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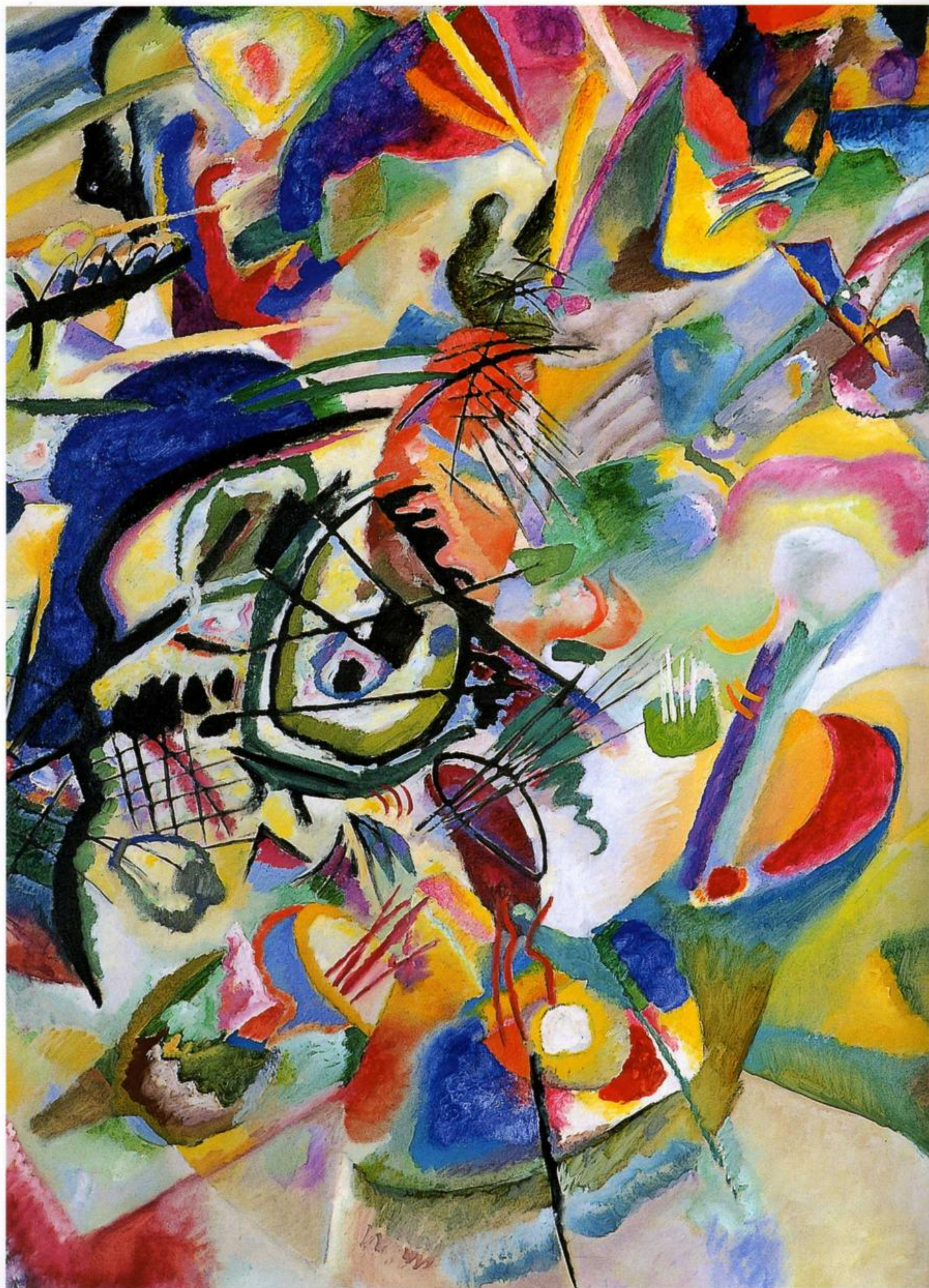
"PURE PAINTING":
Abstraction in Russia



In 1913, the painter Natalia Goncharova wrote "Contemporary Russian art has reached such heights, that, at the present time, it plays a major role in world art. Contemporary Western ideas can be of no further use to us."[1] Although Goncharova's statement may have been slightly premature, it was true that the Russian avant-garde had become one of the most vital forces in modern art, both responsive to, and independent of, creative developments elsewhere. For the next couple of years, Russian artists continued to be inspired by the new pictorial concepts and techniques developed by Cubism and Futurism, but by the end of 1915, Goncharova's declaration had become fact. That year, the painter Kazimir Malevich produced his celebrated *Black Square* and Vladimir Tatlin produced *Corner Counter-reliefs*, abstract constructions of real materials, suspended in space. In pioneering abstraction, Russian artists came to the forefront of aesthetic developments; from following (albeit creatively) inventions emanating from Paris, they became leaders of the European avant-garde.

