Scissors versus T-square: on El Lissitzky's Representations of Space

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ABSTRACT

The first exhibition of Russian art since the Revolution was held in Berlin at the Van Diemen Gallery in the spring of 1922. In Camilla Gray's terms it was 'the most important and the only comprehensive exhibition of Russian abstract art to be seen in the West' (Gray, 1962:315). The exhibition was organized and arranged by Russian architect El Lissitzky who acted as a link between the Russian avant-garde and that of the west. He played a seminal role especially in Germany, where he had lived before the war and where he was a constant visitor between 1922 and 1928. The diversity of El Lissitzky's talents in many fields of art including graphic design, painting, and photography made him known as 'travelling salesman for the avant-garde.' However, what makes the theoretical and visual works of Lissitzky discontinuous and divergent is that they include apparently contradictory domains. Through his short life by shifting different modes of representations - perspective, axonometry, photomontage - Lissitzky sometimes presented us a number of problems in his irrational way of using the techniques. This article concentrates on his contradictory arguments on representation of space especially between 1920 and 1924, by re-reading his theoretical texts published in the avant-garde magazines of the period and looking through his well-preserved visual works.

Keywords: El Lissitzky, representation, space, axonometry, photography, avant-garde

1. INTRODUCTION: SUPREMACY OF PROJECTION

Born in 1890 in the province of Smolensk, Eleazar Lissitzky received his architectural diploma from Technical Institute of Darmstadt, Germany. In 1919 Marc Chagall invited him to Vitebsk School of Art in his homeland to be an instructor of the architecture department. Shortly after Lissitzky's arrival, Kasimir Malevich, the so–called godfather of Suprematism, joined the faculty at Vitebsk. Thus in 1919, the ideas and content of Suprematism had been well-defined by Malevich some six years earlier. Instead of depicting everyday reality, something that he regarded as illusion, Malevich considered Suprematism as an art of the new revolutionary society to visualize an invisible reality,

which he called the 'world of non-objectivity' (Puts, 1990:15). Lissitzky was deeply influenced by Malevich's 'non-objective' paintings where squares, triangles and other flat geometric planes float in a field of white symbolizing an infinite space (Fig. 1). The notions of 'floating' and 'weightlessness' of Suprematism had played a significant role in Lissitzky's painting series of which he called *Prouns* (acronym for the Russian equivalent of 'Project for the Affirmation of the New').
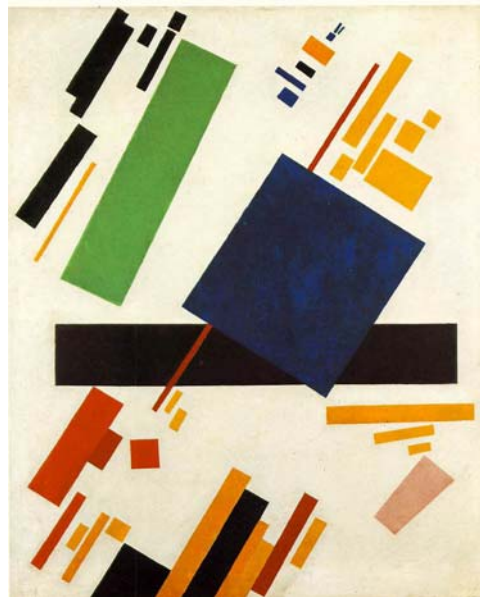

Figure 1. Kasimir Malevich, *Suprematist Painting*
1916, 88 x 70 cm.

However, Malevich didn't resort to any kind of projection for depicting the third dimension of space. For instance, his works have titles such as *Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension*, or *Color Masses in the Second Dimension* – everything but not the third dimension. His paintings were entirely planimetric using geometric planes of single color. In a sense, Lissitzky extended Malevich's two dimensional planes into three-dimensional forms, in his own terms, to be 'neither painting nor architecture but midway station between the two' (Lissitzky, 1922: 340). He argued that by expanding the Suprematist plane into its depth, he was able to dispel the illusion of three-dimensional perspectival space (Fig. 2). Lissitzky wrote: 'Suprematism has shifted the top of the finite pyramid of perspective vision into infinity… Suprematic space makes it possible to design forward of the surface but also in depth... We notice that Suprematism… has created the final illusion of irrational space, with the unlimited extension of background and foreground' (Lissitzky, 1925, 1968: 348).

