

Suprematism: Revolutionary Art for Revolutionary Times

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Kazimir Severinovich Malevich was born in Kiev on 26 February (according to the Gregorian calendar, which Russia adopted in 1918) 1878, to parents of Polish descent. He took drawing and painting classes in his late teens, and began painting scenes in the Ukrainian countryside. He moved to Moscow in 1904 and studied at the Moscow School of painting, Sculpture, and Architecture through his late 20s. During these years his style developed from naturalism to neo-impressionist to expressionist. Exposed to Cubist and Futurist paintings in 1909-10, he developed affinity for and mastery of those artistic approaches over the next five years.

In December 1915 (16 months after Russia's entry into World War I), *0.10, The Last Futurist Exhibition* was held in Petrograd (St. Petersburg). Malevich exhibited 39 "completely nonrepresentational works for the first time, presented as the 'new painterly realism'" [Joosten 1990: 11], including *Black Square* (1915) [Plate 1], which was hung just below the ceiling, spanning a corner, like painted icons in traditional households. He followed that exhibit with brochures and lectures extolling "Suprematism" as "the New Realism of Painting, to Absolute Creation" and "The New Painterly Realism."

The *Tenth State Exhibition: Nonobjective Art and Suprematism* was held in Moscow (1919), after the Russian Revolution and the end of World War II. Malevich exhibited 16 Suprematist paintings in the exhibit, including *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918) [Plate 2]. Alexander Rodchenko exhibited *Non-Objective Painting No. 80 (Black on Black)* (1918) [Plate 3], which hung in stark visual and formal contrast.

Also in 1919, Malevich began teaching at the Popular Art Institute in Vitebsk (in today's Belarus). At the end of the year, the Sixteenth State Exhibition in Moscow was "devoted entirely to a large retrospective titled *K.S. Malevich, One Person Exhibition. His Way from Impressionism to Suprematism*" [Joosten 1990: 13].

In 1922, leaders of Russia's realistic painters declared that realistic painting of Russian workers should be the goal of art in the Soviet Union. Malevich continued to pursue and teach Suprematism, extending its ideas to architecture. In 1927, Malevich toured and lectured in Germany and Poland, leaving behind some paintings and manuscripts for safekeeping. Between 1929 and 1934, increasing resistance to artistic pluralism in general and non-representational art in particular culminated in a statement from the Congress of Soviet Writers claimed "Socialist Realism as the exclusive style for Soviet writers and artists" [Joosten 1990: 20]. From 1928, his painting style shifted to highly stylized depictions of farmers and workers, almost certainly motivated by political pressure¹ [Cumming 2014]. Indeed, in 1934 socialist realism became the only painting style that could be taught or publicly exhibited in the Soviet Union [Lunn 2020].

On 15 May 1935, Malevich died of cancer at home in Leningrad (St. Petersburg) [Cumming 2014; Joosten 1990]. The Soviet regime expunged the man, his art, and his writing. In the words of

¹ In late 1930, Russian authorities imprisoned Malevich for nearly three months, accusing him of spying for Germany [Perloff 2003: 6].

Russian scholar Aleksandra Shatskikh, “From the mid-1930s to the late 1980s, there was [and had been] no artist in the Soviet Union by the name of Kazimir Malevich” [2012: x].

What does Suprematism mean?

Malevich first wrote the term **Suprematism**, in reference to his 1915 works, in a letter dated 24 September (Julian calendar) 1915 [Shatskikh 2012: 54]. In 1927 Malevich wrote “Under Suprematism I understand the *supremacy of pure feeling in creative art* [italics added]. To the Suprematist the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling [that] is called forth” [Malevich, trans. by Dearstyne 1959: 67]. Tupitsyn [2019] suggested that Malevich selected the term also “as an assertion of originality and preeminence over Western movements.”

Malevich’s Suprematist paintings and drawings eschew any representation of objects, people, or landscapes, except for his own visual interpretation of the *feelings* that such things invoked in him: his writing suggested that he perceived those feelings to be widespread. Instead of visual representation, his work relies on rectilinear forms (occasionally circles or half circles) rendered in solid (or nearly solid) color (especially black, reds, and white) on a white background.

What motivated Suprematism?

In 1913, Malevich painted the stage sets and designed the costumes for the opera *Victory Over the Sun* – a collaboration with Mikhail Matiushin (music, composed from the piano) and Alexei Kruchenykh (libretto). The opera was conceived and produced in Zaum, a poetic form whose name translates as “beyond the mind.” The goal of Zaum was to “communicate directly with the subconscious” by sound rather than representation [Laskewicz 1995]. Bowlt [1990] cited Malevich’s letters to show that this experience explicitly led Malevich to his Suprematist painting and writing: Zaum poetry separated words and syllables from any specific objects or actions; Malevich recognized that painting could be separated from any specific objects, figures, or settings [Lunn 2020]. For this explicitly non-rational production, Malevich produced sets and costumes that contained large, geometric blocks of color.²

In 1914, Malevich delivered a talk in Moscow, and later described it “On February 19, 1914, I rejected reason in a public lecture” [Shatskikh 2012: 4]. Reason and logic, applied to visual art, motivated attempts to order the world through carefully composed representations, whether idealized or dystopian. He developed a non-sense, anti-esthetic approach to painting he called Fevralism, referring to the month of the lecture.

Tupitsyn [2019] provided a 1918 quote of Alexander Rodchenko: “The present belongs to artists who are anarchists of art.” She also referenced the contemporaneous diary of the artist Vavara

² For nearly a century, art historians understood that the Malevich painted a large black square on a white background on the curtain he designed for this 1913 production – the original *Black Square*, the original Suprematist work. Shatskikh cited a series of letters and attachments that Malevich sent to Matiushin in 1915, as Matiushin was preparing a print publication of the opera, including a sketch of Black Square. Malevich reminded Matiushin that Malevich had designed that figure for the production, and that it should be included prominently in the publication. It was, but Shatskikh concluded that the 1915 publication, not the 1913 production, is the reason that Malevich was able to claim that the graphic and the painting dated from 1913.

Stepanova to interpret non-objectivism as both a change in the formal nature of painting and an embrace of political anarchy after the fall of czarist Russia.