Even before the important innovations of 1915, the Russian artist Wassily Kandinsky, living and working in Germany from 1896 onwards, had developed a theory and practice for abstract art. According to a letter of 1935, he apparently produced his first abstract painting, *Picture with a Circle*, in 1911.[2] His inspiration came from a wide range of visual and philosophical sources, including the Fauves' expressive use of colour and the ideas of the French and Russian Symbolists. In his treatise *On the Spiritual in Art*, read in St Petersburg at the Second Congress of Russian Artists in December 1911 and published the following year in an extended version in Germany, Kandinsky argued that the artist should obey his intuition or 'inner necessity' in order to create works embodying spiritual values that would counteract the materialism of contemporary society.[3] In pursuit of this aim, he attempted to correlate different colours with particular psychological and emotional effects and also with specific forms and even musical sounds. Since the late nineteenth century, artists and critics in France, Russia and Germany had talked about the synthesis of the arts and of a visual art aspiring to the condition of music, with its autonomy of form and expressive directness. Such ideas were particularly valued by the French *Les Tendances Nouvelles* group, with which Kandinsky was closely associated during his brief stay in France between 22 May 1906 and 9 June 1907.[4]

In 1910, anxious to make a non-figurative art that would not be simply decorative, but possess meaning and create a communication of a spiritual rather than a material truth, Kandinsky started using images of the Apocalypse, derived from medieval painting and Russian lubki (popular prints), which he then disguised by generalising the forms and adding accentuating marks, lines and patches of colour.[5] *Composition 6* represents a later stage in this use of "veiled" religious imagery. It has been dated to 1912, following *Compositions 1–5*, which had been executed between January 1910 and November 1911.[6] In 1913, Kandinsky explained the genesis of the work:

"I carried this picture around in my mind for a year and a half, and often thought that I would not be able to finish it. My starting point was the Deluge. My point of departure was a glass-painting that I had made more for my own satisfaction. Here are to be found various objective forms, which are in part amusing (I enjoyed mingling serious forms with amusing external expressions): nudes, the ark, animals, palm trees, lighting, rain, etc. When the glass painting was finished there arose in me the desire to treat this theme as the subject of a Composition."[7]

During the gestation of *Composition 6*, Kandinsky made numerous sketches, but he dismissed them as either too "corporeal" or too "abstract", while he found himself to be excessively "obedient to the ex-

[1] Natal'ia Goncharova, untitled ms, [spring 1913], State Russian Archive of Literature and Art, Moscow (RGALI), fond 740, opus. 1, list 4; cited in Jane Sharp, *Russian Modernism between East and West: Natal'ia Goncharova and the Russian Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 276.

[2] Jelena Hahl-Koch, *Kandinsky* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993), 181. Kandinsky's *Picture with a Circle* (1911, oil on canvas, 54 x 43 inches, State Museum of Art, Tbilisi, Republic of Georgia) is reproduced on p. 185.

[3] Wassily Kandinsky, *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (Munich, 1912); English translation in Kenneth Lindsay and Peter Vergo, eds., *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1982), I: 114–219.

[4] Yule F. Heibel, "'They danced on Volcanos': Kandinsky's Breakthrough to Abstraction. The German Avant-Garde and the Eve of the First World War", *Art History*, 12, no. 3 (1989): 342–361.

[5] See Rose-Carol Washton Long "Kandinsky and Abstraction: The Role of the Hidden Image", *Artforum* (New York) 10, no. 10 (June 1972): 42–49.

[6] Ibid.