Lissitzky's argument became clearer when he started to distinguish his *prouns* from Malevich's paintings: 'Suprematist canvas [nevertheless] remained in the form of picture. Like any canvas in a museum, it possessed one specific perpendicular axis (vis-à-vis the horizon), and when it was hung any other it looked as if it were sideways or upside down' (Lissitzky, 1976:60). He believed that a *Proun* has a rotational force, which destroys the perpendicular axis proper to easel picture. Lissitzky continued to argue: 'In continuing to paint with brush on canvas, we have seen that we are now building, and the picture is burning up. We have seen that the surface of the canvas has ceased to be a picture. It has become a construction and like a house, you have to walk round it, to look at it from above, to study it from beneath. The picture's one perpendicular axis (vis-à-vis the horizon) turns out to have been destroyed. We have made the canvas rotate' (Lissitzky, 1976: 66).
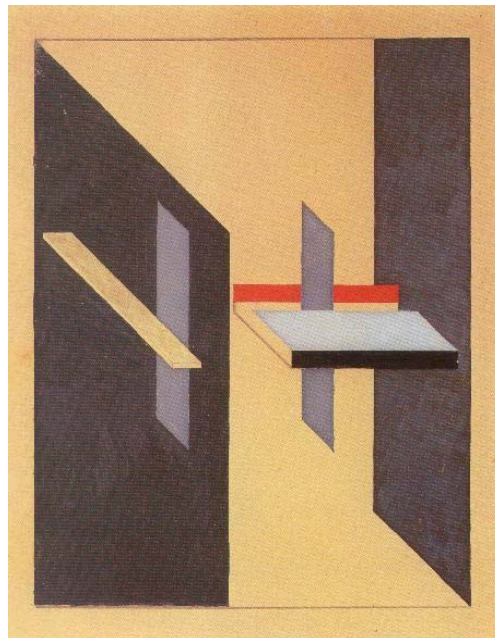

Figure 2. El Lissitzky, *Proun*, c. 1922, 35.9 x 27.5cm

Lissitzky demonstrated this idea of reversibility of the painting in several of his Prouns, such as the lithograph from the *First Proun Portfolio*, with its number (P 1) indicated on all four sides (Fig. 3). What Lissitzky wanted to do was to destroy the position of the spectator in front of the painting, in front of the horizon, by abolishing the orientation of space and in space. This emphasis on the reversibility of the painting is the opposite of the traditional concept of perspective. Unlike perspectival representation, it relies on the choice of arbitrary point of view; in fact there is no point of view now.
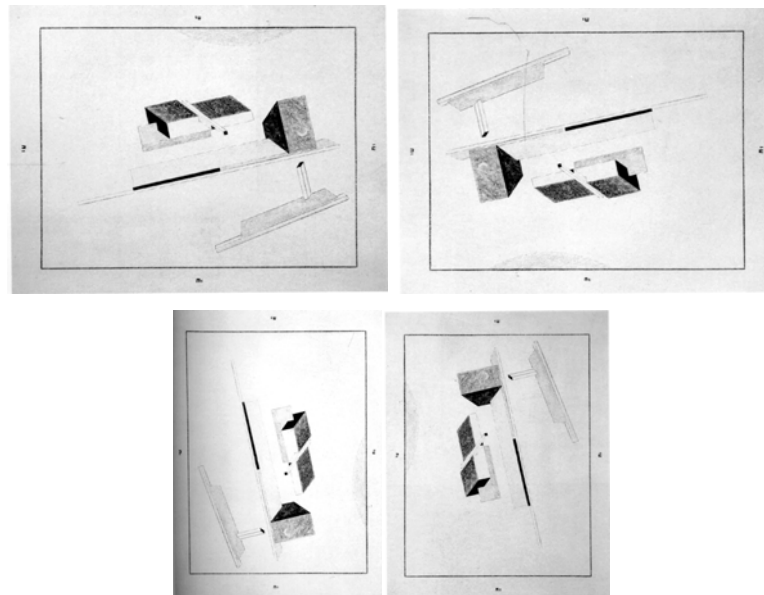
Figure 3. El Lissitzky, *Proun 1*, ca. 1919/20 25.6 x 27. 5 cm