Malevich first used the term 'nonobjective' in his brochure 'From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism' (1916), writing in advance of—but also as though about—his later white paintings: 'I transformed myself in the zero of form and emerged from nothing to . . . nonobjective creation.' This endorsement of a ground-zero regime of painting amply corresponds to a post-revolutionary atmosphere marked by erasure of the toppled political system, including its cultural institutions [Tupitsyn 2019].

In *Chapters from an Artist's Autobiography* [Malevich 1933, trans. by Upchurch 1990: 174], Malevich described his dissatisfaction with naturalistic painting³:

...the emotional energy of painting would not let me see images in their representational nature... The naturalism of objects didn't stand up to my criticism.... I expected that the painting eventually would provide the form deriving from the properties of painting, and would avoid any vital connection with the object.... My acquaintance with icon painting convinced me that the point is not in the study of anatomy and perspective, not in depicting the truth of nature, but in sensing art and artistic reality through the emotions.

Such a move *from* careful reproduction of what the eye sees *toward* careful expression of the emotion (or psychological state) that objects (or ideas) bring to the artist, underlies centuries of artistic movements in East and West. Most of these movements and styles (such as mannerism, Impressionism, Expressionism) make objects and figures into vehicles for expressing mood, emotion, internal psychology. **Non-objective** painting relies on formal elements (shape, color, texture, and their intersections) to convey mood, emotion, and ideas. The precise language that Malevich developed in Suprematism is but one such language for non-objective expression.

Once we recognize that our consciousness is limited and limiting, it follows that the phenomena of which we are conscious are limited. One role of artists is to explore the unconscious, and manifest elements from the unconscious so that viewers or readers *might* be able to lift the veil of their consciousness.

Everything which we call nature, in the last analysis, is a figment of the imagination, having no relation whatever to reality. If the human being were suddenly able to comprehend actual reality – in that very moment the battle would be decided and eternal, unshakable perfection attained. [Until then], the fact that our nervous systems and our brains do not function always and absolutely under the control of our conscious minds but rather, are capable of acting and reacting outside of consciousness, is left out of account. ...To the human being, the conscious mind is always the decisive factor. ...But what is the essence and content of our consciousness? The inability to apprehend reality! [Malevich 1927, trans. by Dearstyne 1959: 20]

In *Futurism-Suprematism* [Malevich 1921, trans. by Bowlit 1990], Malevich related Suprematism to both:

- 1) the energy that allows objects to be composed of atomistic parts: "every solid is a unity of absolutely free units, [an] amalgam contain[ing] units of many kinds, including space.... *solid matter does not exist in nature. There is only energy....* this notion was *the impetus for breaking up the visual complexity of a solid and dividing its mass into the separate energies of the colors of Suprematism* [178; emphasis added].

³ Long translated quotes from Kazimir Malevich's writing appear in sans serif.

and

- 2) the unity of nature, beyond individual objects: “*while each unit of matter is a singular part of nature, it will soon merge with the whole.* This is what Suprematism means to me” [177; emphasis added].

In *The Non-Objective World*, written in 1927⁴, Malevich took a strong stance on the importance of invention (including the invention of non-objectivism) in art, and postulated the conditions under which the *avant garde* becomes accepted.

We must ... distinguish among three categories of activities:

Progressive activities

1. invention (the creation of the new)
2. combination (the transformation of the existing)

Reactionary activity

3. reproduction (the imitation of the existing)

Artists of the third category... who are not endowed with the capacity to create original or composite works, are forced to content themselves with copying nature ‘as is.’ The works of such artists are always comprehensible to the public (the majority of people) because they present nothing new, whereas the works of the creative artist contain new solutions of the eternal conflict between the subject and the object and bear little or no resemblance to accustomed reality.

An artist who creates rather than imitates expresses himself; his works are not reflections of nature but, instead, new realities, which are no less significant than the realities of nature itself.

An invention or an art work becomes available or understandable to the general public very gradually through its practical employment or its mass production. Solutions of the most complex problems – the result of the invaluable creative activity of superior people – become general property and prepare the way for new creative activity [Malevich, trans. by Dearstyne 1959: 30-4].

The truly creative element in art... is, obviously, of a distinctly subjective nature; it creates new artistic realities not found in ‘objective nature’ (just as, for example, the musical ear recognizes possibilities of harmonic order in the discordant hubbub of our surroundings and is able to bring these possibilities to realization) [Malevich, trans. by Dearstyne 1959: 39].

It appears to me that, for the critics and the public, the painting of Raphael, Rubens, Rembrandt, etc. has become nothing more than a conglomeration of countless ‘things’, which conceal its true value – the feeling which gave rise to it. The virtuosity of the objective representation is the only thing admired.

If it were possible to extract from the works of the great masters the feeling expressed in them – the actual artistic value, that is – and to hide this away, the public, along with the critics and the art scholars, would never even miss it.

If one insists on judging an art work on the basis of the virtuosity of the objective representation – the verisimilitude of the illusion – and thinks he sees in the objective

⁴ See InCoRM 2010: 14.

representation itself a symbol of the inducing emotion, he will never partake in the gladdening content of a work of art [Malevich, trans. by Dearstyne 1959: 74].

[T]o the Supremacist, the appropriate means of representation is always the one which gives fullest possible expression to feeling as such and which ignores the familiar appearance of objects. Objectivity, in itself, is meaningless to him; the concepts of the conscious mind are worthless. Feeling is the determining factor, and this art arrives at non-objective representation – at Suprematism [Malevich, trans. by Dearstyne 1959: 67].

Beyond nonobjective subjects, what are the key formal elements of Suprematism?

In *The Non-Objective World* Malevich described his struggle to free himself from any visual representation, whether naturalistic, Impressionist, Cubist, or Futurist. He found liberation in the square, devoid of color. During the 20th century, other artists developed other systems for expressing emotional response rather than identifiable objects or people. For the pioneer Malevich, elemental geometric shapes “formed the basis for a new language that could express an ‘entire system of world-building’” [Sarabianov 1990: 166].

The black square on the white field was the first form in which non-objective feeling came to be expressed. The square = feeling, the white field = the void beyond this feeling [Malevich, trans. by Dearstyne 1959: 76].

Malevich found that black against white gave a suggestion of space. His white ground was not a simple, flat white, but a complex and slightly textured application of multiple pigments (typically lead white and zinc white) and other white materials (calcium carbonate and barium sulfate) [Railing 2011: 48; Shatskikh 2012: 252]. To create the visual illusion of space, Malevich arranged certain colors – often white, black, red – in a particular manner. This became a basic tenet of Suprematism [Walker 1990: xi].

