

LISSITZKY +

Part 1 – Victory over the Sun

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CHARLES ESCHE DISCUSSES EL LISSITZKY AND THE VAN ABBEMUSEUM 'Burying the old to make way for the new'.

Lissitzky's oeuvre is the cornerstone of Charles Esche's policy as director of the Van Abbemuseum.

'When I began working here, I thought that Lissitzky was one of the most attractive components of the collection. Lissitzky is an intriguing model for contemporary artists, because he is engaged with the world as well as his own artistic vision. From Lissitzky you can understand that artists have always risked connecting to society and contributing to its development. He had to fight for his autonomy, rather than have it gifted, but in doing so he established a role for his thinking beyond the art circuit'.

Why is Lissitzky different to other artists?

Lissitzky was an artist of his time but if you compare him with today's art he was busy pushing back the boundaries; he worked with concrete political objectives. In the Netherlands he has usually been categorized as an 'autonomous artist' – that is how we think about artists since Van Gogh. That is a result of compartmentalization, of compartmentalization, I think. 'Autonomous art' is actually a compartment, too. If I were to express this in an extreme form, this autonomy is a form of apartheid: if you are an autonomous artist, then you're allowed to do what you want, so long as you remain within your little domain. You stay separate. This renders art irrelevant, because interconnections don't work in this kind of system. In history, eras of this kind have usually coincided with an age lacking in dynamism, a period of stasis.

In my opinion the basic structure in the Netherlands continues to work along similar lines. Everything, from integration to politics to academic disciplines, is always compartmentalized. Everything is classified: that belongs with art, that belong to politics, that belongs to science, and so on. Lissitzky is the radical and absolute opposite of this. He says: here is a little sketch, and it could be anything and everything. It can be this or that; it can be the whole universe.

Does that tie in with Lissitzky's revolutionary ideology?

What you see with Lissitzky and his contemporaries is the quest for an intermingling of disciplines, of forms, of people. When Malevich went to Vitebsk, it is believed that he took a message from Lenin with him: 'Do whatever you want there, but make sure that everything is temporary.' That stems from necessity but also a political desire to experiment, which fed the artistic culture of that era. You see the same thing with Rodchenko, who worked in industry, or Popova, who worked in

advertising. They were not so focused on their personal work, but on all the other things they might be able to bring about through their art. They had a broader context, in a way like in religious works by Leonardo da Vinci or Michelangelo: a relationship with a bigger objective than self-satisfaction. Artists today are often trained to be concerned only with themselves and their own vision, they are given 'autonomy', but that is a mistake. Autonomy means nothing if it is simply handed to you; you have to fight for your autonomy to make it real and meaningful.

So Lissitzky offers a different perspective on art history?

If you have Lissitzky as a basis in your museum then you've the possibility of telling a completely different modernist narrative. Not the modernism of America, of Clement Greenberg and Jackson Pollock, but a modernism in which the relationship between art and society are central. Lissitzky is not an artist who accepts the traditional template of the artist, simply doing his thing within a given framework, but an artist who tries to use art in a new way, for other purposes, as part of a much bigger narrative. The question is how you can best make that manifest in a museum today, in a manner that does justice to the artist and contributes to contemporary art.

Why is that difficult?

Something that is highly intriguing and significant with regard to Lissitzky – and this also ties in closely with his ideology – is that the way you look at a Lissitzky is different to the way you look at an American expressionist painting. You can understand Lissitzky's work as a proposal, a proposition for a three-dimensional object, one that could assume several different dimensions. It can be a sculpture, it can be architecture, it can be a whole city.

This makes it an applied art of sorts. He does not produce an image, which is related only to a notion of beauty – though it does possess that – but primarily something that could subsequently be used, by you, the viewer. Every time you see such a straightforward drawing, for example of two squares, you have to imagine that you can walk between those forms, like in a city. Or that you could live in there, in various rooms. We are keen to bring these ideas to the fore in the exhibitions.

What will this look like?

There were myriad possibilities. If you start looking into Lissitzky then you come across a great many topics. We have opted for three chapters. What I find really intriguing is the first project, the reconstruction of the whole story around the opera *Victory over the Sun*. I think it's important that *Victory over the Sun* can be seen as a notion of enlightenment, literally and metaphorically. Lenin said: Communism = All power to the Soviets + Electricity. In this sense electricity is an immensely powerful idea, like a victory over nature. Electricity brings light into the world, enables you to read, to develop yourself. It made it possible for a different kind of society to evolve. Now we accept it as the everyday norm, but just imagine what a shift that was then. This makes *Victory over the Sun* an important watershed: the *New Man* is truly born. That is what the work is about, and we want to highlight this: *New Man*, at the big window, with the *Gravediggers* below that, burying the outdated styles and way of life, burying the old to make way for the new on the freshly turned soil. It is, of course, difficult to recapture the optimism in those desperate times today but for me it is crucial to any understanding of modernity and should be a foundation stone for the artistic policy in a museum like the Van Abbe.

THE PROVENANCE OF THE VAN ABBEMUSEUM'S LISSITZKY COLLECTION

The Van Abbemuseum first presented an overview of the work of Lissitzky on 4 December 1965, in an exhibition curated by the then director, Jean Leering. Leering regarded Lissitzky as the link between Constructivism, De Stijl and the Bauhaus. A problem in preparing the exhibition was that the whereabouts of many works by Lissitzky was unknown. Leering approached many people and institutions which had been in contact with Lissitzky. The Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow was at that time not prepared to assist with the exhibition at the Van Abbemuseum, so Leering continued his search elsewhere. Via the Munich-based art dealer Hans Klihm he tracked down a large collection of works by Lissitzky, almost 90 in all, which were in the possession of the widow of the German painter Friedrich Vordemberge Gildewart, who in 1942 had moved into Lissitzky's studio at the Kestner Gesellschaft in Hanover. There he discovered a folder with drawings, watercolours, gouaches, etchings, typographic designs and printer's proofs. Leering showed these works in the exhibition without mentioning their provenance, and he was eventually able to acquire them for the museum. The Van Abbemuseum now boasts one of the world's most important collections of Lissitzky's work, the largest outside Russia.