In 1925, in an essay titled 'A. and Pangeometry' (Lissitzky, 1925, 1968:348-54), which has been cited by Kenneth Frampton as 'the central text to [Lissitky's] theoretical thought,' Lissitzky made an analysis of the changing role of the perspective (Frampton, 1968:262). He wrote that 'Perspective limits space; it has made it finite, closed.' Just after Lissitzky's article, Erwin Panofsky's book, *Perspective as Symbolic Form (Die Perspektive als Symbolische Form)* was published in 1927. Already in the title, Panofsky leaves no room for doubt that perspective is strongly linked to the philosophical anthropological influences in human society (Panofsky, 1927). Towards the end of his essay, Panofsky refers to the two critics of perspective: Plato, who condemned perspective because 'it distorted the 'true proportions' of things, and replaced reality and the *nomos* (law) with subjective appearance and arbitrariness'; and El Lissitzky, who attacked perspective because it 'limited space, made it finite, closed it off' (Panofsky, 1997:154). Lissitzky praised the destruction of the rigid Euclidean space by Lobachevsky, Gauss and Riemann, as well as the shattering of perspective space by impressionism and cubism, the artistic movements responsible for bringing the horizon to the surface of painting.

'It is generally accepted that perspective representation is the clear, objective, obvious way to represent space. [...But in fact:] Perspective has comprehended space according to the concept of Euclidian geometry as a constant three-dimensional state. It has fitted the world into a cube, which it has transformed in such a way that in the plane it appears as a pyramid. The tip of this visual pyramid either lies in our eyes – therefore in front of the object – or we project it

onto the horizon – behind the object. The former concept was chosen by the East, the latter by the West' (Lissitzky, 1925, 1968: 348).

At this point, Lissitzky illustrated his text by a three-part diagram (Fig. 4). On the left a Chinese perspective, on the right, a schematic perspective (Leonardo), and at the middle, two bisecting diagonals. Under this square, he wrote: 'This is the perspective representation of a pyramid. Where does the top lie? In depth, or in front?' Attacking perspective as ambiguous, and rational, incapable of depicting space, Lissitzky praised axonometry, without mentioning by name. It was only one year after the 1923 *De Stijl* exhibition where axonometric drawing was presented as a privileged vehicle by De Stijl architects. According to Yve Alan Bois, in his text Lissitzky describes a mode of geometric projection called '*cavaliere perspective*', which can be truly characterized by axonometry (Bois, 1990:27-33). It means literally perspective of a horse rider that is seen above. Bois explains that in this type of projection, one of the planes of the represented object is projected without any foreshortening, and receding parallel lines don't converge in a vanishing point but remain parallel. It is worth to note here that 'A. and Pangeometry' was written at a time when architects believed that their projects were not complete unless they included perspective drawings (Perez-Gomez, Pelletier, 1997:319).

Chinese   This is the perspective   Leonardo
                 representation of a pyramid.
                 Where does the top lie?
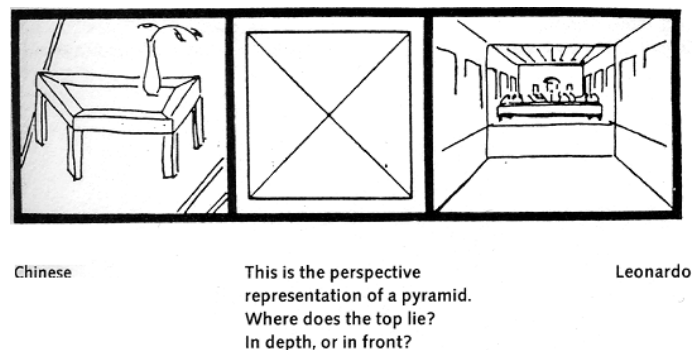   In depth, or in front?

Figure 4. Illustration from 'A. and Pangeometry'

