary colour red, marked the final stage of Rodchenko's systematic investigation of the structural possibilities of painting. Part of the triptych *Pure Red Colour, Pure Yellow Colour, Pure Blue Colour* of 1921, it denied the picture surface any image other than that of the colour spread flatly across it. In doing so, it heralded Rodchenko's farewell to easel painting⁴².

The three-dimensional work that Rodchenko contributed to the display (no.559) was no less revealing of his analytical concerns. One construction and a portion of another are seen hanging above the other exhibits in the top right corner of an installation photograph of the *First Russian Art Exhibition* in the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (fig.5.14). Knowledgeable visitors would have recognised these as two of the abstract structures visible in the view of the May-June 1921

⁴⁰ El Lissitzky, *Die plastische Gestaltung der elektro-mechanischen Schau, Sieg über die Sonne, als Oper gedichtet von A. Krutschonjch, Moskau 1913* (Hanover: Kestner-Gesellschaft, 1923).

⁴¹ 'Zur Einführung', p.13.

⁴² Thus Rodchenko argued in the catalogue of the *5x5=25* exhibition in Moscow in 1921: "1919: At the exhibition *Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism* in Moscow I proclaimed spatial constructions and, in painting, *Black on Black*, for the first time. 1920: At the *Nineteenth State Exhibition* I proclaimed *line* as a factor of construction for the first time. 1921: At this exhibition I have proclaimed the three basic colours in art", quoted in John E. Bowlt (ed.), *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-1934* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), p. xxxvii.

OBMOKhU show published in *Egység* in June 1922, namely Rodchenko's *Hanging Constructions* of 1920-21 (figs.1.12 and 4.13). Altogether, nine of the fourteen participants in the OBMOKhU show also contributed to the *First Russian Art Show*. Aside from Rodchenko, this included Nikolai Denisovskii, Vasilii Komardenkov, A. Perekatov, Nikolai Prusakov, Sergei Svetlov, as well as the other founding members of the OBMOKhU group, Konstantin Medunetskii, Vladimir and Georgii Stenberg, and their Constructivist associate Karl Ioganson. Their names appeared in four of the five catalogue sections. Yet nowhere was their presence as conspicuous as in the field of sculpture. Nearly half of the thirty-three works listed were by Ioganson, Medunetskii, Rodchenko and the Stenberg brothers; in other words by the Constructivist contingent of INKhUK whose 'laboratory work' had formed the highlight of the spring 1921 OBMOKhU show⁴³. Rodchenko's *Hanging Constructions* and Medunetskii's polychrome *Spatial Construction* (no.556), previously examined (fig.4.16), stood amongst twelve other abstract three-dimensional structures or, as the catalogue identified them, 'technological' and 'spatial constructions' by Ioganson and the Stenberg brothers.

Vladimir Tatlin's *Counter-Relief* of 1916-17 (no.569, fig.5.15) complemented this selection. Characteristic of his study of material and *faktura* in constructions, it exemplified the achievements of the older generation. A second relief by one of his followers, Sawjalov (no.562, fig.5.16), indicated the enormous influence exerted by these explorations while the catalogue noted their originality and alluded, not without ambiguity, to their pioneering value for the further development of Russian avant-garde art⁴⁴:

Tatlin, the Constructivist, [...] was the first in Russia to exhibit counter-reliefs, where real materials extend in space from the surface. In the exhibition, Tatlin is represented by non-objective works that constitute a

⁴³ *Erste russische Kunstausstellung*, p.30.

⁴⁴ The latter was erroneously attributed to Tatlin in *Das Kunstblatt* (P.W., 'Die Ausstellung der Russen', p.496). An erratum appeared in *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol.VIII, no.1, January 1924, p.32.

stage in the transition to production art. His Monument to the Third International in Moscow may be regarded as a first step in this direction⁴⁵.

Only two other works by Tatlin were presented; one of which, *Forest* (no.507, fig.5.17), was a set design of 1913-14 for M.I. Glinka's opera, *Ivan Susanin* or *Life of the Tsar*. The production was never realised. Several additional exhibits however documented the fruitful involvement of the avant-garde in theatrical design in the years just before and after the revolution. Aleksandra Ekster's sketches for Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* of 1920-21 (no.305), Georgii Yakulov's designs for Hoffmann's *Brambilla* (no.318) and Natan Al'tman's work on *Uriel' Akosta* of 1921 (no.248, fig.5.18), produced by Granovskii at the Jewish Theatre in Moscow were among these.

According to Hans Richter, the work of Naum Gabo was a focal point of the *First Russian Art Exhibition*. The artist was well-represented, with one 'architectonic design for an electrical station' (no.309) and eight sculptures listed in the catalogue, and overshadowed only by the two other organisers of the event, Shterenberg and Al'tman, who showed sixteen and twelve pieces respectively. Richter cast his mind back to his reaction to Gabo's three-dimensional output:

I clearly remember my first impression [...] A gigantic female nude made of metal sheets stood in the middle of the first room, and a head of similar construction looked down on the nude. They were sculptures that lent spatial dimensions to the object from within, of an audacity and confidence that held me momentarily captive⁴⁶.

The largest of these works, *Torso* of 1917, is seen standing on a pedestal next to Shterenberg on a surviving photograph of the Berlin installation (no.543, fig.5.2). Clearly representational, it was assembled from pieces of sheet iron meticulously cut, shaped and treated with sand. The structure of the sculpture was left open and

⁴⁵ 'Zur Einführung', p.13.

⁴⁶ Richter, *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe*, p.79.

visible, its surface being described only through the edges of the metallic planes and the gaps between them. The relief *Head in a Corner Niche* of 1916-17 (no.544, fig.5.19) also on show was built on the same 'stereometrical method'⁴⁷.

Implicit in such works was the renunciation of volume and mass as essential conditions of sculpture that Gabo and his brother Pevsner had formulated in *The Realistic Manifesto*, published in connection with the outdoor exhibition of their work on Tverskoi Boulevard in Moscow in August 1920. 'We affirm *depth as the only pictorial and plastic form of space*', they proclaimed⁴⁸. The dematerialisation which the implementation of this principle entailed was evident in the abstract *Construction in Relief* of 1919-20 (no.548, fig.5.20). Transparency created new rhythms. The sculpture, open to the play of light, achieved dynamism through the contrasting directions of the lines defined by the edges of the light-reflecting celluloid planes. *Kinetic Construction: Standing Wave* of 1920 (no.550, fig.5.21) shared in the same idea, but advanced one step further: it renounced '*static rhythms as the basic form of our perception of real time*'⁴⁹. Consisting of a steel wire activated by a rotating electric motor concealed in a cuboid base, the sculpture existed through 'kinetic rhythms' alone. Mass was sublimated into virtual volumes. Material solidity disintegrated completely, and time and space, 'the only forms on which life is built and hence art must be constructed', became the new sculptural elements⁵⁰. László Moholy-Nagy's *Space-Light Modulator*, elaborated between 1922 and 1930, is one testament among many to the considerable impact that this new approach to sculpture was to have in the West. In 1929 the Hungarian paid tribute to the break in sculptural development which had occurred with works like *Kinetic Construction* in his book *Von Material zur Architektur*. Until such developments, he argued, volume had been largely

⁴⁷ Naum Gabo, 'Sculpture: carving and constructing in space', in *Gabo, Constructions, Sculpture, Paintings, Drawings, Engravings* (London: Lund Humphries, 1957), p.168.

⁴⁸ N. Gabo, Noton Pevsner, *Realisticheskii manifest* [The realistic manifesto] (Moscow, 5 August 1920); translated in Bann (ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, p.10. The text was written by Gabo and co-signed by his brother.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.10.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.11.

impenetrable. The advent of kinetic sculpture, however, had initiated a transformation of the 'original phenomenon of sculpture', a paradigmatic shift which he summarised with the equation:

sculpture = material + mass relations, changes to the dematerialised and highly intellectualised formula: sculpture = volume relationships⁵¹.

5.3. The catalogue

Though only a limited sample, the works that have been surveyed give an indication of the variety of visual experiences available in the *First Russian Art Exhibition*. Given this diversity and the unprecedented character of such a display in the West, the catalogue assumed a particular function in enlightening the general public, who at best had little knowledge of contemporary Russian art. This task fell mainly upon the foreword and the 'Introduction'. Here, as in the display, the emphasis was on 'the new Russia'⁵². Shterenberg maintained: 'The Revolution threw open new avenues for Russia's creative forces. It gave the artist the opportunity to carry his ideas into the streets and squares and thus to enrich his vision with new ideas'⁵³. The result, he argued, was a profound transformation of the practice of art to adapt it to the new collective ethos and participate in the process of socialist construction:

The decoration of towns, so changed by the Revolution, and the demands of the new architecture naturally called into existence new forms of creation and construction. The most important of these changes was that each artist

⁵¹ László Moholy-Nagy, *Von Material zu Architektur* (Munich: Albert Langen, 1929); translated as *The New Vision: From Material to Architecture* (New York: Brewer, Warren & Putnam, 1932). Gabo's *Kinetic Construction* was reproduced p.156 (ill.141). Moholy-Nagy quoted from *The Realist Manifesto* (p.162) and referred to it as a model for the manifesto he published together with Alfred Kemény published in 1922, Alfred Kemény, László Moholy-Nagy, 'Dynamisch-konstruktives Kraftsystem', *Der Sturm*, Berlin, no.13, December 1922, p.186.

⁵² 'Zur Einführung', p.10.

⁵³ Sterenberg, 'Vorwort: I.', p.3.

no longer worked for himself alone, stuck away in a corner, but sought the closest contact with the people [...] They were no longer content with canvas, they rejected the stone coffins that passed for houses, and they fought to reshape the environment for the new society⁵⁴.

The catalogue's cover effectively reinforced and illustrated this last point (fig.5.22). Lissitzky's large sans serif types, printed in two colours, combined in a powerful orthogonal composition which aptly demonstrated the efforts made by the avant-garde to carry out a radical reconstruction of the appearance of printed books, as well as Russia's advance in the field.

It is important at this point to consider the coherence of the message conveyed by the catalogue. Like *Veshch'*, this publication has often been criticised for the inaccuracy of its contents⁵⁵. The 'Introduction' gave an overview of the different tendencies exhibited and contained useful information to understand the paths along which artists had ventured since the First World War. Such was the case for Malevich and his followers:

Their paintings are based on rhythms of abstract planes that, according to Suprematist theory, have their own precise laws; it is from these that the great non-objective movement has developed. Our Suprematists exhibit a whole range of simple forms: circles, squares, and the rhythmic play of these elements in the canvas⁵⁶.

In comparison, a relatively vague account of the most recent endeavours of the Soviet avant-garde was given. As has been pointed out, the text alluded to 'a transition to *production art*' in connection with Tatlin's *Model for a Monument to the Third International*, the work of Rodchenko and his Constructivist associates. The notion of production art, however, was nowhere defined. Nor was the context

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.3-4.

⁵⁵ For instance, Eberhard Steneberg, *Russische Kunst Berlin 1919-1932* (Berlin: Gebr. Mann Verlag, 1969), p.19.

⁵⁶ 'Zur Einführung', p.12.

in which it had developed; though there was a reference to the decision of 'one group' to abandon easel painting and to a move towards the creation of 'a kind of architectonic utilitarian construction'⁵⁷. The somewhat misleading use of labels did not help to clarify the situation: Gabo, whose *Realistic Manifesto* had been published in 1920 as a reaction against the extreme functionalism and political dedication of the emerging productivist credo, was described as standing 'parallel to the Constructivists'⁵⁸.

This muddled framework could only exacerbate the confusion which prevailed in publications in Germany with regard to Russian Constructivism and was evident, for example, in the catalogue to Puni's solo exhibition at the Galerie Der Sturm, where W.E. Groeger drew attention to the 'constructivist' past of the artist⁵⁹. Extracted mainly from collections created by the Soviet state in the post-revolutionary years, the exhibits of the *First Russian Art Show* predated the emergence of Constructivism proper. By 1922, Rodchenko, Ioganson, Medunetskii and the Stenberg brothers had rejected all but utilitarian goals and relinquished any self-sufficient pursuit of art in favour of 'the communistic expression of materialist structures'⁶⁰. However, the three-dimensional pieces with which they were represented in Berlin had been conceived as neither useful objects nor industrial products. They were the fruit of an analytical research into material and the formal elements of construction undertaken with the ultimate purpose of building a theoretical basis for all future production. As the 'Introduction' noted, they displayed 'no utilitarian characteristics'⁶¹. While they were not meant to be read as works of art, there was nothing to suggest that they were not to be perceived as such, particularly in the context of an art exhibition. The cumulative effect was one of misrepresentation. The specific stance of the Constructivists was not clearly displayed. More precisely, the ideological postulates which had informed their

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.13.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ Groeger, 'Vorwort', p.3.

⁶⁰ 'Programme of the First Working Group of Constructivists' (March 1921); translated in *Art into Life: Russian Constructivism 1914-1932* (New York: Rizzoli International Inc., 1990), p.67.

move into production in 1921 were obscured. Consequently, Western observers were given no adequate tool for constructing a perception of the social and political implications Russian Constructivism that would have supplemented the information hitherto available, and put it into perspective⁶².

Veshch' had provided Erenburg and Lissitzky with both an opportunity to act as a mouthpiece for Russian Constructivism and a compelling medium to assert themselves in Western circles. The *First Russian Art Exhibition* held a similar potential for self-definition and -promotion. This clearly did not escape the organisers. One visitor observed discontentedly:

The unfairness of the artist-organisers is everywhere glaringly present. About that there can be no argument. Many artists are represented by uncharacteristically poor works, and many (a great many) are completely absent [...] Al'tman is exhibited (and quite fully) in four aspects of his work [...] and in the very best rooms⁶³

Shterenberg, Gabo and Al'tman did not merely stand out markedly by the number of works they displayed, their idiosyncratic response to the post-revolutionary redefinition of art was the object of particular scrutiny in the catalogue. Al'tman was presented as having inaugurated 'yet another branch of non-figurative art', Gabo as having 'revolutionised sculpture'⁶⁴. Shterenberg profited by an equally special treatment:

As opposed to the Suprematists, the painter Shterenberg demonstrates in his works that a painting can be organised in a purely painterly manner without, however, becoming non-objective. He is the first to build up the painting in contrasting strokes, depicting the basic form of an object in such

⁶¹ 'Zur Einführung', p.13.

⁶² Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), pp.229-30.

⁶³ Karlinsky, Marcadé, 'Boris Poplavski', p.63.

⁶⁴ 'Zur Einführung', p.13.

a way that it suggest reality, and in doing so he displays the concentrated pictorial content of this object⁶⁵.

Given this focus, it is perhaps not surprising that the 'Introduction' failed to elucidate the strategies implemented by the Constructivists to infuse social power into their creative activity. The text was very similar to an article on 'the artistic situation in Russia' published by Shterenberg in *Das Kunstblatt* in November 1922 as a commentary on the *First Russian Art Exhibition*⁶⁶. Here the head of IZO expanded upon the ideas advanced in the catalogue. He chronicled the achievements of the artists of the 'left' and yet, showed scepticism about the eventual outcome of certain undertakings. Hence the efforts of Malevich and his followers to further the architectonic aspirations of revolutionary Russia were deemed 'purely decorative'⁶⁷. More obliquely, Shterenberg condemned the 'mysticism' and lack of mathematical and technical rigor apparent in Tatlin's *Model for a Monument to the Third International*⁶⁸. He asserted the cardinal importance of utilitarian imperatives in the development of post-revolutionary art and stressed his own dedication to fulfilling them. He nevertheless expressed no doubts as to the possible existence of easel painting parallel to a committed creation fully integrated into the productive process, indicating that his attitude was far more moderate than that of the Constructivists.

What the catalogue's 'Foreword' and 'Introduction' lacked in order to foster an understanding of the external forces to which the Moscow avant-garde was subject, was in part contained in a third text by Arthur Holitscher, the author of *Three Months in Soviet Russia*. The left-wing journalist claimed the artist possessed a precocious ability to perceive and express the social conditions of contemporary reality. Hence he urged visitors to approach the revolutionary art of Russia with an open mind: 'Art conceived at such a time is worthy of

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ D. Sterenberg, 'Die künstlerische Situation in Rußland (Zur Ausstellung in der Galerie van Diemen, Berlin)', *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol. VI, no. 11, November 1922, pp. 485-92.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 487.

consideration and study'⁶⁹. Its significance lay in the fact that it was not the product of yet another 'studio revolution', soon to be 'sucked down into bourgeois society' and 'become the object of the wiles of the commercial world'. Rather, the works on view reflected of 'the gigantic choir of the people's triumphant spirit, the natural urge of the spirit to rise upward from the primeval depths towards the light of delivered humanity'⁷⁰. They conveyed a political force and had a messianic quality:

The art of the Revolution is the Revolution. It carries forward the seed of great and total revolution. It will create new laws for evaluation. Pouring forth from pure springs, it will teach a new aesthetic: to subject oneself to the eternal will of world change, whose visible manifestation is social revolution⁷¹.

It is debatable whether the catalogue's readers appreciated such injunctions or what effect they had, if any. They were certainly consonant with the propagandist intent of the exhibition's organisers; that is, to win the intelligentsia of the West to the cause of Soviet Russia.

5.4. Critical response

There is much discussion about the success of the *First Russian Art Exhibition*. In an interview of early 1923, Shterenberg claimed that it had attracted more than fifteen thousand visitors, with peaks of over five hundred people on Sundays⁷². There is evidence, however, that attendance may actually have been considerably less. Georgii Lukomskii, who visited the exhibition on its fifteenth day, was given

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.488.

⁶⁹ A. Holitscher, 'Vorwort: III.' (Berlin, October 1922), *Erste russische Kunstausstellung*, pp.6-9; translated in Bann (ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, p.74.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Nakov, "The last exhibition which was the 'first'", *The First Russian Art Show*, p.44.

ticket number 1697. He described the success of the event as 'moderate'⁷³. It is worth pondering upon this judgement. For, indeed, the *First Russian Art Exhibition* served several functions. Considering the alleged reason for mounting the exhibition, the question arises as to whether any money was actually raised to provide relief to famine sufferers in Russia. As has been noted, the Dutch showing benefited from additional pieces collected by Shterenberg in Moscow in late December 1922. On the other hand, a small number of works never reached Amsterdam: these included items sold in Berlin to Katherine Dreier and the directors of the Van Diemen gallery, Kurt Benedikt and Eduard Plietzsch. Malevich's *Knife-grinder* (no.127), Lissitzky's *Proun 19D* (no.122), Medunetskii's *Spatial Construction* (no.556), works by Udaltsova (no.235), Popova, Ekster and a few others thus remained in the West past the close of the Van Diemen exhibit and its return from Amsterdam to Moscow⁷⁴. Their purchase by Western patrons was no doubt of great consequence for the recognition of Russian avant-garde art in the West. Yet it hardly seems to be sufficient justification for Shterenberg's assertion that the show had been a huge commercial success⁷⁵.

More significant in the present context is that the *First Russian Art Exhibition* caused much ink to flow, especially about the non-objective work of the avant-garde. Opinions varied, but most reviewers welcomed the possibility of seeing at first hand the emergent artistic culture of Soviet Russia. Adolf Behne delighted at a show challenging what he called '(mistaken) German exhibits of modern Russian art'. He argued:

In no sense is Kandinskii's abstract painting the last word in Russian painting. The leading rôle has not been played by Kandinskii, still less by Chagall (who has a very weak painting on display here), but by the

⁷³ Georgii Lukomskii, 'Russkaya vystavka v Berline (Pis'mo iz Berlina)' [The Russian exhibition in Berlin (Letter from Berlin)], *Argonavty*, Petrograd, no.1, 1923, p.68; quoted in Adkins, 'Erste russische Kunstaustellung', p.193.

⁷⁴ Adkins, 'Erste russische Kunstaustellung', pp.193-94.

⁷⁵ Cited in Nakov, "The last exhibition which was the 'first'", p.44.

constructivists, the splendidly represented Malevich, Rodchenko, Lissitzky, and Tatlin, Al'tman, and Gabo⁷⁶.

However successful the latter artists were eventually pronounced, the originality and inventiveness of their work was almost unanimously acknowledged. 'This was an art of new names, new ideas and new results, which went far beyond what we expected', recounted Hans Richter⁷⁷. Erich Buchholz concurred, finding that, 'dramatically, German Expressionism was simply brushed aside and the parallel position of the Suprematists became apparent'⁷⁸. Sophie Küppers noted:

My eye was assailed by a great harmony of contrasts as if an optical orchestra were playing with tremendous violence. An intoxicating blaze of colour was like a counterpoint for the stark structures of cold steel. The treatment of colour [...] created dissonances undreamed of by the European lover of art; unusual shapes derived from the latest techniques alternated with colours which in this juxtaposition seemed inexplicable; opposites fused to release a natural power, so that their union seemed refreshing and obvious. We were accustomed to the notes of the colour scale being played on muted strings! The effect produced here was one of freshness, like a folksong, uninhibited, natural and pure [...] There was something new [...] - something which hitherto I never encountered in European art⁷⁹.

Malevich was among the contributors who attracted most interest. Although Cubism was identified as one of the formal impulses behind the evolution of Suprematism, its essence was not always grasped, as evidenced by one review where no distinction was made between Malevich's abstract system of

⁷⁶ Adolf Behne, 'Der Staatsanwalt schützt das Bild', *Die Weltbühne*, Berlin, vol.XVIII, zweites Halbjahr, no.47, 23 November 1922, p.546; translated in Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, Edward Dimenberg (eds.), *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), p.232.

⁷⁷ Richter, *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe*, p.97.

⁷⁸ Erich Buchholz, 'Die große Zäsur, 1922/53', in Mo Buchholz, Eberhard Roters, *Erich Buchholz* (Berlin: Ars Nikolai, 1993), p.68.

⁷⁹ Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.12.

representation and that of Kandinskii⁸⁰. Better informed observers, like Paul Westheim, were less confounded yet somewhat troubled by the strong intellectual dimension displayed by Suprematism and the 'leftist' avant-garde as a whole:

There is no disputing that the moving force here is the intellect. It is not all but still, there is a great deal of brainwork [...] This impression is only reinforced when one begins to discuss with one of these artists. They have an inclination towards principles which often escalates to dogmatism, even scholasticism⁸¹.

The editor of *Das Kunstblatt* considered the *First Russian Art Exhibition* was 'not so much an exhibition of art as [...] of artistic problems'⁸². The explanation for this lay in the unique context of Russian history: engaged in a process of global revolution, Soviet Russia was determined to subvert tradition at every level. As a result, artistic creation benefited from 'a freedom and audacity that Europe had not known in centuries'⁸³. He commented on the 'fanaticism' and 'fervour' with which artistic conventions were systematically discarded and new answers to elementary questions sought:

For instance, colour is not yet a means of expression, it is regarded as a material, as a study material [...] Rodchenko coats a small square - evenly, skilfully - with a shiny pure red [...] The point is to clarify the textural value of such a surface⁸⁴.

Rodchenko's *Pure Colour Red* and Malevich's *White on White* were regarded as 'experiments' which had little to do with 'art in the Western sense of the word'⁸⁵. Westheim avowed that this was enough to bewilder 'a connoisseur like Friedlander', 'an amateur like the old Vollard' or anyone viewing the works 'from

⁸⁰ Curt Bauer, 'Berliner Ausstellungen', *Der Cicerone*, Leipzig, vol.XIV, no.21, November 1922, p.869.

⁸¹ P.W., 'Die Ausstellung der Russen', p.498.

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.493.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.498.

the height of Western artistic culture'⁸⁶. Nevertheless, he insisted on the immense possibilities inherent in such investigation. Its potential, he argued, had yet to be realised, just like Soviet Russia's new economic and social order. Therein lay the disappointment of the visitor to the *First Russian Art Exhibition*: the display contained no indication of where this enquiry into the fundamentals of artistic practice was leading Russian progressive artists. In other words, the Van Diemen show gave no answer to the questions it posed. Westheim conceded that Russian revolutionary art was still in an early stage and that the accomplishments of the avant-garde within a few years were already considerable, given the enormous difficulties. He concluded:

It will soon be known whether [the Russians] have more to say than to show; whether their theories and views, their manifestos and programmes, their arguments and theses are more instructive than such an exhibition⁸⁷.

The sentiment that Soviet Russia's cultural vanguard was engaged in a primarily intellectual research, whose practical consequences were still to be felt, was shared by other German critics, among them Fritz Stahl who described the work of the Russians as 'mental acrobatics' and considered that 'in this entire art there is nothing really revolutionary'⁸⁸. Writing in *Der Cicerone*, Curt Bauer reported that Russian revolutionary art had undertaken 'to carry all the modern theories of art to extremes'⁸⁹. P. Landau commented in a similar vein that the Russians were 'fanatically in love with theorisation'⁹⁰. Experimentation and theoretical exploration were evidently perceived as the rationale for the spatial constructions displayed on the second floor of the gallery which, together with

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.497.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.498.

⁸⁸ Fritz Stahl, 'Russische Kunstausstellung. Galerie van Diemen', *Berliner Tageblatt*, Berlin, Abendausgabe, 18 October 1922, n.p.

⁸⁹ Bauer, 'Berliner Ausstellungen', p.869.

⁹⁰ See in Myroslav M. Mudrak, Virginia Hagelstein Marquardt, 'Environments of propaganda: Russian and Soviet expositions and pavilions in the West', in *The Avant-Garde Frontier: Russia meets the West, 1919-1930* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 1992), p.70.

Suprematism, attracted a great deal of attention. Westheim found little to like in this "so-called 'production art'". Having observed those 'constructions in metal, wood and other materials that were neither engineering structures nor art and crafts', he noted laconically: "'Construction' is another concept of the aesthetic discussions of the last decades that one has tried to take literally"⁹¹. He cited Lissitzky's *Prouns*, Tatlin's counter-reliefs and those artists who 'worked with real materials' as telling examples. According to the critic, they illustrated the 'hatred of painting' which prevailed amongst the youngest generations; and their borrowing of materials, forms and constructional devices from modern technology was a symptom of 'engineering romanticism'⁹². Similarly, Bauer asserted that the 'so-called Constructivists' attempted to 'materialise the laws of mechanics' in their 'laboratory art'⁹³.

In *Das Kunstblatt* Shterenberg specified that those artists who, in the wake of the *Model for a Monument to the Third International*, had endeavoured to subject the creative process to rational and instrumentalist principles, were now shifting their attention to the production process itself and the redefinition of useful daily objects: 'books, furniture and other things'⁹⁴. With no concrete sign of such a transition visible in the exhibit, there remains the question as to whether the public fully apprehended the social base of the Russians' work. In a general discussion in *Die Welthühne*, Adolf Behne examined the theoretical ramifications of the sublation of the image concomitant with the advent of Suprematism:

The question is no longer whether the suprematist image is a better or more beautiful image than the impressionist image; rather the question is whether the image as such can continue to supply us with an accepted, fruitful area of work. The image itself is in crisis - not because a couple of painters thought this up but because the modern individual has experienced

⁹¹ P.W., 'Die Ausstellung der Russen', p.497

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Bauer, 'Berliner Ausstellungen', p.869.

⁹⁴ Shterenberg, 'Die künstlerische Situation in Rußland', p.488.

changes in intellectual structure that alienate one from the image. The image is an aesthetic matter whereas what the radical artists of all nations want is to lend immediate form to reality itself (the Russians call it production art). Soviet Russia was the first to recognise the possibilities inherent in this great new goal and give it free rein [...] The Constructivists forsake [the image as an artistic experiment] in order to find a new level of general expression through the forming of reality (flats, houses, towns and so on)⁹⁵.

Another critic comprehended this concern with social utility, yet questioned the coherence of the artistic strategies deployed in order to respond to the need for authentically productive work: 'Here is not yet a question of achievements, but of preliminary stages in the creation of a grammar for a new artistic esperanto'⁹⁶. He regretted that 'a naive inspiration to build, to construct things' had led the Russians to 'a primitive copying of machinery and architecture in their art' and wrote:

Essentially the Russian Constructivists should have been sufficiently consistent to draw the ultimate conclusion and in the place of useless aesthetic games to have entered into practical work; and instead of constructing likenesses of machines to have become workers-productivists creating genuine machines⁹⁷.

So, while there was some understanding of the direction taken by Russia's most radical artists to satisfy the mandate of revolutionary work, there seemed to be no awareness that, by 1922, they had already made substantial efforts to demonstrate their potential capabilities as designers of Russia's new reality by implementing practically a link with industry⁹⁸.

⁹⁵ Behne, 'Der Staatsanwalt schützt das Bild', pp.546-47.

⁹⁶ Quoted in Ya. Tugendkhol'd, 'Russkoe iskusstvo zagranitsei. Russkaya khudozhestvennaya vystvka v Berline' [Russian art abroad. Russian art exhibition in Berlin], *Russkoe iskusstvo*, Petrograd, no.1, 1923; translated in Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p.230.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁹⁸ Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, p.233.

In the light of the Hungarians' familiarity with Russian issues, it is interesting that they were among the most vigorous in their condemnation of the 'laboratory art' staged at the Van Diemen gallery. For Lajos Kassák, the focus of the show was clearly Malevich's Suprematism, the 'first self-confident' accomplishment of Russian art. He asserted:

Suprematism has drawn the final conclusions of painting and has opened the way towards evolution. Malevich is the purest representative of Suprematism. And it was from his roots that the Constructivists and Objectivists have started out [...] Of all the genres represented in the exhibition, painting undoubtedly takes the first place. In this field, the Russians have brought new vigour and new cultural possibilities to Europe. And for themselves too, it is painting which shows the road to follow to achieve their ideal, the new human ideal, and the constructive forms of life⁹⁹.

In comparison, the editor of *MA* was not impressed by 'the endeavours to create spatial constructions with some utilitarian purpose'. He dismissed the Constructivists' sculptures as 'naive and modest works', arguing that 'in an age of 120 km per hour locomotives, heavy-weight cranes and immense bridges they appear as superfluous playthings, as intuitive and without scientific foundation'. Gabo alone escaped this biting criticism. Kassák felt his work was more interesting, though it still 'lacked materiality' and merely represented 'the framework of future creations'¹⁰⁰.

Alfred Kemény's praise of Suprematism was more moderate. He too stressed the historical significance of that movement. He acknowledged that it was a 'milestone' in the evolution from an individualistic to a collective ethos both in art and society, but added:

⁹⁹ Lajos Kassák, 'A berlini orosz kiállításához' [On the Russian exhibition in Berlin], *MA*, Vienna, vol. VIII, no. 2/3, 25 December 1922, pp. 4-8; translated in *Berliner Begegnungen*, pp. 78-79.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

[Suprematism's] metaphysical dynamism is now just as obsolete an artistic worldview as Futurism, of which, in fact, it is a continuation; for [Suprematism] has not exploited the 'building' possibilities of the square as a two-dimensional basic form in its second phase of development¹⁰¹.

Kemény however applauded the 'real path' taken by the Russian Constructivists, i.e. their manipulation of industrial materials in real space in agreement with socially determined goals. 'Constructivism is the right path', he proclaimed. Nevertheless, he reproached the Russians for falling into the trap of 'technological naturalism' and placing their constructions within a physical space 'without also attempting to define that space'. Hungarian Constructivism, he asserted confidently, had advanced one step further. Kemény concluded that the exhibition could have had an extraordinary impact, had it confined itself to Suprematist and Constructivist works. Unfortunately, the presence of less progressive trends belied the 'Constructivist intentions' which prevailed at this point in Russia's avant-garde circles¹⁰².

Disappointment with the works assembled in the *First Russian Art Exhibition* was not peculiar to Hungarian visitors. Reviewers almost invariably condemned the eclecticism of the show, though, as intended by the organisers, at least one saw this to be a sign of tolerance on the part of Soviet Russia¹⁰³. Shterenberg himself admitted that uncharacteristically mediocre works had sometimes been picked, which certainly did not pass unnoticed¹⁰⁴. He explained in *Das Kunstblatt* that 'an exhibition of paintings and constructive works' could not exclusively concentrate on Russia's recent artistic developments, nor convey 'the enormous impact that they had had on the masses during the Revolution'. However, it could indicate 'the

¹⁰¹ Alfréd Kemény, 'Jegyzétek az orosz művészet berlini kiállítás'ához' [Notes on the Russian artists' exhibition in Berlin], *Egység*, Berlin, no.4, 10 February 1923, p.12; translated in Hubertus Gassner (ed.), *Wechselwirkungen: Ungarische Avantgarde in der Weimarer Republik* (Marburg: Jonas Gassner Verlag, 1986), p.232.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, p.233.

¹⁰³ Bauer, 'Berliner Kunstausstellung', p.869.

¹⁰⁴ See for instance Karlinsky, Marcadé, 'Boris Poplavski', p.63 and, with regard to Kandinskii, Bauer, 'Berliner Ausstellungen', p.869.

extraordinary number of artistic schools' that existed in the country¹⁰⁵. In doing precisely this, Ernő Kállai observed, the *First Russian Art Exhibition* obscured the best achievements of Russian vanguard artists. Moreover, it failed to call attention to the revolutionary will that defined the new Russian art. Kállai deplored the diplomatic aspirations that had led to such a compromise:

It was not evident that this exhibition had arrived in the luxury of the Unter den Linden from a country fighting and suffering from Communism [...] What the Russian exhibition showed in determination was merely tactics. It seems that Lunacharskii and the others do not want to frighten away the bourgeois visitors to the exhibition, this is why they refrained from stressing the revolutionary aspect¹⁰⁶.

The significance Lunacharskii accorded to this was made explicit in an essay published in December 1922. He judged the presence of 'leftist' art too strong, the organisation too hasty, and regretted that too many crucial works and artists had been excluded. Like Shterenberg, he recognised the uneven quality of the exhibits and maintained that, with few exceptions, there were 'no paintings of a true quality' to be seen¹⁰⁷. Yet he was satisfied with the political impact of the event and its popularity; quoting at length from enthusiastic reviews in the German and French press.

* * *

The *First Russian Art Exhibition* generated a good deal of discussion among Germans and, just as importantly, Russian émigrés. Ivan Puni talked on the new

¹⁰⁵ Shterenberg, 'Die künstlerische Situation in Rußland', pp.485-86.

¹⁰⁶ Ernő Kállai, 'A berlini orosz kiállítás' [The Russian exhibition], *Azkaszott Ember*, Vienna, no.5, 15 February 1923; translated in Tania Frank (ed.), *Vision und Formgesetz* (Leipzig and Weimar: Kiepenheuer, 1986), pp.26-29.

¹⁰⁷ Anatolii Lunacharskii, 'L'esposizione russa a Berlino', *Rassegna Sovietica*, no.1, 1965, p.111.

Russian art at the House of Arts on 3 November 1922, paying special attention to Kandinskii and Malevich¹⁰⁸. Il'ya Erenburg recalls the agitation which ensued: 'A storm broke out [...]; Archipenko, Al'tman, Shklovsky, Mayakovskii, Gabo, Lissitzky and I argued furiously'¹⁰⁹. It is significant that scathing comments by Viktor Shklovsky about the works of Al'tman were one pretext for the heated dispute, for the exhibition was unquestionably a stepping stone for those contributors who were in the limelight as well as physically present in Berlin to explain and defend their work. Shterenberg and Al'tman's paintings were amongst the most widely discussed and reproduced. Both artists later published in local periodicals¹¹⁰. Gabo, who had hitherto exhibited only once, benefited equally from the show. In fact, it marked the beginning of a long and influential Western-based career. For others, like Lissitzky, who had some experience of the Berlin scene, the display was an opportunity to attract further attention. Sophie Küppers, 'fascinated by Lissitzky's works, obtained [his] address from the office at the exhibition in the hope that it would be possible to show this new art' in Hanover¹¹¹. A personal exhibition at the Kestner-Gesellschaft and two portfolios of lithographs followed in 1923.

