

Why

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El Lissitzky?

The collection of the Van Abbemuseum comprises works by some 800 modern and contemporary artists, and El Lissitzky is one of the most important among them. Lissitzky's special position is not only due to the number of his works in the collection. His work, his ideas and his artistic objectives correspond closely with the museum's engagement with experimentation, radical creativity and public participation. As one of the most dynamic artists of his time, Lissitzky has, over the years, become increasingly important to the museum. He was anything but a creator of static, self-contained works. His creativity was powerful and open to many, a mass of plans and projects bristling with life. Inspired by Lissitzky, the Van Abbemuseum was keen to make that verve and vitality tangible for today's public. The obvious way to do that is to show and discuss his works, but in some cases it was possible to go one step further and look at how contemporary artists relate to Lissitzky's oeuvre. In this essay, I will discuss four such projects of the past decade, shown at our museum and elsewhere.

¹ This text is based on a Skype conversation between Deimantes Narkevicius and the author on 17 April 2017, and on several texts from the exhibition *Plug In #6* in the online archive of the Van Abbemuseum (<https://vanabbemuseum.nl/en/research/resources/archives/>).

Lissitzky—Narkevicius¹

In 2006, the artist Deimantes Narkevicius (b. 1964, Uthena, Lithuania) was asked by the Van Abbemuseum to curate a *Plug In* presentation, one in a series of interventions in the then semi-permanent presentation of the museum's collection. The result, *Plug In #6*, consisted of an ambulatory space in which a selection of graphic works and drawings by Lissitzky was shown, and a central projection room that showed Narkevicius's work *Energy Lithuania* (2006).

Like many of Narkevicius's works, the film *Energy Lithuania* [III.1.2](#) is a cinematic essay on the Soviet period in his homeland. The film tells the story of Elektronai, a Lithuanian town built around a former Soviet power plant. It includes impressive images of the exterior and interior of the industrial building—still in use at the time—and interviews with people who used to work there. With its huge Socialist Realist tableaus and clear architectural references to the communist period of the recent past, the power plant became a kind of museum after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Like many other buildings in the former USSR, this monument of industrial cultural heritage invokes nostalgic reminiscences as well as memories of a dreadful past. In this presentation, the industrial complex with all its connotations becomes the subject of our perception of history. The use of technical equipment from the period—Super 8 film with its “detached” colours—and the slow movements of the camera give these images a painterly quality, while the colossal proportions of the building, its installations and decorations have many sculptural aspects. In an interview, the artist stated:

Energy Lithuania is an ongoing image, like a painting. [...] When I was making the film, I was thinking of it as a documentary, but the connections with painting very much emerged during the editing process. [...] It's probably like making a sculpture, though not in the sense of modelling objects. Rather it is a matter of choosing an area in which you're going to work. It's more like a sculpture for a specific location. Within this area

that you yourself define, I start to look for a certain structure. Because of the specificity of the medium, there are always things that I leave to happen in unexpected ways within the filmed objects and people, the unexpected surfaces.²

² Hans-Ulrich Obrist, "Deimantas Narkevičius: Against Monumentality", *Flash Art*, 261, July–August–September, 2008, <http://www.flashartonline.com/article/deimantas-narkevičius/>

In this *Plug In* presentation, the space around the screening room showed a broad selection from the museum's Lissitzky collection. There were some of the sketches and lithographs from *Figurines* (1923), Lissitzky's project for the electromechanical version of the opera *Victory Over the Sun*. Also shown were the prints from *The Four Fundamental Ways of Arithmetic* (1928, reprint 1976), a project which combined education in basic mathematics and in the structure of Soviet society. There was the catalogue for the *Pressa* (1928), the International Press Exhibition in Cologne, with the famous leporello showing the huge, propagandistic photomontages. Also shown were some of the drawings and lithographs from the *Proun Portfolio* (1923), the first series of prints made for the Kestner Society in Hanover. A reading table included, among



1 Installation view of "Plug In #6", ambulatory space with works by Lissitzky | [Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands, 2006](#) | [Photo: Peter Cox, Eindhoven, Netherlands](#)



other objects, *About Two Squares* (1922) by Malevich and Lissitzky, and the booklet *Die Kunstismen: 1914–1924* (1924), the catalogue of art movements that Lissitzky compiled together with Hans Arp. In this context, these silent works—mainly in black, white and red, and containing the hopes of a new era—formed a striking contrast with the moving, "discoloured" images

2 Installation view of "Plug In #6", inner room | [Still from: Deimantas Narkevičius, Energy Lithuania, 2006](#) | [Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands, 2006](#) | [Photo: Peter Cox, Eindhoven, Netherlands](#)

of the film about the Soviet power plant inside the screening room.