Lissitzky attempted to employ the *reversibility* idea that he improved in his *prouns*, as a method of representing architectural space. The method of axonometry seemed to him well suited to this idea. As a part of the Great Berlin Art Exhibition in 1923, El Lissitzky was commissioned by the November Group to design an exhibition space. (Fig. 5) This was a small space measuring 3 x 3 x 2.5 meters. The method of axonometry allowed him to portray all six surfaces of the room with a minimum of rupture. However, the result drawing is quite ambiguous. Robin Evans explains that one has to look up into the ceiling and the left-hand wall joined to two sides of the central wall, and down into the floor and

the right-hand wall joined to the other two sides of the central wall and imagine all joined together (Evans, 1995: 342-343). The same occurs for his gouache and collage rendering of the *Abstraktes Kabinett* (The Abstract Cabinet) of 1928 at Alexander Dorner's museum in Hanover (Fig. 6). One has to turn upside down in order to be able to read the lower half of the drawing properly. It seems that Lissitzky forgot whether to loose oneself in front of an architectural drawing or to be able to read and comprehend the architectural drawing is important.
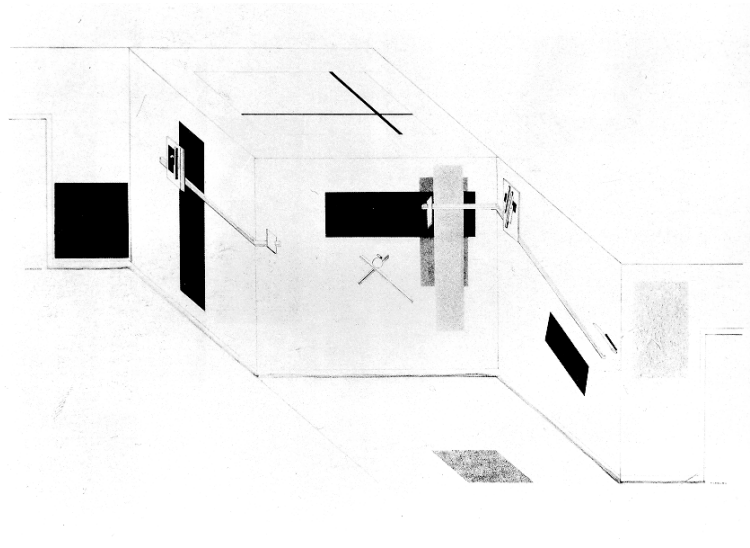

Figure 5. El Lissitzky, Axonometric Projection of the *Proun Room*
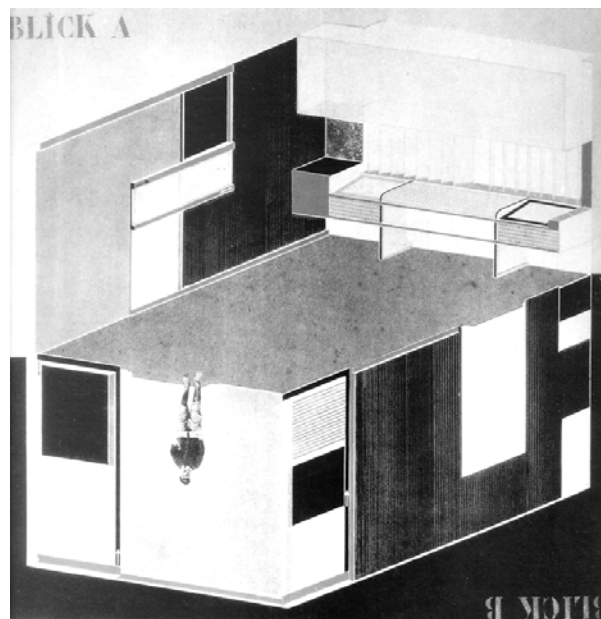Installed at the Greater Berlin Art Exhibition 1923, 59.8 x 44 cm

Figure 6. El Lissitzky, *Abstraktes Kabinett (The Abstract Cabinet)*
1927, 39.9 x 52.3 cm

2. PHOTOMONTAGE: PATH TO THE NARRATIVE

From his texts published during this period, one can assert that Lissitzky tried to contribute to building up a new industrialized society with the help of his new language. However, there was a problem. His *Prouns,* which he called the 'new spatial constructions of reality,' were not understood and appreciated by the Russian population. Depressed by his inability to 'construct iconic representation for a new mass audience,' in 1922, El Lissitzky completely stopped painting. When Alfred Barr asked him during his trip to Soviet Union whether he painted, Lissitzky replied that 'he painted only when he had nothing else to do, and as that was never, never' (Barr, 1978:19). At the same moment when Rodchenko was painting his three monochrome canvases in red, yellow and blue (1921) and Tatlin was painting his pink board (1922), Lissitzky got interested in the possibilities of photography as a medium of documentary representation.