While it is easy to exaggerate the influence of the non-objective canvases and three-dimensional constructions displayed at 21 Unter den Linden, it should be noted that their reverberation was amplified by their diffusion in prominent art journals like *Das Kunstblatt*, *MA* and others. Overall, it is clear that public reaction focused less on the ideological issues underpinning such works and more on their

¹⁰⁸ Thomas R. Beyer Jr., 'The House of Arts and the Writers' Club. Berlin 1921-1923', in Thomas R. Beyer Jr., Gottfried Kratz, Xenia Werner, *Russische Autoren und Verlage in Berlin nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg* (Berlin: A. Spitz, 1987), pp.27-28.

¹⁰⁹ Ilya Ehrenburg, *Men, Years-Life*. Truce: 1921-33 (London: Macgibbon & Kee, 1963), vol.III, p.20.

¹¹⁰ For instance, David Shterenberg, 'Brief aus Rußland', *Das Kunstblatt*; Berlin, vol.VIII, no.11, November 1923, pp.331-33, Nathan Altman, "Das plastische Element in Theaterdekorationen des städtischen jüdischen Kammerspieltheaters in Moskau ('Anlässlich der Russischen Kunstausstellungen bei Van Diemen in Berlin')", *Kunstchronik und Kunstmarkt*, no.9, 1 December 1922, pp.103-05 and Nathan Altmann, 'Elementare Gesichtspunkte', *G, Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.3, June 1924, pp.35-36.

¹¹¹ Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.11.

formal innovations and aesthetic qualities. In this respect, the existing picture of Russia's post-revolutionary creative endeavours in Germany, especially of Constructivism as an industrially-inspired art tending to non-figurative geometric forms, was left relatively unchanged. The fact that some of the artists, including Malevich and Gabo, who attracted considerable interest were estranged in their artistic ideals from the political alignments and radicalism of the movement only further distracted the West's attention. Kassák perhaps best summarised the situation when he noted that, as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Gorky had opened new, peculiarly Russian perspectives and brought a 'profoundly constructive faith' to a 'dandyish, old Europe' a decade earlier, so the *First Russian Art Show* heralded the entry of a potent 'Asian force' into the Berlin art world:

In Berlin, one exhibition devours the other, with shapes winding and colours shrieking. And into this intricate, gaudy confusion, the Russians have brought back the primitive source of colours and the straight line of purity and power¹¹².

Progressive artists found significant inspiration and a validation of their own aspirations. Formal echoes of the impulses manifest in the most advanced items of the *First Russian Art Exhibition* can be seen in the teaching of László Moholy-Nagy's *Vorkurs* [preliminary course] at the Bauhaus from spring 1923 onwards and the theoretical writings supplementing it, as well as in the output of Western artists like Hans Richter and Kurt Schwitters. Had the show featured such milestones of Russian avant-garde art as Malevich's *Black Quadrilateral* and Tatlin's *Model for a Monument to the Third International*, and had it followed immediately on the heels of Germany's revolutionary hopes and of the contacts initiated by IZO's International Bureau in late 1918, the impact might have been greater. There are nevertheless grounds for arguing that the materialisation of the project at the peak of the Russian presence in Berlin gave it more exposure. Indeed, a determining factor in the assimilation of Russian influences in Germany

was undoubtedly that the *First Russian Art Exhibition* coincided with several moves to achieve collaboration between East and West and codify International Constructivism, and this favourably influenced the receptivity of the German avant-garde.

¹¹² Kassák, 'On the Russian exhibition in Berlin', p. 79.

Chapter 6: Constructivist alliances and publications

The four years preceding the Van Diemen show had been punctuated by repeated efforts to establish a national and international axis for artistic co-operation, beginning with calls for unity spurred on by the end of the First World War and ensuing revolutionary events. Common goals were perceived in Russia, Germany and other European countries. To a significant part of the avant-garde, this shared ground was now to be reckoned with. The mood was one of consensus, so that, for a short while, Germany became the stronghold of internationalism and German cities the scene of precarious alliances, shifting allegiances and heated arguments.

Avant-garde periodicals, when they did not spring directly from such interactions, were the prime site for the manifestos and counter-manifestos which validated them. If one is to understand the dynamics of early Constructivist groupings on German soil, it must be through these publications and the various anthologies that supplemented them, for it was there that artists carried out discussion, synchronised their positions and disagreed. In turn this literature indicates how Russian influences were absorbed. Perhaps regrettably, it also serves to demonstrate how little uniformity of opinion there was within the Constructivist contingent and how the prevailing trend towards collective utopianism soon succumbed to a polarisation of interests and the pursuit of parallel yet distinct trajectories.

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6.1. A call for elemental art

In October 1921 a brief manifesto entitled 'Aufruf zur elementaren Kunst' [Call for Elemental Art], appeared in *De Stijl*¹. Signed by Hans Arp, Raoul Hausmann, László Moholy-Nagy and Ivan Puni, it was a sign of the tolerant working climate so unique to Berlin and a foretaste of the artists' congresses that were to take place in Düsseldorf and Weimar the following year. For the first time, four figures from different wings of the avant-garde were gathered under the aegis of Theo van Doesburg: a representative of Zurich Dada, a former Berlin Dadaist, the Berlin correspondent of the Hungarian journal *MA* and one of the first converts to Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism. In a fashion that was by then customary, the 'Call for Elemental Art' addressed 'all the artists of the world'. Couched in very general terms, it demanded an art that was both a product and symbol of the spirit of the time:

Art is actually the consequences of all the forces of an era. We live in the present, and therefore we postulate the consequence of our era, in an art that cannot derive from ourselves, one that did not exist before us and shall not be when we are gone - not as some changing fashion but out of the recognition that art is eternally new and does not stop at the consequences of the past².

Hausmann, who has claimed sole authorship, had already contributed to *De Stijl*³. The previous issue contained his first Presentist manifesto, 'PRÉsentismus gegen den Puffkeismus der teutschen Seele' [PRÉsentism against the Puffkeism

¹ R. Hausmann, Hans Arp, Iwan Puni, Maholy-Nagy, 'Aufruf zur elementaren Kunst' (Berlin, October 1921), *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.IV, no.10, October 1921, col.156; translated in Krisztina Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1985), p.286.

² *Ibid.*

³ John Elderfield, 'On the Dada-Constructivist axis', *Dada/Surrealism*, no.13, 1984, p.12 and n.18, p.16.

(philistinism) of the Teutonic soul]⁴. The two texts show frequent similarities: 'Let us sweep away all the old prejudices, the prejudice that there has been something good yesterday or that there will be something better tomorrow. No! Let us grab every second of the present'⁵. Hausmann argued that man had been '*completely changed, not only because we have the telephone and aeroplane and electric piano or the turret lathe, but because our whole psychological and physical constitution has been altered by the experience*'⁶. As a result, individual complacency and values such as 'psychology' and beauty had become antiquated: 'we must be completely disrespectful, the most beautiful past should not bind us'⁷. The artist was neither to look back on tradition ('plagiarism', 'naive anthropomorphism') nor ahead into the future. His task was '*the elevation of the so-called sciences and arts to the level of the present*'⁸. Hausmann declared, before extolling the beauty which 'arises during the course of production', technology and film: 'We are striving for conformity with the mechanised process: we must accustom ourselves to seeing art created in workshops!'⁹

The 'Call for Elemental Art' likewise insisted on the artist's duty to minimise his subjective response to surrounding reality, for 'the individual is no isolated entity and the artist is but an exponent of the forces that give shape to the elements of the world'¹⁰. However, the signatories posited an alternative approach:

We commit ourselves to elemental art. Art is elemental when, rather than philosophising, it constructs itself out of the elements that belong solely to it¹¹.

⁴ Raoul Hausmann, 'PRÉsentismus gegen den Puffkeismus der teutschen Seele' (Berlin, February 1921), *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.IV, no.9, September 1921, col.136-43; reprinted in Hungarian translation in *MA*, Vienna, vol.VII, no.3, 1 February 1922, pp.42-43.

⁵ *Ibid.*, col.137.

⁶ *Ibid.*, col.139.

⁷ *Ibid.*, col.138.

⁸ *Ibid.*, col.142.

⁹ *Ibid.*, col.139.

¹⁰ 'Aufruf zur elementaren Kunst', col.156.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

Part of the impetus behind this concept, somewhat too cursorily and unsatisfactorily defined, was the Suprematist reduction of painting to the intrinsic elements of form, colour and texture channelled to Berlin by Puni¹². Lissitzky was later to reiterate in several Western declarations the 'primary value of the *elements*' in Malevich's pictorial system and the *Proun*¹³. Yet the 'Call for Elemental Art' bore little mark of Malevich's belief in the authority of the emotions. Art was separated from transcendental thinking in a way that diverged markedly from Suprematism: it was to be attuned to 'the sources of power constantly intersecting and constituting the spirit and the form of an epoch'. The assumption behind this was that 'these sources create art as something pure, liberated from utility and beauty, as something elementary within the individual'¹⁴.

According to Arp, Hausmann, Moholy-Nagy and Puni, the artist's task was merely to 'surrender to the elements that give form'. Precisely what these elements were was not specified. The manifesto proclaimed:

'Artists! Declare your solidarity with art! Reject styles! We demand a world without styles in order to arrive at a *style*! Style is never plagiarism'¹⁵.

The extolling of a 'style' independent of any stylistic *a priori* echoed the credo of *De Stijl*. The first issue of that journal demanded 'the sacrifice of ambitious individualism' on behalf of a 'general principle' based upon 'a clearer relation between the spirit of the age and the means of expression', and embodied in a new universal, 'organic *style*'¹⁶. It is likely that such rhetoric inflected the formulation of the 'Call for Elemental Art'. Thanks to Van Doesburg's insistent proselytising

¹² Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (London: Butterworth Architecture, 1960), p.189.

¹³ El Lissitzky, 'New Russian art' (1922), in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), p.337. See Chapter 2.

¹⁴ 'Aufruf zur elementaren Kunst', col.156.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Theo van Doesburg, 'Ter inleiding' (Leiden, 16 April 1917), *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.I, no.1, October 1917, col.1-2; translated in H.L.C. Jaffé, *De Stijl 1917-1931: The Dutch Contribution to Modern Art* (Amsterdam: J.M. Heulenhoff, 1956), p.11.

activities, his ideas were being followed with increasing interest in Germany. Even more so since he had moved there in spring 1921 and transferred the *De Stijl* office to Weimar. In all events, Van Doesburg probably oversaw the Call's publication as part of his editorial duties. The criteria Arp, Hausmann, Moholy-Nagy and Puni advanced for a new art were implicit in those outlined in *De Stijl*. The 'elementary means' of painting were at the centre of Van Doesburg's concerns and remained so for the next two decades, culminating his Elementarist conception of architecture.

It is symptomatic that the manifesto was published with a remark withholding full *De Stijl* endorsement. Van Doesburg warned:

We are pleased to comply with the request that we publish the following manifesto in *De Stijl*, whereas it will depend on the way this is 'put into practice' whether we subscribe to or accept responsibility for its content¹⁷.

The unity of the artists involved, including the editor, was in their attitude and the breadth of the social renewal they sought. In other words, it was in their enthusiasm for a new, universal art reflecting the new age and renouncing a narrow search for an individual revelation. Consensus seemed possible on a general theoretical level and they were willing to come together under one banner and draft the common goals they shared, despite the heterogeneity of their personal artistic allegiances. Van Doesburg's introductory note however suggested that there was controversy over the basis of their collective effort.

6.2. From Düsseldorf to Weimar

Avant-garde periodicals as a whole are impressive proof of the ardent international spirit that shaped the art world at this juncture. The back cover of the

October 1922 issue of *MA* is a compelling example (fig.6.1). Advertised on the same page were twelve other publications, among them *Der Sturm* and *Die Aktion*, *Der Gegner*, Harold Loeb's *Broom*, *De Stijl* and its Dadaist extension *Mécano*, *L'Esprit Nouveau* and the Yugoslav journal *Zenit*¹⁸. What surfaced in such a juxtaposition was a comprehensive system of communication built by a few daring individuals. Hence the information exchange and reciprocal advertising arrangements between *De Stijl* and *L'Esprit Nouveau*. Van Doesburg drew attention to the appearance of the latter journal in *De Stijl* in July 1920, hinting to the 'possibility of a mutual collaboration' and, in return, a translation of the 'Second De Stijl Manifesto (Literature)' was reproduced in the first issue of *L'Esprit Nouveau* in October 1920¹⁹.

The 'Call for Elemental Art' advanced a step further in this direction. In uniting exponents of independent national groups, it attested to the avant-garde's determination to act upon the concurrence of aspirations which had emerged from the increased circulation of ideas and individuals. It was in pursuit of a similar objective that plans to gather forces, exchange artistic views and ultimately place them within a cultural discourse wherein they made universal sense, began to appear. In January 1922 a proposal for a *Congrès International pour 'la Détermination des Directives et la Défense de l'Esprit Moderne'* [International Congress 'to Define the Directives and Defend the Modern Spirit'] was unveiled by Georges Auric, André Breton, Robert Delaunay, Fernand Léger, Amédée Ozenfant, Jean Paulhan and Roger Vitrac. Due to take place in March 1922, it was announced in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, *Veshch'* and various journals²⁰. The purpose was

¹⁷ *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.IV, no.9, September 1921, col.156; translated in Joost Baljeu, *Theo van Doesburg* (London: Studio Vista, 1974), p.48.

¹⁸ *MA*, Vienna, vol.VIII, no.1, 15 October 1922, n.p.

¹⁹ *L'Esprit Nouveau* was reviewed in *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.IV, no.2, 1921, col.29-31. Van Doesburg and Mondrian were listed as collaborators of *L'Esprit Nouveau* until June 1922. Theo van Doesburg, "Manifeste 2 de 'De Stijl' 1920: la littérature", *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.1, October 1920, pp.82-83.

²⁰ *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.14, January 1922, p.1672; *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922, p.5, and *MA*, Vienna, vol.VII, no.3, 1 February 1922, p.47.

'neither to found a league nor a party'²¹. This was in fact deemed undesirable and highly improbable, considering the irreconcilable opinions of the organising committee members. Rather, the point was to confront recent artistic ideas in all their diversity so as to account for the contending forces and, where appropriate, elucidate the nature of their contribution to the development of 'the modern spirit'. El Lissitzky and Il'ya Erenburg welcomed this initiative, but were sceptical about the suitability of Paris ('a tissue of social and intellectual reaction') as the venue for such a venture²². Their doubts were well-founded. As the project developed, Paris witnessed outbursts of polemics among the main protagonists, e.g. between Breton and Tristan Tzara, who from the start scorned the idea 'to decide whether a railway engine was more modern than a top hat'²³. Infighting eventually prevailed and the congress never took place.

Germany proved a more fruitful ground. From 29 to 31 May 1922 the *Kongress der 'Union internationaler fortschrittlicher Künstler'* [Congress of the 'Union of International Progressive Artists'] was held in Düsseldorf. The catalyst for this event was the artists' group *Das junge Rheinland* [The Young Rhineland]. Early in January 1922 they had written to like-minded German associations to suggest that they concert and form a *Kartells fortschrittlicher Künstlergruppen in Deutschland* [Cartel of Progressive Artists' Groups in Germany]²⁴. The Berlin *Novembergruppe* and *Dresdner Sezession Gruppe 1919* [Dresden Secession Group 1919] had been among the first to respond. A gathering followed on 11 and 12 March 1922 in Weimar²⁵. Those in attendance agreed on a twelve-point programme and it was decided that a *Union der internationaler fortschrittlichen Künstler* [Union of

²¹ *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.14, January 1922, p.1672.

²² Erenburg and Lissitzky sent their 'fraternal greetings' and expressed their 'firm belief in the organisation of mastery and masters, if the old discussions about art should be abandoned', *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922, p.5. In the next issue, they regretted that they were unable to send a delegate and restricted themselves to 'a package containing greetings and material', *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.3, May 1922, p.2.

²³ Cited in Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p.187.

²⁴ 'Die Gründung des Kartells fortschrittlicher Künstlergruppen in Deutschland', *Das junge Rheinland*, Düsseldorf, no.7, 2 April 1922, pp.9-12.

International Progressive Artists] should be created²⁶. Its founding manifesto was reprinted the following May in *De Stijl*, endorsed by *Das junge Rheinland*, the *Novembergruppe*, the *Darmstädter Sezession* [Darmstadt Secession], the *Dresdner Sezession Gruppe 1919*, the *Schaffende* [Workers-Creators] and a number of prominent artists like Vasilii Kandinskii. The message was most explicit:

The long dreary isolation must now end. Art needs the unification of those who create. Forgetting questions of nationalities, without political bias or self-seeking intention, our slogan must now be: 'Artists of all nationalities, unite!' Art must become international or it will perish²⁷.

In keeping with this, it was proposed to publish a periodical and arrange a yearly music festival. The demand that an international artists' congress be organised, in conjunction with an international art exhibition, was also renewed.

This was the prelude to the congress which opened in Düsseldorf two months later. The ideal of a united international avant-garde had gained currency during the previous years, whether it was understood as an essential prerequisite for changing the complexion of social affairs, or as a tool for spreading one specific ideology or artistic vision. Malevich had stressed the need to establish 'a world collective of artists' in 1919²⁸. Meanwhile in Berlin, Raoul Hausmann, Richard Huelsenbeck and Jefim Golyscheff had demanded the 'international revolutionary union of all creative and intellectual men and women on the basis of radical Communism'²⁹. It is reasonable in view of this to assume that the opportunity to

²⁵ Arthur Kaufmann, Adolf Uzarski and Gert H. Wollheim for *Das junge Rheinland*; Dr. Will Grohmann, Otto Lange, Otto Krischer and Constantin von Mitschke-Collande for the *Dresdner Sezession*; and Moritz Melzer for the *Novembergruppe*.

²⁶ 'Das Kartell fortschrittlicher Künstlergruppen in Deutschland', *Das junge Rheinland*, Düsseldorf, no.8, 1 May 1922, p.1.

²⁷ 'Grundungsaufwurf der Union internationaler fortschrittlicher Künstler', *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V, no.4, April 1922, col.49; translated in Stephen Bann (ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), p.59.

²⁸ Kazimir Malevich, 'Nachí zadatchi' [Our tasks], *Izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo*, Petrograd, no.1, pp.27-30; translated in Gérard Conio, *Le Constructivisme Russe dans les Arts Plastiques: Textes Théoriques, Manifestes, Documents* (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1987), pp.243-46.

²⁹ Der dadaistische revolutionäre Zentralrat Gruppe Deutschland (Jefim Golyscheff, Raoul Hausmann, Richard Huelsenbeck), 'Was ist der Dadaismus und was will er in Deutschland?', *Der*

engage in discussion with congenial forces, such as *Das junge Rheinland* proposed to provide the different factions of the avant-garde with, met with a degree of approval. Some circumspection is however necessary. As signalled by the open letter to the *Novembergruppe* which appeared in *Der Gegner* at the end of 1921, deep rifts had opened within Germany's artistic left front. Here Raoul Hausmann and other leading exponents of Berlin Dada clearly disassociated themselves from the *Novembergruppe*, whose passive acceptance of 'individual pretensions' they denounced as inconsistent with the rhetoric of its initial statements and a hypocritical perpetuation of old structures and mentalities. United in their idealistic fervour, they rehearsed their 'faith in the revolution':

We have a sense of the duty imposed on us by the struggle of the world's proletarians for a life imbued with pure spirit. We feel it our duty to go forward with the masses along the path that leads to the achievement of this common life³⁰.

The *Manifest der Kommune* [Manifesto of the Commune], published in March 1922, betrayed a similar disillusionment and exasperation. The signatories advanced no specific programme as such. They vented their anger on the 'opportunism' of virtually every artists' group and defiantly refused 'on grounds wider than the merely artistic' to align themselves with any one group on any terms³¹. This antagonism to the idea of being part of a group also inspired the subsequent declaration of *Die Kommune*, but the context was more specific. In March 1922 *Das junge Rheinland* had called for a boycott of the 1922 *Grosse Kunstausstellung Düsseldorf* [Great Düsseldorf Art Exhibition] and begun to work

Dada, Berlin, no.1, June 1919; reproduced in Hanne Bergius (ed.), *Dada Berlin: Texte, Manifeste, Aktionen* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1977), pp.61-62.

³⁰ 'Offener Brief an die Novembergruppe', *Der Gegner*, Berlin, vol.II, no.8/9, 1920/21, pp.300-01; signed by 'Die Opposition der Novembergruppe: Otto Dix, Max Dugert, George Grosz, Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch, Ernst Krantz, Mutzenbecher, Thomas Ring, Rudolf Schlichter, Georg Scholz, Willy Zierath'.

³¹ *Manifest der Kommune*, Flugblatt (March 1922), signed by Elie Hala, Doris Homann, Stanislawowa, Melchior Hala, Gabarra, Franz Josef Esser, Stanislaw Kubicki, Oskar Fischer, Herm. F.A. Westphal, Otto Freudlich; reprinted in Uwe M. Schneede, *Die zwanziger Jahre: Manifeste und Dokumente deutschen Künstler* (Cologne: DuMont Verlag, 1979), pp.102-03.

on a show to be held concurrently: the *Erste Internationale Kunstausstellung* [First International Art Exhibition]³². The *Zweites Manifest der Kommune* [Second Manifesto of the Commune], co-signed by Hausmann and issued shortly before that rival exhibition opened, mocked its concept in no uncertain terms: 'None of the groups [involved] has dared to abandon its own egocentric views'. Convinced that the designation 'international' was being usurped by artists who sought to further 'personal interests', the members of *Die Kommune* declined group participation³³.

The *First International Art Exhibition* eventually opened on 28 May 1922. On view were 812 works by 344 artists from 19 different countries³⁴. One reviewer praised the organisational achievement that this represented: 'In terms of orientation and co-ordination, it [...] excels anything that has been done on a comparable occasion'³⁵. Vasilii Kandinskii commented in the catalogue (fig.6.2):

All the paths that we have hitherto trodden separately have now become *one* path, which we tread in common - whether we like it or not.

[...] Yesterday those realms of phenomena that we call art, without knowing what it is, were sharply distinct from each other; today they have blended into a single realm, marked off from other realms of human concern by boundaries that are themselves fast vanishing.

³² *Boycott der Großen Kunstausstellung 1922 Düsseldorf*, Flugblatt; reprinted in *Das junge Rheinland*, Düsseldorf, no.7, April 1922, p.9; signed by Christian Rohlf, Arthur Kaufmann, Adolf Uzarski, Gerd H. Wollheim, Wilhelm Brink, Walter Ophey, Hedwig, Petermann, Josef Enseling and Ulric Leman.

³³ *Zweites Manifest der Kommune*, Flugblatt (1922), signed by Stanislaw Kubicki, Otto Freundlich, Tristan Remy, Gasbarra, Herm. F.A. Westphal, Stanislawowa, Ludwig Hilberseimer, Doris Homann, Franz Joseph Esser, Raoul Hausmann, Hedwig Mankiewicz; reprinted in Schneede, *Die zwanziger Jahre*, pp.103-05.

³⁴ It is likely that some items recorded in the catalogue were not shown; see Bernd Finkeldey, "Die 'I. Internationale Kunstausstellung' in Düsseldorf 28. Mai bis 3. Juli 1922", in Bernd Finkeldey, Kai-Uwe Hemken, Maria Müller, Rainer Stommer (eds.), *Konstruktivistische Internationale Schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft 1922-1927: Utopien für eine europäische Kultur* (Oostfildern-Ruit: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1992).

³⁵ Alfred Salmony, 'Düsseldorf', *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol.VI, no.8, August 1922, p.355.

The last ramparts are falling, and the last boundary markers are being eradicated³⁶.

Kandinskii thereby reiterated his continued hope that "there would soon be 'no more frontiers between countries'"³⁷. The catalogue seemed to belie this: German and foreign artists were not only listed in two separate sections, but those foreign artists who took part were first and foremost residents of Germany, e.g. the Russians Kandinskii, Archipenko, Lissitzky, Chagall, Puni and Golyscheff³⁸.

The ambitions of the attendant congress were equally far-reaching. Yet, nowhere were the obstacles that beset such an initiative from the start more evident. According to the attendance list, sixty-one individuals of eleven nationalities gathered in Düsseldorf (fig.6.3)³⁹. The congress lasted three days. It opened with a discussion of the founding manifesto of the 'Union of International Progressive Artists' outlined in Weimar in March, whereupon representatives were selected for each group in attendance. Contention arose on the second day over a second manifesto to be voted on which defined the Union as a central body primarily concerned with practical and economic issues. Theo van Doesburg, El Lissitzky, Hans Richter, Raoul Hausmann, Stanislaw Kubicki, Otto Freundlich and Franz Wilhelm Seiwert of *Das junge Rheinland* stormed out of the congress hall in protest. The first sixty-nine of one hundred and forty-nine paragraphs of the Union's statutes were then debated, along with the foundation of German and foreign branches, and further questions of finance and infrastructure⁴⁰. By the time

³⁶ Kandinsky, 'Vorwort' (Berlin, April 1922), *Erste internationale Kunstausstellung* (Düsseldorf: 1922); reprinted in *Konstruktivistische Internationale*, p.24.

³⁷ Vasilii Kandinskii, "O 'velikoi utopii'" [Concerning the 'Great Utopia'], *Khudozhestvennaya zhizn'*, Moscow, no.3, 1920, pp.2-4; translated in Kenneth C. Lindsay, Peter Vergo, *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), vol.I, p.444. See Chapter 1.

³⁸ Lissitzky showed four works, finding here a second opportunity to exhibit in Germany after the 1922 *Great Berlin Art Exhibition*. The catalogue listed one watercolour, *Proun 15*; one painting, *Proun 1B*; and illustrated one drawing, *Proun 17N*. The fourth item could have been a drawing from the first *Proun-Mappe*.

³⁹ 'Kongreß der Union internationaler fortschrittlicher Künstler, Anwesenheitsliste'; reprinted in Ulrich Krempel (ed.), *Am Anfang: Das junge Rheinland. Zur Kunst- und Zeitgeschichte einer Region 1918-1945* (Düsseldorf: Städtische Kunsthalle, 1985), p.60.

⁴⁰ 'Bericht über die erste Kongreß-Sitzung der Union fortschrittlicher internationaler Künstler', reprinted in *ibid.*, pp.58-59.

Gert Heinrich Wollheim exposed the remainder on 31 May 1922, those disruptive elements in the audience had delivered unequivocal statements on behalf of their respective groups and ‘turned against the programme’ of the Unionists, preventing the assembly from reaching consensus (figs.6.4-5)⁴¹.

Opposition was a predictable response to the demands formulated at Düsseldorf. As Alfred Salmony noted in *Das Kunstblatt*, ‘participants talked at cross purposes’⁴². Taking issue with the very nature of the proposed association in an account of the proceedings written for *De Stijl*, Van Doesburg posed the rhetorical question: ‘was it to be a financial or an artists’ International?’ He presented himself as part of ‘the minority of really progressive artists [...] who had come with the intention of forming an organisation of creative forces, and who put artistic considerations before everything else’⁴³. He contended in his ten-point speech as a spokesman for *De Stijl*:

II. For us the most important thing is to give form, to organise the means into a unity (*Gestaltung*).

III. This unity can be achieved only by suppressing subjective arbitrariness in the means of expression.

IV. We renounce the subjective choice of forms, we are working towards the use of a universal and objective medium of design⁴⁴.

The ‘First De Stijl Manifesto’ (1918), which Van Doesburg quoted in full, served to reinforce his points and underscore the lead taken by Holland in the struggle to achieve solidarity among avant-garde groups: ‘it demonstrated that an international organisation was feasible and indeed necessary’⁴⁵.

⁴¹ ‘Kort overzicht der handelingen van het international kunstenaarscongres te Düsseldorf’ [A short review of the proceedings of the international artists’ congress in Düsseldorf], *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V, no.4, April 1922, col.51; translated in Bann (ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, p.61.

⁴² Salmony, ‘Düsseldorf’, p.354.

⁴³ ‘Kort overzicht der handelingen van het international kunstenaarscongres te Düsseldorf’, col.51.

⁴⁴ Theo van Doesburg, ‘Rechenschaft der Stylgruppe (Holland) gegenüber der Union internationaler fortschrittlicher Künstler’, *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V, no.4, April 1922, col.60; translated in Bann (ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, p.64-65.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

Lissitzky recalled with similar pride the efforts 'to realise the new art on a broad social and political front' in Russia. From these, he argued using the first person plural, the Russian avant-garde had learned that artistic progress was possible only in a society developing completely new organisational forms. He continued: 'The new art is founded not on a subjective, but on a subjective basis. This, like science, can be described with precision and is by nature constructive'. As such, Lissitzky claimed that the new art was imperfectly understood by society and, more regrettably, 'by those who call themselves progressive artists'. It was this deplorable situation that he and Erenburg had sought to remedy by publishing *Veshch'*, in the name of which Lissitzky intervened. However, *Veshch'* was only a first step:

To combat this situation we must join ranks so that we really can fight back. It is essentially this fight that unites us. If our aim were only to defend the material interests of a group of people called artists, we would not need another union, because there are already international unions for painters, decorators and varnishers, and professionally, we belong to these.

*We regard the founding of an international of progressive artists as the banding together of fighters for the new culture. Once again art will return to its former role. Once again we shall find a collective way of relating the work of the artist to the universal*⁴⁶.

To judge from the colourful description of the second day of the congress given by Hermann von Wedderkop in *Die Weltbühne*, such collectivism held little attraction for many a party in attendance. The sculptor Karl Zalit repeatedly interrupted the speeches⁴⁷. Together united in the *Gruppe Sythès*, Zalit, Arnold Dzirkal and Ivan Puni addressed the audience 'about questions that do not fall

⁴⁶ El. Lissitzky, Eli Ehrenburg (Die Redaktion des *Gegenstand*), 'Deklaration an den ersten Kongress fortschrittlicher Künstler, Düsseldorf', *De Stijl*, Leiden, vo.V, no.4, April 1922, col.56-57; translated in Bann (ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, pp.64-65.

⁴⁷ H.v. Wedderkop, 'Internationale Liebe in Düsseldorf', *Die Weltbühne*, Berlin, no.18, 1922, pp.58-59.

under the jurisdiction of the congress'. They contended: 'Feeling and intuition seem to be the source of creating'. Therefore, they objected to any form of influence being exerted on the aesthetic of one particular individual. They summarily condemned Expressionism for releasing a 'cacophony of confused moods', yet insisted that art could by definition never be disengaged from the expression of the artist's personality: 'Works of art that have been stripped out of this strength are only manifestations whose allotted existence exhausts itself in a couple of years'⁴⁸. Thus was the criticism levelled by Puni, Dzirkal and Zalit at non-objective art and all analytically oriented work based on a systematisation of artistic means⁴⁹. Individualism was as 'indispensable' and as artistic freedom. The implication, of course, was that the implementation of a common artistic programme or such 'definite goals' as 'the external organisation of life' could only impede aesthetic development.

This was precisely what Hans Richter contested when speaking for 'the Constructivist groups of Rumania, Switzerland, Scandinavia [and] Germany'⁵⁰. His disillusionment with the agenda of the congress served as a starting point for an exposition of his own credo. Taking his cue from Lissitzky, Richter raised some of the strongest objections:

To build an International around economics is to misunderstand the need for an International. The International must not only support its members, but also create and document a new attitude. To show that it is

⁴⁸ Iwan Puni, Karl Zalit, Arnold Dzirkal (für Gruppe Synthès), 'Die Proklamation der Gruppe von Künstler über Fragen, die der Beurteilung des Kongresses nicht unterliegen', *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V, no.4, April 1922, col.53-55.

⁴⁹ Puni reiterated this criticism his the paper he gave at the House of Arts on 3 November 1922. Boris Poplavsky reported: "Using tables [...], Puni took some of Lissitzky's paintings (*Prouns*), and without harming or detracting from them extracted and inserted various geometric shapes, whereby their 'complex composition' (and general structure) remained unchanged [...]. This was a very convincing demonstration of the extent to which the theories of the Suprematists and Constructivists are unfounded", Simon Karlinsky, Jean-Claude Marcadé, 'Boris Poplavsky: unpublished notes', *Art International: The Lugano Review*, vol.XVIII, no.5, May 1974, p.64. See also Iwan Puni, 'Zur Kunst von heute', *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol.VII, no.7, July 1923, pp.193-201.

⁵⁰ Hans Richter, 'Erklärung vor dem Kongress der internationale fortschrittlicher Künstler Düsseldorf', *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V, no.4, April 1922, col.59; translated in Bann (ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, pp.66-67.

possible to achieve such a new position in a comradely collective way, using all our strength to create the new way of life we so badly need, that is indeed a worthy task!⁵¹.

Richter was dismayed by the total absence of such spirit in the International. 'We cannot achieve this if everybody thinks that it is enough simply to fulfil his personal ambition in society', he proclaimed. 'We must first understand that this can be created only by a society that renounces the perpetuation of the private experiences of the soul'. Hence he exhorted the assembly to 'no longer tack between a society that does not need us and a society that does not yet exist. Let us rather *change the world of today*. In the sureness of our mission we represent a real force that has yet to be felt'⁵².

Richter's arguments did not go unchallenged. Van Doesburg recounted in a letter to Antony Kok a few days later: "The people shouted: 'Academy!', 'We don't want dictatorship!' etc."⁵³ Joining in the controversy, Raoul Hausmann read a brief text explaining that 'he and his friends [...] were cannibals' and disassociated themselves completely from the congress and its outcome. Thereupon, he left the room while singing 'Oh Tannenbaum'. Franz W. Seiwert followed suit, while Werner Gräff added to the general confusion⁵⁴:

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, col.58

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Theo van Doesburg, 'Letter to Antony Kok, 6 June 1922'; reprinted in *Konstruktivistische Internationale*, p.311.

⁵⁴ H.v. Wedderkop, 'Internationale Liebe in Düsseldorf', p.59. According to Van Doesburg, Hausmann 'read a protest both in French and German declaring that he was neither for the progressives nor for the artists, and that he was no more international than he was a cannibal. He then left the room', 'Kort overzicht der handelingen van het international kunstenaarscongres te Düsseldorf', col.52. For his part, Richter reported that, while speaking in the name of his journal *G*, at this point still in the planning stage, he was interrupted by Hausmann bursting in the room and shouting a dozen times 'We are all cannibals'. 'As a further illustration of this remark and with the help of Siewert, he then began to sing the International', Hans Richter, *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe* (Zürich: Die Arche Verlag, 1967), pp.46-47.

I am nearly the youngest of all of you and I have reached the conclusion that you are neither international, nor progressive, nor artists. There is therefore nothing more for me to do here⁵⁵.

At this point, the various conceptions of what the International was to achieve and how this was to be done had become blatantly irreconcilable. Factionalism had proven fatal to any common initiative. Van Doesburg commented: 'Naturally, it ended with us having to leave the hall in heated protest. In any event, we know who we can count on for the next congress. The Futurists, Dadaists and others too walked out with us. We'll do it better the second time around'⁵⁶.

In essence Richter was correct when he wrote retrospectively that 'nothing much came of [the Düsseldorf] meeting'⁵⁷. This remark nonetheless obscured the fact that the congress enabled him, Van Doesburg and Lissitzky to reach a sizeable public with their ideas, including circles in which the last two artists had had little or no exposure since their arrival in Germany. It is revealing in this connection that Van Doesburg and Lissitzky took the floor as self-proclaimed representatives of allegedly united national groups, ignoring the disputes which alienated them from and divided the avant-garde in their own countries⁵⁸. Richter too made himself the voice of a seemingly vast constellation of artists, though only three signed his declaration: his collaborator of the moment, the Viking Eggeling, and two fellow Zurich Dadaists, Marcel Janco and Fritz Baumann. Such self-assurance was not incidental. Although far from being of one mind, the secessionists had come together in Weimar prior to the congress to 'discuss everything'⁵⁹. Along with Werner Gräff, Karl Peter Röhl and Cornelis van Eesteren, they had agreed on the main issues and travelled together to Düsseldorf, where Hausmann and Seiwert had preceded them⁶⁰. The formation of the *Internationale Fraktion der*

⁵⁵ 'Kort overzicht der handelingen van het international kunstenaarscongres te Düsseldorf', col.52.

⁵⁶ Van Doesburg, 'Letter to Antony Kok, 6 June 1922', p.311.

