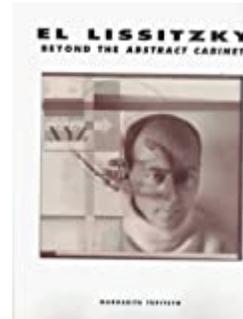




Margarita Tupitsyn. *El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999. 239 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08170-1.



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Crossing Borders: El Lissitzky as Photographer

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As a leading member of the Russian avant-garde during the 1910s and 1920s, El (Lazar) Lissitzky's innovative approaches to painting, graphic design, architecture, and photography helped to shape the dynamic character of early Russian modernism. *El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet* explores Lissitzky's work in photography, an aspect of his career that has not received wide attention. Accompanying a major exhibition of the artist's work held at the Sprengel Museum in Hannover, Germany in 1999, *Beyond the Abstract Cabinet* brings together a major body of Lissitzky's work in photography, photomontage, and graphic design during the 1920s and 1930s.

Curated by Margarita Tupitsyn, author of *The Soviet Photograph, 1924-1937* (Yale University Press, 1996), with essays contributed by Matthew Drutt and Ulrich Pohlmann, this volume will appeal to scholars of the Russian avant-garde as well as to readers with broad interests in early Russian modernism and photography. Exceptionally handsome in design and lavishly illustrated with over 300 plates, two-thirds of which are in color, it is a

welcome addition to the body of literature devoted to Lissitzky's career and is also noteworthy for presenting for the first time in English a collection of the artist's letters written to his wife Sophie Koppers during the summer of 1934.

The three essays in the book shed light on various aspects of Lissitzky's photography from the early 1920s until his death in 1941. In the first, Matthew Drutt chronicles Lissitzky's sojourn in Germany between 1922 and 1925, a trip made in large part to forge stronger international ties between Russia and Europe. It was also the period in which Lissitzky began to experiment with photograms and photo collage. By the time Lissitzky arrived in Berlin, he had already achieved notoriety with works that he labeled Prouns (an acronym for Project for the Affirmation of the New)—dynamic abstract compositions of geometric shapes that explored spatial and architectural relationships. While born from Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism, Lissitzky's Prouns went a step beyond the spiritual aspects of his colleague's floating geometry to address the social implications of that vocabulary. In other words, Lissitzky's work was a bridge

between the theoretical domain of suprematist painting and Constructivist principles of utilitarian design. Lissitzky articulated his belief in the transformative power of blending abstract form with real space in 1922 in a statement made together with the artists Theo van Doesburg and Hans Richter: “Art must stop being just a way of dreaming cosmic secrets. 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” (p. 12).

One of his early pursuits in Berlin was a collaboration with Ilya Ehrenburg, a Russian writer living in Berlin, on two issues of the journal *Veshch-Gegenstand-Object* in 1922 with the intention of generating an international forum for artists interested in constructivist principles. This joint effort led to a project illustrating Ehrenburg’s *6 Tales with Easy Endings* with several photo collages, including the well-known image of the constructivist Vladimir Tatlin working on his “Monument to the Third International.” Drutt notes that Lissitzky’s early photographs have been little studied, a situation complicated by the fact that few pieces were signed or dated. In Hanover, friendship with Kurt Schwitters (who introduced Lissitzky to Sophie Koppers), led Lissitzky to a collaboration with the Dutch artist Vilmos Huszar in 1923 on a photogram published that year in Schwitters’s Dada journal *Merz*. Lissitzky’s interest in photograms was also fueled by learning about Man Ray’s work (who was in Paris at the time) as well as the work of the Laszlo Moholy-Nagy. Drutt argues persuasively for a close link to Moholy-Nagy between 1922 and 1925 by establishing a close formal correspondence of Lissitzky’s work and the Hungarian artist’s experiments—both employed the same sorts of household objects in their works and both artists worked in pairs, making photograms in both positive and negative versions.

In addition to making photograms while in Germany, Lissitzky also experimented with the expressive possibilities of photomontage. Using multiple exposures in printing, he was able to exploit the effects of transparency and juxtaposition to achieve dynamic compositions. These experiments would bear fruit in a series of advertisements that Lissitzky produced in 1924-1925 for Pelikan, a German office-supply company. Created while recuperating in Switzerland after having contracted tuberculosis in 1923, the stunning graphic designs for Pelikan allowed Lissitzky to pay for his medical treatment.

Drutt discusses one of Lissitzky’s most memorable images of the early 1920s. “Constructor,” a self-portrait

that consisted of a complex layering of photographic techniques, can be viewed as a culmination of his work in photography up to 1925. Lissitzky portrayed himself in the role of engineer, accompanied by an image of the artist’s hand holding a compass: iconography (already seen in the image of Tatlin at work on his “Tower”) that would come to serve as a symbol for constructivist art in the 1920s, “signifying the pursuit of creativity through a combination of modern technology with human intellect” (p. 22).

