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### Publication Date

2015

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Ideologies of Pure Abstraction

By

Amy Chun Kim

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

History of Art

in the

Graduate Division

of the

University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Whitney Davis, Chair

Professor Todd Olson

Professor Robert Kaufman

Spring 2015

Ideologies of Pure Abstraction

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Abstract

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This dissertation presents a history of the development of abstract art in the 1920s and 1930s, the period of its expansion and consolidation as an identifiable movement and practice of art. I argue that the emergence of the category of abstract art in the 1920s is grounded in a voluntaristic impulse to remake the world. I argue that the consolidation of abstract art as a movement emerged out of the Parisian reception of a new Soviet art practice that contained a political impetus that was subsequently obscured as this moment passed. The occultation of this historical context laid the groundwork for the postwar “multiplication” of the meanings of abstraction, and the later tendency to associate its early programmatic aspirations with a more apolitical mysticism.

Abstraction has a long and varied history as both a conceptual-aesthetic practice and as an ideal. In the first chapter, I provide a conceptual overview of the terms used by abstract artists and their contemporaries, as well as provide a historicization of the meaning of pure abstraction in terms of the relationship of modernism to its own eighteenth century beginnings and antiquity. The second chapter focuses on the “Soviet moment” of pure abstraction by looking at the Soviet contributions—primarily Konstantin Melnikov’s pavilion—to the 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Modernes* in Paris and their enthusiastic reception. The third chapter continues the examination of pure abstraction but in the context of the Parisian art world. It begins with an examination of the *L’Art d’Au’jourd’hui* exhibit of December 1925 and the two paintings Mondrian contributed to it. I seek to demonstrate that while Mondrian’s practice cannot be assimilated to the revolutionary aesthetics of the previous chapter, it was, nevertheless fundamentally connected to a certain vision of capitalism as a problem of everyday life. I argue that it is within the historical context of a dialectic between a “Soviet moment” and a Parisian experience of daily life that the rise and fall of pure abstraction should be understood. In the final chapter, I present the work of Jean Hélion, a young, committed French painter, whose trajectory from geometric to figural abstraction provides an understanding of the aesthetic and political impasses, as well as defeats, of the period, a case that casts an unsettling light on the entire adventure of pure abstraction.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures	ii
List of Abbreviations	v
Acknowledgements	vi
Introduction	1
Chapter One. Abstract, abstraction, and other terms	6
Chapter Two. The “Soviet Effect”: <i>L’Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes</i>	21
Chapter Three. The Neoplasticist Moment: <i>L’Art d’Aujourd’hui</i> , Mondrian, and Paris	54
Chapter Four. From Pure to Figural Abstraction: Jean Hélion	86
Conclusion	124
Illustrations	129
Select Bibliography	165

## List of Figures

Figure 1. Overall plan of the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, 1925. Paris.

Figure 2. Konstantin Melnikov, Soviet Pavilion, North side, 1925. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris.

Figure 3. Aleksandr Rodchenko, Photograph of north side of Melnikov's Soviet Pavilion, 1925.

Figure 4. Konstantin Melnikov, Soviet Pavilion, West side (before the inauguration), 1925. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris.

Figure 5. Aleksandr Rodchenko, Photograph of a detail of Melnikov's Soviet Pavilion, 1925.

Figure 6. Konstantin Melnikov, Soviet Pavilion, Detail of staircase and covered passage, 1925. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris.

Figure 7. Konstantin Melnikov, Final perspective drawing (north), Soviet Pavilion, 1924. Pencil and watercolor on paper.

Figure 8. Konstantin Melnikov, Final published Pavilion plan and longitudinal sections, Soviet Pavilion, 1924. Pencil and watercolor on paper.

Figure 9. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Workers' Club*, Soviet Pavilion, 1925. Portrait of Lenin seen on back wall. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris.

Figure 10. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Workers' Club*, Soviet Pavilion, 1925. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris.

Figure 11. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Workers' Club*, Soviet Pavilion, 1925. Photo taken day of inauguration. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris.

Figure 12. El Lissitzky, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, 1920. Lithograph on paper, 49 x 49 cm. Lenin Library, Moscow.