Looking back on this remarkable project, Narkevicius says: The total presentation was something like a stylised cinema interior, with an entrance showing posters and a place to sit and drink before entering the “inner sanctum” where the dream is projected. Walking around, you could already see a little bit of what was shown inside. It made you curious to enter. The “film posters” in the “entrance” were all works by Lissitzky connected with the propaganda of the early Soviet state and its hopes for mechanisation and industrialisation. The “cinema” showed a striking example of one of the dystopian places where this utopian ideology came to an end: the Lithuanian power plant. The studies for *Victory Over the Sun* formed an interesting contrast in this context. In many ways, one could compare Soviet history at its beginning and its end. Communist ideals were never able to materialise in the sense that every individual could benefit from them. In the oeuvre of Lissitzky I like the fact that he was an international artist looking for common ground between the new art of East and West. In his creative work, he was both visionary and spiritual protagonist, and a very practical person involved in all kinds of projects aimed at changing society. This combination is very rare in artists. In that sense, he is still of value for us today.³

After the presentation, *Energy Lithuania* was acquired for the collection of the Van Abbemuseum.

Lissitzky—Kabakov

A more elaborate artistic dialogue with the work of Lissitzky followed in 2010, when the Van Abbemuseum invited the artists Ilya and Emilia Kabakov (b. 1933 and 1945, Dnepropetrovsk, Ukraine) to conceive an exhibition using the Lissitzky collection. Ilya Kabakov made the ambitious proposal to arrange both artists’ oeuvres in eight opposing pairs according to the following themes:

³ Skype conversation between Deimantes Narkevicius and the author on 17 April 2017.

⁴ See the exhibition catalogues *El Lissitzky, Ilya / Emilia Kabakov: Utopia and Reality* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2012) and *Utopiya i real'nost'. El Lisitsky, Ilya i Emiliya Kabakovy* (St. Petersburg: State Hermitage Museum, 2013).

LISSITZKY	KABAKOV
THE ARTIST AS A REFORMER	THE ARTIST AS A REFLECTING CHARACTER
THE COSMOS	VOICES IN THE VOID
CLARITY OF FORMS	GARBAGE
VICTORY OVER THE EVERYDAY	EVERYDAY'S VICTORY
MEMORY: MONUMENT TO A LEADER	MEMORY: MONUMENT TO A TYRANT
TRANSFORMING LIFE	ESCAPING LIFE
TRUST IN THE NEW WORLD	UNREALISED UTOPIA
THE BRIGHT FUTURE AHEAD	THE BRIGHT FUTURE BEHIND US

Each room within the exhibition had a theme and was divided into two parts: one for Lissitzky and one for Kabakov. The themes were indicated using large letters on the wall. Thus, each part compared a different aspect of the oeuvre of both artists. The resulting exhibition, carefully designed and prepared by the Kabakovs in collaboration with the museum, took place on two floors in the new building of the Van Abbemuseum. It opened there in December 2012 and was shown subsequently at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg, Multimedia Art Museum in Moscow and the Kunsthaus in Graz.⁴

At first sight, the title of the exhibition, *Lissitzky—Kabakov: Utopia and Reality*, led many to believe that in this pair Lissitzky was the utopian and Kabakov the realist. But a closer look at the exhibition was enough to conclude that the situation was more complicated: aspects of utopia and reality were present in the work of both artists, in totally different ways. And despite the many differences in their oeuvres, there were also similarities to be found.

