

LISSITZKY +

Part 1 – Victory over the Sun

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PROF. DR JOHN MILNER (COURTAULD INSTITUTE LONDON) EXPLAINS THE NEW PRESENTATION AND THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF EL LISSITZKY

'Be new!'

The Van Abbemuseum invited Professor Milner to devise a series of presentations around the Lissitzky collection. The aim of this triptych is to present the work of Lissitzky and his colleagues and contemporaries in several different contexts.

What was your point of departure for Lissitzky+?

When Lissitzky was collaborating with Malevich in Vitebsk he created pseudo-architectural designs. Geometric designs, which might lead to architecture, but they never quite got there. However, the designs look quite close to realizable. It occurred to me, reading one of his essays, that he says, in so many words: 'I am not going to do this. You can do this.' So I started looking at his work and thinking: 'What is he suggesting? What is the potential of these things?' When you look at a little lithograph like *The Town* you begin to see that this is essentially city planning, so we have made some of the models. But we were not making 'fake Lissitzky'; we were trying to convey the idea that there is a proposition here, that you can change the world and this is how you can do it, so we're just taking it forward a step.

That was followed by Victory over the Sun. What was that?

Victory over the Sun was a crazy, futurist opera, about burying the sun and taking over the planet. For the first performance of this opera in 1913 Malevich designed the costumes and sets. In 1920 the piece was staged for a second time, in Vitebsk, by the members of the UNOVIS movement.

What does that mean?

It's like a new verb in the imperative, something like 'Be New!' – an affirmation, like 'Just Do It!' Inspired by the performance in Vitebsk, Lissitzky came up with the idea that you could also mechanize the opera. He designed several figures and a dynamic staging in which they could be placed. The Van Abbemuseum possesses the eventual outcome in the guise of the *Figurinenmappe*, a portfolio with lithographs of several characters from the opera. In addition the museum holds the unique designs for these figures and several proofs.

Have those figures ever been realized in the meantime?

It struck me that those various costume designs were seen from various angles. From this I concluded that those

puppets most likely must have actually existed. On the title page Lissitzky writes: 'I am not doing this. You are doing this. Over to you. You can use different materials. You can use copper if it is red, you can do different things.' So we are seeing how feasible the designs are. It has been fascinating. At the top of the title page stands the *New Man*, at the bottom the *Gravediggers*, who bury the sun, and there is a kind of time-traveller, the *Globetrotter*, who is looping the loop in his aeroplane, and the *Announcer*, a poet, all set in some kind of mechanism. So this is what we are building! Charles Esche was intrigued by those designs, especially the one for the *Gravediggers*, so that is what we have produced, really big, about eight metres high, set in the lake behind the museum, and we are placing the *New Man* in the window facing it – a marvellous thing!

What did the Russian Revolution mean for Russian artists like Lissitzky?

It was a bit like a pressure cooker. Before the war, many Russian artists lived scattered far and wide across Europe, in Munich or Paris, and when war broke out most of them returned. Kandinsky and Chagall went back, just like Larionov and others. When the Revolution broke out in 1917 some of them tried to escape somehow, but many stayed put and for them there was no contact with the rest of the world from 1917 to 1921. These artists had returned home from Europe with all their new discoveries, but were then totally isolated.

What was the impact of the Revolution on the art world?

It was an era of extraordinary opportunities, but great deprivation. The existing structure for the support of artists disappeared in one fell swoop. There were no longer any buyers. Private collections were nationalized. Commercial galleries, which were getting quite lively by 1917, simply vanished. You couldn't travel, there was no money, there were no sponsors, no commissions. It was gone! Everyone was the owner of everything. Nobody owned anything personally. Even the artists who might appear to be 'political' were left with very few options.

How did Lissitzky end up in that pressure cooker?

Lissitzky was an intelligent Jewish boy with ambitions. For young men like him it was almost impossible to study in Russia itself – Russian universities applied a quota for Jews – so it was easier for them to go to Germany. Lissitzky studied architecture in Darmstadt and Riga. When war broke out he was evacuated to Moscow, and there he came into contact with the revolutionaries. For Lissitzky the Revolution seemed like liberation: he could at last do as he pleased. He returned to Vitebsk, in present-day Belarus, where he had grown up. Chagall had just been appointed as 'Commissar for Fine Art' there and reorganized the art school. They made a determined attempt to do away with the distinction between artisans and the snooty, highly educated 'artists'. The new 'free state studios' were open to everyone: children, workers, sailors, soldiers. Lissitzky worked under Chagall, teaching, designing propaganda materials and creating illustrations for Jewish books.

That was rather nostalgic art. How did it relate to modern art?

