

Talks & Events Programme

Lecture + Roundtable Discussion

Saturday 17 October, 3 – 5.30pm, Lecture Room, IMMA

On the closing weekend of *El Lissitzky: The Artist and the State*, Catherine Morris presents a lecture on her research into the work and ideas of the key Irish revolutionary figure, Alice Milligan, in the early years of the 20th century. This will be followed by a discussion addressing Lissitzky's enthusiasm for the revolution and the relevance of his ideas for contemporary artists and society, as Ireland approaches the centenary of 1916. Participants include: Rossella Biscotti, Núria Güell, Sarah Pierce, Annie Fletcher, Sarah Glennie and discussion moderator, Mick Wilson (Researcher, Valand Academy, the University of Gothenburg). A closing reception follows this event.

Booking is essential for all talks.

For further information contact Sophie Byrne, Assistant Curator, Talks and Lectures, IMMA. email: sophie.byrne@imma.ie; Tel: + 353 (0)1 6229913.

For a full programme of events, free tickets and to listen to recordings of past talks on the IMMA Soundcloud Channel, visit www.imma.ie.

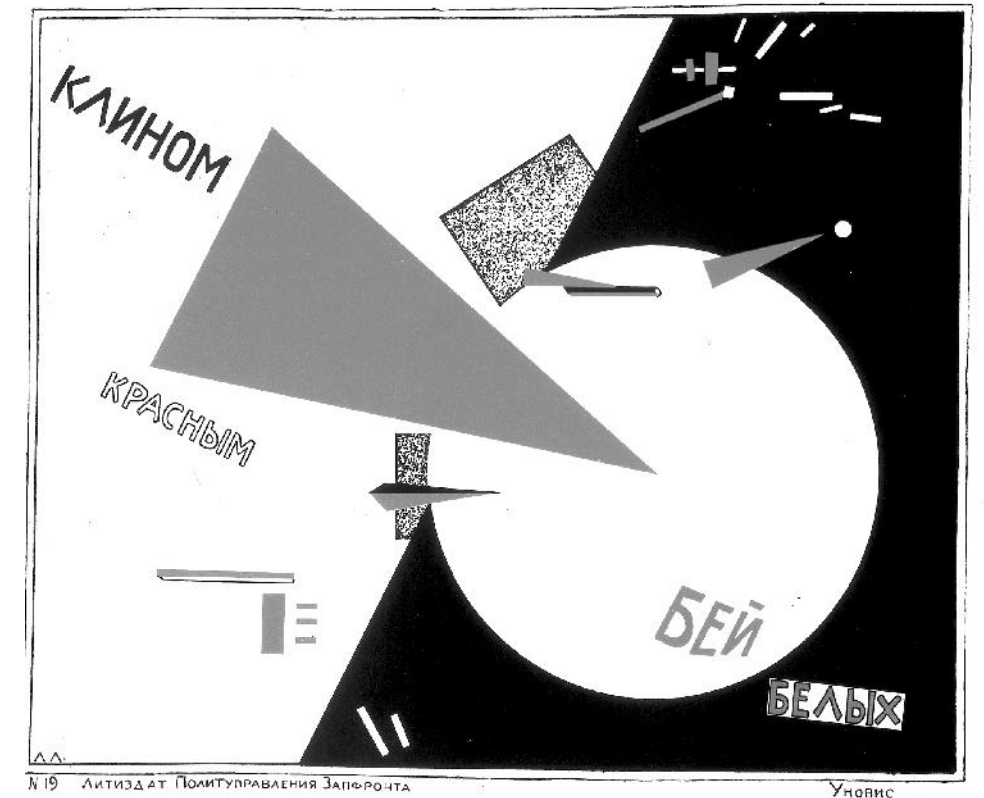
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Image credit: El Lissitzky, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, (1919-1920); offset on paper; 48.8 x 69.2 cm. Courtesy Collection Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, The Netherlands. Photo: Peter Cox, Eindhoven, The Netherlands