Figure 13. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 79.2 x 79.5 cm. State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow.

Figure 14. Kazimir Malevich, *Red Square (Painterly Realism: Peasant Woman in Two*

*Dimensions*), 1915. Oil on canvas, 53 x 53 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

Figure 15. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square and Red Square (Painterly Realism: Boy with Knapsack – Color Masses in the Four Dimensions)*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 71.4 x 44.4 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Figure 16a-h. El Lissitzky, *About 2 Squares*, designed and produced at UNOVIS, 1920 (Berlin: Scythian Press, 1922).

Figure 17a-d. Konstantin Melnikov, Preliminary Sketches, Soviet Pavilion, 1924. Pencil on paper.

Figure 18. Vladimir Tatlin, *Monument to the Third International*, Second model prepared specifically for the Soviet exhibits, 1925. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris.

Figure 19. Vladimir Tatlin, *Monument to the Third International*, Second model prepared specifically for the Paris Exposition Internationale, 1925. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris.

Figure 20. Konstantin Melnikov, Preliminary variants of sarcophagus for V.I. Lenin, 1923.

Figure 21. Photography of entrance to the Soviet Section in the Grand Palais, 1925. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris.

Figure 22. Piet Mondrian, *Tableau No. I: Lozenge with Three Lines and Blue, Gray, and Yellow*, 1925. Oil on canvas, diagonal: 112 cm, sides: 80 x 80 cm. Kunsthaus Zurich.

Figure 23. Piet Mondrian, *Tableau No. II, with Black and Gray*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm. Kunstmuseum Bern.

Figure 24. Piet Mondrian, *Sketchbook 1925, Sheet A*, verso, 1925. Charcoal on paper, 23 x 29.8 cm. Private collection.

Figure 25. Piet Mondrian, *Sketchbook 1925, Sheet C*, 1925. Charcoal on paper, 23 x 29.8 cm. Whereabouts unknown.

Figure 26. Piet Mondrian, *Tableau 2, with Yellow, Black Blue, Red, and Gray*, 1922. Oil on canvas, 55.6 x 53.4 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

Figure 27. Piet Mondrian, *Shilderij No. I: Lozenge with Two Lines and Blue*, 1926. Oil on canvas, diagonals: 84.9 x 85 cm, sides: 60 x 60 .1 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

Figure 28. Piet Mondrian, *Lozenge Composition with Red, Black, Blue, and Yellow*, 1925.

Oil on canvas, diagonal: 109 cm, sides: 77 x 77 cm. Private collection.

Figure 29. Photograph of an exposed wall with advertising on the rue du Départ.

Figure 30. Piet Mondrian, *Paris Courtyard Façades, Rue du Départ*, 1913-14. Pencil on paper, 23.6 x 15.4 cm. Private collection.

Figure 31. László Moholy-Nagy, Photograph of the view of the railway yard from Mondrian's studio, c. 1925.

Figure 32. Piet Mondrian, *Lozenge Composition with Two Lines*, 1931. Oil on canvas, diagonal: 112 cm, sides: 80 x 80 cm. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

Figure 33. Jean Gorin, *Composition No. 28*, 1930. Oil on wood, 60 x 60 x 3 cm. Private collection.

Figure 34. Jean Gorin, *Composition No. 28*, 1930, as published in *Abstraction-Création*, no. 2 (1933), 19.

Figure 35. Jean Gorin, *Composition No. 8*, 1934. Oil on wood, 88 x 115 x 5 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Liège.

Figure 36. Jean Hélion, *Composition Ouverte*, 1930. Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm. Galerie Louis Carré, Paris.

Figure 37. Jean Hélion, *Composition Ouverte*, 1930. Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm. Galerie Louis Carré, Paris.

Figure 38. Jean Hélion, *Équilibre*, 1933. Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm. Private collection.

Figure 39. Jean Hélion, *Équilibre* sketch, 1934. Ink and watercolor on paper.

Figure 40. Jean Hélion, *Équilibre*, 1933-34. Oil on canvas, 97.4 x 131.2 cm. Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.

