Issue 02

Objectless in Vitebsk: Reflections on Kazimir Malevich, Architecture, and Representation

A Conversation with Elizta Dulguerova

Scapgoat posed the following questions to Elizta Dulguerova, Assistant Professor in Art History at the University of Paris I, Panthéon—Sorbonne, who works on the social history of the Russian avant-garde. We are interested in Kazimir Malevich’s claim that “Suprematism is the new realism.” Additionally, we want to clarify the relationship between this claim and what happened to Suprematism when it confronted the built environment, namely during Malevich’s tenure (1919–1922) in the then Soviet town of Vitebsk.

Scapgoat Says

What led Malevich to proclaim that “Suprematism is the new realism”? What, for Malevich, is the real in art, and why does this necessitate an attack on representation?

Elizta Dulguerova

To my knowledge, Malevich first used the concept of “realism” in 1915 within his performatives declaration on the birth of Suprematism. His performative declaration on the birth of Suprematism was staged both visually, through a ensemble of 39 mostly unique paintings, and as a discursive event, through several writings and declarations. The paintings were exhibited at the gallery show The Last Supper (Paris), which was held in December of 1915 and January of 1916. According to the well-known and infinitely reproduced photograph of Malevich’s works at 0.00, the display itself acted as a visual manifest for the advent of a new art of non-representational—almost geometric—forms floating in space. But Suprematism also came into being through a series of written and spoken texts. In addition to the short, hand-written statement he read on the wall of the Suprematist (?) group show. “From Cubism to Suprematism. The New Painterly Realism,” which was on display during the 0.00 group show. Its second edition, based on a public talk from January 1916, expanded the lineage of Suprematism to Futurism. However, even though Malevich started considering architecture as a potential field for Suprematism and even labeled it—on a still initial phase—"the ultimate art," he would not achieve the shift from painting to architecture. Lissitzky had already emphasized the distinction between a “superficial” and a “deep” realism, the first being solely concerned with meaning and painting little consideration to the means of reaching it (Courbet), while never once such as Cubism was filled with the label of “deep” or “true” realism. One of the closing sentences of their texts sums up quite clearly Gleizes and Metzinger’s understanding that “realism” was not a reflection of reality but rather a means of “transforming” it. The very notion of the Cubist painter had to become an object for every viewer: “A realist, he [the neo-painter] will shape the real as in the image of this, for there is only one truth, our own, even if we impose it on everyone.” Léger was another active proponent of “véalisme de conception” over “véalisme visible,” arguing that “The realist value of a work is perfectly independent of any instable quality. […] Pictorial realism is the simultaneous arrangement of the three great plastic quantities: lines, forms, and colors.” Redefining realism stood for more than a new technique. Léger believed that it had an emancipatory value for the artist as well as for the beholder, freeing them from the submission to the mere realm of bourgeois appearances. Malevich’s emphasis on “realism” in 1915–1916 was a symptom of his urge to maintain a tete a tete with Cubism and European modern art while defending the novelty and ultimate difference of Suprematism. In his interpretation, realism in painting was a means to make “living art,” to go beyond representation and into creation.

In the art of Suprematism, forms live, like all living forms of nature. […] The new realism in painting (diagram, painterly) is very much realism in painting (painterly), for it contains no reality of mountains, sky, water. […] Until now there was realism of objects, but not of painted units of colour, which are constructed so that they depend neither on form, nor on colour, nor on their position relative to each other. Each form is free and individual. Each form is a world.

It seems to me that this understanding of “realism” does not outline the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Instead, Malevich’s writings from the early 1910s dwell on the concept of “objectlessness” (bespredmetnoe) both as the ultimate goal of art and as the condition of the world that Malevich longs for. I would not ascribe this semantic shift to political conjuncture alone, insofar as the political appropriation (and approval) of realistic painting and sculpture as the only “appropriate” art for a communist state was not yet dominant, at least not until the end of the Civil War in 1922. The Vitebsk years mark the peak of Malevich—from late 1919 to mid-1922—years during which the political uncertainty and precariousness of everyday life left room for intense experiments with future modes and possible forms of art. This was the case not only in Vitebsk, at the Free State Artist Studios under the direction of Malevich, but also at the Moscow Institute of Artistic Culture (MosINKh), first under the direction of Kandinsky, and then, from 1920 on, within the framework of the Constructivist circle. I would rather guess that the move from “realism” to “objectlessness” allowed for a more accurate definition of the reality that Malevich was trying to conceive—both philosophically, as a way to overcome not only imitation but also any dependence on established objects or rules, and politically, as a state of rest and peace beyond conflicts, struggles and divisions.