EL LISSITZKY



EL LISSITZKY: THE ARTIST AND THE STATE

WITH ROSSELLA BISCOTTI, MAUD GONNE,
NÚRIA GÜELL, ALICE MILLIGAN,
SARAH PIERCE & HITO STEYERL

IRISH MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
GARDEN GALLERIES
30 JULY – 18 OCTOBER 2015

El Lissitzky (1890-1941) was a Russian artist, architect, painter, photographer and typographer who worked throughout the first half of the twentieth century. As an artist he was a vital force in the revolutionary period in Russia. Having trained in architectural engineering, his creative activity ranged across disciplines, which made him influential as a painter, graphic designer, teacher, propagandist, exhibition designer and architectural theorist. As cultural ambassador of the Soviet Union he became a vital link between Soviet culture and Western art groups. His practice was based on the idea that artists should work with the material of society: society itself was seen as a material to be organised into social constructions.

Lissitzky in Vitebsk

In 1909, Lissitzky studied architectural engineering in Darmstadt in Germany. When the First World War started in 1914, he was evacuated to Moscow, where he came into contact with the revolutionaries. Because of his Jewish background the Russian Revolution in 1917 seemed to be a liberation for Lissitzky, as it meant an end to the anti-Semitic regime of the Russian Tsars. He returned to Vitebsk, in present-day Belarus, where he had grown up, where painter Marc Chagall had been appointed 'Commissar for Art Affairs', and decided to start an art academy. He invited Lissitzky to teach in the architecture faculty and the graphic workshops. One of their goals with the art academy was to remove the distinction between artisans and highly educated 'artists'. They developed 'free state studios' that were open to everyone: children, workers, sailors and soldiers. This also seemed to be the right moment for Lissitzky to engage with his Jewish background, using his artistic skills to revive and distribute Yiddish and Hebrew language and culture. Together with Chagall, Lissitzky was teaching, designing propaganda materials and creating illustrations for Jewish children's books.

Soon after, the abstract painter Kazimir Malevich was also invited to come to Vitebsk to teach at the art academy. Malevich introduced all kinds of novel, progressive ideas that would heavily influence Lissitzky. Malevich's paintings were called Suprematist and looked like white surfaces on which squares, triangles and other geometric forms were floating. Malevich stopped depicting visible reality since he was convinced that all of this was just an illusion. According to him true reality consisted of invisible powers and energies and their interrelations. The role of the artist was to make this invisible reality visible, for which he used simple geometric forms and bright colours. With this way of working Malevich introduced geometric art to the academy, and soon he took over the academy. Lissitzky was impressed by Malevich's radical ideas and completely converted to them. He turned away from Jewish art and Chagall's influences and instead worked closely with Malevich.

Geometric art and the state

This concept of geometric art was not completely new, since Malevich had already made abstract paintings from 1913 on – but through the Russian Revolution it now became politicised and adopted as a visualisation of the New Soviet state. There was official support for this kind of innovative art and it was perceived as art that suited the new Soviet state on several levels. One reason was that the new regime wanted to eradicate the taste and style of the old, and they were searching for something that had nothing to do visually with the old regime. The new culture had to be 'proletarian', even if nobody knew exactly what that was, and it had to be devoid of connotations such as 'good taste' or 'bad taste'. Another reason to develop these a-rhythmic and geometric designs was that they showed a dimension that scarcely existed in the West. Geometry was stripped of the decorative features of the old regime and instead it looked clean, energetic and effective. Because

geometry has no particular style or taste and is somehow 'communal', these forms of art were seen as a very useful way forward. Also the main concepts of geometric art like 'structure' and 'construction' were familiar concepts that people knew already, which made this art a less separate and elitist activity that it had so often appeared to be. Finally, geometry is anonymous and cannot be bought, therefore this form of art also conceptualized a new social model.

Collective, public and political

In the communist system of the new Soviet State, individual ownership was replaced with collective ownership. This meant no more art buyers and private collections, but also no more individual self-expression, no more working autonomously in your artist's studio. Instead art had to be collectively developed and made public in its manifestations. Art needed to be political and used as a tool to increase awareness of the new regime's political ends. Exhibitions became State exhibitions and art appeared in the streets in political festivals celebrating the defeat of the old regime and the arrival of the new.