Lissitzky’s return to Russia in 1925, prompted by the suicide of his sister in Vitebsk and by visa difficulties with Swiss authorities, is the subject of Margarita Tupitsyn’s essay. She examines the artist’s career from the mid-20s until his death in 1941, a period in which Lissitzky’s work as a photographer and designer flourished. In particular, Tupitsyn explains his role in organizing several major exhibitions in the late 20s, including the All-Union Printing Trades Exhibition in Moscow in 1927. His success in organizing and installing the exhibition led to a second government commission. Recognizing Lissitzky’s abilities and his foreign contacts, the Soviets made him responsible for the Russian component of the Internationale Presse-Austellung *Pressa* exhibition in Cologne, Germany. The Soviets wanted to show the West just how great politically motivated art could be, and to that end the government generously subsidized the artists who contributed. A collaborative effort, the artists Sergei Senkin and Gustav Klutsis along with Lissitzky were responsible for the installation which included an impressive photo-frieze that measured over 23 meters long.

Tupitsyn makes an interesting observation about the collaborative nature of the work; she notes that the complaints voiced by both Senkin and Klutsis over the fact that only Lissitzky was credited with the project reveals that the notion of sole authorship (an idea deemed bourgeois and old-fashioned by the Constructivists) was, in reality, a hard ideology to swallow. Tupitsyn also points out that *Pressa*’s role in Lissitzky’s career was significant since it marked a turning point in the artist’s move toward greater politicization of photographic imagery. Yet, she also suggests that Lissitzky remained more politically distant in his attitude toward the ‘object’ than did some of his Productivist colleagues such as Rodchenko, a result of his time spent in Germany and his more pronounced internationalist outlook.

Tupitsyn’s essay also explores other key aspects of Lissitzky’s career in the late 20s and 30s, including the close relationship that he and Koppers cultivated with

the film maker Dziga Vertov. Lissitzky and Vertov met in 1929 when the latter released his "Man with a Movie Camera." Shortly after that Lissitzky was given the assignment to design the Soviet pavilion at the International Exhibition of Film and Photo in Stuttgart. Only Vertov accompanied the exhibition to Germany, however; an opportunity that allowed him to visit Hanover, where Kuppers had arranged for him to deliver a lecture about his work. In the 1930s, as Lissitzky became increasingly ill with tuberculosis, his government assignments grew in number. His involvement with IZOGIZ (the State Publishing House for Art) was not based on purely aesthetic motives; it was, in practical terms, a strategy that provided Lissitzky with reliable income and special privileges that eased his medical condition, including several therapeutic trips to sanatoria in southern Russia.

As Tupitsyn notes, these government commissions probably helped to prolong his life. Another ramification of Lissitzky's illness was his growing reliance on Kuppers to carry out his commissions. With her help, he was able to carry out production on assignments for several issues of USSR in Construction and a set of government-sponsored lithographs titled Food Industry. The importance of Kuppers in Lissitzky's life, as both wife and assistant, is given eloquent voice in the section of *Beyond the Abstract Cabinet* devoted to a translation of the artist's letters to his wife, written the summer of 1934 while convalescing in a Georgian sanitarium. Tupitsyn does a great service to Kupper's memory, crediting her with several of the last projects undertaken before Lissitzky's death and with navigating the family through the difficulties of Soviet life in the 1930s.

An interesting addition to *Beyond the Abstract Cabinet* is Ulrich Uhlmann's essay describing the role that Lissitzky's exhibition designs played in influencing the politically charged, government-sponsored displays organized in Italy and Germany in the 1930s. He argues that the use of photomontage, large-format photographs, movable walls, and film-inspired montage-techniques used by Lissitzky in his Soviet Pavilion at the Pressa exhibition in Cologne, the Film and Photography Exhibition in Stuttgart, the International Fur Trade Exhibition in Leipzig and the International Hygiene Exhibition in Dresden in 1930—acted as catalysts for later designers such as the German Herbert Bayer. In particular, Uhlmann cites the panoramic photofrieze designed by Lissitzky, Senkin, and Klutskis for the Pressa display as perhaps the single most impressive feature of what the

Soviets pioneered.

The Soviet use of photography as a "medium of enlightenment" was recognized by the Italians and Germans as a powerful propaganda tool and was used as such by organizers of the Exhibition of the Fascist Revolution in Rome in 1932 and Nationalist Socialist Exhibitions in Berlin from 1933-1937. Ironically, Bayer's use of photomontage to sing praises of the Fuhrer in such exhibitions as the 1936 Deutschland exhibition (mounted to mark the Olympic games that year in Berlin), were rare examples of innovative artistic in German photography in those days. As Uhlmann asserts, when questions about artistic style were being answered in conservative, socialist realist terms in Nazi Germany, it is interesting that the dynamic, modernist associations of photomontage were allowed, at least until 1937.

As fate would have it, it was the United States that benefitted from Bayer's work in exhibition design. He emigrated in 1938 and continued his career with several successful shows mounted at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, including "Road to Victory," an exhibition commissioned by the U.S. government in 1942 to propagandize America's involvement in the war. As Uhlmann notes at the end of his essay: "What had initially seemed paradoxical, even inconceivable, for ideological reasons, had become a political reality...Finally, under the influence of Bayer, Lissitzky's revolutionary mode of designing exhibitions became acceptable for the capitalist West and the American public" (p. 64).

For anyone with an interest in Russian avant-garde art, *El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet* will be a valuable resource. It deepens our knowledge about the career of Lissitzky, an artist who crossed the borders of design, photography, and abstract art. Just as importantly, it widens our perspective on the role that Russian artists played in shaping a great deal of early twentieth century art. For scholars working in the field of Russian avant-garde art, the reproductions alone are worth the price of the book; the substantive and informed essays are icing on the cake.

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