Figure 41. Jean Hélion, *Figure bleue*, 1935-36. Oil on canvas, 145 x 99 cm. Musée de l'art moderne de la ville de Paris.

Figure 42. Fernand Léger, *Three Women (Le Grand Déjeuner)*, 1921. Oil on canvas, 183.5 x 251.5 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

Figure 43. Jean Hélion, *Figure tombée*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 126.2 x 164.3 cm. Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris.



## List of Abbreviations

AEAR	Association des Écrivains et des Artistes Révolutionnaires
ASNOVA	Association of New Architects (Assotsiatsii novykh arkhitektorov)
INKhUK	Institute of Artistic Culture (Institut khudozhestvennoir kul'tury), Moscow
Narkompros	People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia)
NEP	New Economic Policy
OBMOKhU	Society of Young Artists (Obshchestvo molodykh khudozhnikov)
OSA	Organization of Contemporary Architects (Objedinenie sovremennykh arkhitektorov)
PCF	Parti Communiste Français
Proletkul't	Proletarian Culture (Proletarskaia kul'tura)
<i>proun</i>	project for the affirmation of the new ( <i>proekt utverzheniia novogo</i> )
SVOMAS	Free State Art Studios (Svobodnye gosudarstvennye khudozhestvennye masterskie)
UNOVIS	Champions of the New, or Affirmers of the New Art (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva)
VKhUTEMAS	Higher Art and Technical Workshops (Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvennye tekhnicheskie masterskie)
VKhUTEIN	Higher Artistic and Technical Institute (Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvennye tekhnicheskie institut)

## Acknowledgements

This dissertation could not have been written without the support of a number of individuals and institutions. First and foremost I would like to thank Whitney Davis for his intellectual guidance and generous support over the years at Berkeley. From his many seminars to his insightful comments at all stages of this project, he has challenged me to think about abstraction and art history and theory in productive and novel ways. As a scholar and advisor, he has been a model. I also owe much to Todd Olson for his unflagging support and advice, as well as his thoughtful and in depth scrutiny of the text. Robert Kaufman also provided interesting and lively discussion of the project at both its earliest and latest stages. I would also like to thank Darcy Grigsby for helping me shape my early understanding of abstraction through our work on Chardin and the eighteenth century. I am also appreciative of earlier comments by T.J. Clark and Anne Wagner on the project.

I am grateful for support from the U.S. Department of Education for a Jacob K. Javits Fellowship and from the University of California, Berkeley, for a Chancellor's Fellowship. These both enabled me to reside and travel, primarily in France, while conducting archival research for this project. I would like to thank the History of Art Department at the University of California, Berkeley, for its support, especially in bringing the dissertation to completion. I am also very appreciative of the efforts and assistance of the staff members at Berkeley, especially Linda Fitzgerald, Matt Joyce and Solomon Lefler. I have benefited from the help of staff at numerous libraries and archives, but I would like to especially thank Yves Chevrefils Desbiolles at the Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine.

I would like to thank the following people with whom I have discussed this material over the many years I worked on it: Judith Aissen, Cal Bedient, James Clifford, Joshua Clover, Caleb Considine, David Lau, Laura Martin, Jeremy Melius, Jennifer Sakai, Justin Underhill, Kristina Valentinova, and Hayden White. Finally, I would like to thank my parents, my sister and my partner for their support, without which I could not have completed this.

## Introduction

Midnight of art is ringing. Fine art is banished. The artist-idol is a prejudice of the past.

– Kazimir Malevich, 15 July 1919<sup>1</sup>

The ideal of blackness with regard to content is one of the deepest impulses of abstraction.

– Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 1961-1969<sup>2</sup>

This dissertation presents a history of the development of abstract art in the 1920s and 1930s, the period of its expansion and consolidation as an identifiable movement and practice of art. If we look to the pioneers of abstract painting in the 1910s, two distinctive strands emerge—namely, the geometric abstraction of Mondrian and Malevich and the expressive explosion of color and line in Kandinsky. The opposing ideals of purified abstraction and subjective expressionism form a dialectic in the development of modern art, and can be seen as the poles between which abstract art as a whole developed. I argue that the consolidation of abstract art as a movement emerged out of the Parisian reception of a new Soviet art practice that contained a political impetus that was subsequently obscured as this moment passed. The occultation of this historical context laid the groundwork for the postwar “multiplication” of the meanings of abstraction, and the later tendency to associate its early programmatic aspirations with a more apolitical mysticism.