[7] See Wassily Kandinsky, "Komposition 6", in *Kandinsky 1901–1913* (Berlin: Der Sturm, 1913); English translation in Lindsay and Vergo, Kandinsky: *Complete Writings*, I: 385.

pression of the Deluge, instead of heeding the expression of the word 'Deluge'. I was ruled not by the inner sound, but by the external impression".[8] The final monumental canvas fuses the corporeal and the abstract. Lines and swirls of colour overlay a few remaining allusions to the original imagery, including a boat with oars in the bottom left, an angel blowing a trumpet above it, and the heaving crests of waves rising up from the lower border. In a statement of 1913, that strongly evokes *Composition 6*, Kandinsky described the general nature of the creative procedures that produced it:

"Painting is like a thundering collision of different worlds that are destined, in and through conflict, to create that new world called the work. Technically, every work of art comes into being in the same way as the cosmos — by means of catastrophes, which ultimately create out of the cacophony of the various instruments that symphony we call the music of the spheres. The creation of the work of art is the creation of the world."[9]

Kandinsky arrived at his vision of abstract art without reference to Cubism. Yet, in 1911, at the same time as he was developing abstraction, Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque were producing paintings in which the subject matter was no longer identifiable (despite titles like *Accordianist* or *Man with a Guitar*), and the objects had disintegrated into a mass of lines and planes.[10] Picasso and Braque did not take the final step into abstraction, but chose to reassert the relationship between painting and reality, by introducing visual clues, lettering, and pieces of everyday material, like oil cloth, newspapers and wall paper. Nevertheless, in 1913 other artists in Paris pursued the implications of the 1911 paintings, and took Cubism to what they and others saw as its logical conclusion.

Robert Delaunay and Fernand Léger for a short time produced works that appeared to be totally abstract: as in their "Circular Forms" and "Contrast of Form" series respectively. For Robert Delaunay, whose wife Sonia was Russian, Kandinsky's approach may actually have been one of the factors that encouraged him to adopt an abstract vocabulary. Delaunay shared an interest in the relationship between colour and music, was in correspondence with Kandinsky, contributed to the *Blaue Reiter* almanac, saw the three *Improvisations* that Kandinsky exhibited at the Salon des Indépendants in May 1912, and even read *On the Spiritual in Art* in translation. One of the most abstract of his works, Disc of 1913, consists simply of seven concentric rings of various colours, divided into four segments.[11] For critics, like Guillaume Apollinaire, such works represented "the beginning of pure art" — "the art of painting new compositions with elements not taken from reality as it is seen, but entirely created by the artist".[12] He described them as Orphic Cubism, from Orpheus whose music enchanted the gods and spoke directly to the soul.[13]

All these developments were well known in Russia through exhibitions, journals and personal contact. Artists like Liubov Popova, Sofia Dymshits-Tolstaya, and Nadezhda Udaltsova, had all studied in France, while Alexandra Exter, who was a close friend of Sonia Delaunay's, had been constantly travelling back and forth between Paris and Moscow since 1907, bringing valuable first-hand information about the very latest innovations, as well as actual "paintings by Picasso, Léger, and Braque" which she displayed on the walls of her Moscow apartment.[14] Such works complemented the collections of French art from Post-Impressionism onwards that graced the walls of the residences of Sergei Shchukin and Ivan Morozov.

Mikhail Larionov and Goncharova described their new style of Rayism as a synthesis of "Cubism, Futurism and Orphism".[15] The Cubist planes and Futurist lines of force, which had endowed works like Goncharova's *The Cyclist* with sensations of motion, were now used to depict "the spatial forms arising from the intersection of the reflected rays of various objects."[16] Larionov asserted that the forms were "cho-

[8] Ibid. For an illuminating discussion of the studies for *Composition 6* and the final painting, see Dabrowski, *Kandinsky: Compositions*, 37–40.

[9] Wassily Kandinsky, "Rückblicke", in *Kandinsky 1901–1913* (Berlin: Der Sturm, 1913); English translation in Lindsay and Vergo, *Kandinsky: Complete Writings*, I: 373.

[10] See Robert Rosenblum, *Cubism and Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Abrams, 1976), 47–8, plates 32 and 33.

[11] See Neil Cox, *Cubism* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 22–4. Delaunay's *Disc* (*The First Disc*) (1913, oil on canvas, diameter 13.4 cm, Private Collection) is reproduced on p. 222.