⁵⁷ Richter, *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe*, p.47.

⁵⁸ Van Doesburg also represented Belgium, 'Kongreß der Union internationaler fortschrittlicher Künstler, Anwesenheitsliste', p.60.

⁵⁹ Van Doesburg, 'Letter to Antony Kok, 6 June 1922', p.311.

⁶⁰ Richter, *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe*, p.46.

Konstruktivisten [International Faction of Constructivists, I.F.d.K.], announced in the delayed April 1922 special issue of *De Stijl* (fig.6.6), proceeded from this dialogue.

The first and only declaration of the I.F.d.K., dated 30 May 1922, was to a significant extent a repetition of the offensives Van Doesburg, Lissitzky and Richter had launched against their many opponents. It was in reaction to the vague language and ‘*bourgeois colonial policy*’ of the Unionists that the I.F.d.K. defined its identity. ‘Good will is not a programme and cannot therefore be used for the organisation of the International’. They reaffirmed the precedence of artistic over economic concerns and demanded the formation of an international collaborative union that would summon a new culture into being. ‘Lyrical arbitrariness’ and the ‘tyranny of the subjective’ were denounced as anathema to the liberation of ‘the creative energy of mankind’ and, for this very reason, to the ‘progressive artist’. In a common aspiration towards an impersonal art, the I.F.d.K. posited the ‘systemisation of the means of expression to produce results that are universally comprehensible’ as the key to the integrated development of art and life:

Art is, in just the same way as science and technology, a method of organisation which applies to the whole of life [...] Today art is no longer a dream set apart and in contrast to the realities of the world [...] Art is a universal and real expression of creative energy, which can be used to organise the progress of mankind; it is the tool of universal progress. To achieve this reality we must fight, and to fight we must be organised [...] Only by doing so can we bridge the gap between the most grandiose theories and day-to-day survival⁶¹.

It is somewhat daunting in view of the last point that the manifesto gave no indication of how the I.F.d.K. was to grapple with such a disjunction. The

⁶¹ Theo van Doesburg, El Lissitzky, Hans Richter, ‘Erklärung der internationalen Fraktion der Konstruktivisten’ (30 May 1922), *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V, no.4, April 1922 (published June 1922), col.61-64; translated in Bann (ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, pp.66-67.

emphasis at this point was clearly on establishing guidelines, not defining a strict course of action.

With the possible exception of László Péri, the Hungarians of the *MA* circle had been unable to attend. They nonetheless issued a statement of their own in response to those published in *De Stijl*⁶². Most probably written by Lajos Kassák, it appeared in two different versions in the August 1922 editions of that journal and *MA*, signed by László Moholy-Nagy, Ernő Kállai and others⁶³. The Activists, unified for the last time under Kassák's leadership, associated themselves with *De Stijl* and *Veshch'* in their global rejection of the terms advanced by the majority for the creation of a central body for progressive artists. However, they took a more partisan stand. Speaking from a human rather than artistic point of view, the Hungarians called for the creation of a Berlin-based 'International Organisation of Revolutionary-Minded Creators'. Every 'creative mind sharing the belief that a future collective society is the only possible basis for the full development of our creative life' was to belong, each attending to 'the objective demands of the age' in its own field of endeavour⁶⁴. The Hungarians submitted a number of practical measures to ensure that this International be established on a sound basis. For instance, it was incumbent on *MA*, *De Stijl* and *Veshch'* to promote the revolutionary aims of the International and, at the same time, allow a degree of diversity through the exchange and circulation of information. Further projects included international congresses, demonstration exhibitions and publications, including an anthology of writings by exponents of the International to be 'translated into every civilised language'⁶⁵.

⁶² Hungarian translations of the Düsseldorf declarations appeared in *MA*, Vienna, vol.VIII, no.8, 30 August 1922, pp.61-64.

⁶³ "Stellungnahme der Gruppe 'MA' in Wien zum ersten Kongress der fortschrittlichen Künstler in Düsseldorf" (Vienna, July 1922), *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V, no.8, August 1922, col.125-28; signed by Ludwig Kassák, Alexander Barta, Andreas Gaspar, Ernst Kállai, Ludwig Kudlák, Johann Mácza, Ladislaus Moholy-Nagy, Jolan Simon and Elisabeth Ujvari; and 'A haladá művészek első nemzetközi kongresszusa Dusseldorf, 1922 május 29-31', *MA*, Vienna, vol.VIII, no.8, 30 August 1922, p.61.

⁶⁴ "Stellungnahme der Gruppe 'MA'", col.125-26.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, col.128.

Cognisant of the statements read at Düsseldorf and of the I.F.d.K. manifesto, the MA group evidently paid particular attention to mapping the directions in which the International was to engage. The prime concern of the I.F.d.K. had been to establish a front of resistance. Van Doesburg argued with respect to the label he and his allies endorsed: "Constructivist is used here only to characterise the contrast with the 'Impulsivists'"⁶⁶. It was to clarify the I.F.d.K.'s stance and possibly swell their ranks that a smaller Congress of Constructivists and Dadaists was convened in Weimar. According to an account published in the red issue of *Mécano* (fig.6.7), Van Doesburg's 'international periodical for intellectual hygiene, mechanical aesthetic and Neo-Dadaism', participants began to arrive on 19 September 1922⁶⁷. One group including Tristan Tzara, László Moholy-Nagy, Lucia Moholy, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Max Burchartz, Cornelis van Eesteren, Werner Gräff, Theo and Nelly van Doesburg left for Jena shortly after and met in Walter Dexel's house on 24 September⁶⁸. The congress was held upon their return to Weimar the following day. Photographs of the meeting show a cheerful assembly augmented by Hans Richter, Alfréd Kemény, Karl Peter Röhl, Alexa Röhl, Lothe Burchartz, Sophie Tauber-Arp and a few others (fig.1.1 and 6.8). First-hand narratives however present discrepancies, betraying a division of opinion and personal animosities among some of the protagonists. Moholy-Nagy later recalled that 'the Constructivists living in Germany' were bewildered to find Dadaists in attendance: 'This caused a rebellion against the host, Doesburg, because at that time we felt in Dadaism a destructive and obsolete force in comparison with the new outlook of the Constructivists'⁶⁹. Conversely, *Mécano* pointed to the factionalism of the Hungarians who, while moving on common ground, progressed along a distinct trajectory. The anonymous chronicle commented ironically, with implicit reference to the manifesto 'Dynamisch-konstruktives Kraftsystem' [Dynamic-Constructive System of Forces], published by Moholy-Nagy and

⁶⁶ 'Erklärung der internationalen Fraktion der Konstruktivisten', col.61-62.

⁶⁷ Advertisement for *Mécano*, *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V, no.1, January 1922.

⁶⁸ 'ChRoNiEk-MÉCaNo: International Congres van Konstruktivististen en Dada 1922 in Weimar', *Mécano*, Leiden, no.3, winter 1922, n.p.

Kemény in *Der Sturm* in December 1922⁷⁰: 'After a long exchange of words, the first Constructivist egg was laid by the International hen. The dynamic egg from Moholy is at the same time a chick'⁷¹.

In the event, no practical work could be achieved. Tzara delivered a funeral oration for Dada⁷². The session then apparently turned into a tumultuous 'Dadaistic performance', to the dismay of the 'younger, purist members [who] slowly withdrew'⁷³. A joint statement nonetheless subsequently appeared in three languages in *De Stijl* (fig.6.9) announcing the formation of a *Konstruktivistische Internationale schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft* [Constructivist International Creative Working Group, K.I.]⁷⁴. Signed by Theo van Doesburg, Hans Richter, El Lissitzky, Karel Maes and Max Burchartz, it was not an offshoot of the Weimar congress, but the product of a concerted effort initiated months earlier⁷⁵. Already in April 1922, Van Doesburg claimed that he had "laid the 'cornerstone' for an International of Creative Artists" in Berlin⁷⁶. The following June, he informed Antony Kok: 'We are now hard at work on the International, which has to come off before winter. It is of the greatest significance'⁷⁷. Richter agreed: to him, the opposition met by the I.F.d.K. at Düsseldorf had merely substantiated the need for such a structure. He argued in a letter to Van Doesburg: 'We need [the

⁶⁹ László Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion* (Chicago: Paul Theobald, 1947), p.315.

⁷⁰ L. Moholy-Nagy, Alfréd Kemény, 'Dynamisch-konstruktives Kraftsystem', *Der Sturm*, Berlin, vol.XIII, no.12, December 1922, p.186; translated in Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, p.290. This text will be discussed in some detail later.

⁷¹ 'ChRoNiEk-MÉCaNo', n.p.

⁷² 'Vortrag Tzaras auf dem Dada Kongress', *Merz*, Hanover, no.7, January 1924, pp.68-69; translated in Tristan Tzara, *Seven Dada Manifesto and Lampisteries* (London: Calder Publications, 1992), pp.107-12.

⁷³ Moholy-Nagy, *Vision in Motion*, p.315.

⁷⁴ Theo van Doesburg, El Lissitzky, Hans Richter, Karel Maes, Max Buchartz, 'K.I., Konstruktivistische Internationale schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft', *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V, no.8, August 1922 (published September 1922), col.113-19.

⁷⁵ See Theo van Doesburg, 'Letter to Antony Kok, 18 September 1922'; reprinted in *Konstruktivistische Internationale*, p.314. The manifesto of the K.I. had already been drafted.

⁷⁶ Theo van Doesburg, 'Letter to Cornelis de Boer, 24 April 1922'; cited in Alan Doig, *Theo van Doesburg: Painting into Architecture, Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.136.

⁷⁷ Van Doesburg, 'Letter to Antony Kok, 6 June 1922', p.311.

International]: not only as a means to fight the reaction, not only to organise and market our works, but for both'⁷⁸.

The call of the K.I. was for an 'international' forum for the 'communal work' of all 'creative' and 'Constructivist' forces. The text defined each of these four basic tenets and, in a format reminiscent of the programme of the First Working Group of Constructivists, exposed the tasks awaiting every individual aspiring to partake efficiently in the global reform of everyday life. As in the I.F.d.K. declaration, the term 'Constructivist' was employed as an antonym of subjectivism and stubborn individualism. More positively, it designated a rational, 'universal means of expression' commensurate with 'the modern methods of work'. The pragmatic approach of the five signatories was new. Introducing such notions as the 'economy of labour', they stressed their intention to carry out tasks of genuine practical significance, e.g. the 'invention and development of new materials'. They considered it their duty to create new demands, uncover new possibilities and convince the generations to come of the 'usefulness' of such endeavours. 'Collective work is practically a necessity', they asserted:

This International does not arise simply from feelings [...] but rather is based on the same elementary a-moralistic conditions as science and technology, on the necessity to react in a collective creative rather than an individual intuitive manner.

To unfold and develop our individuality completely, we (and all) are forced to organise creative labour⁷⁹.

The provisional committee of the K.I. invited artists from around the world to co-operate and send proposals to Richter's studio in Berlin-Friedenau, which was to serve as central office. A publication, entitled *Konstruktion* [Construction], was

⁷⁸ Hans Richter, 'Letter to Theo van Doesburg, October 1922'; reprinted in *Konstruktivistische Internationale*, p.317.

⁷⁹ 'K.I., Konstruktivistische Internationale schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft', col.113-15.

planned but never appeared⁸⁰. Again, expectations were not to be fulfilled. The collective élan dissipated before practical steps towards concrete work were taken and the main protagonists shifted their attention elsewhere.

6.3. G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung

According to Richter, Hans G, *Material zur elementaren Gestaltung* [G, Material for Elemental Formation] was first discussed in late December 1920. The idea for it emerged during a meeting with Theo van Doesburg in Klein-Kölzig, where Richter and Viking Eggeling had been working closely together since 1919⁸¹. Travelling to Germany as a result of contacts initiated in 1919, Van Doesburg had come on the recommendation of Adolf Behne, who found similarities between *De Stijl* and Richter and Eggeling's aesthetic concerns⁸². In the course of this visit, Van Doesburg suggested that the two artists publish a magazine along the lines of *De Stijl* with part of a substantial loan they had just received from the Universal-Film A.G. (UFA). In that way, he argued, they could reach a broad audience and at the same time raise the necessary funds for their film experiments. Richter immediately mobilised the large circle of acquaintances he met regularly in cafés and studios in Berlin and began to collect contributions. Lissitzky came up with the name G, short for *Gestaltung*. At the beginning of 1922, there was enough material for two issues but no more money⁸³.

⁸⁰ Paper had been bought in view of this publication, but sufficient funds had yet to be raised, Van Doesburg, 'Letter to Antony Kok, 18 September 1922', p.314. Lissitzky, too, wrote of a publication to be called *Konstruktion* in which 'new phenomena and inventions in all areas of life are to be documented from the standpoint of the creative human being', El Lissitzky, 'Letter to Tristan Tzara, 25 October 1922'; cited in Peter Nisbet, 'An introduction to El Lissitzky', in *El Lissitzky 1890-1941* (Harvard: Busch-Reisinger Museum, 1987), n.50, p.49.

⁸¹ Richter, *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe*, p.24.

⁸² Sjarel Ex, "'De Stijl' und Deutschland 1918-1922: Die erste Kontakte", in *Konstruktivistische Internationale*, p.75.

⁸³ Richter, *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe*, p.69.

G appeared for the first time in Berlin in July 1923. Publication was irregular and initially of modest dimensions⁸⁴. Two issues were printed in the first year, each containing four newspaper-size pages of dense text. The title page carried a big bold G, flanked by an equally large issue number and square shape intended as a tribute to Van Doesburg (fig.6.10)⁸⁵. The alignment on the left, the date of publication printed vertically along the side of the square and the thick black line separating the masterhead, editorial details and subscription rates from the body of the text, recalled Lissitzky's work on *Veshch*' (figs.4.6-7). Hans Richter, Werner Gräff and El Lissitzky were named as joint editors. The latter however soon vanished from the roster, replaced by the German architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Friedrich Kiesler in the second and third issues. Thereafter, Richter alone assumed editorial responsibilities.

Below the subtitle, a prologue read: 'The task of this journal is to clarify the general situation of art and life. The selection will be made accordingly: articles and works striving for clarity, not just expression'⁸⁶. Richter expanded upon this policy in a later article:

G [...] owes its existence to an overall optimism about the means and possibilities of our time. This optimism consists before all else in the following: in still having the wish to diagnose the possibility of a culture in the unholy chaos of our age, in the fundamental disintegration in which we find ourselves, with both excess and deficiency of civilisation⁸⁷.

The prerequisite condition of a culture arising, Richter believed, was that 'all human energies' be allowed to grow in a controlled and coherent fashion so they could 'take a place proportionate to their functions': 'A *culture* is not a special province of science or art or any other area, and it is not the province of

⁸⁴ Bimonthly publication was announced in the second issue, but no strict commitment was made to this frequency: 'In any case, we will endeavour to publish one issue every other month', *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, no.2, September 1923, n.p.

⁸⁵ Richter, *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe*, p.69.

⁸⁶ *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923, n.p.

⁸⁷ Hans Richter, 'G', *G, Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.3, June 1924, p.12; translated in Bann (ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, pp.93-96.

philanthropists or altruists either, but *the whole problem of existence* (if this allusion is still considered to be in any way necessary after 1914)⁸⁸.

G was modelled on the belief that 'man - as an indivisible unity of qualities - only bestirs himself if this unity bestirs itself, that is, all the qualities, and moreover in their organic totality; that all areas can only be fruitful *together* and never separately, or at the expense of the others'⁸⁹. The periodical perceived itself as a point of contact for all those involved in cultural production. To the question 'whom does *G* interest?', it answered:

The reader who is interested in the free play of vital energies both in relation to a totality and as a phenomenon in itself [...] The scholar, physicist, or engineer who does not confine himself to a schema or dogma appropriate to his calling [...] The artist who seeks above and beyond his individual problem what is valid on a general level, what is universal [...] The economist, merchant, organiser, or politician who expects it to be useful to him to know 'in what direction things are moving' [...] The manufacturing groups [...] The contemporary who gets interest and pleasure from the development of the great body (humanity) to which he belongs⁹⁰.

Richter added: "In this sense, *G* is a specialised organ, but one that gathers material that is indeed not specialised but universal for requirements which are both 'of the time' and 'outside it'"⁹¹.

The opening editorial specified this last idea: '*The opposition between the new Gestaltung (in art) and yesterday's art is in principle. We do not want to bridge it, but rather deepen it [...] The classical prejudice, the basis of the disappearing culture, must be destroyed*'. This included all forms of conventional artistic

⁸⁸ Richter, 'G', p.11.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.12-13.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.12.

legitimation: 'We need no beauty [...] but *inner order of our beings*'⁹². In order to achieve this, the limitations of individuality had to be transcended: 'It is no accident that exact scientific methods exist in every sector of life. The more consistently a sector develops today, the clearer this tendency becomes, the clearer the coherence of the vital process'⁹³. Accordingly, rationality was demanded of the artist:

To act methodically and impersonally is a problem of culture. Art has striven in this direction for two generations (overcoming the classical prejudice, humanism and the middle-ages) [...] A subjective attitude is ruinous in all sectors of life, and the actual cause of all catastrophes - in art too. *The new artists must act collectively* [...] We do not represent a new movement. We do not address the art lover, but all the people who love principles in art, and in all the connections to life. From such people, we expect to be understood in our will to solve the problem of art from a universal cultural, rather than aesthetic, point of view⁹⁴.

Turning their attention to the creative process itself, Richter and Gräff raised the demand for fundamentals. They extolled '*economy*', 'the pure proportion of force and material', as the sole path to elemental thought and practice, and enunciated the 'genuine principles' of the new *Gestaltung*: '*elemental means, a complete control of them, elemental order and legality*'. German artists were mocked for their reluctance to confront basic theoretical and practical tasks. 'France, the country of artistic tradition, [...] Holland (*De Stijl*) and Russia (the Constructivists, Malevich and Tatlin)' had overthrown 'sentimental limitation'⁹⁵. The editors proposed to provide their compatriots with the means to follow suit. Their intention was both didactic and emancipatory: 'First we will explain what is to be understood, theoretically and practically, by elemental *Gestaltung*,

⁹² Hans Richter, Werner Gräff, 'Nur keine ewige Wahrheiten', *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923, n.p.

⁹³ Richter, 'G', p.11.

⁹⁴ Richter, Gräff, 'Nur keine ewige Wahrheiten', n.p.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

collectivity, tasks etc.; and support this with our own work and that of foreign comrades⁹⁶. Ultimately *G* pledged to set nothing less than ‘general [...] guidelines’⁹⁷. To this end, it called upon a ‘specific type of human being’; ‘one who is not under the impression that by the dilettantism of compromise it is possible to solve the ever more redoubtable problems of the age [...], one who does not accept the chaos in contemporary economics, politics, science, art, and so on’⁹⁸.

This agenda was implicit in the address Richter had given at the Düsseldorf congress. ‘We have gone beyond our own individual problems to the point where we can pose an objective problem’, he argued. ‘This unites us in a common task. This task leads (beyond the scientific methods of investigating the elements of art) to the desire for more than just the creation of a better painting or a better piece of sculpture: to reality itself’⁹⁹. In such circumstances, it was of crucial importance to document and promote what could be and had already been achieved by revising creative strategies and implementing elementary principles. Richter insisted: ‘People must not just sympathise, they must understand the work’¹⁰⁰. It was precisely with this responsibility that *G* was entrusted and, in this sense, it was the direct continuation of the programme laid out by the I.F.d.K.. More specifically, *G* took up where the K.I. had left off with respect to ‘organising creative labour’¹⁰¹. Within three months of the launch, the editors announced their decision to expand their activities and hold ‘demonstration’ exhibitions in Germany and abroad. Artists were invited to send ‘methodical works’¹⁰². Financial difficulties presumably impeded such initiatives. After the issue in which this announcement was made, *G* ceased publication for nearly one year. When it was revived thanks to

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*

⁹⁷ Richter, ‘G’, p.12.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Richter, ‘Erklärung vor dem Kongress der internationale fortschrittlicher Künstler Düsseldorf’, col.57-58.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, col.59.

¹⁰¹ ‘K.I., Konstruktivistische Internationale schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft’, col.115

¹⁰² *G*, *Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.2, September 1923, n.p.

the assistance of Mies van der Rohe in June 1924, no such plans were mentioned¹⁰³.

In 1923 Ludwig Hilberseimer compared *De Stijl*, *MA*, *Veshch'* and *G*, and claimed that the latter was 'the first German art periodical which consistently champions the demands of the new art'¹⁰⁴. Five decades later, Willy Rotzler made a similar assertion, describing *G* as *Veshch'*'s 'German counterpart'¹⁰⁵. Certainly, Richter's journal was compatible with Lissitzky's definition of *Veshch'* as 'a magazine which stands for a new way of thinking and unites the leaders of the new art in nearly all the countries'¹⁰⁶. The agenda drafted in the first issue was remarkably congruent with the resolution to 'follow the reciprocal relations between the new art and the present age in its varied manifestations (science, politics, technology, customs, etc.)' and investigate 'everything that is suitable as material for the conscious creative artist of our time'¹⁰⁷. Richter recalled in 1967: '*G* emerged from the need to say what we could not endure, as well as from the necessity to create a forum for the ideas which after the Dada period and with Constructivism had become a compilation of all cultural tendencies of this new time'¹⁰⁸. On this and many other occasions he insisted that Lissitzky had played no part in the production of *G*¹⁰⁹. His contributions were indeed few¹¹⁰. Lissitzky was clearly unable to muster any sympathy for *G*, which he believed had nothing new

¹⁰³ Works by artists associated with *G* were nonetheless exhibited at the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hanover in 1924; see Curt Germundson, 'Kurt Schwitters and the alternative art community in Hanover', in Charlotte Stokes, Stephen C. Foster (eds.), *Dada Cologne Hanover* (New York: GK Hall & Co., 1997), p.218.

¹⁰⁴ Cited in Werner Gräff, 'Concerning the so-called G group', *Art Journal*, vol.XXIII, no.4, summer 1964, p.280.

¹⁰⁵ Willy Rotzler, *Konstruktive Konzepte: Eine Geschichte der konstruktiven Kunst von Kubismus bis heute* (Zürich: ABC, 1977), p.85.

¹⁰⁶ Lissitzky, Ehrenburg, 'Deklaration an den ersten Kongress fortschrittlicher Künstler, Düsseldorf', col.56.

¹⁰⁷ 'Blokada Rossii konchaetsya' [The blockade of Russia is coming to an end], *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922, p.3; translated in Bann (ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, pp.54-47

¹⁰⁸ Richter, *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe*, p.67.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.69.

¹¹⁰ El Lissitzky, 'Prounenraum, Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung 1923' (Den Haag, May 1923), *G*, *Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923, n.p., and 'Rad -- Propeller und das folgende', *G*, *Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.2, September 1923, n.p.

to say: 'Judging from the first issue, *G* is still a rather remote and snobbish thing created in the studio. Let us hope it will improve and become more like a real American newsreel'¹¹¹.

Substantive affinities between *Veshch'* and *G* suggest that Lissitzky's influence on the latter was greater than Richter ever admitted. Parallel arguments ran through the rhetoric of the two journals. *Veshch'* ostensibly disengaged itself from provocative and 'negative tactics', yet founded its optimistic enterprise of 'constructing new forms of existence' on the ground cleared by pre-war Futurism and Dada¹¹². *G*'s claim that its task was of a 'destructive/constructive nature' proceeded from a kindred logic¹¹³. Like the editors of *Veshch'*, Richter located the possibility of a culture within the subversion of the immediate past and all its conventions, albeit in slightly different terms. By no means exclusive, destruction and construction belonged together in the process of 'elemental *Gestaltung*' in which they existed in a polar, not chronological, relationship. In both cases, it was assumed that by purging creative expression of the particular (historical accretions, romantic sentimentality and individual expressionism), it was possible to 'return art to its former role' and 'find a collective way of relating the work of the artist to the universal'¹¹⁴. Technological development provided legitimate models that could be appropriated for such purposes. The upshot was that the 'genuine principles' of elemental *Gestaltung* were in large part interchangeable with the 'binding laws' extolled in *Veshch'*.

Veshch' took the part of 'constructive art, whose task is not to adorn life but to organise it'¹¹⁵. *G* proclaimed along with Karl Marx that 'art should not explain life,

¹¹¹ El Lissitzky, 'Letter to Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud, 8 September 1924', in Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, Jen Lissitzky (eds.), *El Lissitzky, Proun und Wolkenbügel: Schriften, Briefe, Dokumente* (Dresden: VEB Verlag der Kunst, 1977), p.126. Oud's verdict was not far removed: 'This never-ending repetition bores me', J.J.P. Oud, 'Letter to El Lissitzky, 17 September 1924', in *ibid.*, p.181.

¹¹² 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end', p.55.

¹¹³ Richter, Gräff, 'Nur keine ewige Wahrheiten', n.p.

¹¹⁴ Lissitzky, Erenburg, 'Deklaration an den ersten Kongress fortschrittlicher Künstler, Düsseldorf', col.57.

¹¹⁵ 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end', p.55.

but change it'¹¹⁶. This quotation, double-framed and slanted along the vertical axis of the double-page spread of the inaugural issue, set the tone (fig.6.11). Just as *Veshch* had vowed to be a 'matter-of-fact organ' and affirmed the need for 'work' rather than 'declarations and counter-declarations', so *G* advertised its commitment to achieving results 'of genuine practical significance'¹¹⁷. Chapter 4 has shown how Lissitzky utilised marginal comments to highlight critical passages in keeping with the journal's platform. For instance, the article 'Concerning the Present State of Painting and its Tendencies' carried in the margin the boldly lettered slogan: 'The urge for order - mankind's highest need - this is what produces art' (fig.6.12)¹¹⁸. Richter later acknowledged the novelty of Lissitzky's graphic work and the considerable influence his demonstration of the availability of typography for 'political and philosophical' use had in Berlin¹¹⁹. It is therefore hardly surprising that devices exploited in *Veshch* reappeared in *G*, e.g. the use of heavy black lines to orchestrate the flow of text and the change of typeface or case to distinguish topical writing.

Richter already had substantial publishing experience by the time the idea for *G* arose. In 1914 he had joined the circle of artists and writers gathered around the bimonthly *Die Aktion*¹²⁰. Three years later, he had become the sole illustrator of *Zeit-Echo* [Echo of the Times], the journal published by the German poet and anarchist Ludwig Rubiner in Zurich¹²¹. Collaboration with such activist organs was

¹¹⁶ *G*, *Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923. Three years later, the Swiss journal *ABC*, *Beiträge zur Architektur*, in the launching of which Lissitzky played a crucial role, printed the slogan 'Art should design and organise life, not embellish it' below of photograph of Vladimir Tatlin working on the *Model for a Monument to the Third International*, *ABC*, *Beiträge zur Architektur*, Basle, 2nd series, no.1, 1926, p.1.

¹¹⁷ 'The blockade of Russia is coming to an end', p.57, and Richter, 'G', p.12.

¹¹⁸ Albert Gleizes, 'O sovremennom sostoyanii zhivopisi i ee tendentsiyakh' [Concerning the present state of painting and its tendencies], *Veshch*/*Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922, pp.12-13; translated in *Vešče* 'Objet Gegenstand, Berlin 1922 Il'ja Erenburg/El Lisickij, Reprint 1994, *Kommentar und Übertragungen/Commentary and Translations* (Baden: Verlag Lars Müller, 1994), pp.149-50.

¹¹⁹ Philippe Sers, *Sur Dada: Essais sur l'Expérience Dadaïste de l'Image. Entretiens avec Hans Richter* (Nîmes: Jacqueline Chambon, 1997), p.214.

¹²⁰ *Die Aktion* regularly printed graphic contributions by Richter between 1915 and 1918, and devoted a whole issue to his work (*Hans Richter Heft*, vol.VI, no.13, 25 March 1916).

¹²¹ Cleve Gray (ed.), *Hans Richter by Hans Richter* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), p.30.

consistent with the pacifist convictions expressed in the article 'Ein Maler spricht zu den Malern' [A painter speaks to painters]. An angry rejection of the forces that had unleashed the First World War dominated this text: "If there is anything that is equally active in all of us, it is the grinding pain and disgust and bitter shame at living and making such an age with such good intentions and 'against our better knowledge'". Richter continued, criticising resignation and confidently promoting the liberating potential of art: 'painting serves the idea of humanity, which it has to make clear to one and all, unmistakable to hearts and minds'¹²². This anticipated G and bore witness to a genuine political concern.

Richter later recalled the excitement that news of revolution in Moscow and Petrograd and the return home of Russian Socialist exiles like Lenin and Zinoviev generated among the Dada contingent in Zurich: 'We followed this with great debates'¹²³. Elsewhere, Richter reflected on the ensuing times: 'Revolution in Germany, risings in France and Italy, world revolution in Russia, had stirred men's minds, divided men's interests and diverted energies in the direction of political change'¹²⁴. As noted in Chapter 1, Richter was among the signatories of the reply of the *Aktionausschuß revolutionärer Künstler München* to the 'Call from the Russian Progressive Painters and Sculptors to their German Colleagues' published in April 1919¹²⁵. This declaration of allegiance was the earliest sign of Richter's involvement in the Bavarian Soviet Republic. His contact with politicians like Max Levien and Ernst Toller however probably dated back to early March 1919, when Richter briefly sojourned in Munich after attending the Second Socialist International in Bern. Among his many acquaintances were Frida Rubiner and a number of *Die Aktion* contributors who formed the backbone of the

¹²² Hans Richter, 'Ein Maler spricht zu den Malern', *Zeit-Echo*, Zurich, vol.III, no.1/2, June 1917, pp.19-22

¹²³ Sers, *Sur Dada*, p.129. Hugo Ball observed on 14 June 1917: 'Now the Russian revolution is beginning on the other border. What kind of influence will it have? Will it succeed in bringing about the downfall of its most dangerous opponent, the Prussian monarchy? Will the Russian revolution be able to infect Germany?', John Elderfield (ed.), *Flight out of Time: A Dada Diary by Hugo Ball* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp.117-18.

¹²⁴ Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, p.80.

¹²⁵ *Münchener Neueste Nachrichten*, Munich, no.162, 9 April 1919, p.3.

*Aktionausschuß*¹²⁶: Called in to support their action, Richter eagerly engaged in cultural politics and soon assumed prominent functions in the fight for the reform of artistic education¹²⁷. The overthrow of the Republic on 1 May 1919 prevented his expectations from being fulfilled: like other revolutionaries, he was arrested and tried. Sentenced to five years of imprisonment, he was released after two weeks thanks to the mediation of family friends¹²⁸.

Upon returning to Zurich in June 1919 Richter tried to revive the *Radikalen Künstler* [Radical Artists], which he had founded three months earlier with Hans Arp, Fritz Baumann, Viking Eggeling, Augusto Giacometti, Walter Helbig, Paul Rudolf Henning, Marcel Janco and Otto Morach¹²⁹. The group's manifesto, whose publication was delayed until 3 May 1919, specified its programme¹³⁰. Familiar arguments ran through it. Recognising the significance of recent upheavals in Russia, Hungary and Germany, the *Radikalen Künstler* endorsed the objectives of the Revolution and asserted their right to intervene in cultural policy: 'We artists, as representatives of an essential part of the total culture, want to place ourselves in the midst of things, and share in the responsibility for the coming developments of ideas in the state'. They opposed 'energy-wasting unsystematical activity' and demanded a 'fraternal art':

Art in the state must reflect the spirit of the whole body of the people.
Art compels clarity, should form the foundation of the new man and
belong to each individual and no class; we want to gather the conscious

¹²⁶ Erich Mühsam, Heinrich F.S. Bachmair, Georg Schrimpf and Alfred Wolfenstein.

¹²⁷ Ferdinand Hardekopf, 'Letter to Olly Jacques, 19 April 1919'; reprinted in Richard Sheppard, 'Ferdinand Hardekopf und Dada', *Jahrbuch der Schiller-Gesellschaft*, no.20, 1976, p.144.

¹²⁸ Gisela Großmann, *Hans Richter 1888-1976: das bildnerische Werk* (Inaugural-Dissertation zur Erlangung des Doktorgrades der Philosophischen Fakultät der Universität Köln, 1985), p.36.

¹²⁹ This was to a large measure an extension of *Das Neue Leben* [The New Life], set up by Baumann in Basel in April 1918. All members but Richter and Helbig belonged to that earlier group.

¹³⁰ *Zürcher Post*, Zurich, no.201, 3 May 1919; reprinted in *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, Zurich, Sechstes Blatt, no.655, 4 May 1919 and *Basler Nachrichten*, Basle, no.213, 9 May 1919; translated in Justin Hoffmann, 'Hans Richter: Munich Dada, and the Munich Republic of Workers' Councils', in Stephen Foster (ed.), *Hans Richter: Activism, Modernism and the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1998), p.61.

power of the productive forces of all individuals in the performance of their mission into unified achievement¹³¹.

Abstraction was identified as the only universally valid form of expression capable of supporting this aim: 'The intellectuality of an abstract art [...] means a tremendous expansion of humanity's feeling of freedom'¹³².

The *Radikalen Künstler* dissolved within a few weeks. Their manifesto nonetheless pointed the way towards *G*, revealing a desire 'to find a way to make art a meaningful instrument of life'¹³³. Marcel Janco observed retrospectively: 'We [...] had gone beyond negation, and no longer needed aggression and scandal to pursue our positive course'¹³⁴. The minutes of the meetings of the *Radikalen Künstler* clearly indicate that Richter conceived this new phase in largely political terms: hence it was him who suggested that the group's agenda be modelled on that of the Soviet government in Russia, arguing against the objection of at least one member that the example set by Moscow could be implemented successfully elsewhere¹³⁵. The experience of a failed revolution did not shake this commitment. When Richter returned to Berlin, political problems concerned him as much as artistic ones and he was still intent on assuming a social role¹³⁶.

It is interesting that the *Radikalen Künstler* proposed to launch a programmatic monthly¹³⁷. *G* might in part be seen as an offshoot of their abortive attempt to 'give expression to the mighty currents, and a perceptible direction to the scattered

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*, pp.61-62.

¹³³ Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art*, p.48.

¹³⁴ Marcel Janco, 'Dada at two speeds', in Lucy R. Lippard (ed.), *Dadas on Art* (Prentice-Hall, N.J.: Englewood Cliffs, 1971), p.37.

¹³⁵ 'Protokoll vom 5.April 19./der Sitzung bei Henning. 5 Uhr', in Harry Seiwert, *Marcel Janco – Dadaist – Zeitgenosse – Wohltemperierter morgenländischer Konstruktivist* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1993), p.562.

¹³⁶ Gray (ed.), *Hans Richter by Hans Richter*, p.30.

¹³⁷ Potential contributors were discussed on 2 April 1919 and plans drawn three days later for a monthly called *Zürich 1919*, 'Protokoll vom 5.April 19.', p.566. At least one statement was prepared, see Raimund Meyer, Judith Hossli, Guido Magnaguagno, Juri Steiner, Hans Bollinger (eds.), *Dada Global* (Zurich: Limmat Verlag, 1994), p.128.

efforts'¹³⁸. The contents reflected to some extent Richter's radical spirit. The second issue drew attention to the founding of the *Gesellschaft der Freunde des neuen Rußland* [Society of the Friends of the New Russia] in Berlin on 1 June 1923, welcoming the opportunity to develop bilateral exchange and gain 'impartial information about economic and cultural trends' in the Soviet Union¹³⁹. Prior to this, *G* reprinted excerpts from *The Realistic Manifesto*¹⁴⁰. Richter often related how greatly impressed he was with Naum Gabo's work at the *First Russian Art Exhibition*¹⁴¹. The two artists quickly became friends. Like El Lissitzky, Hans Arp, Tristan Tzara and others, Gabo regularly visited Richter's studio¹⁴². It is therefore not surprising that he was amongst *G*'s contributors. The journal also opened its pages to Natan Al'tman, whose entry into the Berlin art world had drawn equal attention, thanks to his involvement in the Van Diemen show¹⁴³. Al'tman's particular vision of a socially committed easel painting formed the substance of an article entitled 'Elementare Gesichtspunkte' [Elemental Point of View]¹⁴⁴.