...as planes all the Suprematist forms are units of the Suprematist square. Most of them fall into line along diagonal and vertical axes... They also attain their maximum intensity when the Suprematist forms are positioned horizontally. ... The forms are built exclusively on white, which is intended to signify infinite space [Malevich 1921, trans. Bowlt. 1990: 178].

Railing [2011] went further, arguing that these paintings reflected Malevich’s study and experience of the optical qualities of light: “These are the phenomena of the pure sensation of seeing... when the eye, stimulated by a bright light such as the sun, produces luminous planes of color in the eye’s optical field, numerous shapes and colors floating in front of the closed eyes” [49].

From black to white, to visual silence

According to the chronology Malevich wrote and published,

Suprematism is divisible into three stages ... – the black period, the colored period⁵, and the white period. The last denotes white forms painted white. All three of these stages took place between the years 1913 and 1918. These periods were constructed according to a

⁵ also called “Dynamic Suprematism,” because the diagonal orientations of many of the constituent elements can be read to imply movement.

purely planar development, and the main principle of economy lay at the basis of their construction – of how to convey the power of statics and of apparent dynamic rest by means of a single plane [Malevich 1920: 1, quoted in Sarabianov 1990: 166].

However, Malevich displayed several color-dominated Suprematist paintings at the pivotal December 1915 *0.10* exhibition. Shatskikh [2012] used his correspondence and sketches to show that a number of them (including the dynamic *Suprematist Painting (with Black Trapezium and Red Square)* [Plate 4]) were conceptualized and painted *before* Malevich arrived at the negation of color in *Black Square*. Malevich declared his “stages” of Suprematism conceptually, superimposing that conception on the actual chronology of his painting.

Shatskikh [2012] placed the creation of *Black Square* on 8 June 1915 (Julian calendar), or 21 June in the Gregorian calendar. Malevich’s insight to eclipse all non-objective figuration with a black square, creating the “zero point” for painting, came suddenly. Indeed, he painted over a non-objective composition. His later comments to colleagues and students included “fiery lightning bolts crossing the canvas in front of him” and afterwards “he could not eat, drink, or sleep for a full week” [Shatskikh 2012: 45].

Malevich’s self-reported impact of this insight helped Shatskikh respond to the uproar that occurred in 2015. The director of Moscow’s Tretyakov Gallery announced that new analyses of *Black Square* (housed in the gallery) revealed penciled-and-erased writing in the white border of the painting: “A battle of negroes”⁶ [Nueendorf 2015; Shatskikh 2017; Grovier 2018; Vakar 2018]. The director noted that the handwriting was that of Malevich. Vakar [2015, translated 2018] concluded that Malevich penciled this inscription shortly after completing the painting, and erased it when he recognized the significance of the painting. Shatskikh [2017] vehemently disagreed, arguing that Malevich immediately recognized the significance of the painting, and that the painting, painted in oil over another Suprematist painting⁷ that had not yet fully dried, would not have been dry enough for penciling and erasing for years. She implied that the penciled comment was an act of “inscribed vandalism” during the 50 years when Malevich was a non-entity and *avant-garde* art was officially reviled in the Soviet state.

By late 1917, Malevich began producing paintings in which colored shapes dissipate into the white ground [Railing 2011]. He referred to this as “dissolution,” and related it to the ultimate dissolution of the cosmos [Shatskikh 2012: 253]. “[E]ach unit of matter ... will soon merge with the whole,” as quoted above.

In mid-1918, color dissolution reached its apotheosis in *Suprematist Composition: White on White* [Plate 2], which indeed features a white square painted at an oblique angle within the white ground on the canvas. However, as Malevich wrote, “But even the color while is still white, and to show shapes in it, it must be created so that the shape can be read, so that the sign can be taken in. And so there must be a difference between them but only in the pure white form” (quoted in Shatskikh [2012: 260]). Malevich achieved these differences by using different white pigments: lead white, zinc white, and titanium white [Railing 2011].

⁶ The phrase almost certainly alludes to a late- nineteenth century French satirical painting, titled *A Battle of Negroes at Night* and, in a reprinting, *A Battle of Negroes in a Cave on a Dark Night*.

⁷ which itself was painted over an earlier painting by Malevich. Painting over a not-fully dry oil painting is probably what caused the severe cracking of the black paint in *Black Square*.

The very revelation of white is not a foundation evoked purely by paint like the vacillations of color, but as an expression of something more, serves as an indicator of my transformation over time my notion of color ceases to be color Merging into a single color – white.
[Malevich 1918, quoted in Shatskikh [2012: 260]].

Four white-on-white paintings (employing different configurations of shapes) were the logical end of painterly Suprematism. In a 1920 publication of drawings, Malevich wrote “There can be no question of painting in Suprematism, painting has long been outlived, and the artist himself is a prejudice of the past” [Shatskikh 2012: 269].

During the 1920s Malevich painted more black-on-white and black-and-red-on-white compositions, focused on Suprematist writing and teaching, and worked with his students to extend Suprematist principles into architectural drawings and models. After Stalin’s rise to power (1924), the near prohibition on Soviet abstraction, and his 1927 tour in Germany, he returned to his earliest subject, the everyday lives of rural peasants, via highly stylized figurative painting [Joosten 1990; Giuliano 2013; Cumming 2014.] Had Suprematism been extinguished by the impossibility of public presentation, or had it come to its conceptual end?

In a perceptive essay, Preston [2014] argued that Malevich’s figurative painting in his last seven years contained much of the insight and symbolism he developed in Suprematism. See, for example, *Girls in the Field* (1928) [Plate 5]. The peasants and their landscapes appear as colored geometric shapes, identifiable as people and landscapes, but stripped of any detail – even faces. The compositions present only one, or at most two, planes. The coloring often makes use of his dissolution technique. Preston interpreted these compositions as, simultaneously:

- a return to Malevich’s earliest subjects, perhaps motivated by the Soviet insistence on visual representation of heroic workers;
- informed by Suprematist principles (except, of course, the principle of non-representation); and
- a bitter observation of the facelessness and anomie of visual propaganda.

How did Suprematism differ from Constructivism?