[12] Guillaume Apollinaire, *Les Peintres Cubistes* (Paris, 1913); cited from Guillaume Apollinaire, *The Cubist Painters*, trans. Peter Read (Forest Row: Artists Bookworks, 2002), 28.

[13] Ibid.

[14] Some of the correspondence between Sonia Delaunay and Alexandra Exter is to be found in the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris. For the description of Exter's apartment, see A. Koonen, *Stranitsy zhizni* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1975), 225–226; cited from G. F. Kovalenko, *Aleksandra Ekster: Put' khudozhnika. Khudozhnik i vremia* (Moscow: Galart, 1993), 193.

[15] Mikhail Larionov and Natal'ia Goncharova, "Luchisty i budushchniki. Manifest" in *Oslinyi khvost i mishen* (Moscow, 1913); English translation in John. E. Bowlt, ed. and trans. *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902–1934* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 90.

[16] Ibid.

sen by the artist's will" and that the paintings were to be self-sufficient, "free from concrete forms, existing and developing according to painterly laws".[17] He seems to have developed the style during 1912, but only presented it as a fully fledged movement at *The Target* exhibition in spring 1913.[18] He later described his early Rayist works as "Realistic Rayism" because they were still based on legible images. In *Rayist Landscape* (1912), for instance, the boat and trees are easily identified. Such references disappeared completely in "Pneumo-Rayism", where the pictorial elements became completely autonomous and the image was composed entirely of coloured lines, applied with a certain degree of gestural freedom. In such works there was a quality that Larionov identified as the fourth dimension. He wrote "The painting appears slippery, it imparts a sensation of the extra temporal and the spatial — in it arises the sensation of what could be called the fourth dimension, since the length, breadth and density of the paint-layer are the only signs of our surrounding world."[19] Appropriately, perhaps, the style received its greatest accolade from Apollinaire who praised the Rayist works he saw in Paris in 1914 for bringing "a new refinement not only to Russian painting, but to European painting as a whole".[20]

A year later, in late spring 1915, while Russia was cut off from Europe by the First World War, Malevich invented geometrical abstraction with his first Suprematist paintings, comprising flatly painted planes of colour on white grounds. That December, he publicly launched the new style at *The Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10 (Zero Ten)* in Petrograd. The display was dominated by *The Quadrilateral*, better known as *Black Square*, in which subject matter was reduced to a mere quadrilateral and colour was limited to black and white. It is one of the most extreme statements of abstraction in painting. Malevich later illustrated the essential vocabulary of Suprematism with the basic three shapes of the *Black Circle*, *Black Cross*, and *Black Square*, all of 1923. He also devised more complex compositions from shapes varied in colour, scale and geometric regularity, which were richly suggestive of space and movement, before embarking on his white on white paintings of 1918.

Malevich called Suprematism "the new pictorial realism" and presented it as such in his seminal text of 1915, *From Cubism to Suprematism: The New Pictorial Realism*.[21] With a rhetoric that matched Kandinsky's, Malevich announced: "I have transformed myself into the zero of form and emerged from nothing to creation, that is to Suprematism to the new realism in painting — to non-objective creation."[22] He characterised his new style as 'the pure art of painting', in which pictorial elements have their own reality, in contrast to the 'old realism' of imitation. Yet this did not mean that Malevich was only interested in formal effects for their own sake. He asserted, for example, that the new artistic language encapsulated the essential spirit of the contemporary world of speed and machinery. While he acknowledged that the Italian Futurists had inspired his affirmation of the modern world, he considered that their actual art works had been limited by its descriptive approach, "in pursuing the form of aeroplanes or automobiles, we shall always be anticipating the new cast off forms of technical life…" For Malevich, it was essential to create a more abstract equivalent:

"The artist can be a creator only when the forms in his pictures have nothing in common with nature. For art is the ability to construct, not on the interrelation of form and colour, and not on an aesthetic basis of beauty in composition, but on the basis of weight, speed and the direction of movement."[23]

Malevich stressed the fact that his work presented a new perception of reality by hanging *The Quadrilateral*, better known today as *The Black Square*, across the corners of a room in the position normally occupied by an icon in a Russian Orthodox home. In this way, he suggested that his work embodied a new

[17] Ibid.