With the exception of Gabo, Pevsner and Mies van der Rohe, *G*'s early contributors had all collaborated with Van Doesburg, attended and seceded from the Düsseldorf congress. This partly explains why the first issue was advertised in *De Stijl* as 'the organ of the Constructivists in Europe'¹⁴⁵. True to the spirit of the K.I., the emphasis was clearly on uncovering new possibilities. Van Doesburg presented in a diagrammatic form a system of 'primary (elemental) means' for each of the visual arts, intended to put an end to 'impulsive and speculative

¹³⁸ 'Manifest Radikaler Künstler. Zürich'.

¹³⁹ *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.2, September 1923, n.p.

¹⁴⁰ Gabo, Pevzner, 'Thesen aus dem realistischen Manifest Moskau 1920', *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923, n.p.

¹⁴¹ For instance, Richter, *Köpfe und Hinterköpfe*, p.79.

¹⁴² Sers, *Sur Dada*, pp.214-15.

¹⁴³ On Richter's enthusiastic reception of Al'tman's agitational work, see Hans Richter, 'Begegnungen in Berlin', in *Avantgarde Osteuropa 1910-1930* (Berlin: Akademie der Künste, 1967), pp.14-15.

¹⁴⁴ Nathan Altmann, 'Elementare Gesichtspunkte', *G, Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.3, June 1924, pp.35-36.

¹⁴⁵ *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.IV, no.3/4, May/June 1923.

procedures' and allow 'creative consistency'¹⁴⁶. Raoul Hausmann, writing about optophonetics, stressed the necessity to base sound and painting on new foundations and to 'find a new functionality for them'¹⁴⁷. Lissitzky's *Proun Room* (fig.6.13) illustrated how 'elementary forms and materials' could be used to challenge man's sensory experience and in turn influence the reordering of his living environment¹⁴⁸.

Inside *G*'s inaugural issue, pointing hands drew attention to the elementary possibilities of film. Since 1919, Richter and Eggeling had been concerned with the formulation of a 'universal language' of form based on visual perception¹⁴⁹. Their collaborative efforts had led them from systematic experiments with lines and geometric planes to the creation of horizontal scrolls that combined these units into dynamic sequences according to the laws of counterpoint and analogy. The didactic resume of *Rythmus 21* [Rhythm 21] which ran across the double-page spread (fig.6.14) demonstrated how film could release the sense of time and motion inherent in these 'scores', isolated moments of which were widely reproduced¹⁵⁰. The rectangular surface of the screen was divided into smaller black and white sections which, growing or shrinking rapidly, merged, split or dissolved to reveal a new background or figure of a contrasting tone. Their constant interaction, based on the opposition of 'the bright and dark, the big and small, the

¹⁴⁶ Theo van Doesburg, 'Zur Elementare Gestaltung', *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923; translated in Bann (ed.), *The Tradition of Constructivism*, pp.91-93. This was a variant of Theo van Doesburg, 'Monumentalnoe iskusstvo' [Monumental art], *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922, pp.14-15; translated in *Vešč Objekta Gegenstand, Berlin 1922 Ilya Erenburg/El Lisickij, Reprint 1994*, p.151.

¹⁴⁷ R. Hausmann, 'Vom sprechenden Film sur Optophonetik', *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923, n.p.

¹⁴⁸ Lissitzky, 'Prounenraum', n.p. See Chapter 2.

¹⁴⁹ An eight-page-long pamphlet entitled *Universelle Sprache* [Universal language], of which there are no extant copies, was drafted by the two artists in Forst in Lausitz in 1920 and sent to various individuals, Großmann, *Hans Richter 1888-1976*, p.32.

¹⁵⁰ *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922, p.28 and no.3, May 1922, p.18; *MA*, Vienna, vol.VI, no.8, 1 August 1921, pp.105-113 and vol.VIII, no.5/6, 15 March 1923, pp.14-15; and *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.IV, no.5, May 1921, col.54-56; vol.IV, no.7, July 1921, col.83, 85, 87, 89; vol.IV, no.10, October 1921, col.125 etc.

fast and slow, the horizontal and vertical etc.', enriched spatial relationships and stimulated the eye to a new experience, i.e. a purely visual rhythm¹⁵¹.

Further articles included a report on a project for a concrete office block by Mies van der Rohe. Extolling 'work, organisation, clarity, economy', the architect rejected 'all aesthetic speculation, all doctrine, all formalism' and argued: 'Building is the spatial expression of the spirit of our time'¹⁵². This assertion prefigured to some extent the development of *G*. The second issue opened with a description of Giacomo Matte-Trucco's Fiat Factory at Turin, illustrated with photographs of its test-tracks for cars on the roof (fig.6.15), and ended with an enthusiastic review of a book on civil engineering¹⁵³. Thereafter, increasing attention was paid to architectural practice and technical topics such as town planning, modern methods of constructions and materials¹⁵⁴. Photographs, plans, elevations and drawings generally supplemented Mies van der Rohe, Adolf Behne and Ludwig Hilberseimer's articles, so that the pages of *G* occasionally resembled those of a specialist publication.

The driving force behind this turn was no doubt Mies van der Rohe. The cover of the third issue, which he fully financed, carried a large red sans-serif G slightly tipped to the left and superimposed with a reproduction of a project for a steel and glass high-rise (fig.6.16)¹⁵⁵. With this striking image, *G* entered a new phase. It introduced French, English and Russian summaries, expanded into a lavishly illustrated magazine containing 16 to 68 pages per issue and was renamed *Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung* [Journal for Elemental Formation]. The dynamic typography of the early days was substituted for a tamer layout (fig.6.17)

¹⁵¹ *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923, n.p.

¹⁵² Mies v.d. Rohe, 'Bürohaus', *ibid.*, n.p.; translated in *Form*, no.3, 15 December 1966, p.32.

¹⁵³ A similar report on the Fiat factory subsequently appeared in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.19, December 1923, n.p.

¹⁵⁴ Ludwig Hilberseimer, 'Bauhandwerk und Bauindustrie' and 'Das Hochhaus', *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.2, September 1923, n.p.; Adolf Behne, 'Über Städtebau', *ibid.*, n.p. and M. v. d. R., 'Bauen', *ibid.*, n.p.; Mies v. d. Rohe, 'Industrielles Bauen', *G, Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.3, June 1923, pp.18-21, Ludwig Hilberseimer, 'Konstruktion und Form', *ibid.*, pp.24-27; and 'Amerikanische Architektur. Ausstellung in der Akademie der bildenden Künste', *G, Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.4, March 1926, pp.86-90.

¹⁵⁵ Raoul Hausmann, "More on group 'G'", *Art Journal*, vol.24, no.4, summer 1965, p.352.

whereby the text flowed quietly, interrupted only by colour highlights and occasional dramatisation intended to support the journal's campaign for a rationalised architecture, e.g. the photograph of a Neo-Baroque villa crossed out with red bars reproduced opposite the slogan 'The fundamental reorganisation of our housing is necessary' in the June 1924 issue (fig.6.18)¹⁵⁶. New themes also appeared, with articles exploring issues such as the backwardness of German fashion and the revolutionary potential of the photogram¹⁵⁷.

While *G* initially advertised only a few books and periodicals, the authors and editors of which all had connections with the Düsseldorf and Weimar congresses, subsequent issues recommended reading an ever wider range of publications. As horizons expanded, *G* acquired a more self-conscious tone. There arose criticism of other magazines. *L'Esprit Nouveau*, for instance, was accused of being overly concerned with the 'Latin tradition'. *G* recognised the relevance of some Purist ideas, such as the existence of a bond between the great art of the past and the 'new spirit', but found the allegedly 'barbarian' instinct of the Germans better suited to the pressing task of forging of a new environment¹⁵⁸. This change became most evident when Richter returned to full editorial duties in 1926. Articles by and on René Clair, Fernand Léger, Germaine Dulac, George Antheil and others film pioneers reflected a growing concern with a medium that was to monopolise Richter for the next fifteen years and signalled a new course of action.

It was not accidental, therefore, that *G* divorced itself from the 'collective Constructivism' of its early associates in the third issue¹⁵⁹. Richter explained:

¹⁵⁶ Other magazines soon followed suit and adopted this device to further their agenda, e.g. *ABC, Beiträge zum Bauen*, Basle, 2nd series, no.1, 1926, pp.1, 2 and 8; and 2nd series, no.4, 1927/28, pp.1-2.

¹⁵⁷ R. Hausmaun, 'Mode', *G, Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.3, June 1924, pp.60-63 and Tristan Tzara, 'Die Photographie von der Kehrzeit' (Paris, August 1922), *ibid.*, pp.39-40.

¹⁵⁸ H.R., 'L'Esprit nouveau', *G, Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.3, June 1924, p.70.

¹⁵⁹ This term was used by Van Doesburg in a cutting column on artistic events in Paris, Theo van Doesburg, 'Pariser Neuheiten. Motiv: Nur', *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.2, September 1923, n.p.

The word 'Constructivism' was introduced in Russia. It described an art which, instead of conventional materials, exploits modern construction materials and follows constructive goals. At the Düsseldorf congress of May 1920 [sic], the name Constructivism was adopted by [Van] Doesburg, Lissitzky and I in an extended sense, as an opposition. What today passes by this name has nothing more to do with elementary *Gestaltung*, our challenge to the congress¹⁶⁰.

This last comment made it perfectly clear that Richter made no distinction between Constructivism and elementary *Gestaltung*, but used both terms interchangeably. Van Doesburg displayed a similar proclivity with respect to 'elementary *Gestaltung*', 'monumental *Gestaltung*' and 'construction'¹⁶¹. Lissitzky, who had heretofore publicised the *Proun* as partaking of the 'general trend of constructive design', now stressed its 'elementary' qualities¹⁶². The founding manifesto of the K.I., in which 'Constructivist' and 'constructive' were alternatively employed and rendered in French as 'Neo-Plastic', in fact portended such fluctuations in terminology and strategic adjustments. As Richer himself observed, they were hardly unexpected, considering the heterogeneity and promotional purposes of the artists who, sharing a common concern with 'the legality of artistic expression' and 'meaningful contemporary tasks', had appropriated the Constructivist label¹⁶³.

This brief statement absolved *G* of its K.I. legacy and reaffirmed a concern that predated its launching: the search for a single language to transcend all cultures, the medium of which could only be film. 'Art is not the subjective explosion of one individual', Richter argued, 'but an organic language of humanity with the most serious meaning, and must therefore, in its basic elements, be free of error

¹⁶⁰ H.R., 'An der Konstruktivismus', *G, Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.3, June 1924, p.72.

¹⁶¹ Van Doesburg, 'Zur Elementare Gestaltung', n.p.

¹⁶² Lissitzky, 'New Russian art', p.335 and 'Prounenraum', n.p.

¹⁶³ H.R., 'An der Konstruktivismus', p.72.

and so lapidary that it can really be used as such, as the language of mankind'¹⁶⁴. In furthering the 'exact disciplines' created by 'Malevich, Mondrian and Eggeling', *G* had hoped to complete what these 'great founders of modern art' had 'set out to do' but not yet achieved: to provide a structure for cultural cognition and thereby allow a 'total' experience¹⁶⁵. The article 'Prinzipielles der Bewegungskunst' [Principles of the Art of Motion], published in *De Stijl* and *MA*, left no doubt regarding the potential Richter believed resided when the idea for *G* was born:

The will to achieve such a goal is an ethical requirement. Ethics are based on the belief that we are capable of a more perfect existence, and postulate that we behave in accordance with this belief: a total ethic (as opposed to a religious or philosophical ethic) requires that we act 'towards totality'¹⁶⁶.

Thus had been *G*'s ambition. Unfortunately, by the time publication began, the disenchantment between those who had attempted to rally a constituency to support such efforts was clearly felt and schismatic lines had long been drawn.

6.4. Conflicts and factionalism

It is significant that Richter's address 'to Constructivism' lamented that this designation was being usurped by opportunists who sought public recognition by adopting what he felt had become mere fashion:

Commercial oil painting has [...] appropriated the name and individualists march under Constructivism. Arrangers, oil painters, decorators, the entire speculation - As long as the slogan is in - It already seems to be passé, at least the sprinter Moholy-Nagy, who has a fine nose

¹⁶⁴ Hans Richter, 'Prinzipielles zur Bewegungskunst', *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.IV, no.7, July 1921, col.109-12.

¹⁶⁵ *G*, 'Die Kunst von heute (Ausstellung abstrakter Kunst Paris Dezember 1925)', *G, Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.4, March 1926, p.96.

for these things, now lets himself be termed a Suprematist [...]; perhaps he will have more luck than with the erstwhile Constructivism¹⁶⁷.

Writing in *Das Kunstblatt* in March 1924, the art historian Paul Ferdinand Schmidt had indeed referred to László Moholy-Nagy as the prime representative of Suprematism, a movement Schmidt claimed 'works with coloured light displays on a white plane and attempts to make the technics of the cinema, such as electricity, serviceable'¹⁶⁸.

Schmidt's article, published in a journal of fairly wide circulation and traditional disposition compared to *Veshch'* and *G*, testified to the burgeoning new public for Constructivism on the German scene. The opening lines of his text stressed the international nature of this phenomenon, its antagonism towards 'the formlessness and anarchy of subjectivism', and determination 'to put an end to all romantic feeling and vagueness of expression'¹⁶⁹. Schmidt maintained that Constructivism, unlike its predecessor the *Jugendstil* movement, had come to terms with the 'driving force' of its time: it had adequately embraced the matter-of-factness of engineering as applied in bridges, blast furnaces, grain silos, liners, cars, tools' and other structures conceived without 'artistic pretension'¹⁷⁰. As a result, Constructivism was capable of offering viable forms for all of modern life. It was therefore regrettable that the epoch was 'not yet ready to provide tasks' for its Constructivist wills. Part of the reason for this was that decisions regarding the shaping of the future, notably architecture, still lay in the hands of unreceptive officials. Other factors were the total lack of 'community spirit' and unwillingness to incorporate artistic creativity into the technological sphere. Once such obstacles were overthrown, Schmidt speculated, the presence of the new art would be thoroughly felt. He argued with reference to street decorations, propaganda trains

¹⁶⁶ Hans Richter, 'Prinzipielles zur Bewegungskunst'.

¹⁶⁷ H.R., 'An der Konstruktivismus', p.72.

¹⁶⁸ Paul F. Schmidt, 'Konstruktivismus', *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol. VIII, no.3, March 1924, p.84.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.83.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.84.

and other post-revolutionary ventures: 'The scant attempts that have been made in Russia foreshadow the extent to which art might pervade life'¹⁷¹.

It was the 'ethical' power of such endeavours, the prospect of 'a return to calm' after the 'chaos and formlessness of recent times', that most appealed to Schmidt¹⁷². This did not visibly dismay Alfréd Kemény, yet he too took issue with Schmidt's conflation of Moholy-Nagy with the Suprematist movement. In a brief letter to the editor Paul Westheim printed two issues later, Kemény vigorously criticised his compatriot, even questioned his originality:

Suprematism is the life-long work of the Russian artist Malevich and belongs among the most significant artistic movements of today. Suprematism has attained a maximum creative potential, of the inherent necessity of creation; Moholy-Nagy has achieved a minimum of creative potentiality and one sees in his work the maximum of non-creative aesthetics, of external and contrived sterility. It is worth noting that Moholy, who thus far has employed Constructivism for objective unwarranted self-promotion, now, in 1924, makes his appearance as a Suprematist, whereas genuine Suprematism in Russia came to an end once and for all in 1919. Moholy, however, who is eclectic and derivative, has a similarly insignificant role within the essential outcome of new constructive art as within Suprematism¹⁷³.

Kemény, who served as an important source of information on current Soviet art in Berlin, disapproved of Moholy-Nagy being affiliated to its achievements. His political aloofness meant that he could never be considered on the same level: 'Competent Constructivists fulfil the present-day requirements of the age of

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.85.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*

¹⁷³ Alfred Kemény, 'Bemerkungen', *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol.VIII, no.6, June 1924, p.192; translated in Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, pp.394-95.

technology and the demands of the time, which compels them to achieve economy and precision'¹⁷⁴.

These scathing comments made public a split which in 1923, after Moholy-Nagy joined the Bauhaus. In December 1922, however, a statement had appeared in *Der Sturm* under both Moholy-Nagy and Kemény's names. Here, the two Hungarians declared in an implicit challenge to their Russian and Dutch counterparts that 'constructivity as an organising principle of human efforts' had led in the arts 'from technology to the sort of static form-invested procedure which has been reduced either to technical naturalism or to an over-simplification of form limited to the horizontal, the vertical and the diagonal'¹⁷⁵. Barely three months after the opening of the Van Diemen exhibition, Moholy-Nagy and Kemény insinuated that even Naum Gabo's *Kinetic Construction: Standing Wave*, discussed in Chapter 5, left something to be desired. Taking their cue from *The Realistic Manifesto*, they rejected 'the static principle of classical art' in favour of 'the dynamic principle of universal life' and announced their intention to 'carry further the unit of construction' by creating a 'DYNAMIC-CONSTRUCTIVE SYSTEM OF FORCES, [...] whereby man, hitherto merely receptive in his observation of works of art, experiences a heightening of its own faculties, and becomes himself an active partner with the forces unfolding themselves'. 'Free-floating sculpture' and 'film as projected spatial motion' were initially to serve as 'demonstration devices for testing the connection between matter, energy and space'. This was expected to provide the foundation for works that would be 'self-moving, free of machine and technological movement'¹⁷⁶.

Underlying this programme was a broad ideological question that soon resurfaced in less disguised terms in *MA*'s rival, *Egység*. In February 1923, *Egység* published a 'Declaration' in which Moholy-Nagy, Kemény, Ernő Kállai and László Péri warned against what they branded 'bourgeois Constructivism'. Reiterating

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ Moholy-Nagy, Kemény, 'Dynamisch-konstruktives Kraftsystem', p.186.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

ideas in evidence in Kemény and Kállai's criticism of the *First Russian Art Exhibition*, this text condemned De Stijl's 'constructive (mechanised) aestheticism' and 'the technological Naturalism achieved by the Russian Constructivists (the OBMOKhU group) with their constructions representing technical devices'. In contrast to this, the Hungarians stressed the political significance of their own Constructivism and readiness to 'subordinate [their] individual interests to those of the proletariat' in the struggle towards 'the most advanced organisation of life', i.e. communist culture:

This kind of reappraised (from a bourgeois point of view, destructive) Constructivism (to which only a tiny proportion of those contemporary movements in art that are known by the name of Constructivism belong) leads, on the one hand, in practical life to a new constructive architecture that can be realised only in communist society, and, on the other hand, to a nonfunctional but dynamic (kinetic) constructive system of forces which organises space by moving in it, the further potential of which is again in practice dynamic architecture¹⁷⁷.

So the signatories announced that they were joining *Egység* and, in accordance with its agenda, called for the establishment of a new *Proletkult* organisation 'to pave the way for a high-standard (adequate) proletarian and collective art'¹⁷⁸.

Drafted in close proximity to one another, these statements of position and intention reflected fairly well the fragility of the associations thus formed, suggesting both ulterior motives and compromise. Hence it was probably not fortuitous that the above 'Declaration' appeared in the issue which revived *Egység* away from Kassák's immediate sphere of influence, whose relationships with the Hungarians in Berlin had by then largely soured. As is clear from Aurél Bernáth's

¹⁷⁷ Ernő Kállai, Alfréd Kemény, László Moholy-Nagy, László Péri, 'Nyilatkozat' [Declaration], *Egység*, Berlin, no.4, 10 February 1923, p.12; translated in Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, pp.288-89.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.289. *Egység*'s intention to establish a *Proletkult* organisation in Hungary was announced in Aladár Komját, Béla Uitz, 'Az *Egység* úja és munkaprogramja' [The road and programme of *Egység*], *Egység*, Vienna, no.3, 16 September 1922, p.1; translated in Hubertus Gassner (ed.),

record of a meeting which preceded *Egység's* 'resurrection', there was little consensus between those involved¹⁷⁹. Ideological dissension, in fact, served to justify both Kállai and Kemény's exclusion from the journal's circle in the following issue. It is worth noting, however, that while factionalism was nowhere more apparent than among the Hungarians, it was not peculiar to them. Following the inconclusive congresses of 1922, many felt compelled to signal what separated them from their peers or former associates. New, equally precarious, alliances were forged and more proclamations ensued which, along with the 'constantly changing attraction and repulsion' that inspired such ventures, betrayed a distrust of any attempt to channel creative impulses through doctrinaire restrictions¹⁸⁰.

The call Viking Eggeling and Raoul Hausmann launched in German in the March 1923 issue of *MA* is a compelling example. A sequel of the essay Hausmann published in *De Stijl* in September 1921, the 'Zweite präsentistische Deklaration' [Second Presentist Declaration] responded to the militant rhetoric deployed in *Egység*¹⁸¹. Hausmann had already expressed concern about *Proletkult*, fearing that it might easily become an ally of conservatism by insulating the proletariat against truly subversive art¹⁸². This new pronouncement clarified and formalised his reservations. Demanding 'the expansion and conquest of all our senses', Hausmann and Eggeling unequivocally rejected anything to do with either *Proletkut* or *l'art pour l'art*. To merely seek to influence the proletariat was never to allow the 'broadening of all human functions'. Psychology and physics were the best available means for achieving such a goal:

Our task is to work on nature's and mankind's physical and physiological problems in a spirit of universal obligation [...] Art, the

Wechselwirkungen: Ungarische Avantgarde in der Weimarer Republik (Marburg: Jonas Verlag, 1986), p.234.

¹⁷⁹ Aurél Bernáth, *Utak Pannóniából* [Roads from Pannonia] (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1960), pp.362-63; translated in Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, p.392.

¹⁸⁰ Elderfield (ed.), *Flight out of Time: A Dada Diary by Hugo Ball*, p.64.

¹⁸¹ V. Eggeling, R. Hausmann, 'Zweite präsentistische Deklaration, gerichtet an die internationalen Konstruktivisten', *MA*, Vienna, vol. VIII, no.5/6, 15 March 1923, n.p.

¹⁸² Raoul Hausmann, 'Puffke propagiert Proletkult', *Die Aktion*, Berlin, vol. XI, no.3, 5 March 1921, col.131-34.

only area of production where the laws of causality cannot be applied, [...] is rid of the stamp of uselessness and abstraction [...] The common denominator for all the senses is our time-space-sense¹⁸³.

Accordingly, the two artists renewed their shared commitment to exploring the processes of visual and tactile perception, their correspondence and the laws governing them, and, in the process, parted from the 'international Constructivists in general'¹⁸⁴.

Hausmann and Eggeling were not isolated in their polemic against partisan art and Constructivism. Theo van Doesburg, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Tristan Tzara and Christof Spengemann raised similar objections in the second issue of Schwitters' periodical *Merz*. The *Manifest Proletkunst* [Proletarian Art Manifesto], produced during the Dada tour Schwitters, Vilmos Huszár, Theo and Nelly van Doesburg made through the Netherlands in spring 1923, insisted that art was 'much more sublime than a class distinction between proletariat and bourgeoisie' and protested against its transformation into a tool for propaganda, left or right. Schwitters and his four colleagues maintained: 'Art is a spiritual function of man, the purpose of which is to redeem him from the chaos of life (tragedy). Art is free in the use of its means in any way it likes, but is bound to its own laws and to its laws alone'. They continued, extolling the restorative powers of artistic expression:

The sole object of art is [...] to arouse man's creative powers; its target is the mature human being, not the proletarian or the bourgeois [...] Art as we would have it is neither proletarian nor bourgeois; the forces it develops are strong enough to influence the whole of civilisation, rather than let themselves be influenced by social conditions. The proletariat, like the bourgeoisie, is a condition that must be superseded. But if the proletarians imitate the bourgeois cult by setting up a rival cult of their

¹⁸³ Eggeling, Hausmann, 'Zweite präsentistische Deklaration', n.p.

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

own, they are unconsciously helping to preserve the corrupt culture of the bourgeoisie, to the detriment of art and of civilisation¹⁸⁵.

6.5. Attempts at synthesis: anthologies

On 18 December 1923, László Moholy-Nagy wrote to Aleksandr Rodchenko to inform him of the Bauhaus' plan to 'publish a series of brochures' on 'current issues', starting with a "discussion of 'Constructivism'". Moholy-Nagy explained: 'Although the term here, in Germany, became very well known in recent times, very few people have a clear idea of its meaning'. Obviously frustrated with the resultant confusion, he entreated: 'We would be very happy if you could explain your own or perhaps the Russian interpretation in general pertaining to this question'. As an insider, Moholy-Nagy's dissatisfaction was less with the amount of eclecticism that such lack of codification permitted than with the promotional efforts of those Russian émigré members of the avant-garde who posed as defenders and representatives of the Constructivist cause in Berlin. He argued: 'We sorely miss the co-operation of our Russian comrades (those who are living in Russia) and we are not quite sure that statements made and positions taken up by Lissitzky and Gabo, who are known here, are representative of the opinion of all the Russian artists¹⁸⁶. Moholy-Nagy proposed to supplement these 'occasional news and individual incursions', and balance them by providing a 'comprehensive and cohesive picture from Russia'¹⁸⁷.

While there may be some question as to the practicability of such a project in 1924, there is little doubt that Moholy-Nagy was intent upon the making of history:

¹⁸⁵ Théo van Doesburg, Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Tristan Tzara, Chr. Spengemann, 'Manifest Proletkunst' (d. Haag, 6 March 1923), *Merz*, Hanover, no.2, April 1923, pp.23-25; reprinted under the title 'Anti-Tendenzkunst', signed by Van Doesburg alone in *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.VI, no.2, col.17-19; translated in *Kurt Schwitters: Das literarische Werk* (Cologne: DuMont Verlag, 1981), vol.V, p.143-45.

¹⁸⁶ László Moholy-Nagy, 'Letter to Aleksandr Rodchenko, Weimar, 18 December 1923'; translated in Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, pp.392-93.

'Our goal is to give a summary of all that is contemporary'¹⁸⁸. Several initiatives had been taken in this direction by the time the *Bauhausbücher* [Bauhaus books] series actually began. In 1922 Moholy-Nagy had joined Lajos Kassák in compiling an 'anthology of the latest results in the field of the visual arts, architecture, music and engineering, summarised in over one hundred illustrations'¹⁸⁹. Published in September 1922 in Vienna in both Hungarian and German editions, the *Buch neuer Künstler* [Book of New Artists] (fig.6.19) was in its basic intention akin to *Der blaue Reiter* [The Blue Rider] almanac of 1912¹⁹⁰. Franz Marc and Vasilii Kandinskii had sought to communicate a vision of the coming age by drawing upon an international array of creators which could represent the challenge to established ideas and conventions that was occurring in all the arts. Reproductions of paintings were thus juxtaposed with musical scores by Arnold Schönberg and Anton Webern, a drama and examples of tribal, folk and children's art¹⁹¹. Ten years later, the *Book of New Artists* presented a similar cross-section of modern culture. The selection, however, no longer reflected the spirit of Expressionism, but optimistically chronicled the advent of a new era: 'the era of constructivity' in which the artist 'finally [brings] forth the unity of a decadent world, the architecture of strength and the spirit'¹⁹².

As was later to be the case with most Bauhaus books, the *Book of New Artists* included a brief foreword, followed by over forty double-page spreads of illustrative material so assembled as to 'make the problems raised in the text VISUALLY clear'¹⁹³. Opening the latter section, a photograph of a high voltage pylon signified 'the invincible strength of man' (fig.6.20). Kassák argued: 'Scientific thinking has not only disengaged man from God, it has shown him the way to himself'. Emancipated from spiritual coercion and 'morbid romanticism',

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁹ *MA*, Vienna, vol. VIII, no.5/6, 15 March 1923, n.p.

¹⁹⁰ An American version was reportedly planned, Éva Körner, 'Nachwort', in *Buch neuer Künstler* (Budapest: Corvina Verlag/Magyar Helikon, 1977), n.p.

¹⁹¹ Franz Marc, Wassily Kandinsky (eds.), *Der blaue Reiter* (Munich: Piper, 1912).

¹⁹² Lajos Kassák, László Moholy-Nagy, *Buch neuer Künstler* (Vienna: MA, 1922), n.p.

¹⁹³ László Moholy-Nagy, *Malerei, Photographie, Film* (Munich: Albert Langen, 1925), p.39.

the 'new man' set himself no 'imaginary goals'. He wished 'to realise himself, for he knows from the history of the centuries and feels with his potentiated humanity: only in him and through his feeling of responsibility can the world struggle to a higher plane of happiness'¹⁹⁴. The recent evolution of art mirrored this new 'practical consciousness'. Kassák asserted: 'From one day to the next, the scales of time-tested aesthetic truths fell from us'. Although lacking 'direction', Futurism had initiated the disintegration of 'classical aesthetics'. Expressionism had embraced this agenda but proved incapable of furthering it. Not until Cubism had the necessity to strive towards 'the most basic foundations' been recognised. Unfortunately, Kassák said, Cubism had 'remained at the ascertainment stage': unable 'to reveal itself and its new laws', it had 'fell victim to its own analytical method'. It was the Dadaists who had 'leant meaning to [this] bankruptcy' by 'voluntarily [sacrificing] themselves knocking down old idols' and thereby ensuring that the future be created on 'virginal ground'¹⁹⁵.

Visually, this narrative ended much as it began. Two photographs of aeroplanes, previously published in *And Yet the World Goes Round* (figs.3.4-5) and *L'Esprit Nouveau*, stood as emblems of an heroic epoch which transcended both 'religious collective art and nullifidian individualistic art'¹⁹⁶. As Kassák saw it, creativity was 'not a merely a matter of pictures, or only pictures, poems, musical compositions and sculpture, but of everything man devises and whatever he adds to the hitherto known form of the world out of the essence of his time'. Twenty instances of technological progress thus alternated with eighty-eight reproductions of works by leading representatives of the movements dealt with in the

¹⁹⁴ Kassák, *Buch neuer Künstler*, n.p.

¹⁹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid.* Contact with *L'Esprit Nouveau* was established through Moholy-Nagy, who sent all the 1921 issues of *MA* to Ozenfant and Jeanneret in exchange for copies of their journal, László Moholy-Nagy, 'Letter to Lajos Kassák, 22 February 1922, Berlin', in Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, p.389. Enclosed in this letter were 'a few Russian photographs (6)'. An article by Erenburg, to be translated from Russian into Hungarian, was to follow along with a copy of the freshly published *And Yet the World Goes Round*: 'It is a very interesting book', Moholy-Nagy wrote, *ibid.* Although the table of contents named another source, the photograph of the 'Goliath' Farman aeroplane was probably borrowed from Erenburg's book, as suggested by an earlier issue of *MA* (vol.VIII, n.8, 30 August 1922, p.54), where it appeared with the caption 'Cliché Helikon Verlag'.

introduction. Just as ocean liners and other feats of modern engineering had served as argumentational aids in Le Corbusier's essays 'Eyes which do not see...', so the pairing of a racing car and a dynamo with the spiralling and interpenetrating planes of Umberto Boccioni's *States of Mind: The Farewells* (1911) reinforced Kassák's contention that 'art, science, engineering converge at a single point'¹⁹⁷. A few pages later, the crystalline geometry of Lyonel Feininger's Cubo-Expressionist painting formally echoed the stark steel and glass architecture of a Stuttgart railway station (fig.6.21). Unlike *L'Esprit Nouveau*, however, the *Book of New Artists* featured no explanatory captions. The plates, surrounded by large white margins, conveyed a message of their own, insistently building up the argument that modern art was the product of a historically determined evolution that culminated in 'constructivity'¹⁹⁸.

Of all those artists who strove in this direction, the sequence of illustrations pointedly implied the precedence of the Hungarians, represented by the two editors. It is notable that Moholy-Nagy's *Glass Architecture* and *Nickel Construction* of 1921 and Kassák's *Pictorial Architecture* (fig.6.22) appeared in the concluding pages in an unbroken succession. This was in marked contrast to the accomplishments of the Russian avant-garde, allotted substantial space in the preceding spreads. For example, Vladimir Tatlin's *Model for a Monument to the Third International* was reproduced opposite a photograph of the steel skeleton of an American aeroplane hangar under construction. Similarly, Malevich's painting and Lissitzky's *Proun 17N* (ca.1920) were confronted with a close-up of the interior of a steel suspension bridge, whose curvilinear beams imparted a tangible quality to the elliptical orbits of Suprematist elements (fig.6.23). The placement of such works in a modern technological context was not coincidental. As has been

¹⁹⁷ Kassák, *Buch neuer Künstler*, n.p.

¹⁹⁸ The crucial role of the plates in furthering this argument was noted by Eckardt von Sydow: 'Kassák's foreword proclaims, with a perhaps all too Expressionist range of feeling, that the principle of the new art which is to replace Futurism, Expressionist, Cubism, and Dadaism is the double-page of architecture and constructivity. How this is meant is shown by the more important part of the book: the illustrations', E. v. Sydow, 'Ludwig Kassák und László Moholy-Nagy: Buch neuer Künstler, Wien 1922', *Der Cicerone*, Leipzig, vol.XV, no.5, 1923, p.239.

noted in Chapter 5, Kassák was soon to make it clear in his criticism of the Van Diemen exhibition that, although he acknowledged the historical significance of recent Russian avant-garde achievements, he objected to an immoderate adoption of functionalism and engineering romanticism. No doubt, the intention was to highlight the distinctive character of parallel Hungarian endeavours, the implication being that they provided a more consistent answer to the challenge of construction.

Conceived as a visual manifesto, the *Book of New Artists*' mission was 'to help to generate [...] assimilation' for the 'new art' and to carve a niche for the Hungarians in the history of modern art¹⁹⁹. The fact that Constructivism as such was never mentioned was symptomatic of Kassák's desire to steer *MA* clear of the overt Communist perspectives of his Russian colleagues and maintain a high level of independence on the international scene²⁰⁰. As highlighted above, this intent found a clear echo one month later in the response of the *MA* group to the statement of the I.F.d.K. which appeared in the K.I. issue of *De Stijl*. It is revealing in this connection that the compilation of an anthology of writings figured among the practical measures Kassák suggested should be taken on this occasion in order to muster support for the proposed 'International Organisation of Revolutionary-Minded Creators'. It was yet another sign of his clear-eyed recognition of the strategic importance of carefully documenting the aims and meaning of the avant-garde's work. As evinced by the anthology El Lissitzky and Hans Arp joint-edited in 1925 and its precedent, the *Nasci* issue of *Merz* (fig.6.24), Kassák's colleagues, too, saw the potential for self-definition that lay in a synoptic presentation of their personal view of the current state of modern culture.

¹⁹⁹ Gábor Gaál, 'Kassák Lajos - Moholy-Nagy László: Új művészek könyve', *Jövo*, 1922, p.249; translated in Passuth, *Moholy-Nagy*, p.413.

²⁰⁰ Kassák had unequivocally stated his refusal to subordinate art to the demands of Communism and vehemently condemned the *Proletkult* partisanship of the Russians in his answer of 25 October 1920 to a questionnaire sent out by IZO's International Bureau, Lajos Kassák, 'Az Alkotó Művészek Provizorikus Moszkvai Internacionális Irodájának kérdései a magyarországi aktivista művészek' [Questions of the provisional Moscow International Bureau of Creative Artists to the Hungarian Activists], *MA*, Vienna, vol.VI, no.1/2, 1 November 1920, pp.18-19; translated in Charles Dautrey, Jean-Claude Guerlain (eds.), *L'Activisme Hongrois* (Bayeux: Goutal-Derly, 1979), pp.106-11.