New visual means were used to put across the ideological message, so Suprematism and all forms of art had to be useful, which meant being collective, public and political. Malevich developed a specialised department in the art academy under the name of 'Unovis', meaning 'Assert the New'. In this Unovis collective Lissitzky and Malevich worked together to further develop Suprematism, expanding it into everyday life through means of design, architectural projects, and street decorations. They disseminated their dynamic geometric compositions through painting big spots, triangles and squares on posters, trams and buildings in Vitebsk – using the city as a politicised, collective public display. Lissitzky worked as typographer and graphic designer adding lettering to

the Suprematic forms to give them an extra political dimension. This lettering transformed the geometric forms in explicit and energetic ways to present political slogans and messages.

An example of these geometric forms communicating political messages is Lissitzky's poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*. In this image the Whites symbolise the old, bourgeois regime whose powers are being beaten by the powers of the Reds symbolising the Revolutionaries. The Suprematist design is clearly collective, public and political. The dynamic design, with a minimum of geometric shapes, letters and colours provided a novel look for the new regime. It also shows how Lissitzky adopted this new visual language, abandoning Chagall's style of painting in favour of Malevich's geometric forms and techniques.

Prouns as open proposals

An important part of Lissitzky's visual language are his forms floating in space, like three-dimensional shapes in flight. He took Malevich's two-dimensional Suprematist forms as a basis, and then added three-dimensional building structures, connections and constructions to it. In this addition we recognise his background in architectural engineering: the forms should not just float, but form structures and constructions to propose a future. 'Proun' was the name that he invented for this kind of work, meaning 'Project for Asserting the New'. He defined Proun as the interchange between painting and architecture. Painting would provide the fresh vision and architecture could find ways to construct and design it. The Prouns were literally a station-in-between; they were not meant as autonomous, aesthetic artworks, but functioned as proposals ready to be interpreted, used and realised. With the Prouns he made a kind of proto-architecture: a vision and a plan that others could develop. He was thus

not finishing or closing works, but proposing ideas and developments in a constructive language for others to use. His projects remain open to engagement and for the realization of their full power they depended on being used by others. He finishes his explanation of his designs for the opera *Victory Over the Sun* with the following note: 'I will leave the further processing and application of the proposed ideas and forms to the others.'

Lissitzky used his paintings, books and architectural designs to develop a new understanding of time, space and society. He did not strive to reform something, but to bring something else into existence. He perceived his role as artist as a designer for the new society, focusing on mediums that could reach the masses and be used by them: graphic design, typography and photography for posters and books, exhibition design and architecture.

Lissitzky described his designs as an unity of organised energy, a confident sign for the new world, ready to be put in use by others. 'We are constructing a stage on a square, which is open and accessible.' Lissitzky's perception of his role as artist was that of designer of social constructions. To some extent Lissitzky was an architect in every way except for actually constructing buildings. He wrote books about architecture, published architectural magazines, drafted designs, built models – but no brick was ever laid. He mainly worked from the idea of architecture as social construction, and the idea that architects and artists at that time were ultimately working with the material of society. Their material was not conceived as paint, wood, concrete, bricks and mortar, but society itself was to be seen as a material to be organised into social constructions.

Biography
El Lissitzky (1890 – 1941) was a Russian artist, photographer, designer, typographer, architect and polemicist. A significant figure of the Russian Avant Garde, Lissitzky, together with his mentor, Kazimir Malevich, informed the development of Suprematism, designing numerous exhibition displays and propaganda works for the Soviet Union. Lissitzky's work was a major influence on the Bauhaus and constructivist movements, and he experimented with stylistic devices and production techniques that would go on to dominate 20th century visual culture.

Further Reading

Cassette – Lissitzky-Kabakov, featuring texts by Charles Esche, Boris Groys, John Milner, and Anton Vidokle (Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, 2012).

El Lissitzky: Design, by John Milner, presenting the life and work of El Lissitzky (ACC, London, 2009).

Both publications are available to purchase at the IMMA Bookshop.