In his introductory essay to the catalogue, Boris Groys saw Malevich's *Black Square*

as the common ground for both artists: In the following paragraphs, I will show that both leading protagonists of Russian installation art, El Lissitzky and Ilya Kabakov, used the *Black Square* as the starting point for their artistic practice. Both artists have, so to say, gone through the *Black Square*—and made visible a space that was hidden behind it.⁵

In the case of Lissitzky, his relationship to the *Black Square* is well documented: he writes about this iconic work and its meaning several times. The relationship that Groys sees between the Kabakov album *Sitting-in-the-Closet Primakov* (1972–1975)—an illustrated story of a boy in a dark closet—and the *Black Square* is, however, not so obvious. In an interview with Anton Vidokle, Ilya Kabakov doubts that there is any at all:

There was no such *Black Square* in my consciousness at the time. There was a con-



3 VICTORY OVER THE EVERYDAY. Installation view of “Lissitzky—Kabakov: Utopia and Reality” | Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands, 2006 | Photo: Peter Cox, Eindhoven, Netherlands



consciousness of the blackness of a closed closet. It is difficult to say what I knew and did not know. Some sort of cultural genetics kicked in and started working.⁶

4 EVERYDAY'S VICTORY. Installation view, “Lissitzky—Kabakov : Utopia and Reality” | Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands, 2006 | Photo: Peter Cox, Eindhoven, Netherlands

During his artistic education, Kabakov did not see any works by Lissitzky, Malevich or any other Russian avant-garde artist.

Our education in the art school and institute was constructed in such a way that Western art history was presented up

⁵ Boris Groys, “Installing Communism”, in *El Lissitzky, Ilya / Emilia Kabakov: Utopia and Reality*, op. cit., p.8.

⁶ Anton Vidokle, “Interview with Ilya and Emilia Kabakov”, in *El Lissitzky, Ilya / Emilia Kabakov: Utopia and Reality*, op. cit., p.32.

until the Barbizons. [...] Our self-education in terms of the visual was sporadic, it was not methodical and thorough. Books on Malevich were not sold, his works were not exhibited. [...] A feeling of sensitivity of the nostrils developed, such that given three-four molecules you could catch something in the air that could be Malevich or Kandinsky.⁷

Later, when Kabakov became aware of Lissitzky, he began to admire his work. While developing the concept of the exhibition he compared himself with his predecessor:

Lissitzky is entirely oriented toward the future; for him, everything is being built. Kabakov is turned toward the evaluation of that which had already been built. [...] Unlike Malevich, he is a Renaissance type. This type is capable of working in many genres, in many professions, not clamping up... Hence Lissitzky functions as an artist, and an illustrator, and an architect, and a designer, and a polygraphist. [...] By the way, such a universal type is not welcomed by the Western art community today. If you do one thing, you don't need to do another thing. There is this horrifying specialisation whereby everything else is perceived to be a hobby. I myself am one of the victims of this corridor system. But in the past, you could get away with this, therefore such a personality like Lissitzky is perceived rather respectfully, but anachronistically. [...] The Renaissance type is closely connected, it is terrible to say, with the commission, with the form of the proposal. The Western artist before the Impressionists in general didn't draw much in his free time, he was overburdened with commissions. They were the stimulus for him.⁸

Although he is “a victim of the corridor system”, it is clear that Kabakov also sees himself as a “Renaissance type”. He too worked on many commissions, and indeed his oeuvre incorporates many aspects of Lissitzky's creative work: installation, drawing, graphic work, painting, illustration and writing. It is exactly that similarity which makes the first comparison in this exhibition possible: the reformer

versus the reflecting character. Despite a difference in intention and subject matter, there is a multilateral artistic practice that unites both. And besides that, there is the fact that both artists are Russian, not Western. There are fundamental differences between Russian and Western avant-garde art.

It [the Russian avant-garde] is understood as a Russian version of the Western avant-garde. [...] The Russian avant-garde accepted the paradigm of the Western artistic evolution, understanding it not as a critical attitude towards the past, but as a normal evolutionary movement. They perceived formal changes in the Western artistic process. By 1905–1907, the perception had emerged that the old world had ended. [...] The Russian avant-garde believed that a new cosmic era had begun. Technology, steamships, airplanes, steam engines were all perceived to be signs of the cosmos. There was no such cosmism in the West. [...] For Malevich and Lissitzky the cosmos was white. This, of course, represents an unbelievable enthusiasm for the approach of the future. [...] The degree of cosmism of that epoch is not understood fully. Everyone understood what is happening in the new Russia as a social utopia. [...] It is important to note that artistic creations of these artists were not only formalistic, they were not only about art. To a great degree they bore world-building, cosmic experiences.⁹