The emergence of the category of abstract art in the 1920s, and its association with a collective movement, is grounded in the phenomenon of “pure,” or geometric, abstraction as the instantiation of a passionate negation of existing conditions and a voluntaristic impetus to remake the world. Pure abstraction also posed anew the problem of realism, attempting to redefine it in terms of a mimetic—but not naturalistic—image of the real in a starkly estranged form. This is the content of the new representational order proposed by pure abstract painting, even as it seemingly rejected the imperatives of manifest content. With its pioneers, there was always an impulse towards negativity, but this does not mean that the desire to enact a radical destruction of painting was not also, in registering the limits of representation, a search for a new form of representation that could overcome these limits. Abstraction came up against the problem of planarity and flatness, the material constraints and conditions of painting, but took these, and a new emphasis on geometry, as the grounds of a new practice of making meaning. The genesis,

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<sup>1</sup> Printed in 1925 as the part of the “Suprematism” text in El Lissitzky & Hans Arp, *Die Kunstisten, Les Ismes de L'Art, The Isms of Art* (Erlenbach-Zürich, München and Leipzig: Eugen Rentsch Verlag, 1925), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 39.

and ambition, of abstraction as a category of art lay in its attempt to articulate a beyond of representation as it had existed, and in so doing establish a new understanding of not only the means but also the aim of representation, the illumination of underlying structures of social experience—an abstract planarity that had its basis in the “real abstractions” of the world around it.

That these concerns were at the heart of abstraction as it was introduced to and practiced in Paris in the 1920s and early 1930s is one of the main arguments of this dissertation. The use of the term “pure abstraction” for the paintings discussed here is meant to highlight the commitment to geometric form, as well as the idea that the origin of abstract art lies in this mode of painting—of enacting a “purifying destruction”<sup>3</sup> of old forms of representation and a revelation of the universal “pure relationships” that formed the ontological foundation of painting itself.<sup>4</sup> In the first chapter, I offer a brief survey of the terminological and conceptual landscape of abstract art in this period. The remaining chapters track the development of abstract art as a movement by focusing in on three distinct historical “moments” that I argue frame the rise and fall of pure abstraction.

The direct engagement of modern art with politics, and revolutionary practice even, constitute for many the exemplary moments of modernism. The second chapter thus begins with just such a high point in examining the Soviet contributions to the 1925 *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Modernes* and their enthusiastic reception. Although the importance of the Russian avant-garde is never dismissed in histories of early twentieth century art, I will argue that its moment in modern art has not been given its due significance in understanding the course charted by abstract art in the interwar period, as well as its preeminent position in the thinking of artists in Paris. The experience of the Soviet avant-garde, with its abstract artists and painters of an epic of revolutionary praxis, provides a central insight into understanding the emergence of abstract art as a group movement in Paris.

This is not to say that all pure abstract art was manifestly “political” or even that artists in this mode thought of their art as having a political function. Melnikov’s pavilion, which draws on the formal language of Suprematism and Constructivism—Malevich, Lissitzky, and Tatlin—is a special case in which abstract form is seen as the solution to a specific ideological project of presenting the Soviet Union to Europe, on the heels of its diplomatic normalization with France in late 1924. Melnikov’s pavilion, the highlight of the 1925 Exposition, is significant because makes explicit the radical political content of geometric abstraction. However, it also signals the desire to move beyond the two-dimensional expression of this form-content problem, indicating the

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<sup>3</sup> Carel Blotkamp, *Mondrian: The Art of Destruction* (London: Reaktion Books, 1994).