The term constructivism stems from the Working Group of Constructivists, founded in Moscow in March 1921 by Karl Ioganson, Konstantin Medunetski, Alexander Rodchenko and Varvara Stepanova, and Georgii and Vladimir Stenberg. The movement was concerned with literally and figuratively constructing a better world through collective action of creators, in contrast to visual works created by individual artists [Lodder 2003]. Suprematism (in its manifestation in painting as well as writing and architecture) was not motivated by utilitarian goals.⁸

However, during the 1920s Malevich turned his energies to teaching, writing, and models and sketches for architectural works, and even “Suprematist designs for fabric and ceramics” [Giuliano

⁸ However Shatskikh [2012: 94-8] emphasized that the very first exhibition of Malevich’s Suprematist works was at the exhibition of Modern Decorative Art in Verbovka, Ukraine in November 1915, and that the catalog listed the artworks as designs for a scarf and for a pillow. Thus, while the motivation for the work was not utilitarian, from the beginning, Malevich seemed willing for them to be the design basis for everyday objects.

2013]. He began to argue that Suprematism could be applied in utilitarian ways⁹: “The utilitarian constructions of technology, which develop out of the skillful pitting of one natural force against another, have in them no trace of an ‘artistic’ imitation of natural forms; they are new creations of human culture” [Malevich, trans. by Dearstyne 1959: 30].

In the table below, I attempt to relate Suprematism (for which Malevich (1878-1935) was the chief theorist), Russian Constructivism, International Constructivism, and the work and tenets of El Lissitzky (1890-1941), who was active in all three movements.

Suprematism (1913-21]	Russian Constructivism [1921-34]	Lissitzky [esp. 1921-34]	International Constructivism [1922-1950s]
Art drives interior consciousness; best achieved through a vocabulary of simple, flat shapes and limited colors.	“Art” is irrelevant; creators must design and build to improve the collective, communist future; this requires movement into the third (and fourth) dimensions. Followed Marx’s dictum that “Art must not explain the world, but change it” [quoted by Lodder on p. 37].	Art is a means to increase collective consciousness in the pursuit of socialist ideals.	Embraced total abstraction via visual and actual three-dimensionality of simple forms. The IFC’s Statement also emphasized the role of art in social progress, but this was not evident in all manifestations of IC.

This table emphasizes the contrast of Suprematism, which mirrored the anarchy of the period surrounding the Russian Revolution, versus Russian Constructivism, which considered thoughtful and ambitious design as a driver of a new order. However, the Soviet state had other purposes for art. Rather than a tool for creating a new order, visual, written, and musical arts were to glorify the worker, peasant, and the nation.

What artists were fellow travelers with or followers of Malevich?

In publicity before the December 1915 *0.10* exhibit, four Suprematist artists were listed with Malevich: Kseniya Boguslavskaja, Ivan Kliun, Mikhail Menkov, and Ivan Puni. In the 1916 edition of Malevich’s booklet *From Cubism to Suprematism*, Olga Rozanova is listed, as well. They had exhibited together in earlier Futurist exhibitions, as well [The Art Story 2012; Shatskikh 2012]. Below I describe the most relevant work of four visual artists, listed in order of their birth years (recall that Malevich was born in 1878).

Olga Rozanova (1882-1918) produced Neo-Primitivist, Futurist, and Cubo-Futurist paintings from 1911-15. She began producing brightly colored, non-objective collages in 1915 [Berkowitz 2018]. Upon hearing of Malevich’s Suprematist work, she was supportive, but also appalled at what she saw as theft of her ideas. Whether Malevich had seen her work before his early Suprematist drawings and paintings is debated hotly. She exhibited four three-dimensional works in *0.10*, but thereafter turned from Suprematism [Shayskikh 2012], toward painting that presaged mid-twentieth-century color fields. See *Color Painting: Non-Objective Composition* (1917) [Plate 7], which presages Mark Rothko’s color fields of the 1950s. Her selection and juxtapositions of color stem in part from her experiments with spinning colored disks, and with projected light. These color experiments and resultant paintings influenced Malevich’s later Suprematist work [Railing 2011]. Rozanova died at age 32.

⁹ Compare the previous footnote. Malevich’s written emphasis on Suprematist design as the basis for objects and buildings began during the 1920s, but his recognition of this seems to have been present from the start.

Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953) was born in Moscow, and began painting religious icons at an early age. He became part of the Russian *avant garde* in the first decade of the 1900s. His visit to Pablo Picasso's studio in 1913 was a turning point; struck by Picasso's abstracted sculptures, he began constructing sculpture from wood and found materials. His most famous and influential work was his 1920 architectural model for a *Monument to the Third International* [Plate 6], conceived as a 1300-foot-high building to house offices and meeting spaces for the Communist International (Comintern). This model was an embodiment of what became Constructivist ideals: it was a three-dimensional work that made very complex use of simple iron and steel forms, designed for utilitarian purposes. It even ventured into the fourth dimension (time), because its three major interior spaces (a cube, a pyramid, and a cylinder) were designed to rotate at different rates (annually, monthly, and daily, respectively). It is widely regarded as the starting point for Russian Constructivism, which got its organizational start a few months later [Dusan 2011; Lodder 1983; Ng 2012].

Lazar ("El") Lissitzky (1890-1941), twelve years younger than Malevich, became a pivot between Suprematism and Constructivism. Rather than focusing specifically on utilitarian creations to further the building of a socialist society, "for Lissitzky, the essential task at hand was to use art as a symbolic, ideological vehicle with which to assist in the transformation of consciousness both in communist Russia and in the capitalist West; for the Moscow constructivists, the imperative was to contribute in a direct, hands-on manner to the building of the new society that had actually come into being in Russia" [Lodder 2003: 30].

In late 1921, the Soviet government sent Lissitzky to Berlin "to establish cultural contacts between Soviet and German artists" [Perloff 2003: 7]. In 1922, he was a founding member of the International Faction of Constructivists, based in Berlin. He served as a bridge among Suprematist ideals, Russian Constructivist practical goals, and the International Constructivist use Constructivism's aesthetic and formal ideals with Suprematism's focus on personal psychological effect. The IFC's founding Statement maintained "Art is a universal and real expression of creative energy, which can be used to organize the progress of mankind; it is the tool of universal progress" [Lodder 2003: 31]. Lissitzky maintained an identity and role for art separate from but complementary to societal restructuring.