Here we have another aspect that binds the works of Lissitzky and Kabakov. It constitutes the second theme: cosmos versus the void. In this room, Kabakov opposed Lissitzky's Proun works with some of his albums and his “white paintings”. The next room showed a more profound difference in the work of the two artists: the forms they use. It was clarity versus garbage. A large model of Lissitzky's *Wolkenbügel* (1925) was contrasted with labelled pieces of garbage on strings and in boxes and vitrines. After that came everyday life: the victory over it versus the victory of it. ⁱⁱⁱ3,4 One part of the room showed the floorplan of an interior design and a chair by Lissitzky together with a model of his

7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., pp.35, 36.

9 Ibid., p.34.

design for the F-Type residential cell (1927). The other part showed works by Kabakov related to the communal kitchen. In this way Kabakov brought together ideal living and what became of it.

The next room featured the Leader versus the Tyrant, with a model of Lissitzky's *Lenin Tribune* (1920) and a model and drawings of Kabakov's *Monument to a Tyrant* (2005), in which the tyrant came to life and scared people away. The room on transforming versus escaping life showed a model of the *Prounenraum* (*Proun Room*, 1923, reconstruction 1971) and the installation *The Man Who Flew into Space from His Apartment* (1985). Further rooms addressed theatrical projects by both artists (trust in the new world versus unrealised utopia) and propaganda (the bright future ahead and behind). In this versatile, playful and sometimes melancholic way Ilya and Emilia Kabakov set out a multi-layered exhibition which juxtaposed their work with that of Lissitzky.

Lissitzky—Fiks¹⁰

In 2013, Yevgeniy Fiks (b. 1972, Moscow, Russia) made a series of paintings after some of Lissitzky's Proun paintings. The Proun series constitutes the first non-objective work that Lissitzky made while teaching alongside Malevich at the revolutionary People's Art School in Vitebsk. Fiks's works are the same size as the originals. The title of this series is "Lissitzky" written in Hebrew characters. Each work has a number. Fiks "signed" these paintings in Hebrew characters with Lissitzky's Jewish name: Eliezer Lissitzky.

Let's compare one of the paintings in Fiks's series with the original Proun it was based on. The work לייסיצקי #5 (2013) [ill.5](#) is an adapted version of one of the earliest Proun paintings: *Proun 1 C* (1919) (cat. no. 17). This work was made by Lissitzky in Vitebsk and is now in the collection of the Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum in Madrid. Comparing these two paintings, what catches the eye immediately is the different use of colour and the bold Hebrew "signature".

¹⁰ This part of the text is based on a series of questions by the author answered by e-mail by Yevgeniy Fiks on 17 April 2017. The quotations are taken from this e-mail.

This signature is so large that it becomes part of the painting. It stands out in contrast to the abstract forms. Fiks enhances the colours that Lissitzky used. He makes the paintings “newer” than Lissitzky could ever have made them. Lissitzky never signed his Proun paintings, and he would surely not have signed them using such large Hebrew characters. This raises the questions: why does Fiks use Proun paintings for his own work and why does he sign them so boldly in Hebrew characters? The artist’s answers are thought-provoking. He writes:

I’m very interested in early Lissitzky and his connection to the Jewish secular cultural awakening that took place in the late Russian Empire and in the early years of revolutionary Russia. I’m intrigued by Lissitzky’s collaboration with the cultural workers of the Culture League in Kiev and their desperate and short-lived attempt to create a modern, secular and progressive Yiddish culture. This “hidden Lissitzky” seems to have disappeared after 1922, when the artist made his last “Jewish” work. I wanted to recover him. In the period 1919–1922, he was still a Jewish cultural activist and already an internationalist/modernist. The temporary coexistence of those two identities—even if in a state of tension—fascinates me. I specifically chose those early Prouns which Lissitzky made while still creating his “Jewish” work (mostly illustrations for Yiddish and Hebrew texts). He didn’t sign them, but he did sign his “Jewish” works with his Jewish name.

For me, the years between 1919 and 1922 are conceptually important. Lissitzky was simultaneously an Ashkenazi Modernist and a Russian or Soviet Universalist. After 1922, the Jewish Lissitzky disappeared and only the Universalist Lissitzky remained. With these paintings I aimed to raise the issue of the universality and (inter)national belonging of twentieth-century modernism. I wanted to reclaim Lissitzky as an Ashkenazi Modernist and, in a way, reconstruct the Russian-Jewish secular identity, which is personally important to me. This is an identity politics project.