From Kurt Schwitters' own admission, his journal and *G* shared a common agenda: 'Merz strives to help to uncover the truth of the age. And so Merz allies itself with the ideal of joint artistic activity, as realised to some extent, for example, in Holland (Stijl) and Russia'²⁰¹. The first issue, published in January 1923 and dedicated to 'Holland Dada', testified to a desire to define a new camp. Schwitters declared: 'We turn against dada and fight only for Style'²⁰². Still, Merz was in the early days largely Dadaist in tone and content. Three further issues were produced in 1923²⁰³. Gathered in them were I.K. Bonset, Raoul Hausmann, Hannah Höch, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes, Francis Picabia, Philippe Soupault, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp and other prominent members of the various Dada groups. Increasingly, however, Merz also produced an outlet for the work of artists like Piet Mondrian, Vilmos Huszár, László Moholy-Nagy and El Lissitzky, as well as a forum for the new architectural ideas of J.J.P. Oud, Gerrit T. Rietveld, Theo van Doesburg and Mies van der Rohe. Hence the October 1923 issue contained reproductions of Vladimir Tatlin's *Model for a Monument to the Third International* and Lissitzky's *The Town (Proun 1E)* (fig.6.25)²⁰⁴. By the time these went to print, Schwitters evidently felt compelled to give extended space to such developments. He suggested to Lissitzky, who had already contributed a brief essay on typography, that he edit a special issue²⁰⁵.

'The constructional formation of life in Germany has become so interesting that we have taken the liberty of publishing [...] Merz [...] without Dada', Schwitters wrote in the Polish magazine *Blok* [Blok] in June 1924²⁰⁶. The result was *Nasci*, published the following month with 'specifications of typography' by Lissitzky²⁰⁷. The primary palette and striking geometry of the covers were decidedly new.

²⁰¹ K. Schwitters, 'Watch your step!', *Merz*, Hanover, no.6, October 1923, p.58.

²⁰² Kurt Schwitters, 'Dada complet', *Merz*, Hanover, no.1, January 1923, p.8.

²⁰³ Issues 2 (*nummer 1*), 4 (*Banalitäten*) and 6 (*Imitatoren watch step!*). Issues 3 (*Kurt Schwitters. Sechs Lithos auf den Stein gemerzt*) and 5 (*Sieben Arpaden*) appeared as volumes of lithographs.

²⁰⁴ *Merz*, Hanover, no.6, October 1923, pp.57 and 62.

²⁰⁵ El Lissitzky, 'Topographie der Typographie', *Merz*, Hanover, no.4, July 1923, p.47. An editorial note withholding Merz's full endorsement followed the article.

²⁰⁶ Kurt Schwitters, 'Dadaizm' (June 1924), *Blok, Revue internationale d'avant-garde*, Warsaw, no.6/7, 1924-25, n.p.; translated in *Kurt Schwitters: Das literarische Werk*, vol.V, p.196.

Printed in blue on either side of a bold centred vertical ruler, the preface enunciated the intention of the issue in both German and French (fig.6.26)²⁰⁸. True to the matter-of-fact spirit of *Veshch'*, Lissitzky warned: 'Our work is not a philosophy'. The objective was neither to hail the machine nor to prove once again that 'the task of creative work, therefore also of art, is not to represent but to present'. Both were deemed 'an unproductive waste of time'. The editors preferred to extend the existing perception of contemporary Constructivist concerns:

Here is an attempt to show the collective will which is already beginning to govern the international art production of the present time. There is still a war going on with opposing factions; and today this civil war is art's fight for his life.

IN THE YEAR 1924 WILL BE FOUND THE SQUARE ROOT ($\sqrt{\quad}$) OF INFINITY (∞) WHICH SWINGS BETWEEN MEANINGFUL (+) AND MEANINGLESS (-); ITS NAME - NASCI²⁰⁹.

An encyclopaedia definition elucidated this last notion on the front cover: 'Nature, from the Latin *nasci*, i.e. to become or come into being, everything that through its own force develops, forms or moves'²¹⁰. Sixteen pages followed where examples of natural forms and avant-garde achievements combined with interpretative captions to evoke the universal laws governing creation and illustrate their enduring value in the modern age (fig.6.27). Schwitters commented:

There you will see clearly demonstrated the essential likeness of a drawing by Lissitzky to a crystal, of a high building by Mies van der Rohe to the austere composition of an upper thigh bone; you will recognise the constructive tendency of the position of the leaves to the stem²¹¹.

²⁰⁷ *Merz*, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/July 1924, front cover.

²⁰⁸ This bilingual approach was maintained throughout the issue.

²⁰⁹ El Lissitzky, 'Nasci' (Locarno, Ospedale), *Merz*, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/July 1924, n.p.

²¹⁰ *Merz*, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/July 1924, front cover.

²¹¹ Kurt Schwitters, 'Kunst und Zeiten' (Hanover, March 1926), in *Kurt Schwitters. Das literarische Werk*, vol.V, p.237.

Two images with a cosmological resonance framed this demonstration. As in the second issue of *Veshch'*, Kazimir Malevich's *Black Quadrilateral* occupied pride of place on the first page. Lissitzky wrote in 1922: 'On one side the stone of the square has blocked the narrow canal of painting, on the other side it becomes the foundation stone for the new spatial construction of reality'²¹². The final plate was a schematic representation of the canals on Mars punctuated with a bold question mark (fig.6.28).

In the first double-page spread, a print from Lissitzky's *Erste Kestnerprounmappe* [First Kestner Proun portfolio] featured opposite a photograph of a crystal (fig.6.29). Seven elements were listed beside the latter: 'crystal, sphere, plane, rod, strip, spiral, cone'. Two quotations from the biologist Raoul Francé, whose popular scientific writing on plants and evolution received much notice in the German press at the time, provided the link:

These are the underlying shapes out of which everything is made. They are sufficient to ensure optimal operation of the total world processes. All that exists is a combination of these seven primordial forms.

This is all that architecture, engineering, crystallography and chemistry, geography and astronomy, art, every kind of making and doing, indeed the whole world is about²¹³.

The ensuing pages offered further visual analogies intended to reveal this latent 'biotechnical' dynamism, such as Schwitters' *Scrap Paper Picture* of 1920 against the basic forms of Mondrian, Arp's abstract paper cut-outs alongside the simplified volumes of Archipenko's *Boxkampf* (1914), and Tatlin's Tower coupled with the curvilinear rhythms of Léger's painting (fig.6.30).

Captions stressing 'the countless constructive laws of nature' and the artist's ability to 'shape forms that are organic' imposed a powerful reading on these

²¹² El Lissitzky, 'New Russian art', p.334.

²¹³ These quotations, taken *verbatim* from Raoul Heinrich Francé, *Die Pflanze als Erfinder* (Stuttgart: Franckhschen Verlagshandlung, 1920), had appeared the previous year in R.H. Francé,

images²¹⁴. In a few spreads, one was presented with the notion that art was 'a limb of nature' and partner with science in its goal of uncovering the fundamental determinants required to bring humanity in accord with its true biological needs²¹⁵. Francé argued in *Bios* in 1923, from which some of the illustrations were taken: 'It is not enough to know the laws of the world, one must also live by them'²¹⁶. Such was the consistency *Nasci* urged in creative activity. Citing another of the biologist's key ideas, Lissitzky claimed: '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'²¹⁷. This last aphorism, reminiscent of earlier *Proun* statements, eloquently recapitulated the message propagated by *Veshch'* and *G*, substantiating their claim that the very possibility of a culture hinged on the implementation of universal, elementary principles. Hence the slogans on the title page of the latter journal in July 1923, reprinted as a visual link between a Mies van der Rohe building and the aforementioned cross-section of a bone (fig.6.27): 'We know no problems of form but only those of construction. Form is not the aim but the result of our work'²¹⁸.

Following this venture, Lissitzky made plans for the final issue of *Merz* in 1924, but there was no sequel²¹⁹. Perhaps disheartened by the disagreements that had occurred and compromises that had to be made along the way, Schwitters showed little interest²²⁰. It was with Arp's concurrence that Lissitzky eventually realised his idea for what he called a 'Last parade of all the isms of art from 1914-24'²²¹. Lissitzky's letters to Sophie Küppers are replete with details of the strain the

'Die sieben technischen Grundformen der Natur', *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, January 1923, pp.5-11 (pp.8 and 10 respectively).

²¹⁴ *Merz*, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/July 1924, p.80.

²¹⁵ Lissitzky, 'Nasci', n.p.

²¹⁶ Raoul Heinrich Francé, *Bios. Die Gesetze der Welt* (München: Franz Haufstaengl, 1921), vol.I, epitaph. The cross-section of the bone on p.73 (fig.16) appeared in *Nasci* on p.82.

²¹⁷ Lissitzky, 'Nasci', n.p.

²¹⁸ *Merz*, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/July 1924, pp.82-83.

²¹⁹ El Lissitzky, 'Letter to Lissitzky-Küppers, Orsalino, 23 March 1924', in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.48.

²²⁰ See, for instance, El Lissitzky, 'Letter to Lissitzky-Küppers, Ospedale, Locarno, 6 March 1924', in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.52.

²²¹ Lissitzky, 'Letter to Lissitzky-Küppers, Orsalino, 23 March 1924', p.48.

project yielded between the two artists²²². Theirs was clearly no easy collaboration, yet it produced a remarkable result. Eventually printed in a small book format, *Die Kunstismen* [The Isms of Art] was intended as a guide through the many divergent preoccupations of the avant-garde of the past ten years (fig.6.31). As in the *Book of New Artists*, the literary content was separated from the illustrations. An alphabetical list of the sixty-eight artists and groups included in the survey appeared on the first page, followed by the table of contents and a succinct bibliography. Sixteen different sections were announced, each prefaced with a brief quotation or commentary: Abstract film, Constructivism, Verism, Proun, Compressionism, Merz, Neo-Plasticism, Purism, Dada, Simultaneism, Suprematism, Metaphysicians, Abstractivism, Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism²²³.

The typographical layout was consistent with the call for visual clarity and immediacy Lissitzky had launched in *Merz* in July 1923²²⁴. The bold vertical lines employed in the opening editorial of *Veshch'* were slightly modified so as to divide the page into three equal columns in which the German, French and English versions of text appeared side by side (figs.4.5. and 6.32). Malevich again opened the discussion, his description of the new age as one of 'analysis' serving as a prologue to the series of definitions which formed the bulk of the text²²⁵. It is significant that while the latter began with a reverence to Cubism, outlined in Guillaume Apollinaire and Roger Allard's words, and gradually advanced into the future, the sequence was reversed in the visual section. Like the *Book of New Artists*, the chronology established by *The Isms of Art* ended with stills from Richter and Eggeling's abstract films, preceded directly by what the editors presented as typical examples of Constructivism. In contrast to the Hungarian

²²² For instance, El Lissitzky, 'Letter to Lissitzky-Küppers, Locarno, 1 November 1924', in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.53. Four weeks later, Lissitzky wrote that he was now 'seeing to the whole thing by [himself]', El Lissitzky, 'Letter to Lissitzky-Küppers, Minusio, Locarno, 6 December 1924', in *ibid.*, p.55.

²²³ El Lissitzky, Hans Arp, *Die Kunstismen* (Erlenbach-Zurich, Munich and Leipzig: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925), pp.vii. No definition appeared for 'Compressionism'.

²²⁴ Lissitzky, 'Topography der Typographie', p.47.

²²⁵ Lissitzky, Arp, *Die Kunstismen*, p.viii.

survey, however, the line of argumentation was retrospective. The later date of publication no doubt in part accounted for this. Here modern art was shown as a series of parallel, individual developments, free of the intrusion of iconic objects such as high tension pylons or ocean liners. The question of its future evolution was left unanswered. Although a clue was given as to the editors' personal expectations through the inclusion of abstract film, it came immediately after a bold question mark (fig.6.33)²²⁶.

The text, considered in relation to the plates, explained this structure. Like Kassák, Lissitzky and Arp wrote dismissively of Expressionism, and showed little more appreciation of Italian 'metaphysical' painting, exemplified by Carlo Carrà and Giorgio de Chirico. 'Abstractivism' and Constructivism were among the few other movements that were defined by the editors, rather than a quotation from a major representative. They wrote: 'The abstract artists give form to the Inobjective without being bound by a common problem. Abstractivism offers multiple senses [sic]'. Such was the message conveyed by the plates. Included in this category were figures as diverse as Vasili Kandinskii, Aleksandr Rodchenko Petr Miturich, Natan Al'tman, Lyubov' Popova, Arthur Segal, Hans Arp, László Moholy-Nagy and László Peri²²⁷. It is worth recalling that the last two artists had been singled out by Lissitzky shortly after he arrived in Berlin as sharing the Russian avant-garde's 'organised approach' and standing out 'in relief' against 'the background of jellyfish-like German non-objective painting', to which Kandinsky was directly affiliated²²⁸. The evaluation of the Dadaists' position *The Isms of Art* offered likewise differed from that put forward in *Veshch'*. Formerly described as antithetical to the constructive aims of that journal, Dadaism was now credited for exercising general criticism of bourgeois society and thereby carrying out 'a magic purge'²²⁹. Arp's input, of course, justified this shift. It is also likely that Lissitzky's

²²⁶ As pointed out in the discussion of 'A. and Pangeometry' in Chapter 2, Lissitzky placed high hopes in Eggeling and Richter's experiments, seeing in them the herald of a new era.

²²⁷ Arp also appeared in the section devoted to Dada.

²²⁸ El., 'Vystavki v Berline' [Exhibitions in Berlin], *Veshch'*, Berlin, no.3, May 1922, p.14; translated in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, pp.342-43. See Chapter 4.

²²⁹ Lissitzky, Arp, *Die Kunstisten*, p.x.

appreciation of the Dadaists' achievements had benefited from his prolonged exposure to them and fruitful collaboration with Schwitters, whom Lissitzky reportedly '[liked] best of all the artists in Germany' in 1924²³⁰.

The statement about Constructivism was equally suggestive. In his Western declarations Lissitzky repeatedly denounced the German misconception of a *Maschinenkunst* introduced by Umanski's writings in 1920²³¹. *The Isms of Art* in part reiterated this:

These artists look of the world through the prisma of technic. They don't want to give an illusion by the means of colours on canvas, but work directly in iron, wood, glass, a.o. The shortsighted see therein only the machine. Constructivism proves that the limits of mathematics and art, between a work of art and a technical invention are not to be fixed [sic]²³².

Five plates illustrated this explanatory comment: a counter-relief by Tatlin and photograph of him at work on the *Model to the Monument to the Third International*, a reprint of the installation photograph of the Constructivist room at the spring 1921 OBMOKhU exhibition published in *Veshsh'*, the *Construction in Relief* Naum Gabo had entered in the *First Russian Exhibition*, and an architectural project from the studio of Nikolai Ladovskii, who had formed the group ASNOVA [*Assotsiatsiya novykh arkhitektorov* - Association of new architects] and recently entrusted its promotion in the West to Lissitzky (fig.6.34)²³³. Tellingly, Lissitzky included neither his own painting nor architectural work. Instances of these appeared earlier in a separate *Proun* section (fig.6.35), between 'Verism' (George Grosz and Otto Dix) and 'Compressionism' (Willi Baumeister and Oskar Schlemmer).

²³⁰ El Lissitzky, 'Letter to Sophie Küppers, Bellinzona, 16 October 1924', in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.53.

²³¹ For instance, he argued with regard to Tatlin's counter-reliefs in Berlin in 1922: 'In the West, this thing was erroneously termed machine-art, on the strength of an erroneously termed analogy', El Lissitzky, 'New Russian art', in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.333.

²³² Lissitzky, Arp, *Die Kunstismen*, p.x.

²³³ Nisbet, 'An introduction to El Lissitzky', p.32.

The Isms of Art, compiled shortly before Lissitzky returned to Russia in May 1925, in a sense closed one chapter of the history of Constructivism in Germany. Lissitzky wrote to Sophie Küppers while working on the final proofs of *Nasci* in Switzerland: 'I do not see anything that excites feeling in Germany any more'²³⁴. Less than a year later, he recommended that, when in Berlin, she did not 'enter into long conversations with the crowd there (Richter, Doesburg and so on)', clearly distrustful of his former K.I. associates and concerned with possible plagiarism²³⁵. His was by no means an isolated attitude.

The emergence of anthologies legitimising the achievements of the avant-garde and establishing categories, to which specific artists were assigned or willing to be affiliated, indicated that a new phase had begun. The collective spirit that invigorated *Veshch'* and seemed so promising on paper had never come to true fruition. Attempts to lay the foundation for a cohesive international effort were not sustained and, as a result, rarely proceeded beyond the planning stage or ended prematurely. With Constructivist alliances bringing few rewards, artists soon altered their focus. They learned to seek recognition elsewhere, resuming their goals in their own directions. Offshoots like *G* retained some of the original impetus, but ultimately showed a broad unanimity that was easier to sense in terms of a shared utopian idealism than it was to define. In the final issues, published in 1926, the goals advanced by the K.I. had definitely been pushed into the background.

Europa Almanach [Europe Almanac], the anthology which Paul Westheim and Carl Einstein edited in 1924, illustrated this change perhaps better than any other

²³⁴ El Lissitzky, 'Letter to Sophie Küppers, Orsalino, 21 March 1924', in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p.46.

²³⁵ El Lissitzky, 'Letter to Sophie Küppers, Minusio, Locarno, 4 January 1925', in *ibid.*, p.57.

source²³⁶. According to an advert placed in *Das Kunstblatt*, it was intended as a platform for that 'minority of good Europeans' who still believed in the possibility of a global reform of everyday life²³⁷. Gathered in its 282 pages were works and statements by no less than 130 international artists, including Lissitzky's seminal article 'A. and Pangeometry'. Although they were presented as 'allied in their intentions', no attempt was made to establish a common platform under a specific label or ideology²³⁸. Of the resulting book, Lissitzky wrote to Sophie Küppers: 'Get yourself *Europa*. It is a document typical of this anti-*Deutschland über alles* sentiment, seeking to conceal its true value behind a cheap shabby exterior'²³⁹.

²³⁶ Carl Einstein, Paul Westheim (ed.), *Europa Almanach* (Potsdam: Gustav Kiepenheuer Verlag, 1925).

²³⁷ *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol. VIII, no. 11, November 1924, p. 344.

²³⁸ *Ibid.*

²³⁹ El Lissitzky, 'Letter to Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, Misusio, Locarno, 12 December 1924', in Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky*, p. 56.

Conclusion

The distinguished feature of Berlin in the early 1920s was its responsiveness to innovation. It welcomed artistic experiments with enthusiasm, which encouraged a steady influx of outsiders from all parts of Germany and beyond. The dramatist and contributor to *Die Aktion* Carl Zuckmayer commented five decades later:

Berlin was worth more than a Mass. This city devoured talents and human energies with a ravenous appetite, grinding them small, digesting them, or rapidly spitting them out again. It sucked into itself with hurricane force all the ambitious in Germany [...] Secretly everyone looked upon her as the goal of their desires [...] To conquer Berlin was to conquer the world¹.

Of all those artists who 'came and went' to test reactions in this unique arena, hoping to overcome their peripheral location and gain additional recognition, the Russians seldom went unnoticed². One reviewer of the Düsseldorf *First International Exhibition* noted in August 1922, three months before the Van Diemen show afforded the West a comprehensive look at contemporary Russian art: 'Here in Germany we all feel a wind blowing over us from the East. We know that this Russian natural force will grow beyond a national characteristic feature and be the characteristic feature of the new spirit everywhere, penetrating every part of mankind, and that it will leave its mark on the masses of all the countries'³.

¹ Carl Zuckmayer, *A Part of Myself* (London: Secken & Warburg, 1970), p.217.

² Marc Chagall, interviewed in Edouard Roditi, *Dialogues on Art* (London: Secken & Warburg, 1960), p.36.

³ Otto Pankok, 'Betrachtung zur Internationalen in Düsseldorf', *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol.VI, no.8, August 1922, pp.359-60.

This influence, described by another critic as bringing to Germany 'the revolution in art which we had felt for a decade in our bones', acted as a galvanising force⁴.

The belief that isolation was anathema to world peace and post-war reconstruction had gained currency by the time the January 1919 issue of *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung* publicised the 'Call of Russian Progressive Painters and Sculptors to their German Colleagues' as an expression of the 'spiritual solidarity' existing among radical artists⁵. Substantial energy was being devoted to developing connections with wider artistic communities, and many post-revolutionary associations in Germany and avant-garde groups elsewhere in Europe reclaimed the internationalism that had been relinquished after the beginning of the First World War. Differences in accentuation in their programmes reflected local legacies, but it was commonly assumed that social renewal and cultural advancement required a collective effort and 'close co-operation [...] among like-minded people of all lands'⁶.

Avant-garde periodicals are eloquent testimony to the momentary 'sense of world citizenship' [*Weltnationalitätsgefühl*] which many felt as political circumstances slowly allowed lines of international communication to reopen and propagandists like Il'ya Erenburg and El Lissitzky substantiated this developing discourse, adroitly drawing Soviet Russia and Constructivism into its scope⁷. Theo van Doesburg had argued in *De Stijl* in August 1921: 'The bearers of the new spirit are joined together. Internally [...] Already a new Europe has begun in us'⁸. He wrote enthusiastically to Cornelis de Boer after establishing personal contact with Lissitzky and other representatives of the Russian avant-garde in Berlin the

⁴ *Ausbürger Allgemeine Zeitung*, 5 May 1923, p.5; quoted in Robert C. Williams, *Culture in Exile. Russians Emigrés in Germany, 1881-1941* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1972), pp.315-16.

⁵ *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung*, Dresden, vol.I, January 1919, p.214.

⁶ *Novembergruppe Rundschreiben vom 13. Dezember 1918* (Postdamerstr. 113, Villa II); translated in Rose-Carol Washon-Long (ed.), *German Expressionism: Documents from the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), p.213.

⁷ 'Manifest Proletkunst', *Merz*, Hanover, no.2, April 1923, p.25; translated in *Kurt Schwitters: Das literarische Werk* (Cologne: DuMont Verlag, 1981), vol.V, p.413.

⁸ 'Manifest III, Zur neuen Weltgestaltung' (1921), *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.IV, no.8, August 1921, col.124-26.

following April: 'My expectations concerning their work were not proved wrong: the younger ones all work in the *same spirit as ours*'⁹.

The difficulty of acting upon this concurrence of aspirations became emphatically evident as the first attempts to unite the avant-garde under a common cause failed. The Düsseldorf congress of May 1922 soon showed that no lasting cohesion was possible on a large scale, effectively isolating the most vocal defenders of a Constructivist approach from the rest of the attendance. Despite the rich and mutually productive informal contact that those secessionists later experienced with one another, the loose Constructivist groupings and alliances that emerged from this and subsequent meetings in Berlin's cafés and artists' studios were short-lived. Ideological grounds for unity certainly existed but were insufficient to 'bridge the gap between the most grandiose theories and day-to-day survival'¹⁰. Personal ambitions and loyalties to particular world-views or ideologies ultimately impeded agreement through compromise. Van Doesburg complained to Tristan Tzara in December 1924: 'Although the whole world is talking about collectivism and working together, etc., art has never been so individualistic [...] everyone is still hopelessly at odds, and it never goes beyond *talk*'¹¹.

⁹ Theo van Doesburg, 'Letter to Cornelis de Boer, Weimar, 24 April 1922'; cited in Allan Doig, *Theo van Doesburg: Painting into Architecture, Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), p.135.

¹⁰ Theo van Doesburg, El Lissitzky, Hans Richter, 'Erklärung der internationalen Fraktion der Konstruktivisten' (30 May 1922), *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V. no.4, April 1922, col.64.

¹¹ Theo van Doesburg, 'Letter to Tristan Tzara', Clamart, 24 December 1924'; reprinted in Raoul Schrott, *Dada 15/25* (Innsbrück: Haymon, 1992), p.356.

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- 6.5** Congress for the Union of International Progressive Artists, Düsseldorf, 29-31 May 1922 - from left to right: unidentified, Ruggero Vasari, Werner Gräff, unidentified, Hans Richter, Nelly van Doesburg, Marcel Janco (?), El Lissitzky, Theo van Doesburg, Franz Wilhelm Seiwert, Raoul Hausmann
- 6.6** Cover, *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V, no.4, April 1922
- 6.7** *Mécano*, Leiden, no.3 (red issue), winter 1922
- 6.8** Congress of Constructivists and Dadaists, Weimar, 25 September 1922 - from left to right: Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Marx and Lotte Buchartz, Hans Richter, Nelly van Doesburg, Cornelis van Eesteren, Theo van Doesburg, Karl Peter and Alexa Röhl, Werner Gräff
- 6.9** Cover and title page, *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V, no.8, August 1922
- 6.10** Title page, *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923
- 6.11** Double-page spread, *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923

- 6.12 Double-page spread, *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922
- 6.13 El Lissitzky, *Proun Room*, reproduced in *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923
- 6.14 Hans Richter, *Rhythm 21*, reproduced in *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923
- 6.15 Title page, *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.2, September 1923
- 6.16 Cover, *G, Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.3, June 1924
- 6.17 Double-page spread, *G, Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.3, June 1924
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- 6.19 Cover, Lajos Kassák, László Moholy-Nagy, *Buch neuer Künstler* (Vienna: MA, 1922)
- 6.20 High voltage pylon, reproduced in László Moholy-Nagy, *Buch neuer Künstler* (Vienna: MA, 1922)
- 6.21 Double-page spreads, László Moholy-Nagy, *Buch neuer Künstler* (Vienna: MA, 1922)
- 6.22 Double-page spreads, László Moholy-Nagy, *Buch neuer Künstler* (Vienna: MA, 1922)
- 6.23 Double-page spreads, László Moholy-Nagy, *Buch neuer Künstler* (Vienna: MA, 1922)
- 6.24 Covers, *Merz*, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/July 1924
- 6.25 Cover and pages from *Merz*, Hanover, no.6, October 1923
- 6.26 Title page, *Merz*, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/June 1924
- 6.27 Double-page spread, *Merz*, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/June 1924
- 6.28 *Merz*, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/June 1924

- 6.29 Double-page spread, *Merz*, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/June 1924
- 6.30 Double-page spreads, *Merz*, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/June 1924
- 6.31 Cover and title page, El Lissitzky, Hans Arp, *Die Kunstismen* (Erlenbach-Zurich: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925)
- 6.32 El Lissitzky, Hans Arp, *Die Kunstismen* (Erlenbach-Zurich: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925)
- 6.33 Double-page spreads, El Lissitzky, Hans Arp, *Die Kunstismen* (Erlenbach-Zurich: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925)
- 6.34 Double-page spread, El Lissitzky, Hans Arp, *Die Kunstismen* (Erlenbach-Zurich: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925)
- 6.35 Double-page spread, El Lissitzky, Hans Arp, *Die Kunstismen* (Erlenbach-Zurich: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925)



Fig. 1.1

Congress of Constructivists and Dadaists, Weimar, 25 September 1922 - from left to right, top row: Max and Lotte Burchartz, Karl Peter Röhl, Hans Vogel, Lucia and László Moholy-Nagy, Alfréd Kemény; middle row: Alexa Röhl, El Lissitzky, Nelly and Theo van Doesburg, Bernhard Sturtzkopf; bottom row: Werner Gräff, Nini Smith, Harry Scheibe, Cornelis van Eesteren, Hans Richter, Tristan Tzara, Hans Arp

1919

NEUE BLÄTTER FÜR KUNST UND DICHTUNG

EIN AUFRUF DER RUSSISCHEN KÜNSTLER

Überzeugen Sie, daß die Russen unter Kontrolle der Expansionsmacht stärkere Stützpunkte waren. Was von ihrem Werk nicht überlebt wurde, erfuhr fortwährend Erweiterung durch ihre selbständig entwickelten formalen Theorien. Sie triumphierten, als die blutige Spinnerei kretschisch. Was in einer stillen Geschichte? In europäischen Ländern beginnt man nicht mehr, daß die Expansionsmacht war, sondern der zeitliche Not diese Zeit ist und seine Urheber hervortreten Wirkung des Kunstwerkes hatten. Das heißt ihm überall zum Sieg. Das ließ ihm die Freiheit überlassen und schiedet vorüber. Aber dort in Osten, woher das Heil kam? Welches Schicksal erfüllte sich dort der neuen Kunst? Seit die Front im Sommer 1918 das Reich abschütt, drang alles patriotisch Kunde herüber, was die Führer der selbstständigen Kunstbewegung vollbracht. Seit Revolution die Front nicht, ist's nicht länger geworden. Wer jedoch an die Kraft dieser Kunst glaubt, um ihre selbständigen Quellen weiß sich, unterstützungen durch Expansionsmacht, wirtschaftliche Herstellung der Tagespresse, aber, daß auch selbständige Ursprung ist, was in nach immer nicht selbständigen Ursprung anzuzeigen sich vollzieht, vermehrte nicht in bewirkt, daß auch dort die russische Jugend ihre Ideale von russischer Arche überliefere der neuen Zeit geliebt hat. Nun kommt darüber hinaus, die Dichtung, die die Masse, die in Russland von wissenschaftlichen Sozialismus zur Utopie zurückzuführen und den Versuch ihrer Verwirklichung unerschütterlichen Willen, Selbstkritik und Bestimmung

der künstlerischen Jugend lebhaft erkennen, sie öffnete das Russen Consensus vorleben. Die Revolution der Kunst gibt Hand in Hand mit der Revolution des neuen Menschlichen Lebens. Und kann, daß die russischen Revolutionäre der Kunst vom deutschen Diktator Kunst verstanden, auch bei ihnen das Göttliche geistiger Solidarität durch. Sie sind Verkörper der wieder kulturelle revolutionäre Internationaler aller Künste die in Deutschland bisher unbekannter, vielfach unverständlicher Auffassung der russischen Vorkörper wird von Herkömmlich. Er lautet:

Moskau, den 20. November 1918.

AUF RUF

der russischen fortschrittlichen bildenden Künstler an die deutschen Kollegen!

Die neue russische Regierung hat alle jungen schöpferischen Kräfte zur Gründung eines neuen Lebens herausgerufen und die überlebende Lehrgang in Sachen der Kunst des neuen Strömungen hervorgerufen. Das ist die neue Strömung, die heute vor die Welt tritt, die von dem Schicksal, das heute auf dem Rücken der neuen sich lebenden Lebens in Erhebung hebt.

Es ist natürlich anzunehmen, daß das gemeinsame schöpferische Arbeit, die das eigene weltliche Bewusstsein überwinden und einem internationalen Verbrüderung sind.

Die russischen Künstler wenden sich zum ersten Mal an ihre nächsten Nachbarn, ihre deutschen Kollegen, und fordern sie zu Bewusstwerden und Anknüpfen an die künstlerische in Rahmen der künstlerischen Erziehung auf. Als praktische Maßregel zur Verwirklichung solcher Beziehungen schlagen wir einen Aufruf der Vertreter der deutschen und russischen Künstlerkreise vor, der den Anfang einer späteren Weltkonferenz der Kunst bilden würde und der sofort einen Vertreter der bildenden

Voller auf künstlerischen Gebiet in diese aufmerksamen Aufgaben, mit die Anstaltungen, die Verfassungen, die Theater und der Mensch, verbunden sind.

Der Vollständigkeit halber sind die Künstlerkreise in Petersburg und Moskau an D. A. Stenogru an. (Unterstützung von Mitgliedern der internationalen Kunst der Kunst)

Die Erklärung der russischen Künstler wird, obwohl politische Umstände machen nicht ermöglichen, ihr zu folgen, unsere Künstler, denen sie gut, denen sie Dank verbleiben wie die Mitteilung, daß die Kunstbewegung in jeder Hinsicht die jungen künstlerischen Kräfte mit der Führung der allgemeinen Kunstbewegung betonen hat. Schon in Russland innerhalb des russischen Revolutionären Revolutionären Aufbegehrens gebildet worden, viele großartige Pläne sind in Angriff genommen. Die Anwesenheit von bildenden Künstlern. Ein Kollegium des Volkskommissars für Aufklärung in Moskau berichtet ein Museum, in dem die neue Kunst, von Boris Bogdanoff, bei Mir, Ikonnikoff, Konezoff, Seroff, Tolstojoff, Wladoff, vertreten sein wird, die alle Modernität sind mit dem Handwerksbetrieb, mit Bildhauern, Schreibern, Platinen; aus Bekannten der Tischler, Goldschmied, etc. ergänzt werden, durch ausländische Kunst erweitert. Viele staatliche Künstlerverbände, die Führer Urpater der alten Kunstschulen, in denen der Handwerksbetrieb der Russen gelebt wurde, sind schon eröffnet; ihre Programmen bilden Kunst, Leben, zur die Meisterhaftigkeit der Künstler erheben. Diese Wirkungen, welche Zucht haben, vornehmlich Erweiterung des bildnerischen Gebietes des Volkes. Das Handwerk hebt sich zur Kunst, die der Künstler schöpferische Vorzeichen bilden hilft und den Handwerker nicht als Ordnung ansetzt; die Schwächen des Handwerkes überwinden — Bildhauer und Bildhauer, Kunsthandwerk ist 'Schicklichkeit' — nicht auf die Tätigkeit zurück. Die neue Ordnung leitet nur Handwerk und Technik, die beide als Kunst zusammengeführt. Die Veranschaulichung der Kunst mit dem Mensch beginnt. [...] also, voll die Kunst Schöpfer, wird ein eigenes Werk, was sich jetzt in Russland vollzieht. 'Es ist von Grund an' 'widerum als die' 'historische' Kunst, 'welche' 'Wirk' 'besteht' 'genügend' 'in' 'der' 'eigenen' 'Arbeit' 'besteht', Kunst ist Lerne und nicht zugrunde gehen, selbst

Reaktion der Masse aufsteht, wird einem Reiz zu befehlen. Ein neuer Weg öffnet sich in die Überwindung des Zukunfts. Während deutsche Künstler die Menschlichen Mitter heranziehen, haben russische junge Künstler ihre unerschütterlichen beschließen.

FRÖH AM MORGEN

Im Silberlicht verlor die erste Licht des Tages auf der Wälderwiese. Die hohen Kiefern standen auf, friedlich Verwöhnt. Der Schein der Sonne schielte sich vor die Wand und nicht geschwächte Kaffee! Die Föhren verlor an die Dache. Die eine Föhren stand offen. Kumpfer und Lenzelnd gabten aus dem Kalderr und schiedten sich um Trauer, Sorgen, wachen Pflanz in Atem der Schickenden. Mann und Frau lagen liebes schmerzlos. Ihre Möbel, Kleider, Geschäfte starben sie an. Warten zugewandt auf die Erwachen. Schon spielte Morgengraue durch das Fenster und leuchtete den Vorhang auf. Aber noch achsel in langen Zügen Leben auf aus neuen Längen. Dunkel leuchtete der Schlaf auf Kalderr und Dache, am Föhren: der Dache aufgedeckt. Sie wachen, und ihre Föhren bilden kumpfer auf den Hörd ihres Traumes, der ihnen Patient, Mut, kumpferlose Willen, Blausatz und Sieg über alle Berge, über alle Entfernung, alle Föhren entgegen. O, wachet! (dieser Traum sie endet!) Die wachen, in Musik wachenden Leben, Anna, kein Prindoff, kein Rosner, kein Kalderr und kein Geld (wachen können!) Die Sorgenlosigkeit der Jugend, die tollte Spindele des Jauchens — der wachende in der saueren Lieder, und wacher Leben, auch ohne, noch Nachbars, Mündern setzen aus (Kalderr, sein wachende). Sie Mand, hing offen unter braunen Schattens, und nicht: große grau Zimm, ist lag der wachende keine Kopf wachet, man gelübt, gelübt und besuchet spinnen die Wägen, teilhaft für Hoch, aus dem Schicksal, der unbewußt sind. Die Föhren blühen in sich verhalten unter das Dach der, Mann, die die Mensch der Augen wachen, Föhren: der wachende Dache profit sich nicht durch die Lebend; und wie im Mensch auf der Frucht durch große Wägen schichten ihre Föhren weit an, über sich zu röhren. Der Schiller nicht zusammen, über demnach wie

Fig. 1.2
Title page, *Neue Blätter für Kunst und Dichtung*, Dresden, vol.I, January 1919

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TER INLEIDING.

Dit tijdschrift wil zijn eene bijdrage tot de ontwikkeling van het nieuwe schoonheidsbewustzijn. Het wil den modernen mensch onwankelijk maken voor het nieuwe in de beeldende kunst. Het wil tegengaan de archaische verwarring — het „moderne barok“ — de logische begripen stellen van een ripenden stijl, gebaseerd op zuivere verhouding van tijdgeest en uitdrukkingsmiddelen. Het wil de huidige denkrichtingen betreffende de nieuwe beelding, die hoewel in wezen gelijk, zich onafhankelijk van elkaar ontwikkeld hebben, in zich vereenigen.