<sup>4</sup> Charles Harrison has also referred to this as the “strong” understanding of abstraction as opposed to a “weak” definition that would also include works such as Pablo Picasso’s *Guitarist* of 1910. Charles Harrison, et al., *Primitivism Cubism Abstraction* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 185. In bringing in a Picasso example, Harrison is responding to Paul Nash’s claim in 1932 that Picasso was “the greatest of all abstract painters.” Paul Nash, “Abstract Art,” *The Listener*, 17 August 1932.

limits of both the negative and constructive possibilities of pure abstraction as well. In fact, while the pavilion demonstrates the possibilities of an abstract syntax of forms, the very fact that this demonstration manifests itself through architecture, not painting, can be read already as prefiguring the end of the project of radical abstract painting. In light of the imperatives of the revolutionary project, architecture seems to make explicit the impasses of pure abstraction as it developed in the context of painting. The new art cannot truly become the new art without its own dissolution. This central contradiction has fundamental implications for the unfolding of the project of abstraction in Paris, examined in the two following chapters.

One of the core claims of the dissertation is that abstract art emerged in a dialectical, or even disjunctive connection between the experience of a new stage in the modernism of everyday life and a revolutionary project that sought to direct and accelerate this transformation towards a horizon of aesthetic-political transcendence. That is to say, in attempting to draw out the historical content of what this new “abstract form of life” meant to the artists, such as Mondrian, who cited it as the basis of their practice, I argue that these radical and short-lived events need to be seen against the backdrop of the experience of everyday life in the capitalist metropolises of the west. Thus, I will argue that it is necessary to consider the Parisian art world, despite the more obviously politically oriented scenes in the Soviet Union or even Berlin, in order to understand the course charted by abstract art in the interwar period.

After looking at the Soviet pavilion, then, the third chapter examines more specifically Paris-based abstract art activity, centered around Mondrian’s neoplasticism. In Paris, the flourishing of abstract art after the 1925 Exposition remained an affair largely of painters who are influenced by their exposure to revolutionary upheavals but also by their rootedness in Paris, the “capital of modernity.” Mondrian, for instance, sees the new art and the new form of life it presages (albeit in less specifically revolutionary forms, although his writing and thinking is also embedded in the problem of the relation between art and society, abstract art and the life of the city) as a fusion of painting, sculpture, and architecture. This is not an uncommon stance at this time, but he also declares that the time has not yet arrived for this total work of art to emerge.

The chapter begins at the end of 1925 with the only major exhibition of abstract art to be held that decade: the December *L’Art d’Aujourd’hui* show. Examining in detail Mondrian’s two contributions to the exhibit, I place them in the context of his prolific writing on neoplasticism. I argue that his understanding of neoplasticism, geometric form and formal painterly relations are fundamentally connected to an experience of the spaces of the modern city and Paris in particular. I hope to demonstrate that Mondrian’s neoplasticism was marked by an attunement to a developing capitalist metropole. However, it may also be that because Mondrian’s ideal of pure abstraction was more rooted in an idea of the Parisian avant-garde and inspired by his encounters with Paris as the modern city *par excellence*, he was the only artist not to abandon pure abstraction. This is perhaps also the reason why for far longer than any other pioneer of abstract art or artist of pure abstraction—who sought to unify art and revolutionary praxis—he

maintained his commitment to neoplasticism. While I seek to emphasize the importance of the “Soviet moment” at the origins of the idea of abstraction, Mondrian serves as an important and necessary counterexample to more politically committed practices.

The final chapter delves into the world of Jean Héliion, a young French painter who came to abstraction in the late 20s. Héliion’s first serious engagement with abstraction took place through his introduction to Van Doesburg and his *Art Concret* group and soon thereafter Mondrian, in the fall of 1929. Although most of the literature on Héliion credits his turn to abstraction to the influence of Van Doesburg and Mondrian, his memoirs also contain several short but intriguing pages on gatherings at the Communist writer, Tristan Rémy’s house in Montmartre and Rémy’s plan to form the first *Association des écrivains et des Artistes Révolutionnaires* (AEAR).<sup>5</sup> Although Rémy and the AEAR are often remembered as proponents of Surrealism, it was at Rémy’s house that he was introduced to the German painter, Otto Freundlich, and thereby abstract art. He reminisced that before this meeting, “Je ne savais pas que l’art abstrait pouvait exister.”<sup>6</sup> Focusing on Héliion’s activities from the late 20s to his last abstract painting completed in 1937, this chapter argues that this Communist left context is central to understanding his adoption of, as well as eventual abandonment of, abstraction.