[18] Mak [Pavel Ivanov], "Luchizm", *Golos Moskvy* (14 October 1912) is the first published mention of the new style. For a detailed discussion of Rayism, see Anthony Parton, *Mikhail Larionov and the Russian Avant-Garde* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), especially chapters 7 and 8.

[19] Mikhail Larionov, *Luchizm* (Moscow, 1913), 20; cited from Parton, *Mikhail Larionov*, 133.

[20] Apollinaire's review appeared in *Soirées de Paris*, July 1914. See Guillaume Apollinaire, *Apollinaire on Art: Essays and Reviews 1902–1918*, ed. Leroy C. Breunig, trans. Susan Suleiman (London, Thames and Hudson, 1972), 413.

[21] Kazimir Malevich, *Ot kubizma i futurizma do suprematizma. Novyi zhivopisnyi realizm* (Moscow, 1916); English translation in *K. S. Malevich: Essays on Art 1915–1928*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, 1 (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), 19–41.

[22] Ibid., 37.

[23] Ibid., 24.

transcendental truth. The allusion was not lost on his contemporaries. The painter and critic Alexander Benois fumed against such sacrilege.[24] In his riposte, Malevich proudly called the *Black Square* "the icon of my time".[25] By introducing this spiritual nuance, Malevich was very much in line with Kandinsky's thinking, and it is possible that Malevich may have actually been encouraged to make his final move into abstraction when he saw the Russian version of Kandinsky's text *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, published in late 1914, which contained a colour illustration of a yellow triangle, a blue circle and a red square.[26] Prior to this, Malevich had been producing works like *Composition with Giaconda*, in which large rectangles of colour were combined with collaged elements and lettering arranged loosely in the language of Cubism. Kandinsky's illustration may have prompted Malevich to liberate his rectangles from such Cubist practice and give them full pictorial autonomy. This is perhaps not the only connection between the artists. Like Kandinsky, Malevich's ideas and even his terminology also possess affinities with Symbolism. Malevich called his art "non-objective" or "objectless" (*bezpredmetnyi*), a term that seems to have been first used by the Russian Symbolist writer Andrei Bely in 1907.[27]

At the same time, six of Malevich's thirty-nine exhibits actually contained titles that referred to the fourth dimension, such as *Painterly Realism of a Boy with Knapsack — Colour Masses in the Fourth Dimension*.[28] This abstruse idea was in tune with current scientific terminology, suggesting that the universe was more spatially and temporally complicated than our naïve sensory awareness would seem to indicate. Certain French Cubists and critics had talked about the fourth dimension, and in spring 1913, before Larionov mentioned the term in relation to Rayism, the Russian musician and artist Mikhail Matyushin had linked it with Cubism.[29] His article combined long quotes from the Russian translation of Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger's book *Du "Cubisme"*, with extensive citations from Peter Ouspensky's writings, especially *Tertium Organum*, which stressed the spiritual qualities of the fourth dimension as a higher state of consciousness.[30] Malevich was clearly aware of this article through his close friendship with Matyushin. Matyushin also brought Malevich into direct contact with the related poetic theory of *zaum*, which may also have been a factor in the emergence of Suprematism. *Zaum* (the transrational or beyonsense) which rejected conventional logic, and liberated words, syllables, letters and sounds from their accepted meanings, so that they could acquire new meanings that transcended reason. The autonomy of the sounds and syllables in a *zaum* poem is similar to the autonomy of the painted elements in a Suprematist painting.

Ideas of the fourth dimension and *zaum* came together in the opera *Victory over the Sun*, for which Alexei Kruchenykh wrote the libretto, Matyushin composed the music, and Malevich designed the sets and costumes. The *zaum* script intensified the incomprehensibility of the opera's plot, which was a bizarre mixture of allusions to space, time travel, and other dimensions, while Malevich's sets and costumes complemented such ideas by destroying any sense of visual or spatial coherence on the stage. It was around this time that Malevich painted his *Portrait of Matyushin*, in which the piano keys are prominent and the face is almost entirely absent.[31] Not surprisingly perhaps, it was two years later, while studying his designs in preparation for an edition of the opera, that Malevich developed one of his designs for a backcloth into the first Suprematist painting.[32]

The invention of Suprematism brought Malevich to immediate prominence among the Russian avant-garde.[33] The new style acted as a starting point for a wide spectrum of experimentation among artists who had previously been exploring Cubism and Futurism such as Popova, Exter and Udaltsova. Yet few

[24] Aleksandr Benua, "Poslednaia futuristicheskaia vystavka", *Rech'* (9 January 1916).