De Redactie zal het hierboven omschreven doel trachten te bereiken door den werkelijk modernen kunstenaar, die iets kan bijdragen tot de hervorming van het aesthetisch besef en de bewustwording der beeldende kunst aan het woord te laten. Waar het publiek nog niet aan de nieuwe beeldings-schoonheid toe is, wordt het de taak van den vakman het schoonheidsbewustzijn bij den leek wakker te maken. De werkelijk moderne, — d. i. bewuste, — kunstenaar heeft een dubbele roeping. Ten eerste: het rein-beeldende kunstwerk voort te brengen; ten tweede: het publiek voor de schoonheid der reïne beeldende kunst onwankelijk te maken. Hiervoor is een tijdschrift van intieme aard noodzakelijk geworden. Te meer, daar de openbare kritiek in gebreke bleef het te kort aan schoonheidsontwikkeling voor de abstracte kunstopenbaring, aan te vullen. Tot dit laatste zal de Redactie de vaklieden zelf in staat stellen.

Dit tijdschrift zal hierdoor een inniger contact scheppen tusschen kunstenaar en publiek en tusschen de beoefenaars der verschillende beeldende vakken. Door den modernen kunstenaar over zijn eigen vak aan het woord te laten zal het vooroordeel, als zou de moderne werkman volgens vooropgestelde theorieën werken, verdwijnen. Integendeel. Het zal blijken, dat het nieuwe kunstwerk niet voortkomt uit a priori aangenomen theorieën, maar juist andersom, dat de beginselen voortvloeien uit de beeldende arbeid. Het zal zoodoende de mogelijkheid voorbereiden eener verdiepte kunstcultuur, gegrond op gemeenschappelijke belichaming van het nieuwe beeldende kunstbewustzijn. Zoodra de kunstenaars in de verschillende beeldende vakken tot de erkenning zullen komen, dat zij in principe aan elkaar gelijk zijn, dat ze eene algemeene taal te spreken hebben.

1

Fig. 1.3
Title page, *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.I, no.1, October 1917

Fig. 1.4

George Grosz and John Heartfield at the *First International Dada Fair*, Berlin, June 1920, reproduced in Richard Huelsenbeck (ed.), *Dada Almanach. Im Auftrag des Zentralamts der deutschen Dada-Bewegung* (Berlin: Erich Reiss, 1920)



Fig. 1.5

Boris Korolev, *Monument to Mikhail Bakunin*, sketch by Konstantin Umanskii, reproduced in *Der Ararat*, Munich, no.5/6, March 1920

Fig. 1.6

Vladimir Tatlin, *Model for the Monument to the Third International*, 1920, on exhibition at the Academy of Arts, Petrograd, November 1920

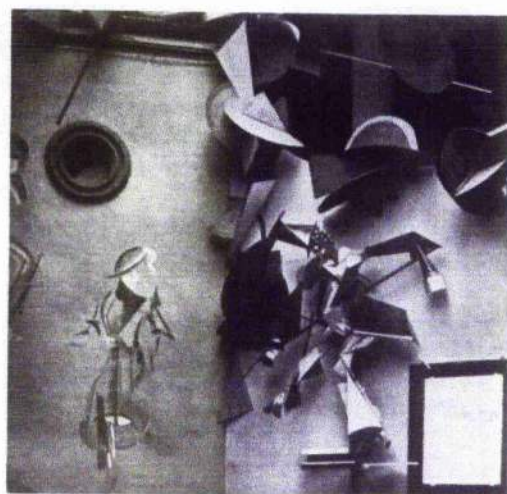


Fig. 1.7

Vladimir Tatlin, Georgii Yakulov and others, detail of the Kafe Pittoresk, interior decorations, Moscow, 1917

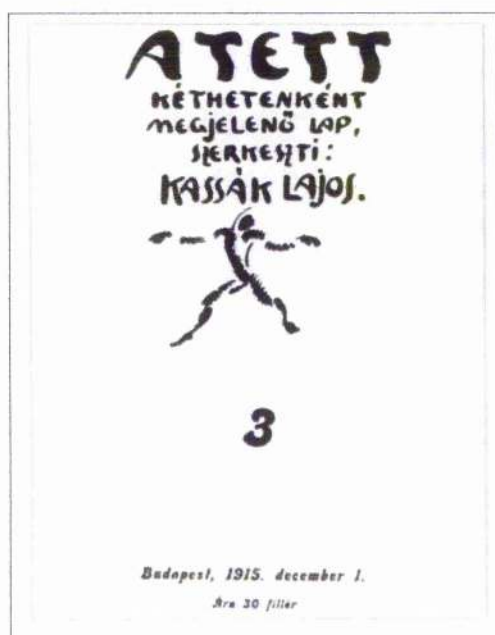


Fig. 1.8

Cover, *A Tett*, Budapest, 1 December 1915



Fig. 1.9

Béla Uitz, *Red Soldiers, Forward!*, 1919, lithograph, 126 x 192 cm, Museum of the Modern Age, Budapest

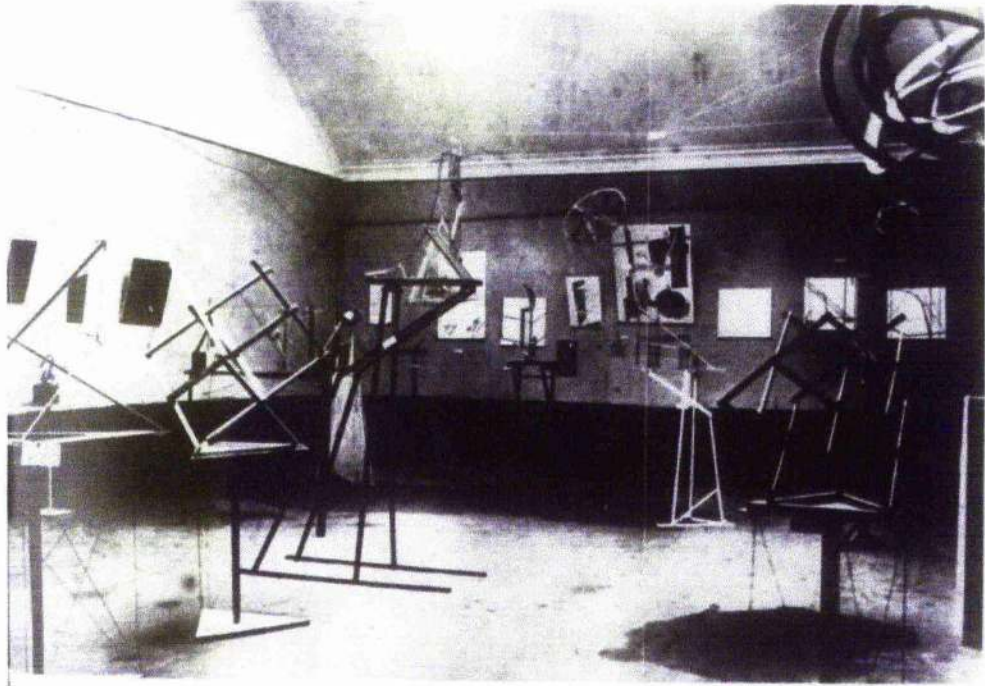


Fig. 1.12

View of the OBMOKhU show, Moscow, May 1921, reproduced in *Egység*, Vienna, no.2, 30 June 1922

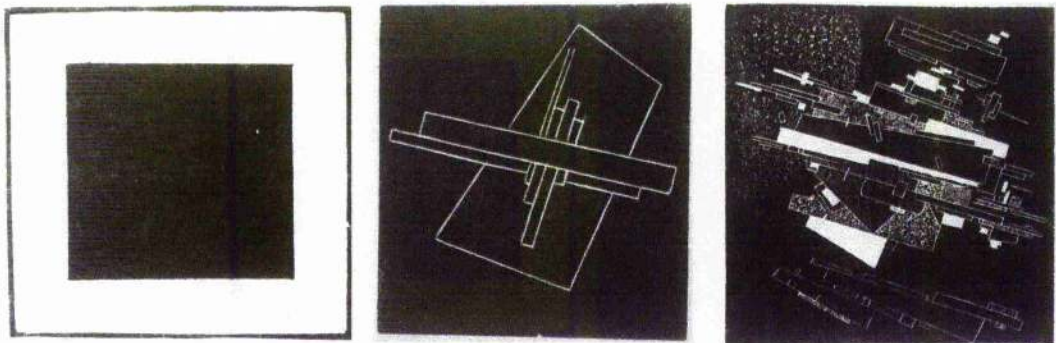


Fig. 1.13

Suprematist lithographs after Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematism: 34 Drawings* (Vitebsk: 1920), reproduced in *Egység*, Vienna, no.3, 16 September 1922



Fig. 2.1

El Lissitzky, Title page for Moshe Borderzon, *A Prager Legende* (Moscow: Shamir, 1917), hand-coloured lithograph, 22.8 x 38,5 cm, Israel Museum, Jerusalem



Fig. 2.2

El Lissitzky, Illustration for *Had Gadya* (Kiev: Kultur Lige, 1919), colour lithograph, 28 x 26 cm, Israel Museum, Jerusalem

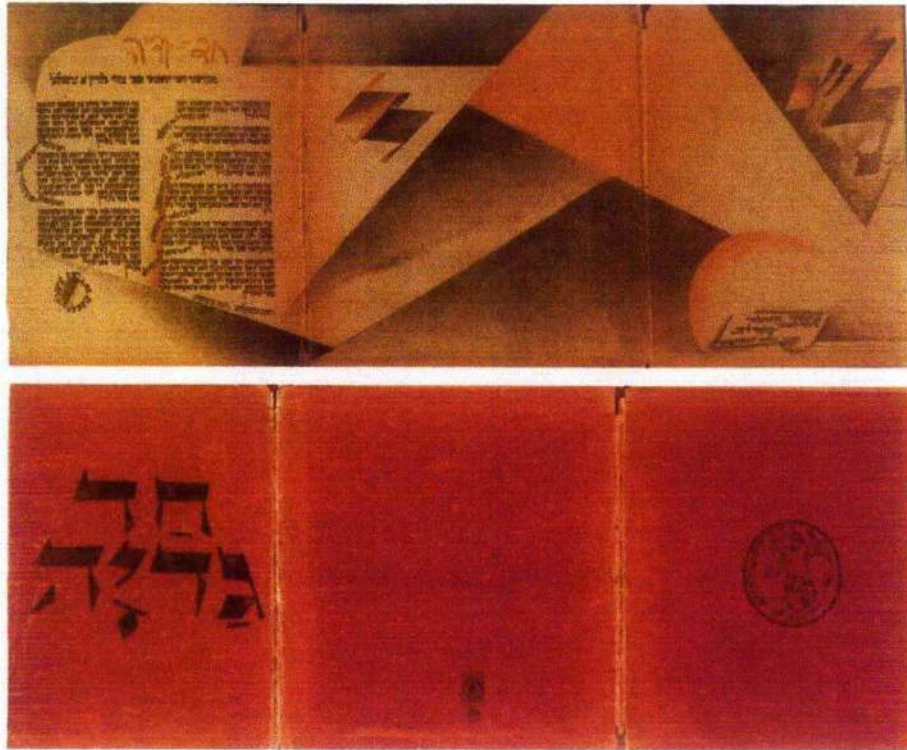


Fig. 2.3

El Lissitzky, Dust jacket for *Had Gadya* (Kiev: Kultur Lige, 1919),
29 x 67.5 cm, colour lithograph, private collection



Fig. 2.4

El Lissitzky,
Composition, 1919, 71
x 58 cm, oil on canvas,
Museum of Ukrainian
Art, Kiev

Fig. 2.5

Kazimir Malevich,
Suprematism, 1915, oil
on canvas, 101.5 x 62
cm, Stedelijk Museum,
Amsterdam

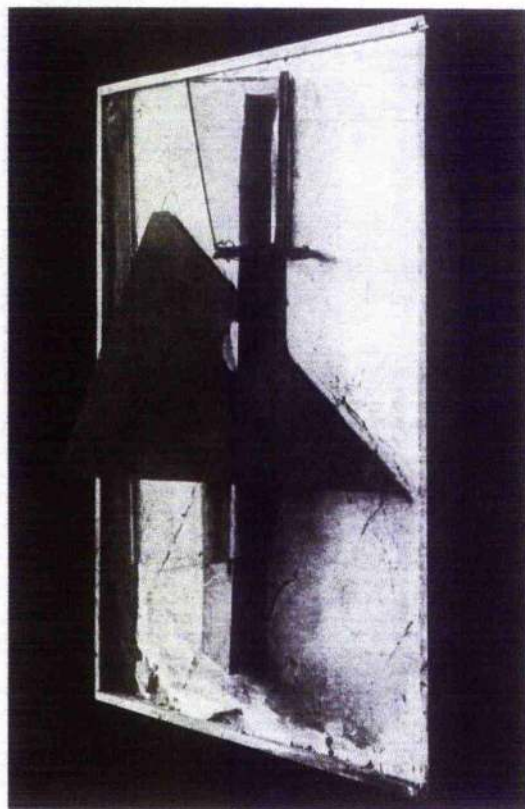
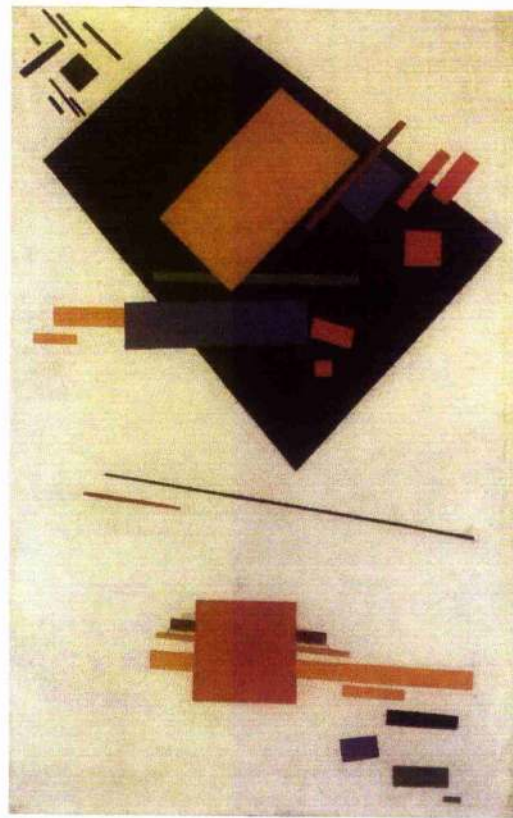


Fig. 2.6

Vladimir Tatlin, *Painterly
Relief: Selection of
Materials*, 1914, iron,
stucco, glass, asphalt,
whereabouts unknown

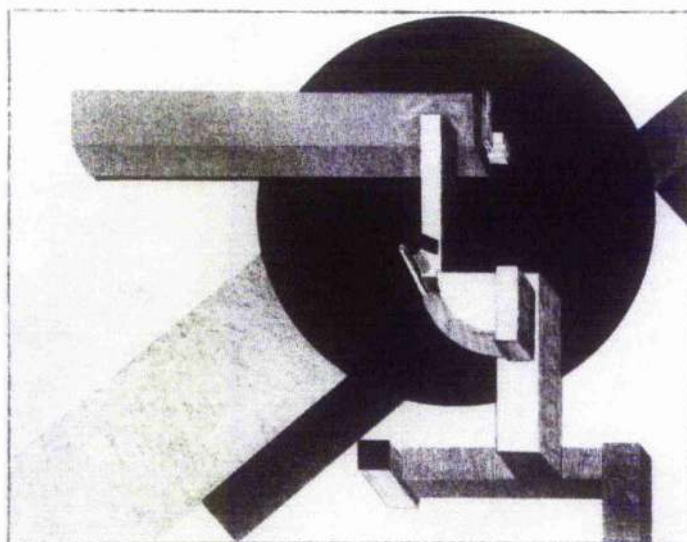


Fig. 2.7

El Lissitzky, *Proun 1D*, 1919-20, lithograph, 21.5 x 26.9 cm, Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

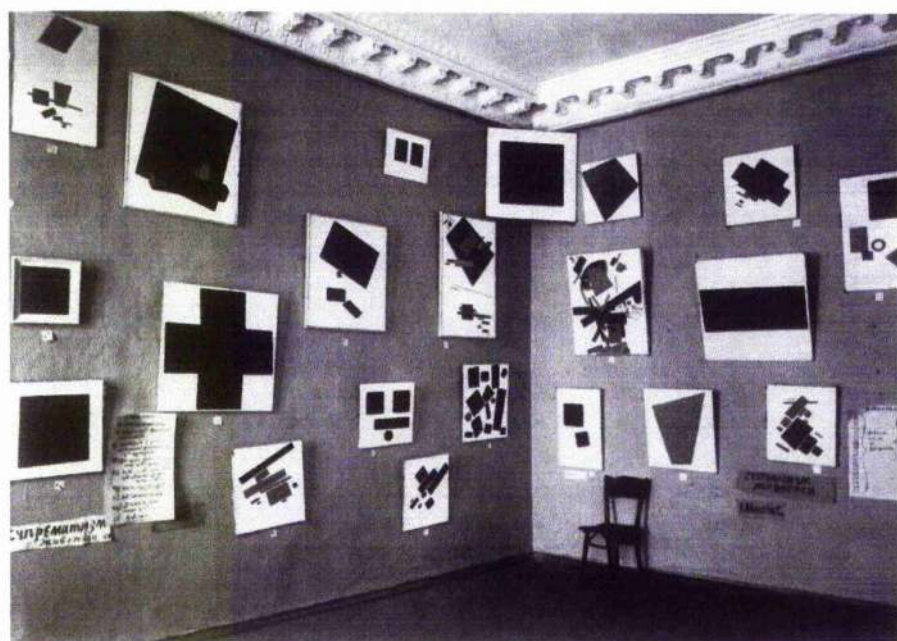


Fig. 2.8

Paintings by Kazimir Malevich at *The Last Futurist Exhibition of Pictures 0.10 (Zero-Ten)*, Petrograd, December 1915

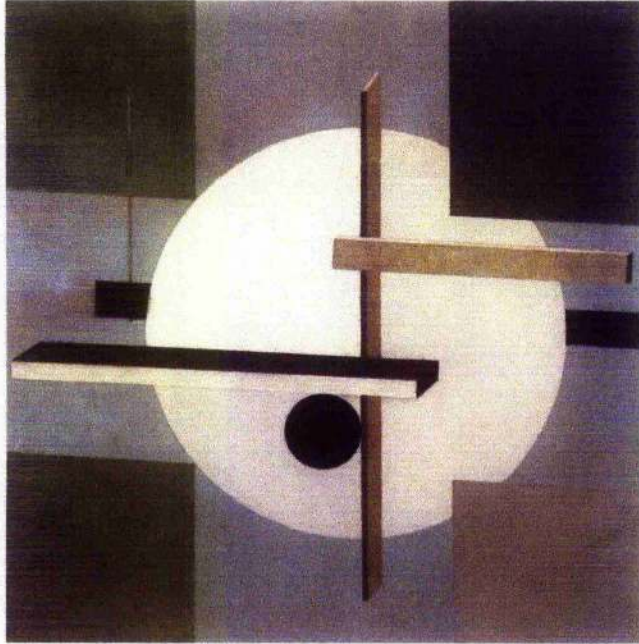


Fig. 2.9

El Lissitzky, *Proun R.V.N.2*, 1923, oil and mixed media on canvas, 99 x 99 cm, Sprengel Museum, Hanover

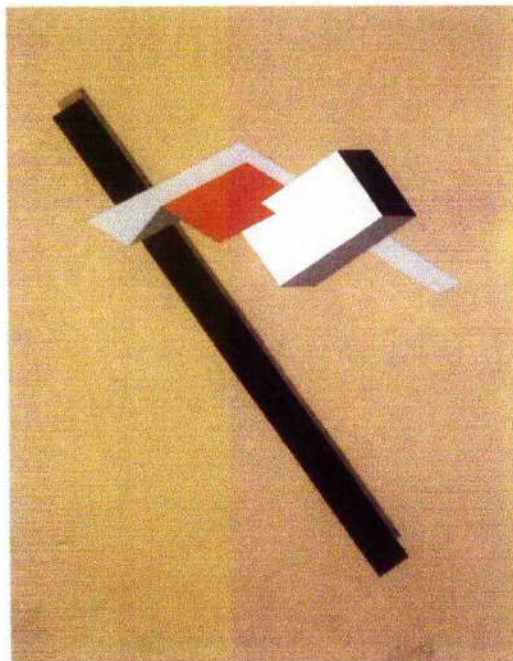


Fig. 2.10

El Lissitzky, *Proun GK*, 1922-23, gouache and ink on paper, 66 x 50.2 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

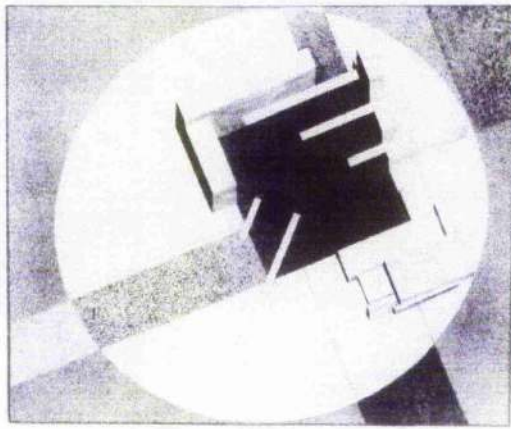


Fig. 2.11

El Lissitzky, *The Town (Proun 1E)*, 1919, lithograph, 22.6 x 27.5 cm, State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow

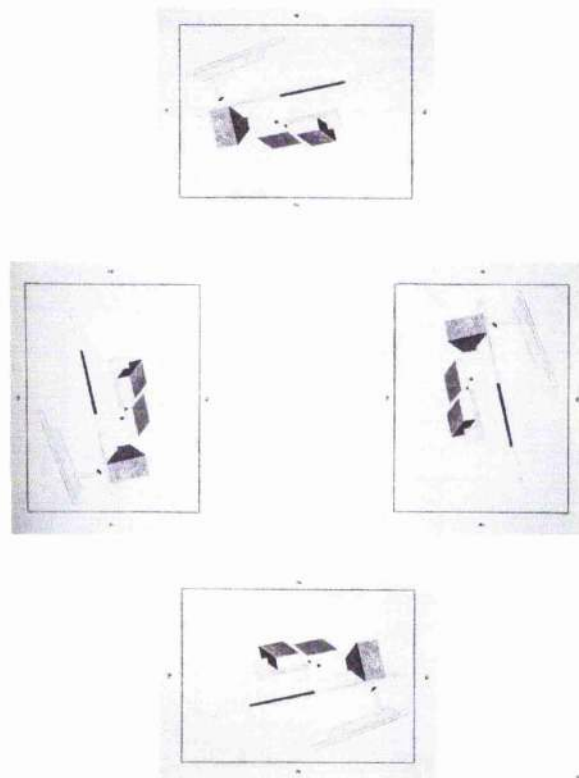


Fig. 2.12

El Lissitzky, *Proun 1*, 1919-20, lithograph, 25.6 x 27.5 cm, State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow

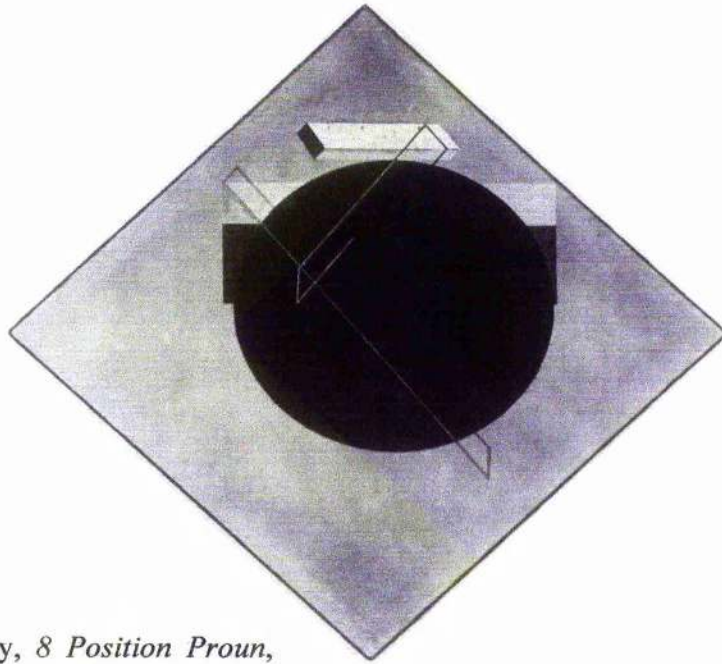


Fig. 2.13

El Lissitzky, *8 Position Proun*,
1923, metal foil, oil and gouache
on canvas, 98.6 x 98.6 cm,
National Gallery of Canada,
Ottawa

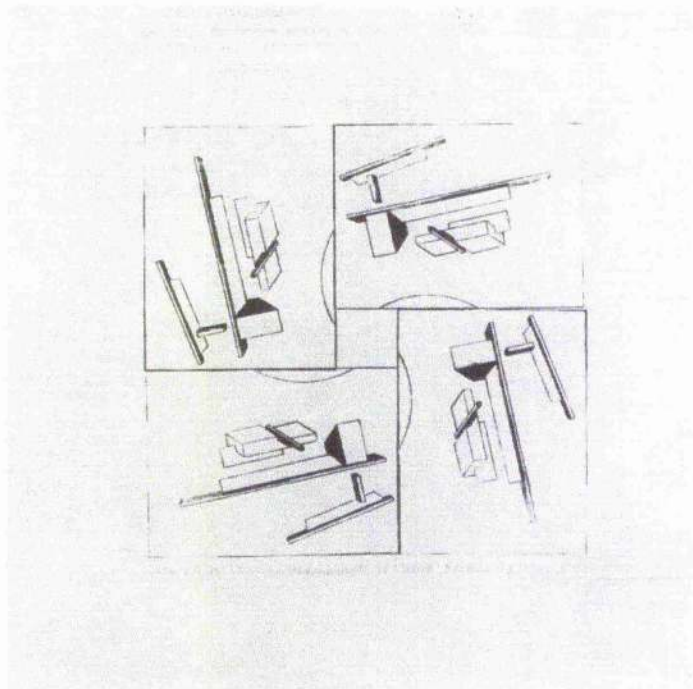


Fig. 2.14

El Lissitzky, *Construction Floating in Space*, ca.
1920, lithograph with graphite annotations, private
collection

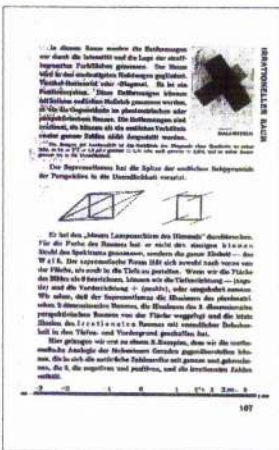


Fig. 2.15

Page from Carl Einstein, Paul Westheim (eds.), *Europa-Almanach* (Nelden: Kraus Verlag, 1973)

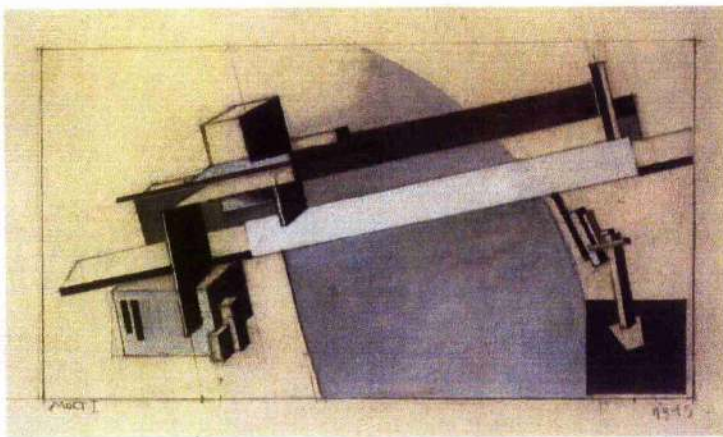


Fig. 2.16

El Lissitzky,
Proun 1A
(The Bridge),
1919,
lithograph, 17
x 30 cm, State
Tetriakov
Gallery,
Moscow

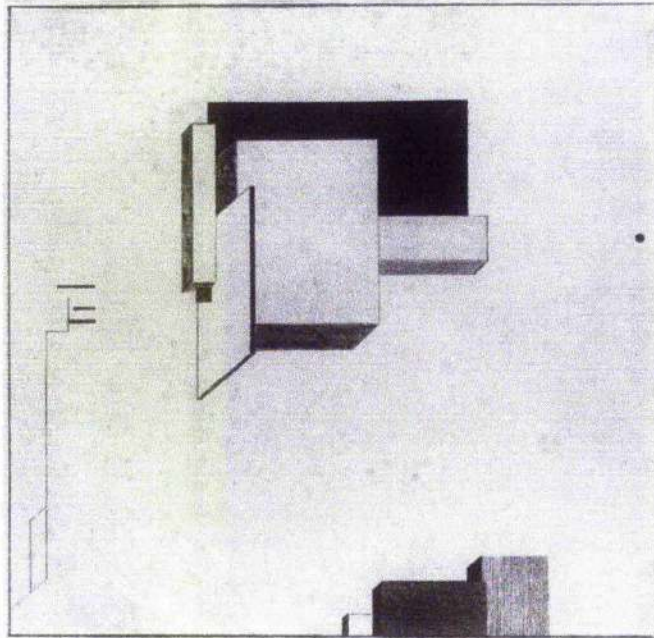


Fig. 2.17

El Lissitzky, *House Above the Earth. Proun 1C*, 1921, lithograph, 29.9 x 20 cm, State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow

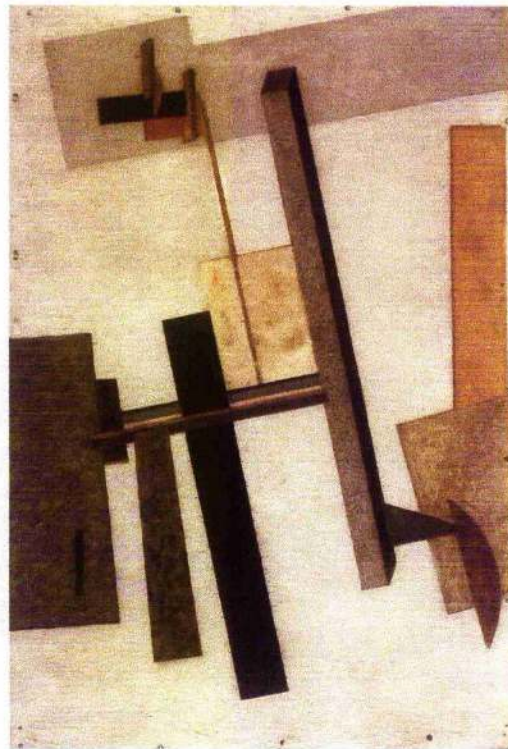


Fig. 2.18

El Lissitzky, *Proun 2C*, 1920, oil, paper and metal on wood, 60 x 40 cm, Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia

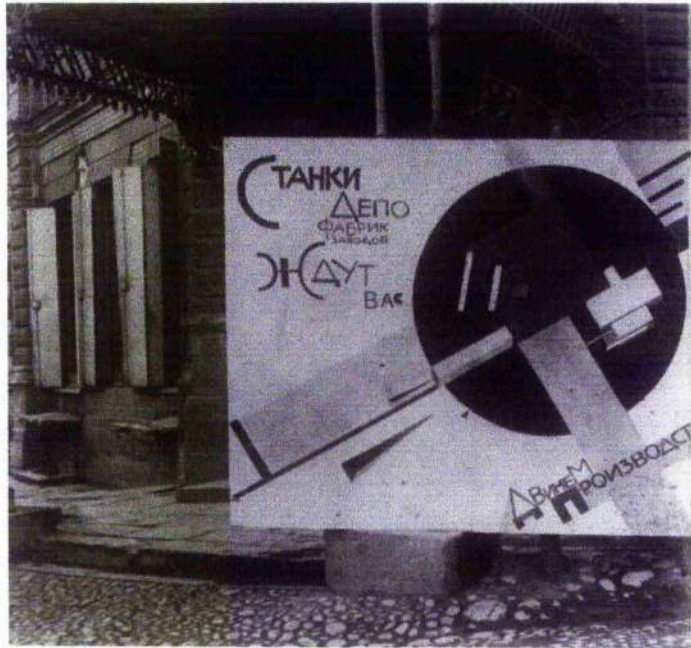


Fig. 2.19

El Lissitzky, *The Factory Benches Await You*, 1919, propaganda board in Vitebsk



Fig. 2.20

El Lissitzky, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, 1919-20, reprint 1966, 48.5 x 69.2 cm, Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven

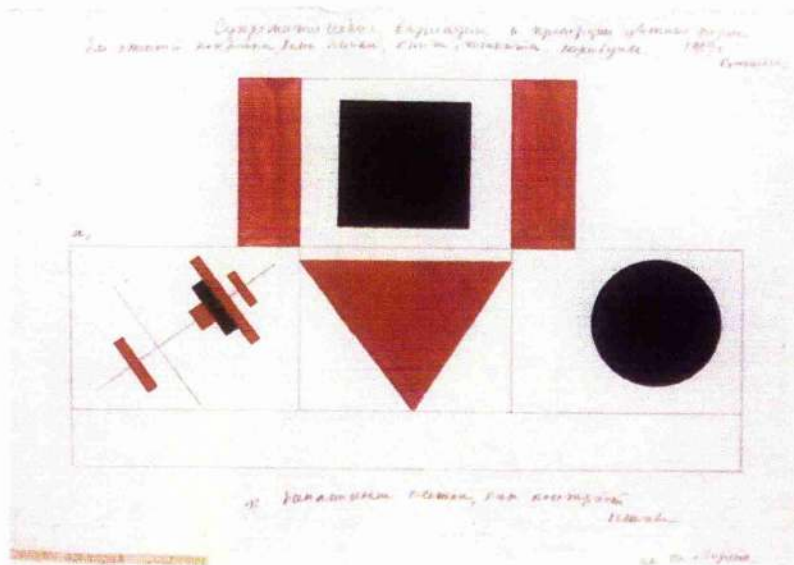


Fig. 2.21

Kazimir Malevich, *Design for Textile Designs*, 1919, watercolour, gouache and ink on paper, 24.8 x 33.8 cm, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

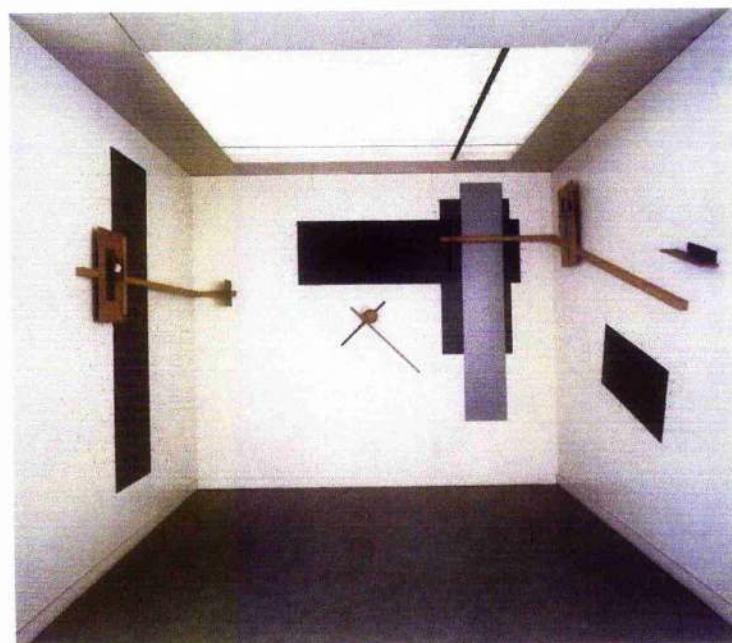


Fig. 2.22

El Lissitzky, *Prounenraum*, 1923, reconstruction 1965, 300 x 300 x 260 cm, Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven



Fig. 3.1

Ferdinand Léger, Cover for Il'ya Erenburg, *A vse-taki ona vertitsya* (Berlin: Helikon Verlag, 1922)

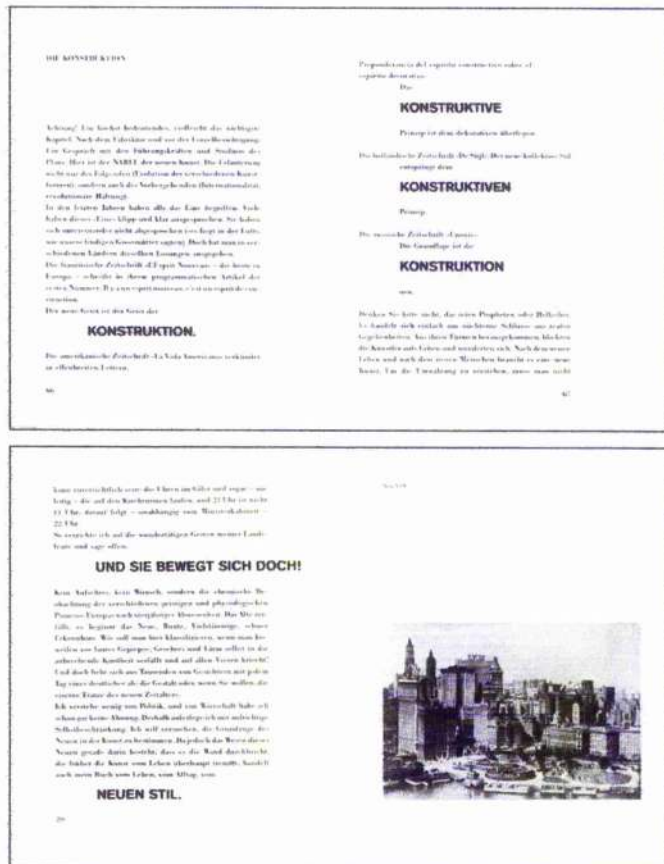


Fig. 3.2

Double-page spreads, Ilja Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch* (Baden: LIT Verlag Lars Müller, 1986)



Fig. 3.3

Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Design for a Kiosk*, reproduced in Ilja Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch* (Baden: LIT Verlag Lars Müller, 1986)

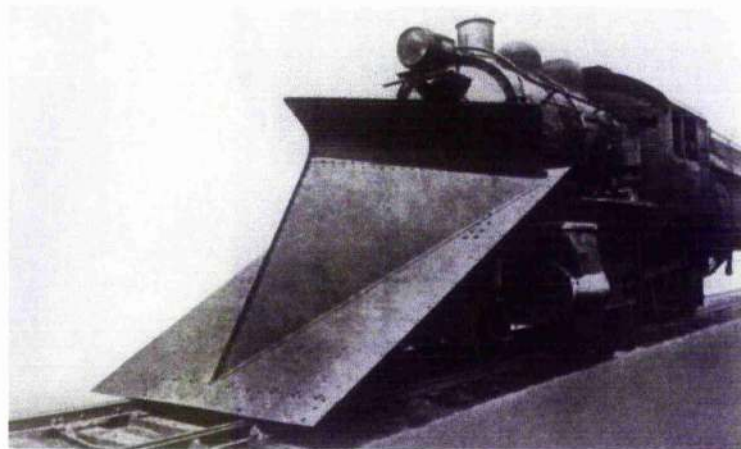


Fig. 3.4

American snowplough locomotive, reproduced in Ilja Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch* (Baden: LIT Verlag Lars Müller, 1986)



Fig. 3.5

Farman aeroplane 'Goliath', reproduced in Iija Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch* (Baden: LIT Verlag Lars Müller, 1986)



Fig. 3.6

Caproni hydroplaine (300CS), reproduced in Iija Ehrenburg, *Und sie bewegt sich doch* (Baden: LIT Verlag Lars Müller, 1986)

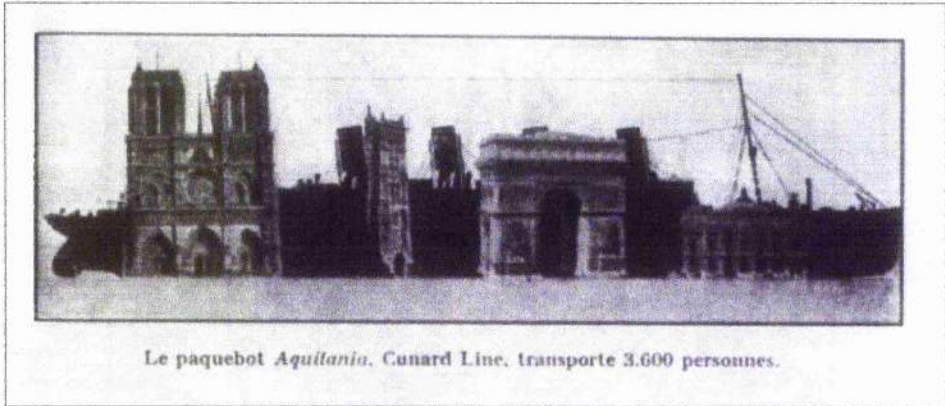


Fig. 3.7

Ocean liner *Aquitania*, reproduced in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.8, May 1921



Fig. 3.8

Brake, reproduced in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.10, July 1921

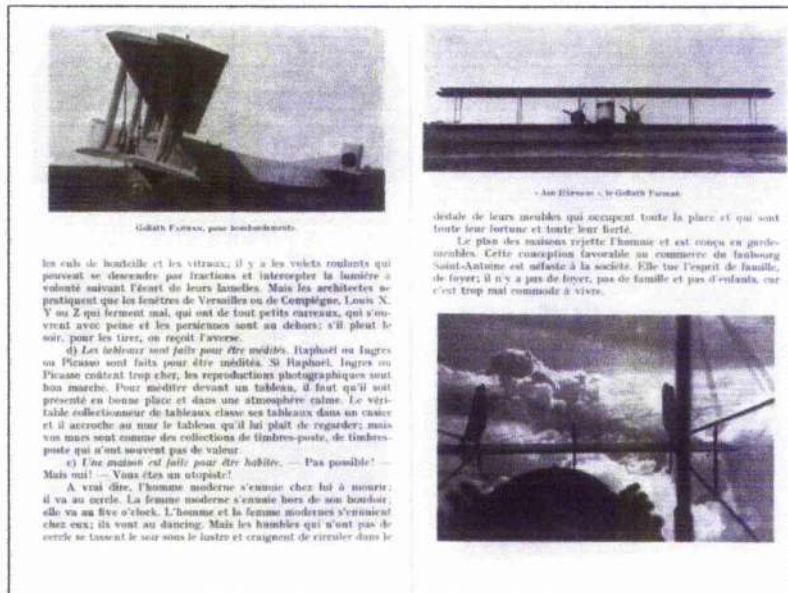


Fig. 3.9

Farman aeroplane 'Goliath', reproduced in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.9, June 1921



Fig. 3.10

Caproni hydroplane, reproduced in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.9, June 1921

Le volume et la surface sont les éléments par quoi se manifeste l'architecture. Le volume et la surface sont déterminés par le plan. C'est le plan qui est le générateur. Tant pis pour ceux à qui manque l'imagination!

Premier Rappel. Le Volume

L'architecture est le jeu savant, correct et magnifique des volumes assimilés aux formes. Son genre est fait pour voir les formes sans la lumière. Les ombres et les clairs révèlent les formes : les cubes, les cônes, les sphères, les cylindres ou les pyramides sont les grandes formes génératrices que la lumière révèle bien : l'image nous en est nette et tangible, sans ambiguïté. C'est pour cela que ce sont les belles formes de sculpture. Tant le sculpteur est-il accordé en cela. Fondant, le langage et le métaphysique. C'est la résolution même des arts plastiques.

L'architecture égyptienne, grecque ou romaine est une architecture de prismes, cubes et cylindres, tirés ou aplatis. Les Pyramides, le Temple de Loussouf, le Parthénon, le Colosse, la Villa Adriana.

L'architecture gothique n'est pas, dans son fondement, à base de sphères, cônes et cylindres. La nef seule exprime une forme simple, sans d'une géométrie complexe de mensural simple (voûtes d'ogives). C'est pour cela, que une cathédrale n'est pas une telle et que nous y cherchons des compositions d'ordre subjectif hors de la plastique. Une cathédrale n'est indécise comme l'architecture moderne d'un problème difficile mais dont les données ont été mal posées parce qu'elle ne prend pas des grandes formes primaires. La cathédrale n'est pas une œuvre plastique; c'est un édifice. Le fait même la prouve, association d'ordre architectural.

Les Pyramides, les Tours de Babel, les Portes de Samarkand, le Parthénon, le Colosse, le Panthéon, le Vaut de Saint-Sauveur de Constantinople, les mosquées de Saint-Jacques, la Tour de Pise, les temples de Brémontcombault de Meudon-Angers, le Vaut Royal, les Écoles sont des architectures.

La Gare du Quai d'Orsay, le Grand Palais et le Samarkand ne sont pas de l'architecture.

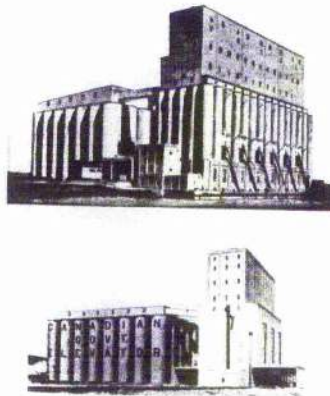
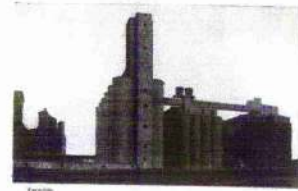


Fig. 3.11

American silos, reproduced in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.1, October 1920

Fig. 3.12

American silos, reproduced in Lajos Kassák, László Moholy-Nagy, *Buch neue Künstler* (Vienna: MA, 1922)



ACTUALITÉS

LE RÉSEAU AÉRIEN

Voici d'après LA NATURE, le réseau des lignes aériennes actuelles.



LA TOUR DE TATLINE

... PROBLÈME INTERNATIONALE

Jeune par Vladimir Tatline en 1919-1921 en verre et fer. Elle doit avoir 400 mètres de haut et être placée sur le Champ de Mars de Pétersbourg. Le modèle reproduit ici mesure 15 mètres de haut.

Elle représentera de toutes silles de révolutions. La spirale sera de chemin à un arc-en-ciel, des formes variées de radicaux.

(Travaux remis par M. Elia Kleeberg.)

Fig. 3.13

Vladimir Tatlin, *Model for a Monument to the Third International*, reproduced in *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.14, January 1922

Fig. 4.1

El Lissitzky, Cover design for *Veshch' /Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.1, February 1922, 30.7 x 22.5 cm, Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven



Fig. 4.2

El Lissitzky, Cover proof for *Veshch' /Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.1, 1922, 45.1 x 34.4 cm, Stedelijk van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven



Fig. 4.3
Cover,
Veshch' /Gegenstand/Objet,
Berlin, no.1/2, March/April
1922



Fig. 4.4
Cover,
Veshch' /Gegenstand/Objet,
Berlin, no.3, May 1922

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Fig. 4.5
Double-page spread, *Veshch' /Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.1/2,
March/April 1922

DER VERBAND DER DEUTSCHEN UND RUSSEN KUNSTLER
ГЕНЕСТАНД
ВЕЩЬ
OBJET
 № 1-2
 1922

LE BLOCUS DE LA RUSSIE TOUCHE A SA FIN

БЛОКАДА РОССИИ КОНЧАЕТСЯ

„GEGENSTAND“
 Die russische Kunst ist in der Lage, die Blockade zu durchbrechen, die sie seit Jahren durch die russische Revolution erfahren hat. Die russische Kunst ist in der Lage, die Blockade zu durchbrechen, die sie seit Jahren durch die russische Revolution erfahren hat.

„OBJET“
 Les artistes russes ont réussi à briser le blocus qui les avait isolés pendant des années. L'art russe est capable de briser le blocus qui l'avait isolé pendant des années.

„ВЕЩЬ“
 Искусство России способно преодолеть блокаду, которая существовала над ней в течение многих лет. Искусство России способно преодолеть блокаду, которая существовала над ней в течение многих лет.

Fig. 4.6
 Title page,
Veshch' /Gegenstand/Objet,
 Berlin, no.1/2, March/April
 1922

DER VERBAND DER DEUTSCHEN UND RUSSEN KUNSTLER
ГЕНЕСТАНД
ВЕЩЬ
OBJET
 № 3
 1922

1 ИСКУССТВО И ОБЩЕСТВЕННОСТЬ



ТЕХНИЧЕСКАЯ ВЕЩЬ
ЭКОНОМИЯ
СТРЕМЛЯТЕЛЬСКАЯ ВЕЩЬ

Fig. 4.7
 Title page,
Veshch' /Gegenstand/Objet,
 Berlin, no.3, May 1922

Fig. 4.8
Veshch' /Gegenstand/Objet,
 Berlin, no.1/2,
 March/April
 1922

Die russische Kunst ist in der Lage, die Blockade zu durchbrechen, die sie seit Jahren durch die russische Revolution erfahren hat. Die russische Kunst ist in der Lage, die Blockade zu durchbrechen, die sie seit Jahren durch die russische Revolution erfahren hat.

„GEGENSTAND“
 Die russische Kunst ist in der Lage, die Blockade zu durchbrechen, die sie seit Jahren durch die russische Revolution erfahren hat. Die russische Kunst ist in der Lage, die Blockade zu durchbrechen, die sie seit Jahren durch die russische Revolution erfahren hat.

„OBJET“
 Les artistes russes ont réussi à briser le blocus qui les avait isolés pendant des années. L'art russe est capable de briser le blocus qui l'avait isolé pendant des années.

„ВЕЩЬ“
 Искусство России способно преодолеть блокаду, которая существовала над ней в течение многих лет. Искусство России способно преодолеть блокаду, которая существовала над ней в течение многих лет.

**НИ РОЗА
 НИ МАШИНА
 НЕ ЯВЛЯЮТСЯ ТЕМОМ
 ПОЭЗИИ**

**НИИ
 ЛИМНОПИСИ
 НИИ УСТАВ МЕТРА
 СТРУКТУРЕ
 СОЗИДАНИЮ**



**ПАРФЕНОН
 И
 АПОЛЛОН
 XX**

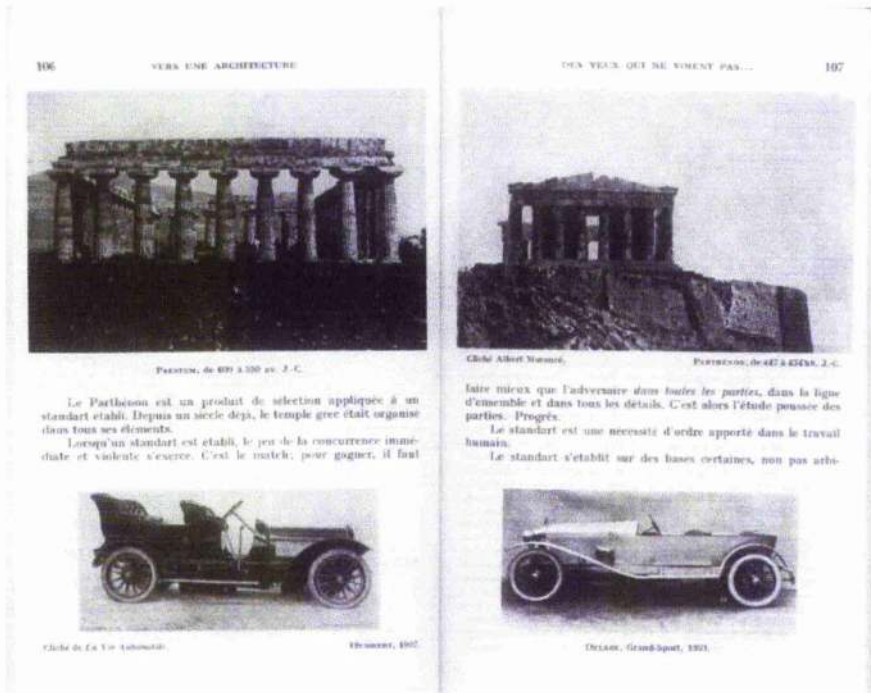


Fig. 4.9

Double-page spread, *L'Esprit Nouveau*, Paris, no.10, July 1921

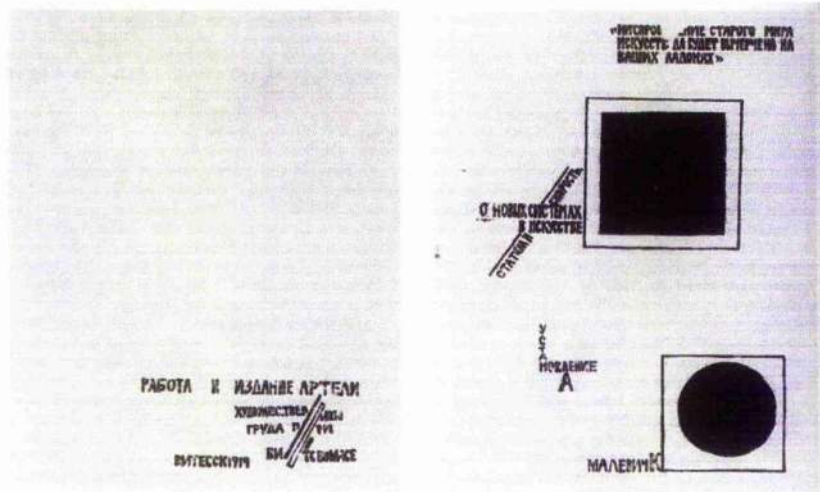


Fig. 4.10

El Lissitzky, Cover for Kazimir Malevich, *On New Systems in Art* (Vitebsk: 1919)

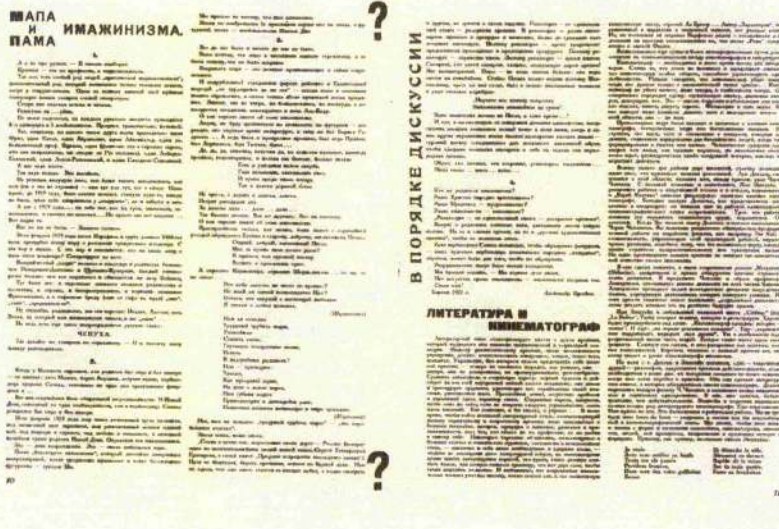


Fig. 4.11
 Double-page spread, *Veshch' /Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922

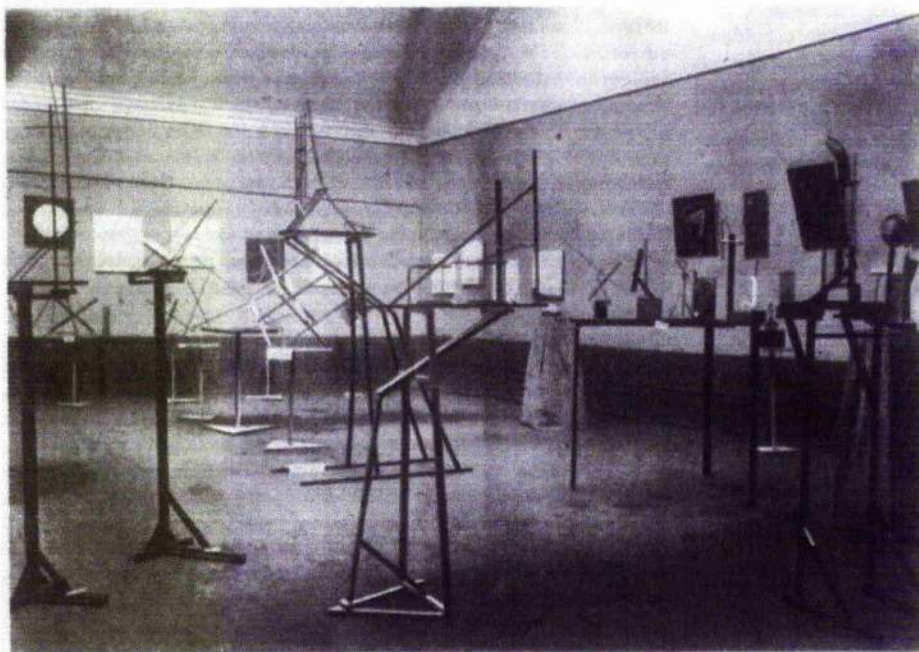


Fig. 4.12
 View of the OBMOKhU show, Moscow, May 1921, reproduced in *Veshch' /Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922

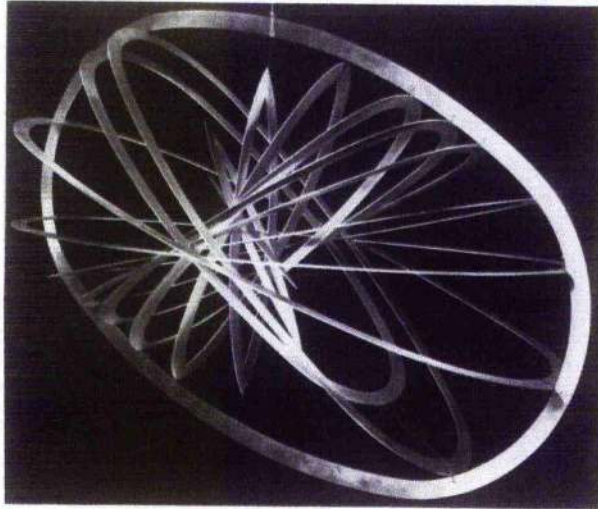


Fig. 4.13

Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Hanging Construction: Oval*, 1920-21, plywood painted silver, 83.5 x 58.5 x 43.3 cm, whereabouts unknown

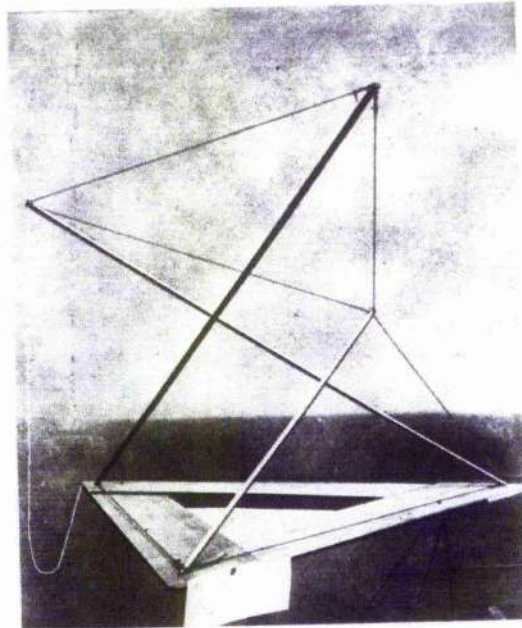


Fig. 4.14

Karl Ioganson, *Study in Balance*, ca. 1920, wood and wire, reproduced in László Moholy-Nagy, *The New Vision: From Material to Architecture* (New York: Brewer Warrar & Putnam Inc., 1930), fig.93

Fig. 4.15

Vladimir Stenberg, *Spatial Construction KPS 42 N IV*, 1919, reconstruction 1973, 264 x 70 x 130 cm, Galerie Gmurzynska, Cologne

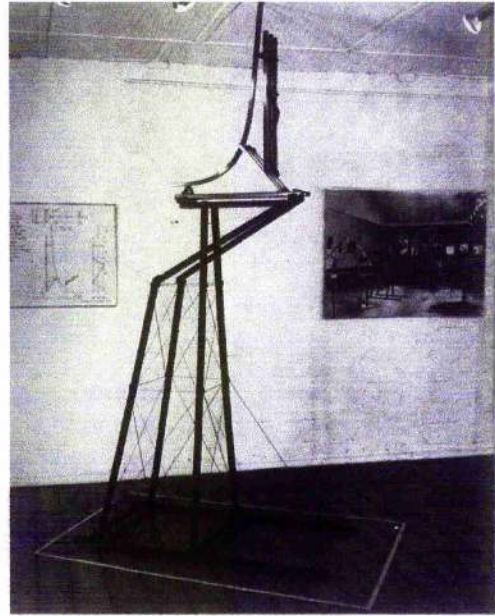


Fig. 4.16

Konstantin Medunetskii, *Spatial Construction*, 1920-21, tin, brass, steel and painted iron on painted metal base, height 45 cm, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven



Fig. 5.1

Natan Al'tman, *Poster for the First Russian Art Exhibition, Berlin, Galerie van Diemen, October 1922, Paris, Nakov Archives*



Fig. 5.2

Organisers of the *First Russian Art Exhibition, Berlin, Galerie van Diemen, October 1922* - from left to right: David Shterenberg, D. Marianov (propaganda representative), Natan Al'tman, Naum Gabo and Dr. Friedrich A. Lutz (future director of the *Gemälde neuer Meister, renamed Galerie Lutz & Co in early 1923*)

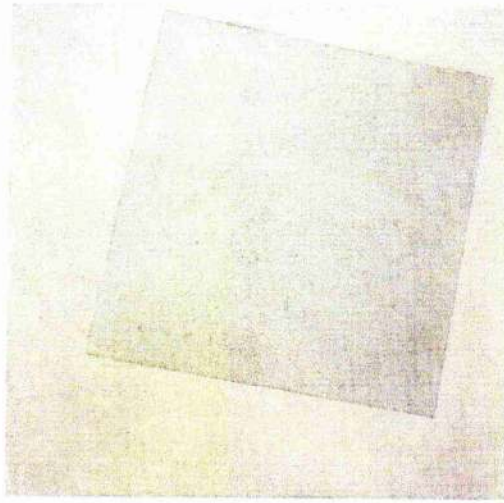


Fig. 5.3

Kazimir Malevich, *White on White*, 1918, oil on canvas, 79.4 x 79.4 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York



Fig. 5.4

Kazimir Malevich, *The Knife-Grinder: Principles of Glittering*, 1913, oil on canvas, 79.5 x 79.5 cm, Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven

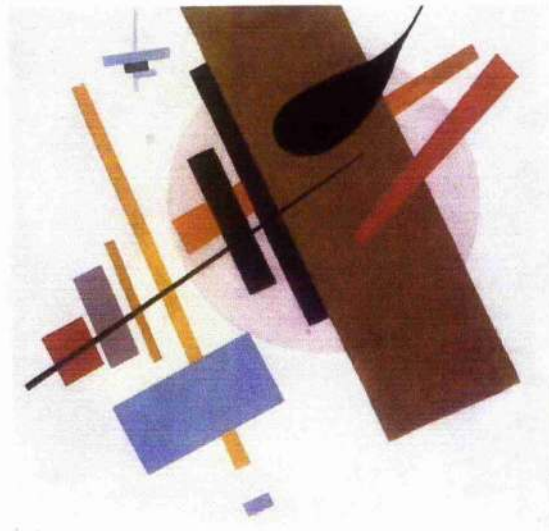


Fig. 5.5

Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematism*, 1917, oil on canvas, 80 x 80 cm, Regional Lunacharskii Art Museum, Krasnodar, reproduced in this orientation in the catalogue



Fig. 5.6

Kazimir Malevich, *Portfolio for the Congress of Committees on Rural Poverty*, 1918, colour lithograph, 42.2 x 64 cm, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg



Fig. 5.7

Ivan Puni, *Composition*, 1920-21, oil on canvas,
54.5 x 63 cm, Berlin, Berlinische Galerie

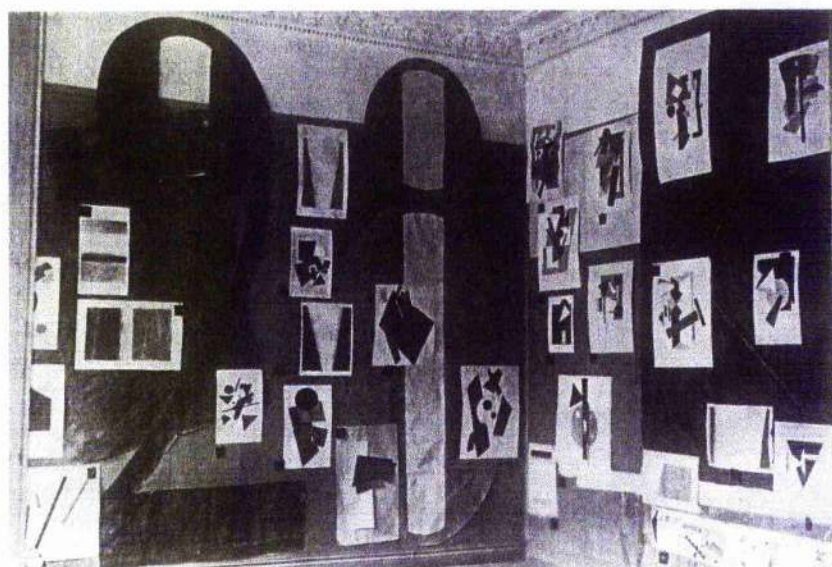


Fig. 5.8

View of the Ivan Puni exhibition at the Galerie Der Sturm,
Berlin, February 1921

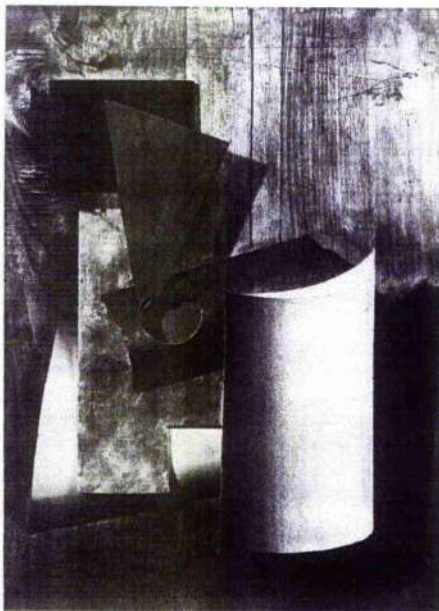


Fig. 5.9

Ivan Puni, *Sculpture*, 1915, wood, tin, cardboard and paint, 52.5 x 38 x 10 cm, Collection Mme Dina Vierny, Paris, listed as *Suprematist Sculpture* in the catalogue to the Galerie Der Sturm exhibition

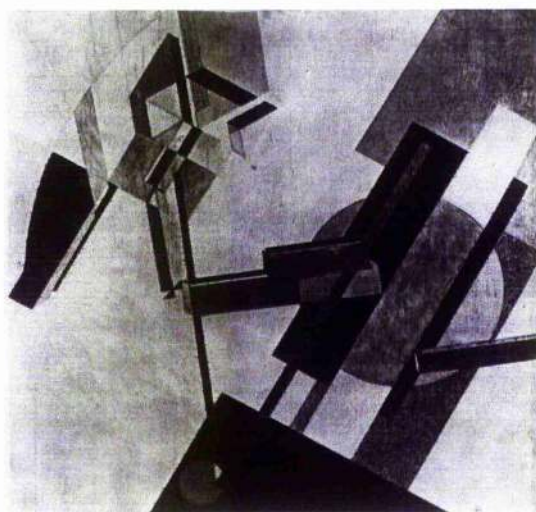


Fig. 5.10

El Lissitzky, *Proun 19D*, ca. 1920, gesso, oil, collage and mixed media on plywood, 97.5 x 97.5 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York



Fig. 5.11

Aleksandr Rodchenko, Composition no.66/86, 1919, oil on canvas, 123.3 x 73.5 cm, State Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow, listed as Non-Objective Composition

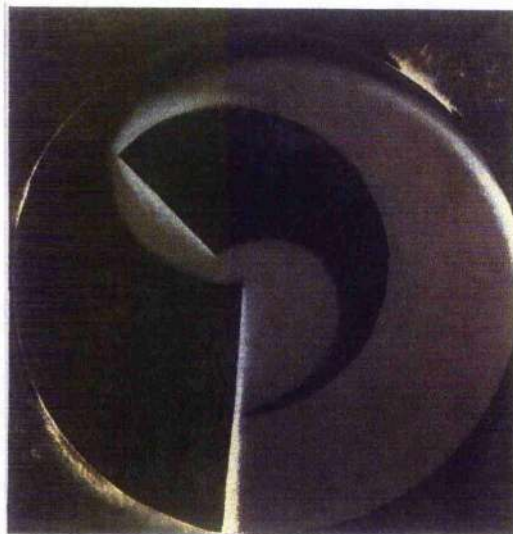


Fig. 5.12

Aleksandr Rodchenko, Non-Objective Painting: Black on Black, 1918, oil on canvas, 81.9 x 79.4 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

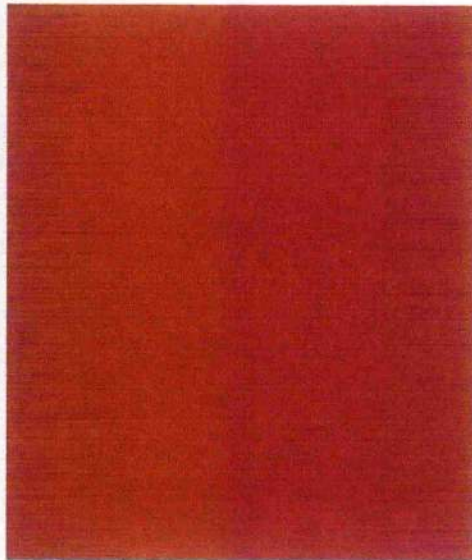


Fig. 5.13

*Aleksandr
Rodchenko, Pure Red
Colour, 1921, oil on
canvas, 62.5 x 52.7
cm, listed as Red
Colour*



Fig. 5.14

*View of the First
Russian Art
Exhibition,
Amsterdam, Stedelijk
Museum, 1923*

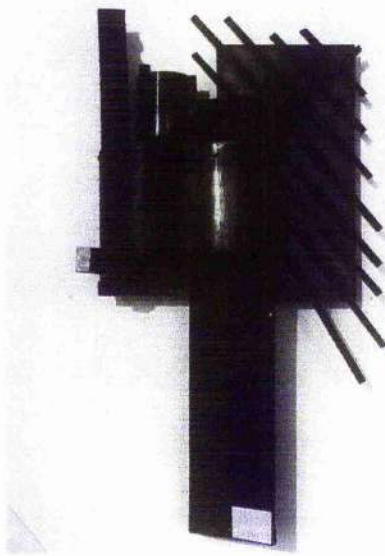


Fig. 5.15

Vladimir Tatlin, *Counter-Relief*, 1916-17, wood and metal, whereabouts unknown

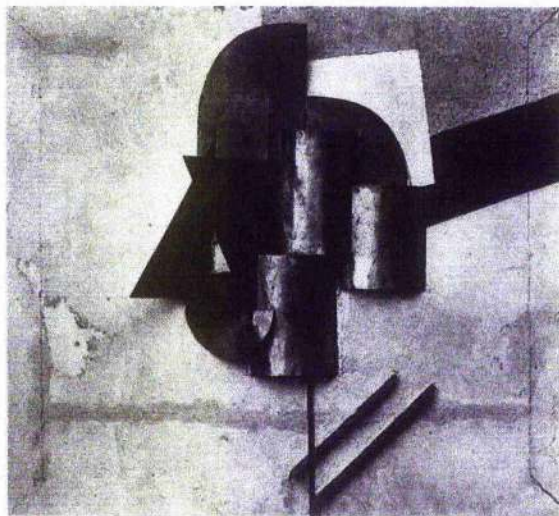


Fig. 5.16

Sawjalov, *Counter-Relief*, 1919, reproduced in *Das Kunstblatt*, Berlin, vol.VI, no.11, November 1922