The invention of the half tone plate in the 1880s had already made the mechanical transformation of photography on paper economic and feasible, although its initial adoption was slow in the USSR (Newhall, 1982: 249-59). But by the early 1920s with the technological developments in photomechanical reproduction and other advances in printing technology, the quantity and availability of images in the public sphere proportionally increased.

In an anonymous text, first published in 1924 in the Moscow avant-garde review LEF, the necessity of documentary representation in order to reach the new mass audience was introduced: '… [The] photographic print is not a sketch of a visual fact but a precise fixation. The precision and documentary character gives photography an impact on the spectator that the graphic representation can never claim to achieve' (Anonymous, 1924). The fact that photography is an imprint or transfer from the real life, and was directly connected to things and events in the world made it a successful way of achieving the task of educating, informing and persuading people. It was also very effective in a country whose population was neither fully literate nor united by a single language (Ades, 1986:63). Actually, attaching a photographic fragment into painting was not a new event in USSR. In 1913, Malevich had already incorporated photographic fragments in paintings, like *Composition with Mona Lisa* (a retouched and altered photographic of the Mona Lisa) or *Woman at an Advertisement Kiosk* (a fragment of dancing couple).

Gustav Klutcis, a disciple of Malevich and a collaborator with Lissitzky was the first artist to transcend the purity of Suprematist painting by introducing iconic photographic fragments into his painting, *Dynamic City* of 1919 (Buchloch, 1984:82-119) (Fig. 7).

Klutcis pasted four small figures of construction workers around central geometric shapes, adding an element of reality to an otherwise abstract composition. Indeed, *Dynamic City* is very similar in its formal structure to a painting of the same title and date (Fig. 8). Klutcis replaced certain planes by the photographs of skyscrapers to make his message clearer: 'Communist world of the future is under construction: New world is being built' (Ades, 1986:67). As Peter Burger pointed out, with the addition of photographic fragments, *Dynamic City* is 'not primarily aesthetic object but an image for reading' (Burger, 1984).
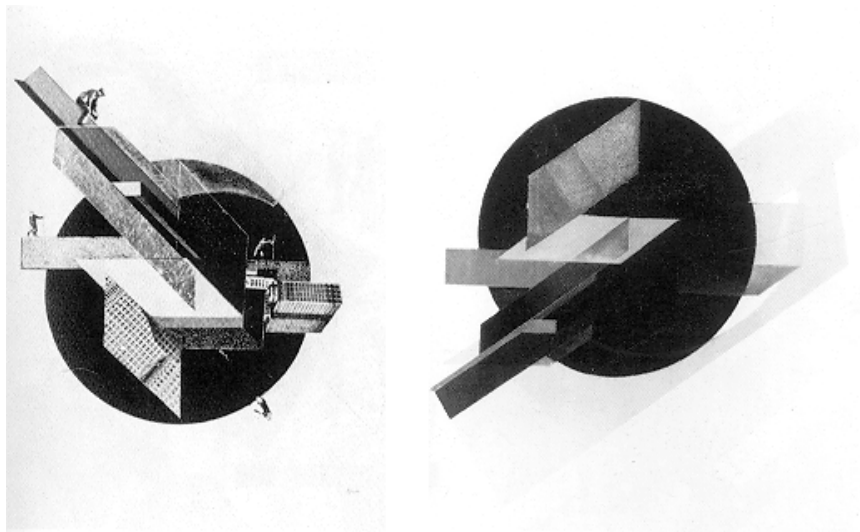

Figure 7. Gustav Klutcis, *Dynamic City*, 1919-21, photomontage

Figure 8. Gustav Klutcis, *Dynamic City*, 1919-21, oil with sand and concrete on wood

Lissitzky's first application of the photographic fragment in his work was titled *Vladimir Tatlin Working on the Monument* to the 3rd International of 1920-1 (Fig. 9). He took Tatlin's photograph from a photograph in which Tatlin was seen at work on a construction of a model together with his students. Instead of the model, Lissitzky placed his own diagrammatic plan of a model for the monument. Lissitzky incorporated the photograph for ironic and satirical effect by attaching a compass in the place of Tatlin's eye, to suggest that the artists sight could be substituted by a technical device (Tupitsyn, 1991:6), which at the same time echoes Dziga Vertov's notion of *Kino eye*, the camera as expansion of human vision, developed shortly before the execution of the monument. Another photomontage Lissitzky produced in 1922, *The Footballer* (Fig. 10) has affinities with his *Proun* constructions, particularly *Proun L. No.31*. But it was also a kind of joke between Lissitzky and his teacher Malevich. When Malevich first exhibited Suprematism in December 1915 in '0.10 the Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting,' one of his works was titled *Painterly Realism of a Football Player: Color Masses in the Forth Dimension.*