Lissitzky worked in many media and forms, including photography, photomontage, and architecture. In painting, he developed an abstract, geometric, architectonic style which he called "Proun," an acronym for the Russian phrase "project for the affirmation of the new" [Moma.org; Wolf 2016]. He defined Proun as "an interchange between painting and architecture" [Lodder 2003]. Among the most ambitious Proun works was the *Proun Room (Prounenraum)* [Plate 8]. This installation was created for and exhibited in the 1923 Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung (art exhibition), May-September. Visitors were directed in a particular direction through a 12-foot square room, viewing its interior paintings and constructions. *Proun Room* was part of Lissitzky's elaboration of Constructivism, retaining the visual realm of flexibility of "art" within a built environment. Thus, the work was not "merely" pictorial, but functioned as a useable design. In this way, Lissitzky manifested a role for "art" within Constructivism. Indeed, the installation allowed the artist to give the viewer art in four dimensions, since he scripted the path through the three-dimensional space [Forgács 2013].

Alexander Rodchenko was born in St. Petersburg in 1891. The 1919 Tenth State Exhibition: Nonobjective Creation and Suprematism displayed his 1918 painting *Non-Objective Painting no. 80 (Black on Black)* [Plate 3] adjacent to Malevich's 1918 painting *Suprematist Composition: White on*

White [Plate 2]. Much has been made of the contrasts in these two similarly-sized paintings: title, tonality, formal structure (thick black curves taking the overall form of a circle vs. a dominant white square surrounded by white), and texture (a combination of matte, gloss, and textured paint vs. a thin layer of flat white). Thirteen years younger than Malevich, Rodchenko painted *Black on Black* in direct response to Malevich's 1915 *Black Square*, but was certainly pleased with its contrast to the 1918 painting. Despite the contrasts in their approaches to non-objectivism, the two men became allies in their push against any vestige of representation and in their insistence on a uniquely Russian style, publishing and presenting jointly. Rodchenko (1891-1956) and his wife Vavara Stepanova (1894-1958) went on to become leading exponents of Constructivism in the 1920s, breaking with Malevich's insistence on creating without regard to utility. In the 1930s, strong pressure and eventual prohibition of *avant garde* and abstract art led Rodchenko to pursue a very influential path as a photojournalist, through to his death in 1956 [Savvine 2012; Shatskikh 2012].

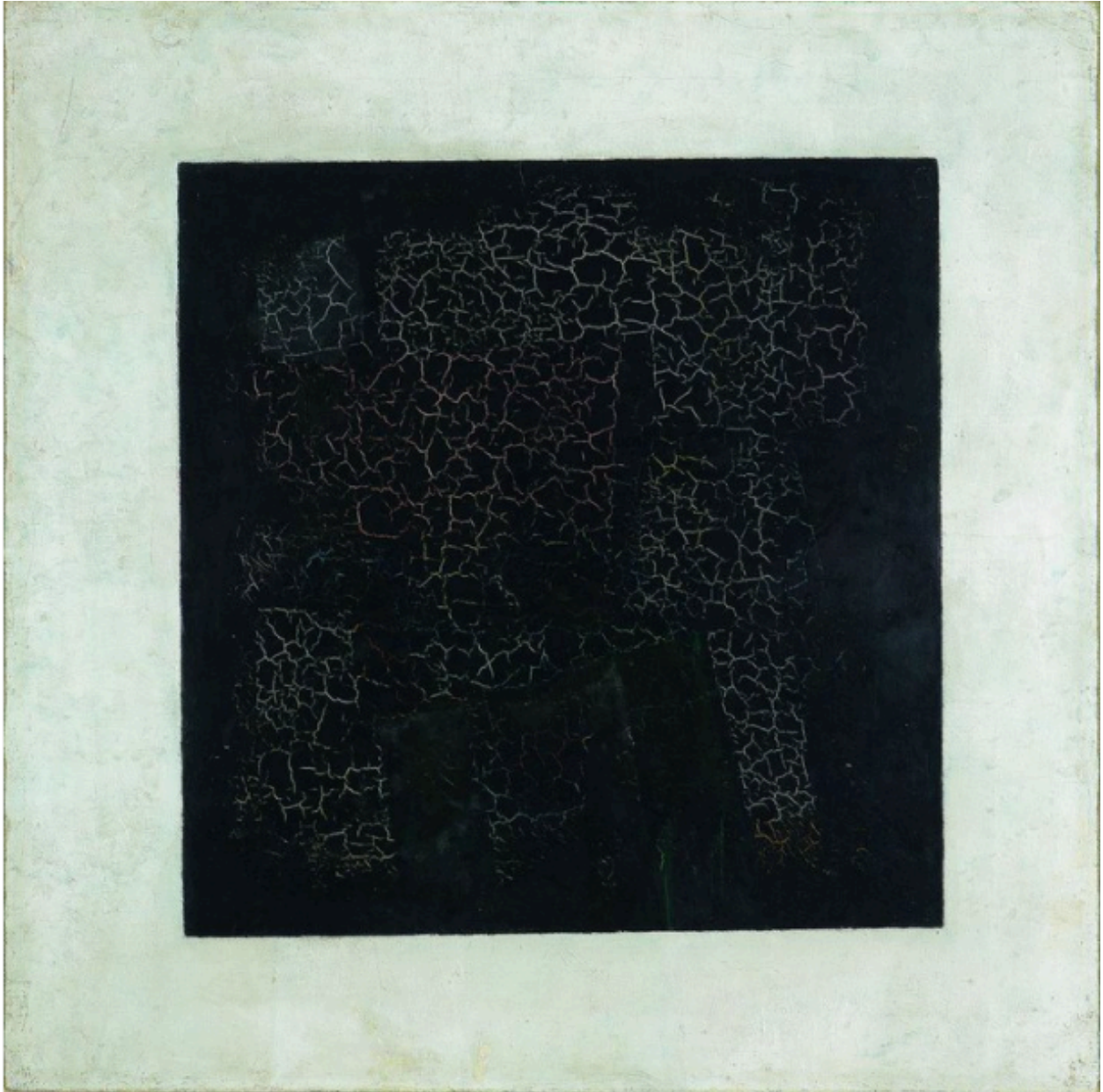


PLATE 1

Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935)

Black Square, 1915

Oil on linen, 31¼" x 31¼" (79.5 x 79.5 cm)

Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

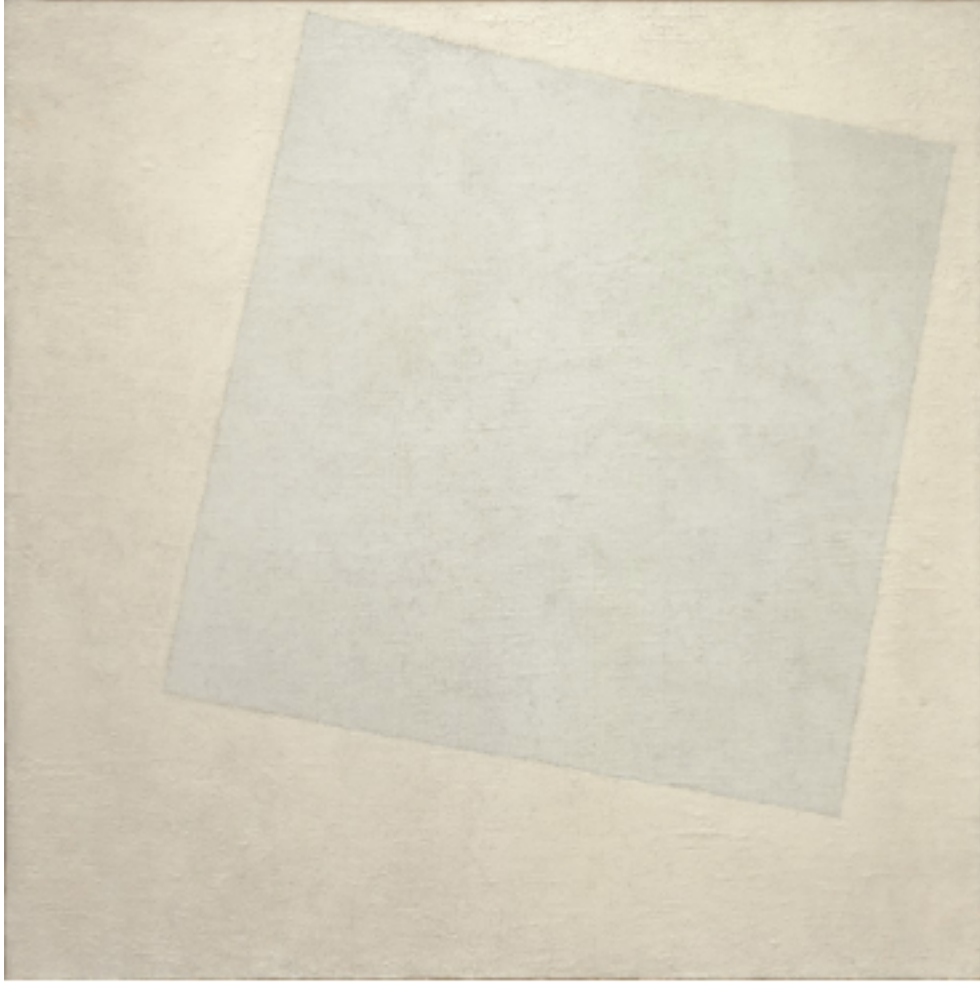


PLATE 2

Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935)

Suprematist Composition: White on White (1918)

Oil on canvas, 31¼" x 31¼" (79.4 x 79.4 cm)

Museum of Modern Art



PLATE 3

Aleksandr (Alexander) Rodchenko (1891-1956)

Non-Objective Painting No. 80 (Black on Black) (1918)

Oil on canvas, 32¼" x 31¼" (81.9 x 79.4 cm)

Museum of Modern Art

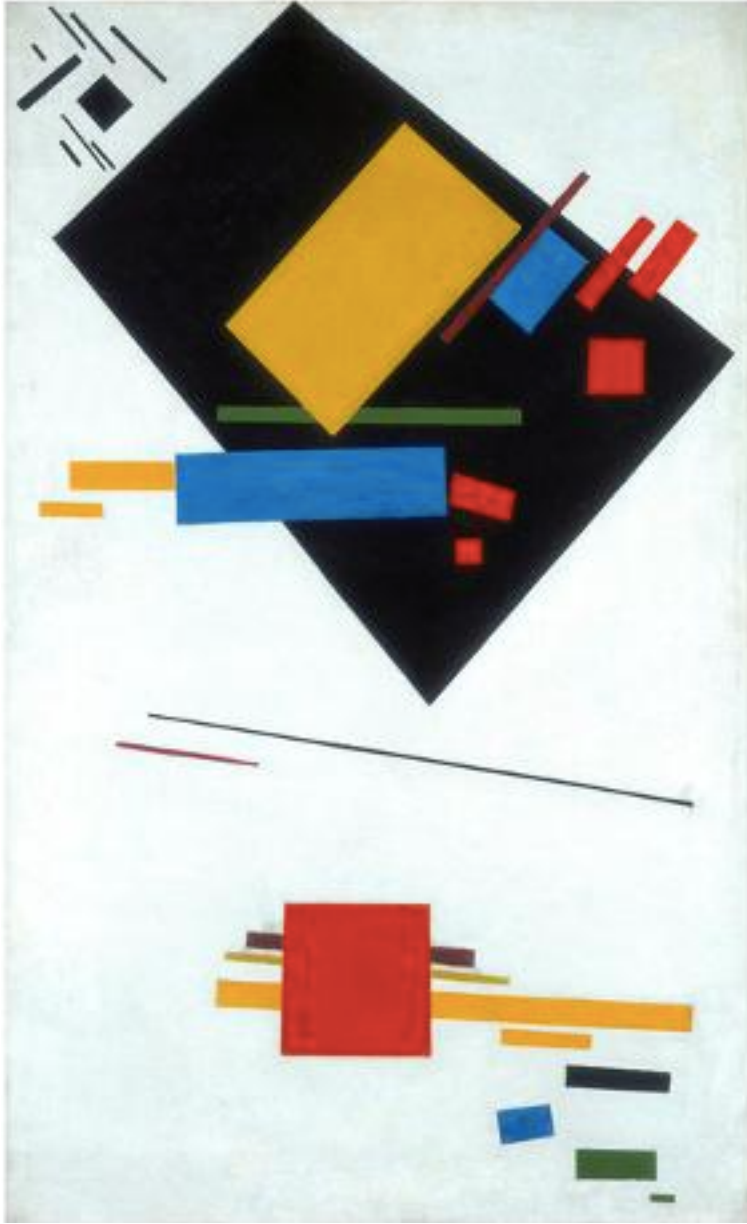


PLATE 4

Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935)