¹¹ Sarah Pierce answered the author’s questions in an email of 18 April 2017.

I also questioned the assumed universality of the Russian avant-garde project and wished to shed light on the Jewish secular micro-narrative within it. In this respect, Issachar Ber Ryback and early Mark Epstein are also important to me. Like Lissitzky, they saw twentieth-century Ashkenazi culture as an integral part of the European modernist project. In their eyes, Jewish (Yiddish) culture was not only compatible with, but an organic part of (then) modern Europe.

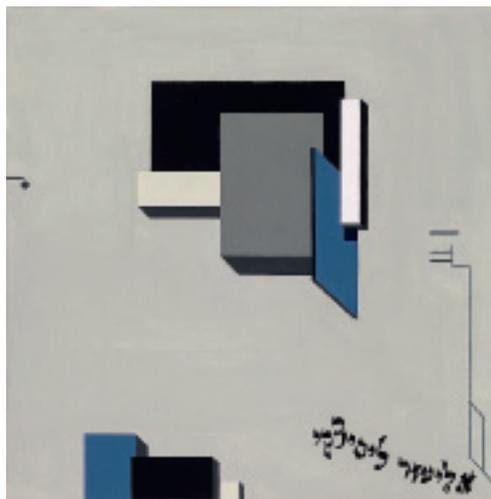
Of course, this series is a blunt juxtaposition. Looking at it now, I still like its unapologetic directness. But of course, the situation with Lissitzky and the rest of the Russian avant-garde is very complex. The question remains, what exactly did it mean to be a Russian Jew, a modernist artist and a fellow-traveller of the Revolution in those times.

With his *Lissitzky* series, Fiks aimed to bridge the art historical and personal gap in the work and life of El Lissitzky, something that Lissitzky himself was clearly unable to do at the time. In a provocative way, these paintings remind us that the goals of the Jewish national cause and the Communist International cause were not (and are still not) the same.

Lissitzky—Pierce¹¹

Sarah Pierce (b. 1968, Dublin, Ireland) was one of four artists who participated in the exhibition *Positions #2* (2016) at the Van Abbemuseum. She showed three installations, one of which was based on the work of Lissitzky and the poet and writer Alice Milligan (1865–1953, Omagh, Northern Ireland). As a nationalist, Milligan promoted Gaelic, the Irish language, and employed amateur theatre as a medium to involve rural communities in the Irish cultural revolution.

In her work, Sarah Pierce uses performance, installation, video, and archival and art historical material. The starting point for the installation *Gag* (2015) ^{iii.6} was an “archive of debris”. In the lead-up to her



5 Yevgeniy Fiks, לייסיצקי #5, 2013 | Collection of the artist | Photo: Etienne Frossard

presentation, the unused scraps and remnants from the previous exhibition were collected together: plinths, presentation walls and other material which is normally discarded. In the resulting installation, these left-overs not only made the immediate past of these particular museum rooms visible and tangible, they also related visually to photographs of the works in the *First Constructivist Exhibition* (1921)—as reconstructed at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow—and a photograph of the *Black Square*. On the walls, the Proun lithographs from the first Kestner portfolio (1923) were displayed, including the isometric layout of the *Prounenraum*.

The word “gag” has several meanings. A gag is an object placed over the mouth to prevent a person from speaking. It is also a visual joke, a “sight gag”, that conveys humour without words (think of Charlie Chaplin). And it is an improvisational gesture, the “actor’s gag”, used when a per-



former literally cannot find the words. **6** Sarah Pierce, *Gag*, 2015 | [Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, Netherlands, 2015](#) | [Photo: Peter Cox, Eindhoven, Netherlands](#)

In a performance during the exhibition, Pierce used Gaelic words and sentences as a kind of *zaum*—the transrational language developed by Russian poets such as Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh. Lissitzky knew their *zaum* from the opera *Victory Over the Sun*, which he re-enacted together with Malevich in Vitebsk in 1920. When one does not know any Gaelic it remains an abstract language. One just listens to the captivating sounds, as with *zaum* poetry. Looking back at this project, Pierce says:

I'm not certain how involved Lissitzky was in it, but *zaum* is an aspect of the Russian project in the 1920s that interests me. I incorporated it into the project *Gag* (2015) at the Van Abbemuseum. I worked with Dutch artists to make a performance work in Gaelic, where Gaelic stood in for *zaum* as a linguistic experiment within the exhibition. Lissitzky's work is important for my work, although I am not at all interested in either the cult of the artist or the cult of genius. In fact, my turn to Lissitzky has less to do with specific historical works created in his lifetime or the artist himself as a historical figure and more with what I read as the interplays between a specific and general address in his work. Lissitzky made his works in direct dialogue with artists around him. This transfer between artists, how one person's work changes through the work of others, has always interested me. What also strikes me is that I can still take up this address a century later. This is important, because it speaks to a way that artists work, really, across geographies and times. I do not mean this as a universal address—it is not received in the same way by everyone, or every artist.

I have been to the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow on several occasions, but I will never forget the first time I saw the diorama of the *First Constructivist Exhibition*. The space does so much to foreground the idea of a movement that allows us to think radically away from the individual "figures". This is how I like to think of these Russian artists from the 1920s. In these projects, my concern is

how to take up the work of such artists, not as an act of reverence but as a real and material transfer of concepts across time. The best art history understands how to do this. It requires a complete institutional shift, away from individuals, biographies and the intrigue that often compels historians to look closely at the figure. Instead we should turn to the signs and symbols of a total system of art making. That is what we can get from artists such as Lissitzky.

I focused on the Prouns because, for Lissitzky, they hover between disciplines (architecture and art). They are his way of communicating through a spatial, graphic language. *Gag* uses the exhibition space almost as though it is a three-dimensional Proun. This is a political way of behaving, where the precepts of one discipline cross over to another. The *Abstract Cabinet* (1927) is also relevant in this respect and I am always wondering if I could do something more with this idea. Many artists have tried that as well. But maybe that is the way the *Abstract Cabinet* works: it generates thinking beyond the actual decisions that Lissitzky made. I am not sure that I would want to just respond to his work, because this is precisely the wrong way to approach his ideas. Lissitzky is not fixed, his ideas are fluid and they change—sometimes in front of one's eyes. I would like to think more about Lissitzky as a teacher. Did he teach? I have learned from him. I have looked at his contributions to the language of art and thought "Oh good, that is allowed. Then that is what I'll do!"

It is clear that this creative approach to the work of Lissitzky differs radically from most of the art historical research on him. Where art historians often meticulously reconstruct the artist's personal history, other artists can take the liberty to use art history as a flexible and dynamic tool to create new works. Looking at such works, it becomes clear to us that we too can use the past as a source of inspiration. Because of his pluriform way of creating, Lissitzky is one of those artists who allows such a dynamic use.

Epilogue

Above we have seen some examples of how the work of El Lissitzky relates to that of contemporary artists. Deimantas Narkevicius juxtaposed his cinematic essay about a monument of the Soviet era to works by Lissitzky from the beginning of the Soviet period. The result was an opposition of hope and disillusion, both conceptually and visually. The same opposition was present in the exhibition *Lissitzky—Kabakov*, but here there were many other themes which Ilya Kabakov invented. Yevgeniy Fiks made a new version of the Proun series and signed the works with Lissitzky's Jewish name to remind us that the Lissitzky who began this series of abstract works in Vitebsk is the same artist who just arrived from Kiev, where he had worked on projects designed to create a new Jewish culture. Finally, Sarah Pierce focused on Lissitzky's way of working and on the results of that process.

There are many more examples of how Lissitzky is of value for contemporary artists, but the projects discussed indicate how immensely varied and up-to-date his oeuvre is. Social change, universality, theatre, politics, mechanisation, cosmism, daily life, propaganda, Jewish activism and collective pluriform artistic production are all elements which are ready to be picked up. As part of such a creative process, Lissitzky's Proun lithographs, for instance, change their meaning depending on the context in which they are shown.

In working with these artists and discussing their work, we discovered that Lissitzky's versatile and varied art is not only a moment of inspiration, an idea, a thought, a concept. Through these projects, it became clear to us that art can indeed become a tangible reality. And now we ask ourselves, impatiently: "Where will Lissitzky take us next?"