Even as the enthusiasm that greeted Melnikov’s pavilion disappeared and a more classicizing tendency—another “call to order”—seemed to grip the French art world, Héliion settled into geometric abstraction as the first real style of his own. In 1930 he completed a couple of paintings. Then there is a break until 1932, which begins a continuous period of development of abstraction. The signal event of the intervening year, 1931, is Héliion’s visit to the Soviet Union, which stoked his enthusiasm for a seemingly radical blend of politics and abstraction. As he describes it: “Nul doute qu’au début des années trente, j’avais beaucoup de sympathie pour les idées communistes. On les prêchait, ici et là, comme une religion du bonheur de tous. Je me suis rendu moi-même en U.R.S.S. avec le peintre William Einstein, en 1931, et me suis émerveillé des choses qu’on me montrait: coopératives, écoles, prisons, ponts, usines...”<sup>7</sup>

Although he spoke of his admiration for Malevich, Lissitzky and Tatlin, Héliion’s understanding abstraction was more influenced by a kind of diluted version of constructivism that was known to Western European artists. This, I argue, is significant in understanding Héliion’s turn away from abstraction towards a more figurative style of painting in the mid-30s. In fact, it is important not to conflate the political situation of the late 1910s and early 20s with that of the late 20s or mid-30s, a difference that is manifest in Héliion’s identification of left politics with the Communist Party from his introduction to it in the 1920s to his turn away from abstraction coinciding with his break with the AEAR and the CP in the mid-30s. Pure, geometric abstraction had seemed to have reached an impasse, neither its political nor spiritual ventures into the absolute seeming to

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<sup>5</sup> Jean Héliion, *Mémoire de la chambre jaune* (Paris: École nationale supérieure des Beaux-Arts, 1994 [dictated 1983]), 18-20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>7</sup> Héliion, “Origine et fin de mon abstraction” (1983), in *Mémoire de la chambre jaune*, 175.

have any purchase on actual lived experience, and Héliion took up instead a form of abstraction that he perceived as allowing him to develop his self-described “aspirations” in a more concrete form: “figural” abstraction as seen in the *Figure* compositions of 1934-1938. Here, the passage from a more strictly geometric abstraction in his early paintings to the figural abstraction beginning in 1934 can be seen, on the one hand, as a development out of the disappointingly unrealized ambitions of pure abstraction. One reading of the 1932-34 series of *Équilibre* paintings can see the title in terms of a nascent, if unconscious, desire for order and even reconciliation, which is manifested later in the rejection of the CP based on self-described principles of moderation and limitation.<sup>8</sup> On the other, the move towards figuration can also be seen as an attempt to reorient the practice of abstraction within a changed landscape of capitalist life, seeking to propose a counterimage in the form of a different utopian figure of the concrete before memory consigned these years to a mere prefiguration of Stalinism. Ultimately, this move is also seen bereft of possibility, and Héliion brings the period of abstract art to a close with *Figure Tombée*.

An examination of the history of this period will show that it was in a mediation between these two centers—the Soviet Union, and particularly its 1925 exhibits, and Paris—that abstract artists, chart their course. The later obscurity of the meaning of abstraction was the result of the steady retraction of the impetus coming from the former. While many artists are drawn to the idea of the Soviet Union, in the end, the vision of emancipated life and art thought to exist there turn out to be dreams shattered by their very visits. Artists thus turn back to consider the concrete forms of life in Paris, “capital of modernity,” and themes of a more specifically European tradition embodied in the works of the Parisian avant-garde and French art. Héliion’s painting eventually moved away from the constructivist, architectural form of abstraction, which failed to achieve the real utopian constructions it symbolized while also seeming to demand the end of painting itself for its true realization. The adventure of the avant-garde and abstraction played out in the urban milieu of Paris and its image of modern life—its own dream of a totalized, Haussmanian façade, interrupted by the co-existence of vestiges of aristocratic life in *hotel particuliers* and its refashioned grand new bourgeois spaces, and the intransigent evidence of working class life—and it is within the historical context of a dialectic between a “Soviet moment” and a Parisian experience of daily life that the rise and fall of pure abstraction should be understood.