[25] Kazimir Malevich, letter to A. N. Benua, May 1916; reprinted in *Malevich o sebe. Sovremenniki o Maleviche. Pis'ma. Dokumenty. Vospominaniia. Kritika*, ed. I. A. Vakar, and T. I. Mikhienko (Moscow: RA, 2004), I: 85.

[26] V. V. Kandinskii, "O dukhovnom v iskusstve" in *Trudy Vserossiiskago s'ezda khudozhnikov v Petrograde, dekabr 1911 — yanvar 1922 gg.* (Petrograd, 1914), I. Malevich might also have been encouraged by English discussions about abstraction, see Susan Compton, "Kazimir Malevich: A Study of His Paintings, 1910–1935" (Ph.D. diss., Courtauld Institute, University of London, 1983), 309 and 312.

[27] See A. Belyi "Budushchee iskusstvo" (1907) in *Simvolizm* (Moscow, 1910), 452. Cited in John E. Bowlt , "Vasilii Kandinsky: The Russian Connection", in *The Life of Vasilii Kandinsky in Russian Art; A Study of On the Spiritual in Art*, ed. John E. Bowlt and Rose-Carol Washton Long, trans. John E. Bowlt (Newtonville, Mass.: Oriental Research Partners, 1980), 8.

[28] *Poslednaia futuristicheskaia vystavka kartin 0,10 (nol'-desiat). Katalog* (Petrograd, 1915), nos. 40–41, and 43–46.

[29] For a highly accessible discussion of French Cubism and the fourth dimension, see Neil Cox, *Cubism* (London: Phaidon, 2000), 188–91.

[30] See Mikhail Matyushin, "O knige Metzanzhe-Gleza 'Du Cubisme'", *Soyuz molodezhi*, 3 (1913): 25–34; English translation in Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 368–375. Professor Henderson's discussion of the subject is highly detailed and fascinating.

[31] A study for this painting shows that the black and white stripped strip refers to a piano keyboard (Chaga-Khardzhiev Foundation, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam).

[32] E. F. Kovtun, "K. S. Malevich. Pis'ma k M. V. Matyushinu", in *Ezhegodnik rukopisnogo otdela Pushkinskogo Doma na 1974 god* (Leningrad: Nauka, 1976), 177–195.

painters merely copied Suprematism, and many quickly developed alternative approaches. Popova produced compositions of layered, intersecting planes of colour before moving onto rigorous investigations into the structural possibilities of the line in works like *Spatial Force Construction* (1921). In this painting, concerns with pictorial construction and texture are paramount; she employed only three colours and applied pigment with a palette knife. Matyushin himself produced the extraordinary *Movement in Space* (before 1920), in which a lines of colour move across the canvas, producing a sense of spatial and dynamic continuity and evoking that higher state of consciousness about which the artist had written in his 1913 article.

Exceptionally, Olga Rozanova had been making abstract collages of coloured paper as early as the summer of 1915. Produced independently of Malevich, these "must be counted as one of the "earliest appearances of abstraction in Russia".[34] When she saw the exhibits at *Zero-Ten*, she felt that Malevich had stolen her ideas. Rozanova immediately wrote to Kruchenykh, "The whole of Suprematism is completely my *paste-ups ... Did you show my paste ups to Malevich*?"[35] Despite this, Malevich's objectless paintings clearly encouraged her to move from paper to canvas, and expand the scale of her explorations. Rozanova's abstract works, like *Non-Figurative Composition* 1916, are far removed from Suprematist in terms of the range of colours and shapes, the tautness of the composition, and the handling of space.