Suprematist Painting (Black Trapezium and Red Square) (1915)

Oil on canvas, 40" x 24 3/8" (101.5 x 62 cm)

Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam



PLATE 5

Kazimir Malevich (1878-1935)

Girls in the Field (1928)

Oil on canvas, 106 x 125 cm

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

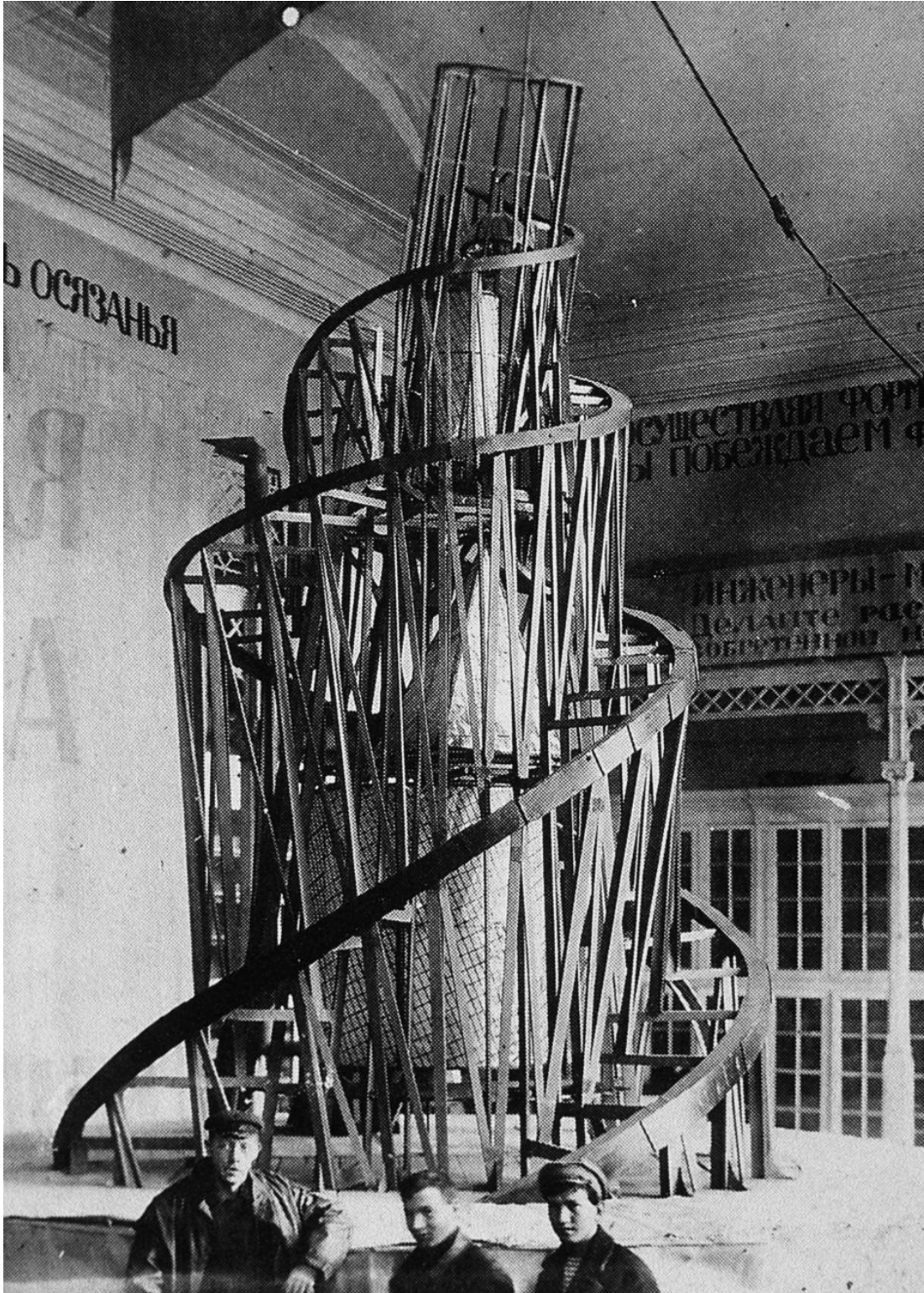


PLATE 6

Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953)

model of proposed *Monument to the Third International* (1920)

https://monoskop.org/File:Tatlin_Vladimir_Model_of_the_Monument_to_the_Third_International_1920.jpg