A recently published transcript of “Note on the Limits of Reality,” a lecture that Malevich delivered to his fellow UNOVIS members in Vitebsk in 1921, can be used to introduce his conceptual framework. Malevich argues that the need to represent phenomena or things belonged to a foregone conception of art, where art was seen as a means to grasp and understand the “real” world. This could no longer be the case, he adds, as we now know that such an understanding cannot be objective: we perceive not one but multiple “realities” smoothly sliding into each other. Arguing that reality has to be thought of as something that happens as a representation, Malevich gives the example of a child who would alternately define his father as a “big person” when in the company of other adults, and as a “small person” when they play together. Malevich concludes that when we experience the world we do not single out things or elements: “no dishes, no palaces, no chairs.” The existence of the latter decides the world into parts and thus betrays both our experience and the demonstrations of contemporary science. This search for an experience that is both relative (free, not obeying predetermined rules) and unfixed (not divided) motivates the anti-utilitarian stance of Malevich’s writings in the 1920s. In the aftermath of the Bolshevik revolution, Malevich reconsidered the other major promise of Suprematism by stating that “painting was done for long ago and neglected the task of developing architectural Suprematism to the young architects in somewhat vague terms, as the “are of the new system of architecture.” Such a stance was not surprising in 1920, when the Moscow INKh was delivering the definition and rules of construction as an alternative to easel painting. If Lissitzky certainly also played a part in this shift towards architecture, Malevich had been a member of the Vitebsk branch of Narkompros (People’s Commissariat for Education) since May 1919, and a teacher at the People’s Art School of Vitebsk under the direction of the People’s Commissar Marc Chagall. It was under these circumstances that Lissitzky considered Malevich in the late 1919 to leave his teaching position at the Free State Artist Studios in Moscow and join the Vitebsk team. As is well known, Lissitzky was trained as an architect, and his Suprematist-inspired “Proun” (Projects for the Alteration of the New) was attempts to correlate the exploration of the pictorial space in Suprematism to the space of the viewer, thus going beyond painting and into the three-dimensional realm. However, even though Malevich started considering architecture as a potential field for Suprematism and even labeled it—on a still initial phase—“the ultimate art,” he would not achieve the shift from painting to architecture, or even from two-dimensional to three-dimensional forms, during his stay in Vitebsk.

Scapegoat Architecture/Landscape/Political Economy

Issue 03

Elizta Dulguerova

Why and when was Malevich in Vitebsk? Can you briefly explain the situation there?

Elizta Dulguerova

Malevich moved from Moscow to Vitebsk in November 1919. The UNOVIS (Exponents of the New Art) group was officially created in February 1920 and became dominant at the Vitebsk Free State Artist Studios after the departure of Chagall in May of the same year. In the following two years, UNOVIS organized exhibitions, conferences, and theatrical representations, published a series of books, including several treaties with Malevich, and took part in the lively life of the city of Vitebsk. Through its ramifications, the UNOVIS idea spread out to the cities of Smolensk, Oranienburg, and Perm; its works were shown in exhibitions in Moscow and displayed at the 1922 First Russian Art Exhibition in Berlin. For a number of reasons, including severe financial cuts, administrative reorganization and increasing intolerance towards “formalist” art.
And while for a year the streetcars in Vitebsk were
the UNOVIS project was carried on at the
SS,[22] where the UNOVIS project was carried on at the
tory occasions (1st of May, the anniversary of the
projects combined Suprematist-inspired three-dimensional projects were the monuments
projects of UNOVIS in Vitebsk avoids classify by some Russian scholars to depict the urban

It seems to me that the urban projects of the
Ethnic Association); signboards created for the stores and shops

What is the relationship between Malevich's realism largely expressed through painting) and architectural projects in Vitebsk? What is at stake in the transition from painting to architecture?

Malevich's own experiments in architecture—his arhitektur model and plan drawings—date from May 1923. Between 1918 and 1923, he moved to Petrograd and before his retrospective shows in Warsaw and Berlin in 1927. During this period, Malevich's interest in abstraction and the ideas of forms and texts and sometimes considered it as the ultimate end of creation which reaches beyond the three realms of religion, civic life, and art.[29]

Architecture cannot be dissociated from Malevich's more global quest of a "realistic beyond image" toward which "the whole and the aeroplane fly, the train rushes by, man, man, the sun and the moon, for there only, in the ideal state, does the world end, as an image, as a weight in the air, and the world awakens as objectlessness."[29]

In his fascinating 1924–25 text on the ideology of architecture Malevich presents his fundamental thought that technology, science, or utilitarianism per se. He concedes that inventions like "aeroplanes, ships, and electricity" were partly driven "to do so, it has to be freed from the object-like space, it persists in utilitarianism, outside utilitarianism I do not know whether weight exists."[29] Malevich concedes that "art objects both as a non-representational, as the citizen submitted to the utilitarian needs of daily life which has been granted palaces, gardens, and monuments created for a specific, temporar}
neologism based on the Russian

no purpose would mean discarding this painting.

The "1/48" essay contains a precious—and rare—definition of objectless architecture as "architectonic" artifacts, malevich's own architectural projects, which


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