Malevich's emphasis on the autonomy of pictorial elements led Alexander Rodchenko to produce a series of paintings that demonstrate how line, form and colour can yield compositions of radical simplicity. *Red and Yellow* and *White Circle* (both of 1918) deal with simple primary shapes, but are characterised by a pronounced interest in the texture of the painted surface and in the use of tonal modelling to create sensations of light. This emphasis on the materiality of the pigment and painting as a material artefact took Rodchenko away from mainstream Suprematism. To emphasise his independence he even created a series of black on black canvases, which he exhibited in 1919 as a direct challenge to Malevich's white on white paintings of 1918.[36] By this time, as Varvara Stepanova tartly observed, "the dominant atmosphere is not to submit to the influence of Malevich".[37]

By 1919, ideas of construction and work with real materials in space were coming to the fore, inspired by the work of Vladimir Tatlin. Five years earlier, between 10 and 14 May 1914 Tatlin had presented his "synthetic-static compositions" and "pictorial reliefs" to the Moscow public for the first time.[38] In creating such works, Tatlin had clearly been inspired by his experience of Cubist experiments in collage, *papier collé* and construction, which he had seen that spring in Picasso's Paris studio.[39] Bringing together in a new way the worlds of painting and sculpture, these compositions were built up from, "wood, metals, glass, plaster, cardboard, gesso, tar, etc.," while "the surfaces of these materials were treated with putty, gloss paints, steam, sprinkled with dust, and other means".[40] These materials, their textures (*faktura* in Russian) and the way they interacted became the subject matter of these abstract works, while the configurations (initially constructed outwards from a base plane) established increasingly active relationships with their spatial environments.

In late 1914 Tatlin took the dramatic step of liberating his structures completely from the wall and produced a series of corner counter-reliefs that consisted simply of intersecting planes of metal in space, suspended on wires or ropes across the corners of a room. Their placement, like Malevich's *Black Square*, recalled the position of the icon in the Russian Orthodox home, possessing metaphysical connotations.

See also A. Shatskikh, "Malevich, Curator of Malevich", in *The Russian Avant-Garde: Representation and Interpretation*, ed. Yevgeniia Petrova (St Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2001), 149–156.

[33] Tatiana Goriatcheva, "Le suprématisme et le constructivisme Deux parallèles qui se croisent", in *La Russie et les avant-gardes* (Saint-Paul: Fondation Maeght, 2003), 124.

[34] Charlotte Douglas "The Art of Pure Design: The Move to Abstraction in Russian and English Art and Textiles: A Meditation", in *Russian Art and The West: A Century of Dialogue in Painting, Architecture and the Decorative Arts*, ed. Rosalind P. Blakesley and Susan E. Reid, (DeKalb, Ill.: Northern Illinois University Press, 2007), 99–101. Quote, ibid, 100.

[35] Ol'ga Rozanova, letter to Aleksei Kruchenykh, 2–4 January 1916; cited by Douglas "The Art of Pure Design", 100.

[36] Magdalena Dabrowski "Aleksandr Rodchenko: Innovation and Experiment" in Magdalena Dabrowski, Leah Dickerman,and Peter Galassi, *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 29.

[37] Varvara Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit' bez chuda. Pis'ma. Poeticheskie opyty. Zapiski khudozhnitsy* (Moscow: Sfera, 1994), 60–63.

[38] *Personal'aia vystavka sintezo-statichnykh kompozitsii (Pervaia vystavka zhivopisnykh rel'efov)*, 10–14 May, 1914, Studio No. 3, 37 Ostozhenka, Moscow. "Verzeichnis der Austellungen", in *Anatolij Strigalev and Jürgen Harten*, eds., *Vladimir Tatlin: Retrospektive* (Köln: DuMont Verlag, 1993), 400.

[39] Anatolii Strigalev, "O poezdka Tatlina v Berlin i Parizh", *Iskusstvo*, 2 (1989): 39–43.

[40] *Vladimir Evgrafovich Tatlin* (Petrograd, 1915), 3. Reproduced in Larissa Zhadova. ed., *Tatlin* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988), plate 125; translation, ibid, 331. The text was apparently written by Nadezhda Udal'tsova, see Vasilii Rakitin, "Nadezhda Udaltsova" *Amazons of the Avant-Garde* (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1999), 273.