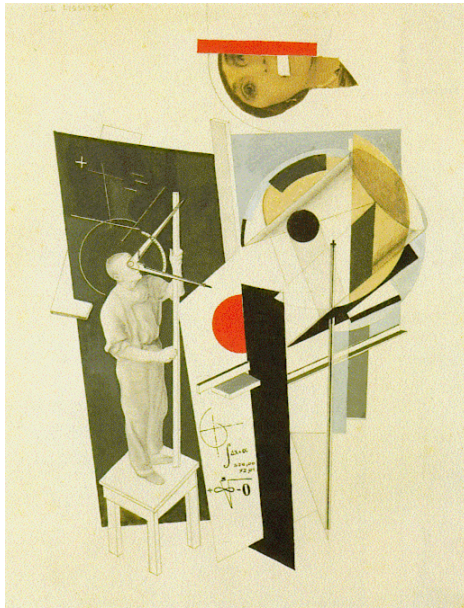Lissitzky's Footballer and Malevich's 1915 Football Player even have traces of the same structural similarities.

Figure 9. El Lissitzky, *Tatlin at Work*, 1922, 29.2 x 22.9 cm

Figure 10. El Lissitzky, *The Footballer*, 1922, 33.0 x 24.3 cm

3. PHOTOMONTAGE: MANIPULATION OF REALITY

Does photography depict more truthfully? In her book, *On Photography*, Susan Sontag concludes that reality does not have to necessarily be understood as a photographic image (Sontag, 1977). However, from the very beginning, photography confirmed painting's concern with the idea of truth in representation. The camera obscura, Sir Charles Wheatstone's stereo viewer, and Daguerre's large-scaled illusionistic light paintings for his Diorama Theater were all in part conceived from the ideas of perspective. With the invention of the modern process of photography, the understanding that a photograph was a 'mirror of nature' became a central theme. With photography's development, which included experimentation with a variety of materials and processes at the turn of the century, the belief in photography's capacity to represent truth was changed. *Photomontage*, which was the medium of Russian artists for documentary representation, derives from the idea of the manipulation of the reality. Whether made by cut and paste technique or re-photography, or photogram ('rayogram', 'schadogram'), photomontage employs fragmentation and dislocation of images to create a new meaning, a new reality out the images. And also it doesn't have to be always a montage of images. As German photomontagist John Heartfield asserted, 'A photograph can, by the addition of an unimportant spot of color, become a photomontage, a work of art of a special kind' (Heartfield, 1977:26). Sergei Tretyakov, writing about Heartfield in 1936: 'If

the photograph, under the influence of the text, expresses not simply the fact which it shows, but also the social tendency expressed by the fact, then this is already a photomontage' (Heartfield, 1977:26).

The origins of photomontage go back to the times of early photographers who produced new pictures by combining separate details together (Sobieszek, 1978). In those examples, no one was supposed to notice that the picture had been pieced together manually. In early 1920s the aim of photomontage was enlarged by the Russian Constructivists and the German Dadasits. It is evident that both groups exploited photomontage not only as a new aesthetic but to make a political statement. Dada used photomontage to attack the current political status, while Russians sought to support the new Soviet regime. Gustav Klutcis underlines the essential difference between the Soviet type of photomontage and that of Berlin Dadaists in an exhibition catalogue, in 1931:

> 'There are two general tendencies in the development of photomontage: One comes from American publicity and is exploited by the Dadaists and expressionists – the so-called photomontage of form, the second tendency that of militant and political photomontage was created on the soil of the Soviet Union. Photomontage appeared in the USSR under the banner of LEF when non-objective art was already finished' (Klucis, 1931, cited in Ades, 1986:15).

Whether German or Russian, the main idea in these photomontages was to change the reality or to create a new narrative out of the photographs. And it was far from pretending to be real. It showed brutally the process, the dissection of single photos, they were crudely cut by *scissors*.