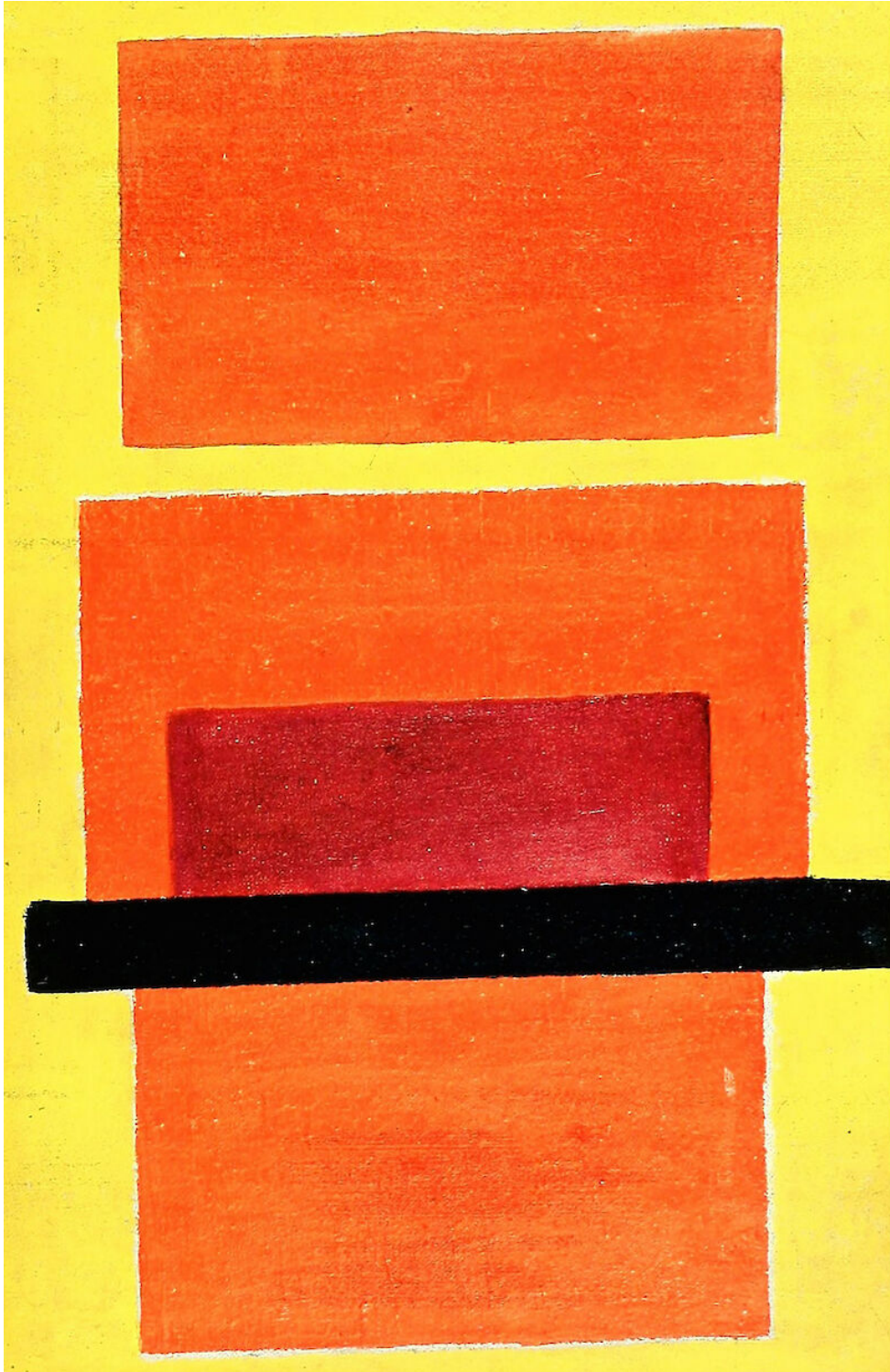


PLATE 7

Olga Rozanova (1882-1918)

Color Painting (Non-Objective Composition) (1917)

Oil on canvas

State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

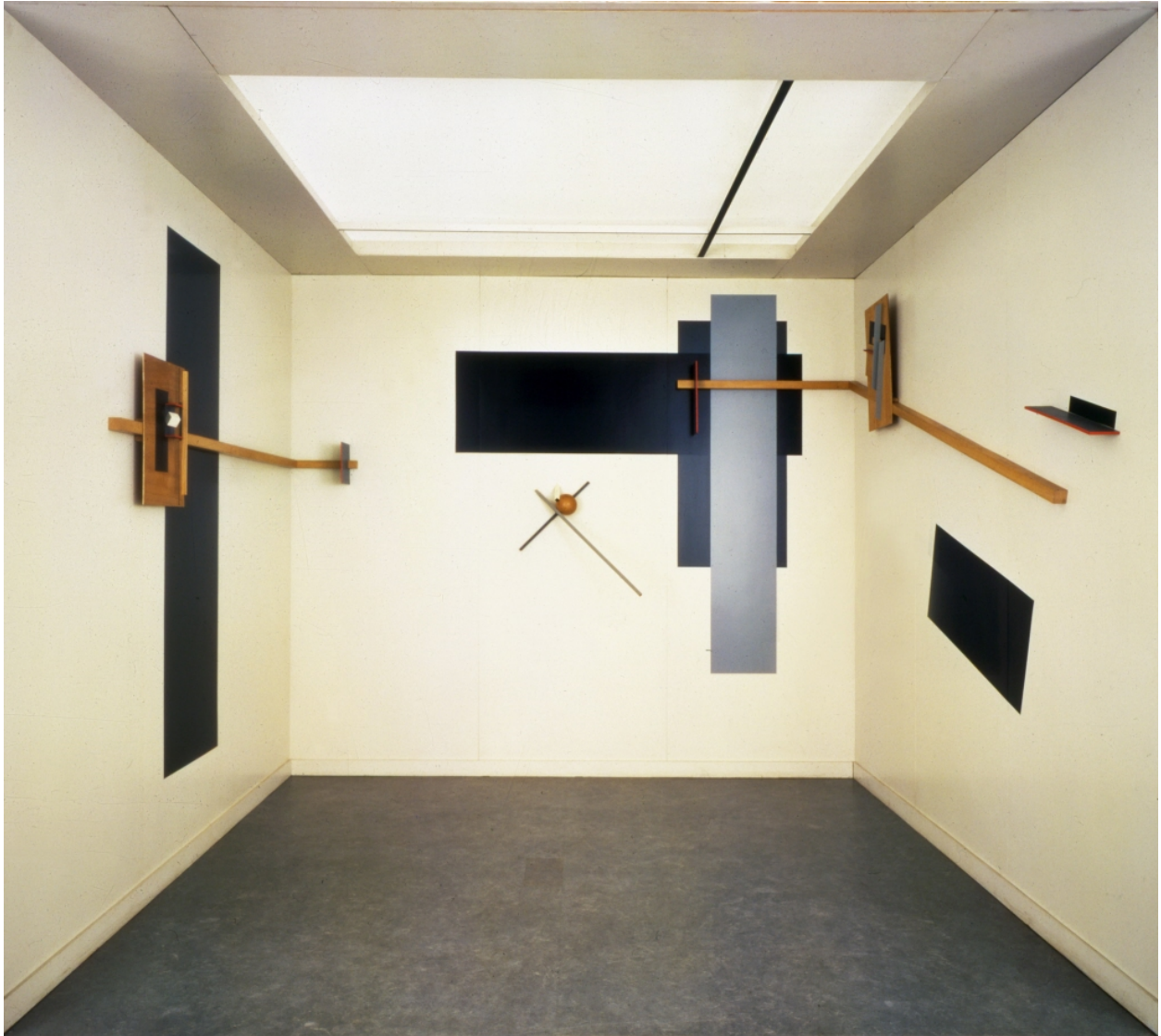


PLATE 8

El Lissitzky (1890-1941)

Prounenraum (Proun Room), 1923

1971 reconstruction by Jean Leering, Van Abbemuseum (Eindhoven)

320 x 364 x 364 cm

© DACS 2007

<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/tate-papers/08/replicas-and-reconstructions-in-twentieth-century-art>

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