That Jewish background was important in Vitebsk. It was not a specifically Jewish city – a third of the population was Jewish – but the Revolution seemed like the ideal moment to revive the Yiddish and Hebrew language and culture. That was difficult, because after the Revolution religion was forbidden. For a devout Jew like Chagall that was an exceptionally tricky combination. Chagall and Lissitzky invited Malevich to come and teach there. Malevich introduced all kinds of novel, progressive ideas: he soon took over the school, simply ousting Chagall, which must have been a harrowing moment. But that is how geometric art began. It already existed – Malevich had already painted his Black Square in 1913 – but now it became a political affair. Malevich was very intelligent and passionate. Lissitzky was a complete convert. He turned away from Jewish art and worked incredibly closely with Malevich. In Vitebsk they established a new group named UNOVIS.

Did that geometric art immediately become the official Soviet style?

There was certainly official support for this kind of innovative art. The new regime wanted to eradicate the taste and style of the old regime, and they were therefore searching for something that had nothing to do with it. That new culture had to be 'proletarian', even if nobody knew exactly what that was, and it had to be 'tasteless', devoid of connotations such as 'good taste' or 'bad taste'. Art also had to be 'collective' – no more working on your own in a studio – and 'public' in its manifestations. Malevich was adept at that, so they painted fantastic designs on the trams and buildings in Vitebsk: big spots, triangles and squares. So these geometric forms of art seemed to be a very useful way forward, because geometry knows no style, no taste,

and is somehow 'communal'. So a new visual language emerged from this, and not only for painting but for all kinds of things: a podium for an orator, a building, a parade, or whatever.

Does that mean the Soviets preferred such art because it was abstract?

No, they didn't consider this art to be 'abstract'. The word 'abstract' doesn't exist in Russian. Abstraktny is an insult. Rodchenko called Kandinsky abstraktny, meaning a fool, a daydreamer, someone selfish, deluding himself with semi-religious, mystical nonsense.

Lissitzky was trained as an architect. Do you know of any buildings by him from that period?

Lissitzky was an architect in every way except for actually building the buildings. He wrote books about architecture, published architectural magazines, drafted designs, built models – but no brick was ever laid. Between 1917 and 1923 almost nothing was built in Russia, so that period produced a paper-architecture period. Tatlin's famous tower is a bit like that: it's fantastical architecture. There are quite a lot of designs for flying buildings from that period. Malevich designed floating structures that would 'hang' at a fixed point between the earth and the moon. Absurd plans, but in those years there were, of course, many scientific breakthroughs, new ideas about time and space, and about travelling through time.

And that's why he left?

In 1921 Lissitzky took a job as cultural ambassador of the Soviet Union. He travelled throughout the West as a servant of the state, to promote the new Soviet culture. He organized the 'First Russian Art Exhibition' in Berlin, the first time that Russian avant-garde art had been exhibited in the West since 1914 – nobody knew anything about it, so it caused a sensation. Lissitzky was very good at making contacts. He worked with Arp, Schwitters and Van Doesburg, he became a member of De Stijl, he met the Dadaists in Germany, met the people who established the Bauhaus, absolutely everyone.

Why were the Russians interested in all these artistic movements in the West?

They wanted to infiltrate them. They were interested in everything 'international' – the League of Nations, communism, the revolution, De Stijl – and free of individual self-expression. Lissitzky latched on to such ideas and these networks. He may even have considered defecting to the West.

Why?

Because he worked so well with everyone. In the West he found patrons who made a couple of his biggest projects possible. And he met his wife, Sophie Küppers, in Hanover, where he also found plenty of work. He

**Interview with guest curator John Milner
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designed exhibitions for Mondrian and Gabo and Van der Leek, he laid out private museums, he wrote a good book with Hans Arp, *Die Kunstisten (The Isms of Art)* he was extraordinarily prolific, for commercial clients, too. He designed advertising for Pelikan ink, for example. This notwithstanding he was a sick man, suffering from tuberculosis, and he took a lengthy stay in Switzerland to recover. His friends and sponsors in the West paid for that.

He ended up returning to Russia after all – where the situation was one of upheaval.

When Lissitzky travelled to the West, his wife, Sophie, had to remain behind in Russia, so he was obliged to return home. When Stalin came to power the Constructivist artists kept a low profile. They produced book designs, propaganda, exhibition designs, and those kinds of things. Lissitzky did a lot of work for trade fairs, which were often highly politicized. He produced some books, which are spectacular, but they certainly promote Stalin's Russia as well, and he invented a kind of 'photo-mural', gigantic collages of photographic images, and he was very good at that. As long as the content was acceptable, in the Stalin era that was fine.

But Lissitzky was cosmopolitan, a Jew. He must have had some idea of what was going on?

Yes, absolutely, but there wasn't much you could do about it. These were very dangerous times. The Lissitzky family were moved to Novosibirsk in Siberia and Sophie stayed there for the rest of her life, even after Lissitzky passed away in 1941.