4. THE ARCHITECT WITH SCISSORS

The use of photomontage by Russian architects in building plans and projections was quite common in the period, since many of the projects remained unbuilt in Russia at the time. Photomontage had a practical use in showing the relationship between the existing environment and projected building. Lissitzky also applied the means of photomontage in representing his projects. One example is the photomontage, which he made for his *Workenbugel* project in Nikitsky Square in Moscow (sky hanger or sky iron) of 1925 (Fig. 11). The photomontage shows the building from the point of view of a man walking in the street. It is startlingly *realistic* and makes the visionary project *actual* with the geometric rules of *perspective* and *proportion*. One has to remember that Lissitzky once wrote 'Perspective limits space; it has made it finite, closed.' However, this one is also quite different from his other photomontages where he applied the photographic element for ironic or satirical effect in order to transform the reality, not to allude the reality. On

the contrary, in the *Workenbugel* photomontage, Lissitzky sought the illusion of reality, which has the opposite effect of his non-architectural photomontages.
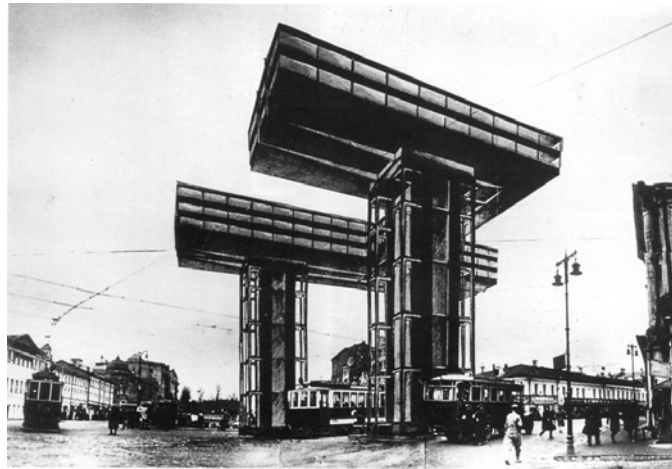

Figure 11. El Lissitzky, *Workenb/gel project*, c1924-5

In *Tatlin at Work* (Fig. 9), Lissitzky assembled images from the print media directly into the work, with no attempt to create an illusionistic space. The edges are visible. The experience of blanks or spacing between the photographic fragments is very explicit. Photographs are scattered over the surface. This visibility of the seams went further in some of his later photomontages, for example in his poster design of 1941, *Make More Tanks!* (Fig. 12). The white halos around the plane and the tank he pasted on the surface make the pieces more explicit and are understood individually. Rosalind Krauss noted that 'the white page is not the opaque surface of Cubist collage, asserting the formal and material unity of the visual support: the white page is rather the fluid matrix within which each representation of reality is secured in isolation, held with in a composition of exteriority, of syntax, of spacing' (Krauss, 1985). Therefore, 'spacing' makes it clear that we are not looking at reality but at the world infested by interpretation or signification. However, Lissitzky's interest in *Workenbugel* was in the seamless unity of the photomontage with no intrusions of the white page to create an illusionistic perspectival space. This is what fundamentally distinguishes *Workenbugel* from *Tatlin at Work*. So what is involved in *Workenbugel* is just a perspectival representation of space, which is clearly different from what he tried to achieve in his *Proun* projections.

Figure 12. El Lissitzky, *Give More Tanks!,* propaganda poster, 1941

One can conclude that Lissitzky's photomontages representing architectural spaces present an entirely different attitude from his other photomontages, or *Proun* paintings. He seems to forget his ideas about dispelling the tradition of perspectival illusion. In a certain sense these architectural photomontages of him are close to film, not only because both use photography but also because in both cases, the montage is obscured or at least made difficult to spot. One might ask why El Lissitzky's visual works are so different. Is there more than one Lissitzky, such as Lissitzky the Suprematist, Lissitzky the Soviet propagandist, Lissitzky the theoretician of abstract art, Lissitzky the photographer, etc? This question of continuity or discontinuity in his visual work is definitely not related to a chronological account. It is obvious that when it comes to represent architectural space, the avant-garde concepts that Lissitzky improved and strongly defended necessarily collapse. Attacking perspective as ambiguous, and incapable of depicting space in his paintings, Lissitzky could not escape from creating illusionistic perspectival space in his architectural photomontages. At the end, one can make a division of his works: Lissitzky the architect versus Lissitzky the avant-garde artist. T-square versus scissors!

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