Corner Counter Relief (remade by Tatlin himself in 1925 after an original version of 1915) is the only surviving example of this type of construction. The splayed rope supports recall the fact that Tatlin had been a sailor, while the dramatically intersecting metal sheets create a strongly dynamic configuration, reminiscent of a ship's sails, in which suggestions of movement and time are evocative of a fourth dimension. Tatlin tends to be regarded as a staunch materialist, but this may have been overstated because of his rivalry with Malevich and later career as a designer. His paintings such as *The Nude* of 1913 had been based on the pictorial technique and composition of icon painting, while in his reliefs he sometimes used old icon boards and methods associated with icon painting. He also used "found" materials, which bore the imprint of their experiences over time in the form of dents, scratches, etc. Indeed, the emerging concept of *faktura* (texture) in Russian art was closely associated with metaphysical notions. Vladimir Markov pointed out: "Through the resonance of the [icon's] colours, the sound of the materials, the assemblage of textures (faktura), we call the people to beauty, to religion, to God".[41] Tatlin even confessed to Berthold Lubetkin that "if it was not for the icons... I should have remained preoccupied with water-drips, sponges, rags and aquarelles."[42]

Tatlin inspired a whole range of experiments with constructed sculpture by a wide range of artists from Rodchenko to Popova. Sofia Dymshits-Tolstaya, for instance, started working with materials like wood, sand, plaster, and rope, but also with glass.[43] Her first glass constructions, exhibited at *The Store* of 1916, created a variety of spatial effects by painting on both sides of the material. After the Revolution she used the same techniques in a series of "Propaganda Glass", including *Workers of All Countries Unite*, 1921, in which she incorporated revolutionary slogans into her multi-layered constructions.

The Russian Revolution of October 1917 presented new challenges. The avant-garde identified their artistic innovations with the revolution and responded by running artistic affairs, decorating the cities for the revolutionary festivals, designing posters, etc. Tatlin declared that 'what happened from the social aspect in 1917 was realised in our work as pictorial artists in 1914, when 'materials, volume and construction" were accepted as our foundation.[44] Tatlin's commitment is manifest in his extraordinary *Model for a Monument to the Third International*, first exhibited in November 1920. Envisaged as a building a third higher than the Eiffel tower, it was intended to house the headquarters of the Comintern, the international communist organisation dedicated to fomenting world revolution. The external framework (to be made of iron) spiralled upwards on a diagonal axis, creating a powerful image of dynamism and progress. Within it were to be suspended three enormous glazed volumes (rotating at various speeds). The Tower combined the geometric clarity of the new abstract art with technology, synthesising 'the principles of architecture, sculpture and painting", and "uniting purely artistic forms with utilitarian intentions".[45] The emphasis on practical application and on a "machine" aesthetic appropriate to a workers' state, made the Tower a paradigm of new possibilities.

Inspired by Tatlin's call for artists to 'take control over the forms encountered in everyday life,"[46] Rodchenko, Stepanova and others began in March 1921 to describe themselves as Constructivists. The group, which pledged its allegiance to Marxist materialism, rejected art as a bourgeois commodity, replacing it with what they called "intellectual production", which would harness artistic skills and design everyday items for industrial manufacture, and so help in the creation of a new socialist environment.[47] They envisaged a completely new kind of creative activity that would establish a new relationship between art and reality and between art and society.

[41] Vladimir Markov, *Printsipy tvorchestva v plasticheskikh iskusstvakh. Faktura* (St Petersburg, 1914), 56.

[42] Bethold Lubetkin, "The Origins of Constructivism", 1 May 1969, tape recording; cited in Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 12.

[43] See A. D. Sarab'ianov, *Neizvestnyi Russkii avangard v muzeiakh I chastnykh sobraniiakh* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1992), 86.

[44] Vladimir Tatlin, Tevel Shapiro, I. Meerzon and P. Vinogradov, "Predstoiashaia rabota", *VIII s'ezd sovetov. Ezhednevnyi byulleten' s'ezda VTsIK*, 13 (1 January 1921), 11. English translation in Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism*, (London: Thames and Hudson, 1974), 12–14.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] "Programme of the Working Group of Constructivists" in Selim O. Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1986), 289–290.

When *The First Russian Art Exhibition* opened at the Van Diemen Gallery in Berlin in October 1922, it included Suprematist paintings as well as constructions by Tatlin, Rodchenko and others. Such innovations were identified with the progressive ideology of post-revolutionary Russia and with "the art of the material culture of the technical age".[48] The works fuelled the movement in the West known as International Constructivism. Progressive artists now looked to Russia as a political and artistic beacon.

[48] Alfréd Kemény, "Die abstrakte Gestaltung vom Suprematismus bis Heute", *Das Kunstblatt*, 8 (1924): 248.