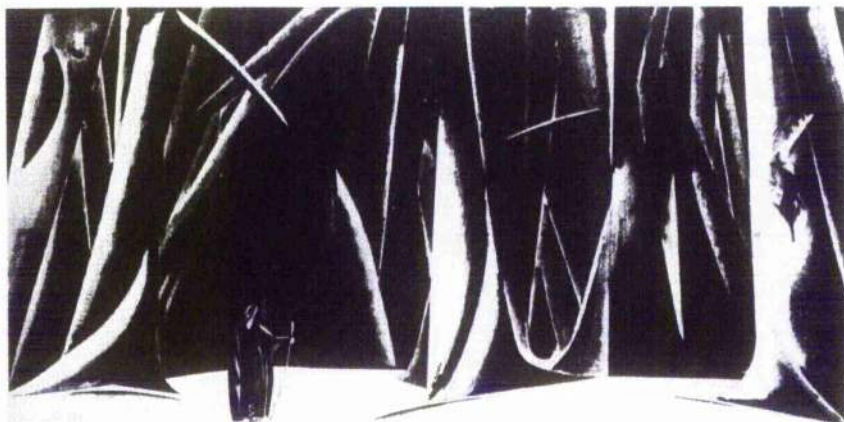


Fig. 5.17

Vladimir Tatlin, *Forest*, 1913-14, sketch for a backcloth for M.I. Glinka's opera *Ivan Susanin*, glue-based colours on cardboard, 54.5 x 95.5 cm, State Tetriakov Gallery, Moscow

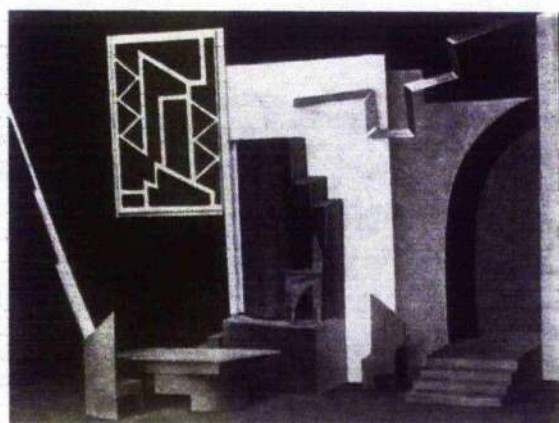


Fig. 5.18

Natan Al'tman, Stage set for *Uriel' Akosta*, 1921, Jewish Theatre, Moscow



Fig. 5.19

Naum Gabo, *Head in a Corner Niche*, 1916-17, after a work of 1916, celluloid and metal, 62.2 x 49.5 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York, listed as *Constructive Head no.3*

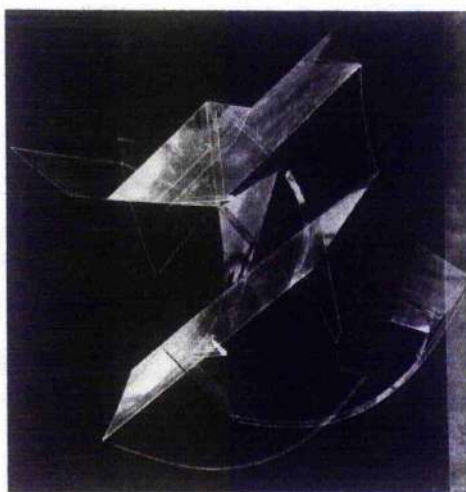


Fig. 5.20

Naum Gabo, *Construction in Relief*, 1919-20, whereabouts unknown, listed as *Spatial Construction C. Model for a Plastic Glass*

Fig. 5.21

Naum Gabo, *Kinetic Construction: Standing Wave*, 1920, metal rod and electric motor, 61.5 x 24.1 x 19 cm, Tate Gallery, London, listed as *Kinetic Construction (Time as a New Element of the Plastic Arts)*

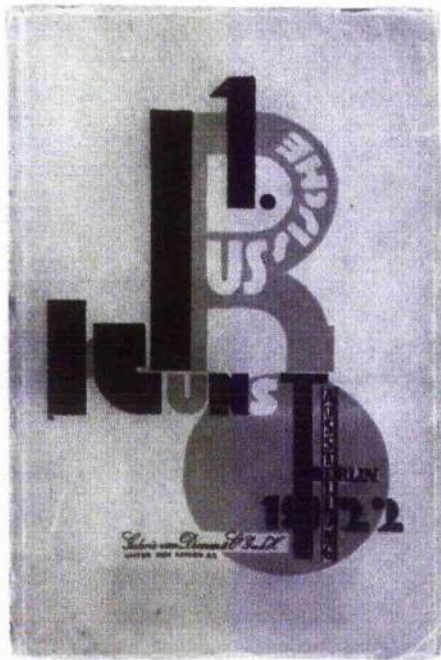
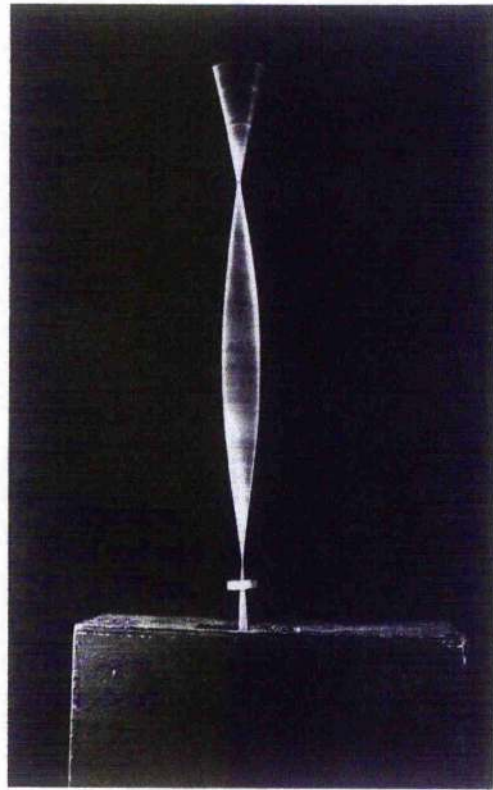


Fig. 5.22

El Lissitzky, Cover for the catalogue to the *First Russian Art Exhibition*, Berlin, Galerie van Diemen, 1922



Fig. 6.4

Congress for the Union of International Progressive Artists, Düsseldorf, 29-31 May 1922 - from left to right: Werner Gräff, Raoul Hausmann, Theo van Doesburg, Cornelis van Eesteren, Hans Richter, Nelly van Doesburg, Marcel Janco (?), El Lissitzky, Ruggero Vasari, Otto Freudlich, Hannah Höch, Franz Wilhelm Seiwert, Stanislaw Kubicki



Fig. 6.5

Congress for the Union of International Progressive Artists, Düsseldorf, 29-31 May 1922 - from left to right: unidentified, Ruggero Vasari, Werner Gräff, unidentified, Hans Richter, Nelly van Doesburg, Marcel Janco (?), El Lissitzky, Theo van Doesburg, Franz Wilhelm Seiwert, Raoul Hausmann



Fig. 6.6

Cover, *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V, no.4, April 1922



Fig. 6.7

Mécano, Leiden, no.3 (red issue), winter 1922



Fig. 6.8

Congress of Constructivists and Dadaists, Weimar, 25 September 1922 - from left to right: Kurt Schwitters, Hans Arp, Marx and Lotte Buchartz, Hans Richter, Nelly van Doesburg, Cornelis van Eesteren, Theo van Doesburg, Karl Peter and Alexa Röhl, Werner Gräff



Fig. 6.9

Cover and title page, *De Stijl*, Leiden, vol.V, no.8, August 1922



Fig. 6.10

Title page, *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923

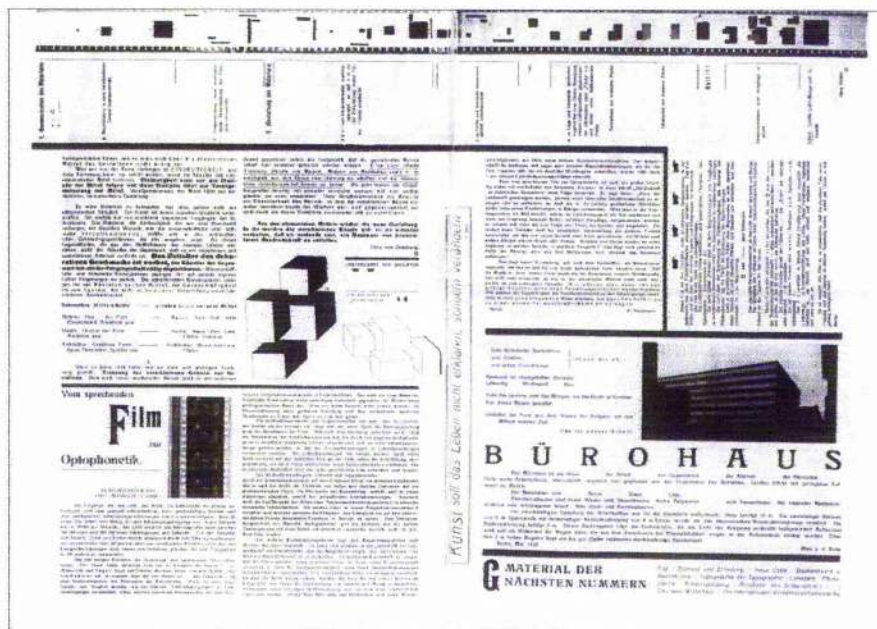


Fig. 6.11

Double-page spread, *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923

Важнейшим из искусств является искусство архитектуры, которое имеет своим предметом создание среды обитания человека. Оно, как и поэзия, имеет своим предметом создание образа, но этот образ создается не в воображении поэта, а в действительности. Архитектура — искусство, которое создает среду обитания человека. Оно, как и поэзия, имеет своим предметом создание образа, но этот образ создается не в воображении поэта, а в действительности. Архитектура — искусство, которое создает среду обитания человека.

Статьи и русский язык в иностранных журналах

Почему



Вещь — это материал и пространственная форма, которая создается в процессе работы скульптора. Вещь — это материал и пространственная форма, которая создается в процессе работы скульптора. Вещь — это материал и пространственная форма, которая создается в процессе работы скульптора.

3 ЖИВОПИСЬ С КУЛЬТУРА А РИТМ И ТЕНЬ
О современном состоянии живописи и ее тенденциях.

Важнейшим из искусств является искусство живописи, которое имеет своим предметом создание образа. Оно, как и поэзия, имеет своим предметом создание образа, но этот образ создается не в воображении поэта, а в действительности. Живопись — искусство, которое создает образ. Оно, как и поэзия, имеет своим предметом создание образа, но этот образ создается не в воображении поэта, а в действительности. Живопись — искусство, которое создает образ.

ОНА РОДИЛА ИСКУССТВО

Fig. 6.12
 Double-page spread, *Veshch'/Gegenstand/Objet*, Berlin, no.1/2, March/April 1922

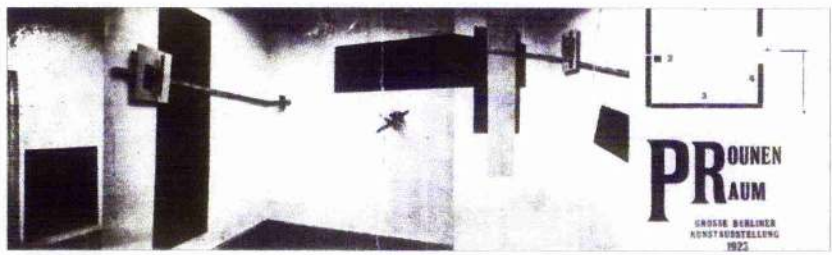


Fig. 6.13
 El Lissitzky, *Proun Room*, reproduced in *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923

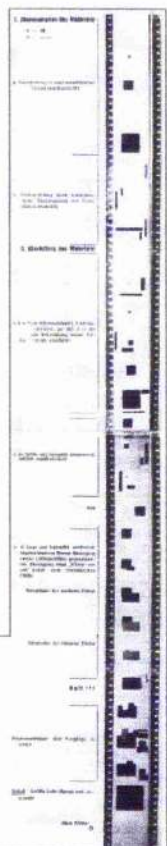


Fig. 6.14
 Hans Richter, *Rhythm 21*, reproduced in *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.1, July 1923

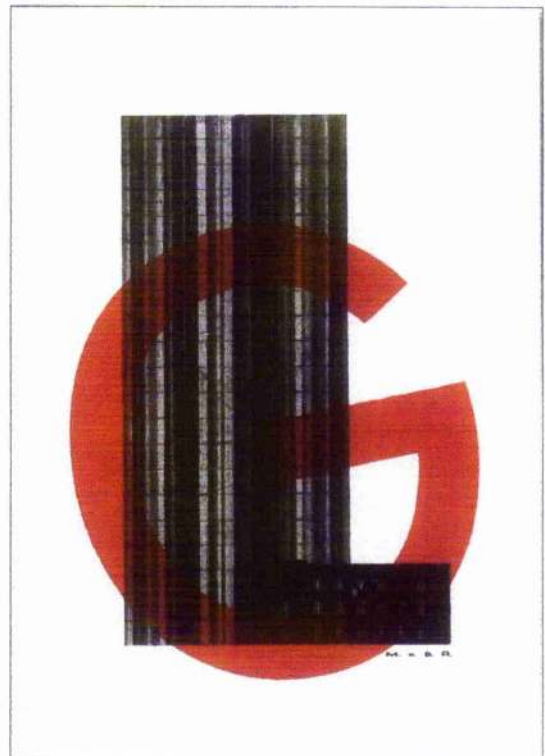


Fig. 6.15

Title page, *G, Material zur elementaren Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.2, September 1923

Fig. 6.16

Cover, *G, Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.3, June 1924



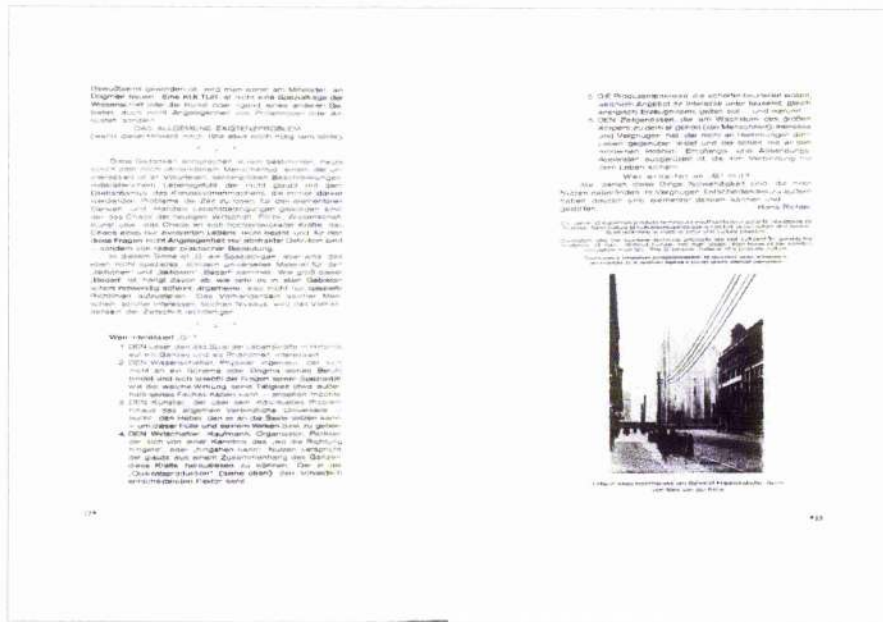


Fig. 6.17

Double-page spread, *G, Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.3, June 1924



Fig. 6.18

Double-page spread, *G, Zeitschrift für elementare Gestaltung*, Berlin, no.3, June 1924

Fig. 6.19

Cover, Lajos Kassák, László Moholy-Nagy, *Buch neuer Künstler* (Vienna: MA, 1922)

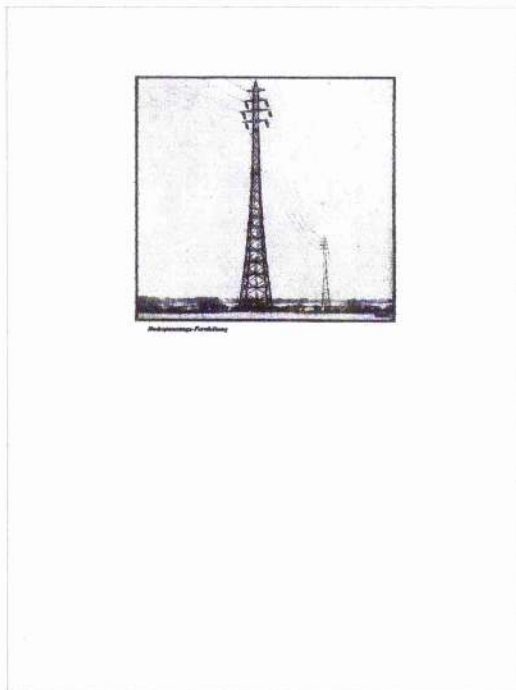
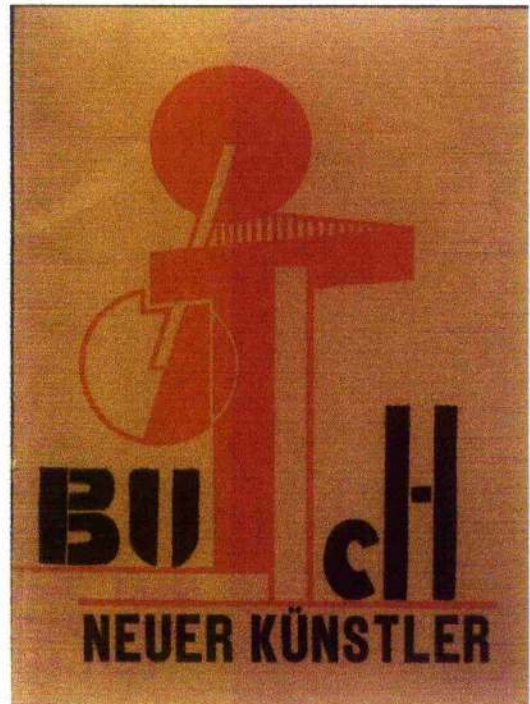


Fig. 6.20

High voltage pylon, reproduced in László Moholy-Nagy, *Buch neuer Künstler* (Vienna: MA, 1922)

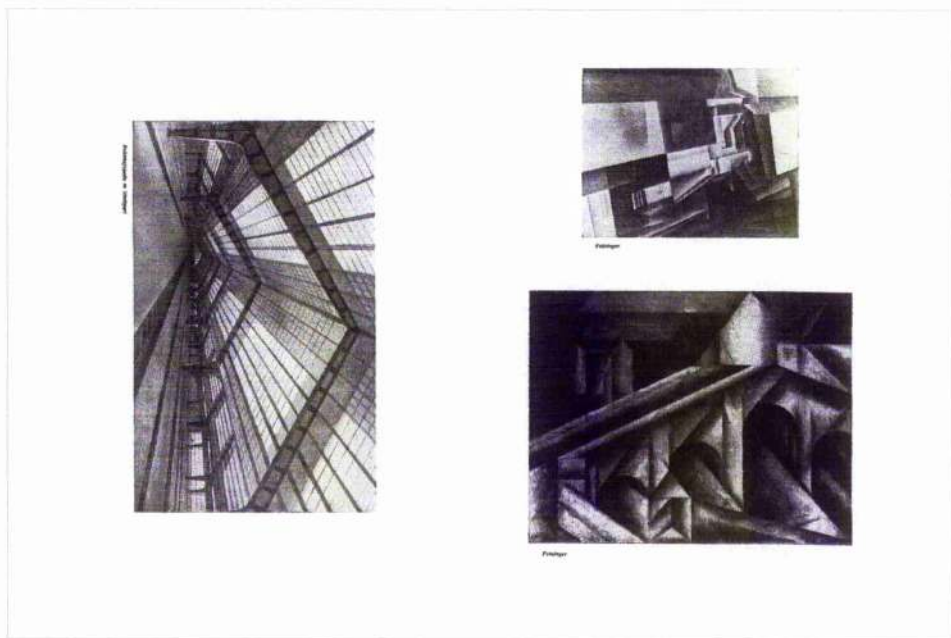


Fig. 6.21

Double-page spreads, László Moholy-Nagy, *Buch neuer Künstler* (Vienna: MA, 1922)

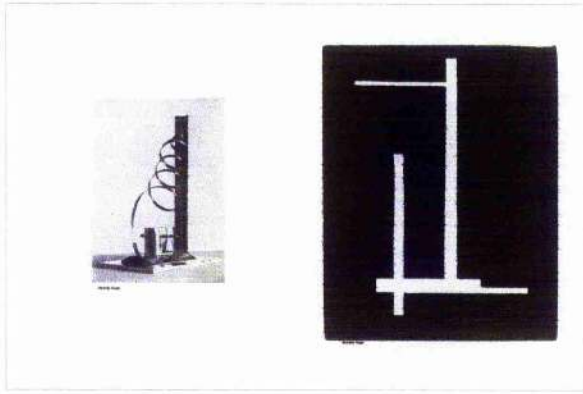


Fig. 6.22

Double-page spreads, László Moholy-Nagy, *Buch neuer Künstler* (Vienna: MA, 1922)

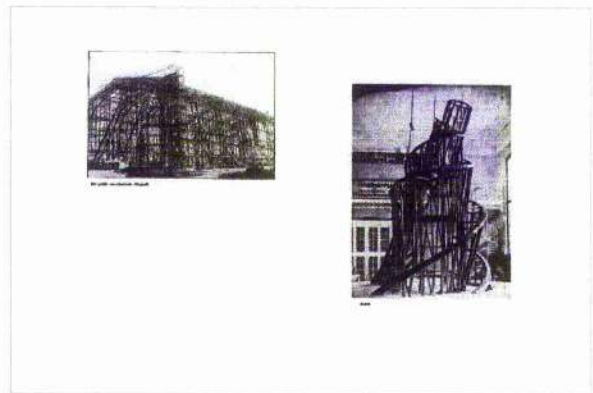
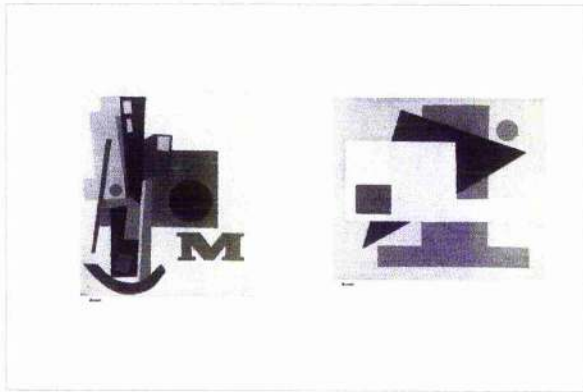


Fig. 6.23

Double-page spreads, László Moholy-Nagy, *Buch neuer Künstler* (Vienna: MA, 1922)

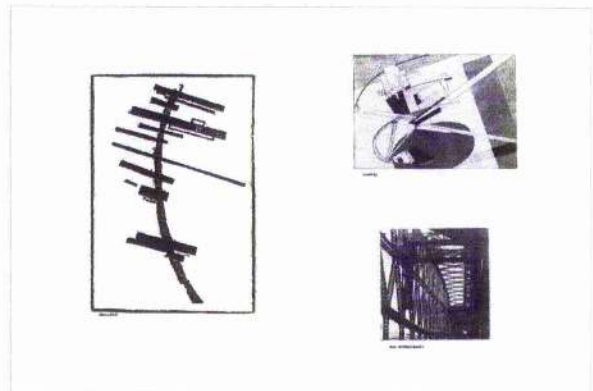




Fig. 6.24

Covers, *Merz*, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/July 1924



Fig. 6.25

Cover and pages from *Merz*, Hanover, no.6, October 1923



Fig. 6.26

Title page, *Merz*, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/June 1924

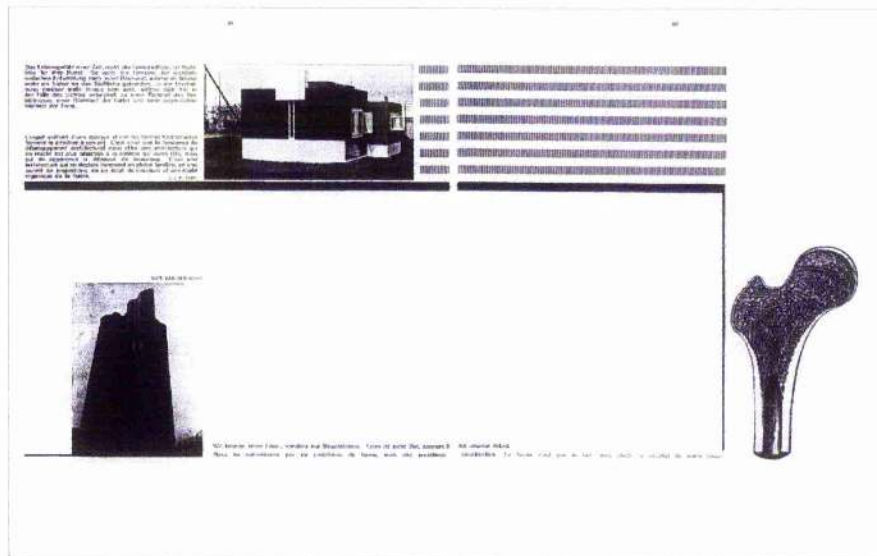


Fig. 6.27

Double-page spread, *Merz*, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/June 1924

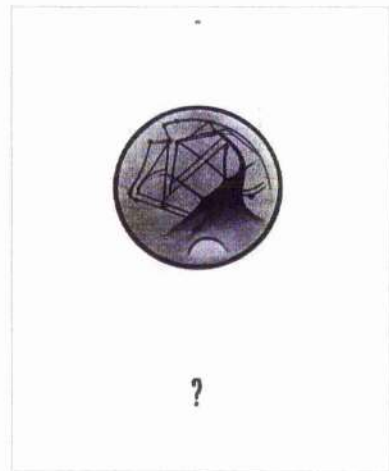
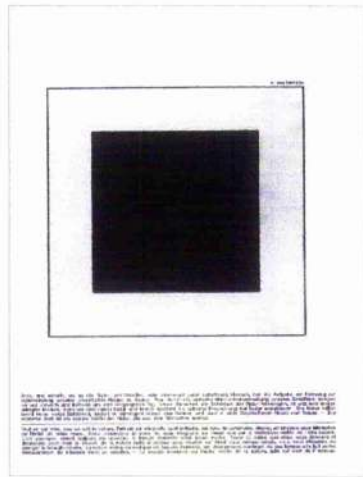


Fig. 6.28

Merz, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/June 1924



Fig. 6.29

Double-page spread, *Merz, Hanover, vol.II, no.8/9, April/June 1924*

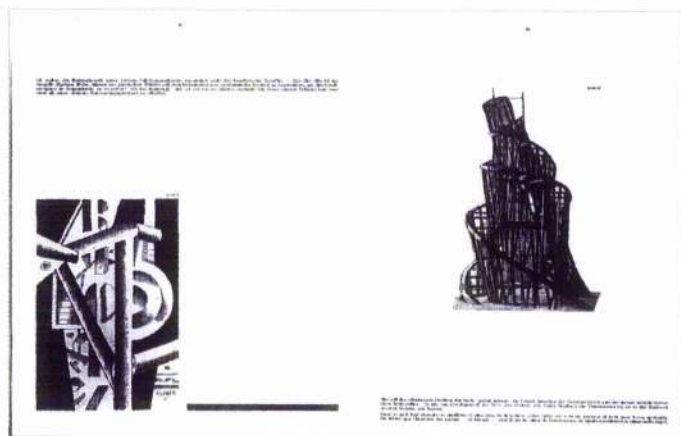
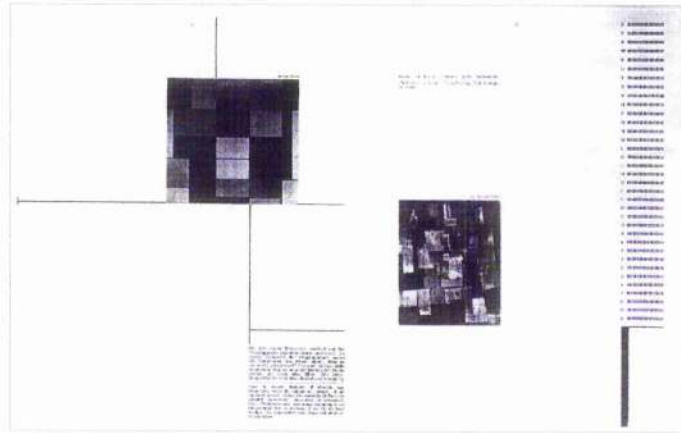


Fig. 6.30

Double-page spreads, *Merz*, Hanover, vol.II,
no.8/9, April/June 1924

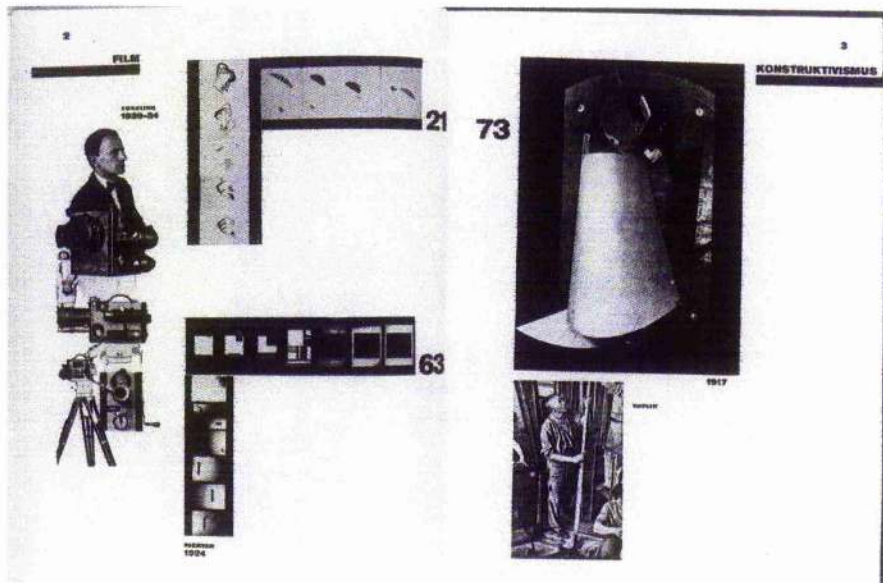
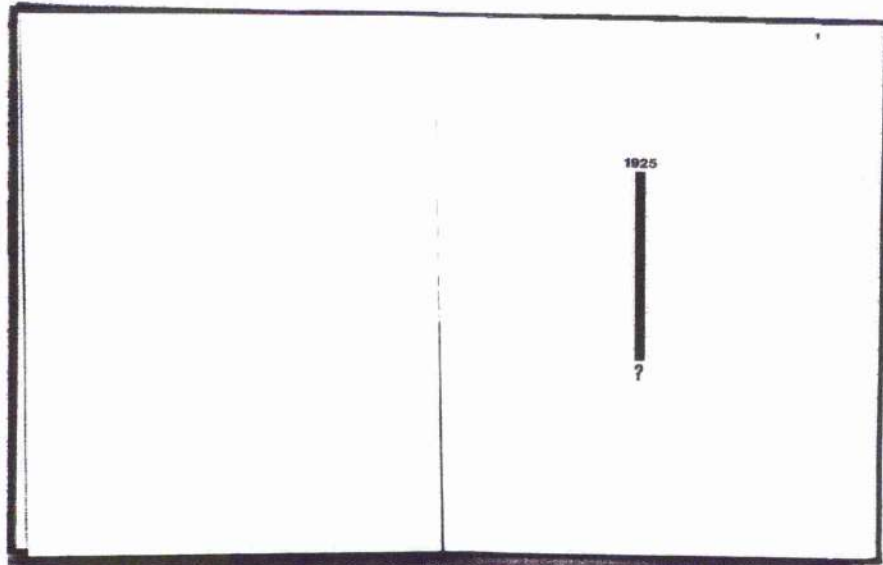


Fig. 6.33

Double-page spreads, El Lissitzky, Hans Arp, *Die Kunstismen* (Erlenbach-Zurich: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925)

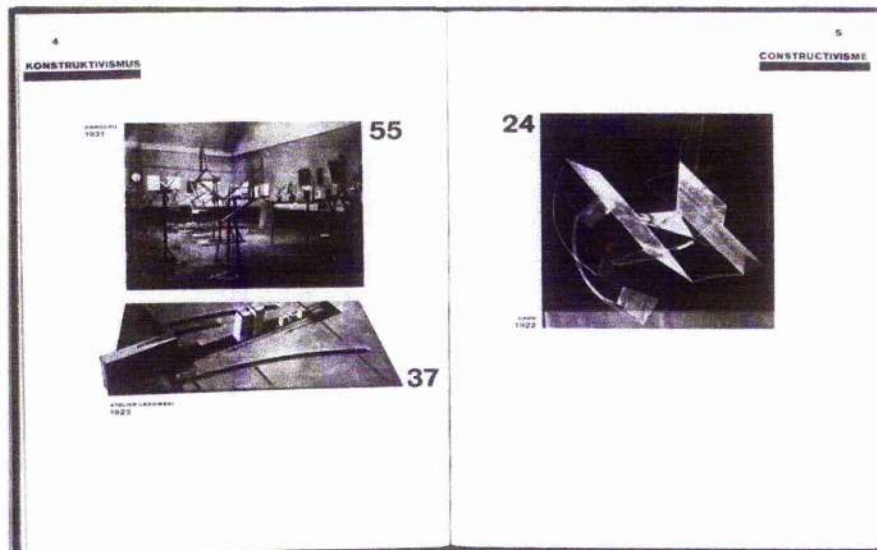


Fig. 6.34

Double-page spread, El Lissitzky, Hans Arp, *Die Kunstisten* (Erlenbach-Zurich: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925)

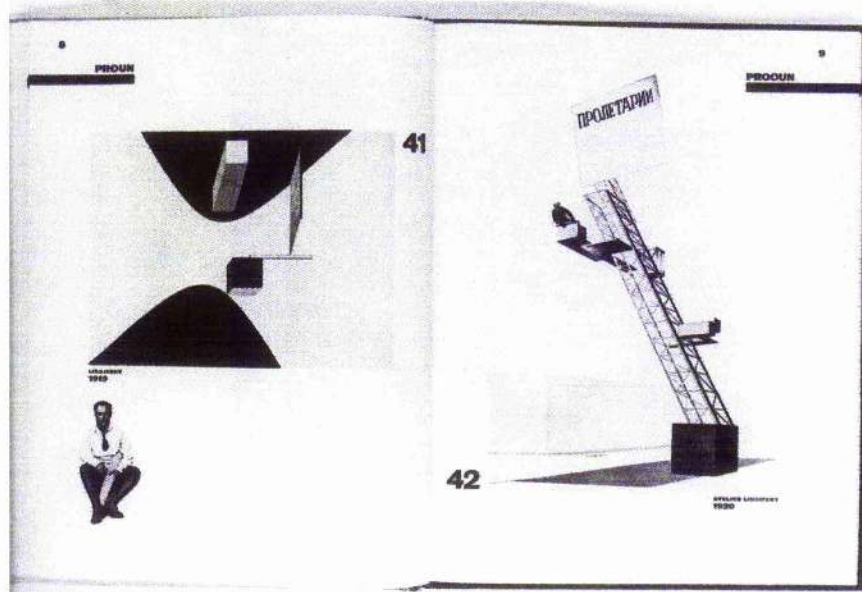


Fig. 6.35

Double-page spread, El Lissitzky, Hans Arp, *Die Kunstisten* (Erlenbach-Zurich: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925)

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