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 183-4.

## Chapter One

### Abstract, abstraction, and other terms

The turn to geometry and planar form was steeped in the radical atmosphere of an epoch, and the “new art” was marked by a profound engagement with the creation of a different understanding of the concrete that would reveal the world in its essence, rather than its naturalistic appearances. That there was a desire to make a complete break with the past, and have the new art stand for a new world, was clear in the work of the pioneers of abstraction, Malevich and Mondrian. The precise contours of what this would entail and what an abstract realism would be were subject to debate, and artists struggled to devise a proper language and terminology.

#### *Die Kunstismen*

By 1925, abstract art had broadened its appeal and was no longer limited to the pioneering practices of its founders but attracted a number of artists who found for the first time a vocation in its forms. Evidence of this activity can be found in El Lissitzky and Hans Arp’s 1925 *Die Kunstismen*, where the phenomenon of abstraction is omnipresent in its variations, irreducible to a single ism, school, or style. Lissitzky first conceived of the book, which was to be a “last parade of all the isms from 1914-24,” in 1924 and proposed the idea to Hans Arp and Sophie Taeuber-Arp later that year.<sup>9</sup> Arp found the publisher and has been credited with drafting much of the short text of *Die Kunstismen*, which was presented in German, French and English translation. This text consists of aphoristic sayings on the various avant-garde “isms,” but a large portion is also made up of direct quotations from the principal artists. Although Arp was in charge of the proofs at an early stage, after several disagreements and perceived mutual slights by both, Lissitzky took over responsibility for putting together and publishing the book. In December 1924, for instance, he is writing to Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers: “Habe viel mit dem Ismen-Buch zu tun. Fast jeden Tag kommen Korrekturen Es geht jetzt prächtig, da ich die ganze Sache allein besorge...Ich glaube, der Einband ist mir auch gelungen.”<sup>10</sup> In the final, published version of the book, his influence is seen not only in his designs for the cover and the book itself but can also be traced to the central, leading role given to Malevich, as well as the overall space devoted to Russian and Soviet artists.

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<sup>9</sup> Alois Martin Müller, “The Last Parade,” introduction to *Die Kunstismen* (1968 ed.), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Lissitzky, Letter, 6 December 1924, in El Lissitzky and Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Maler, Architekt, Typograf, Fotograf: Erinnerungen, Briefe, Schriften*. Dresden: VEB Verlag Der Kunst, 1967, 52. Translated by Helene Aldwinckle and Mary Whitehall as *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1968, 55. “For this reason, I refer primarily to Lissitzky as the author. Have a lot to do for the *Isms*-book. Proofs arrive almost every day. It is going marvelously now that I am seeing to the whole thing by myself...I think I have also been successful with the cover.” It is for the reasons stated here that I primarily refer to Lissitzky as the author of the book.



In summing up the avant-garde developments of the preceding ten years, the book identifies sixteen separate isms: *Abstrakter Film*, *Konstruktivismus*, *Verismus*, *Proun*, *Kompressionismus*, *Merz*, *Neo-Plastizismus*, *Purismus*, *Dada*, *Simultanismus*, *Suprematismus*, *Metaphysiker*, *Abstraktivismus*, *Kubismus*, *Futurismus*, and *Expressionismus*. With the exception of the last three and *Metaphysiker*, categories that all feature artists and work preceding the emergence of the first abstract paintings, the majority of the remaining categories represent some form of arguably abstract art.<sup>11</sup> *Neo-Plastizismus*, for instance, features work by Mondrian, Theo van Doesburg, Georges Vantongerloo, as well as a well-known collaboration on a room by Victor Huszar and Gerrit Rietveld. *Proun*, as to be expected, is devoted to Lissitzky and the work of his atelier while *Konstruktivismus* and *Suprematismus* constitute separate entries.

The distinction drawn between Lissitzky's *proun* paintings and the objects in *Konstruktivismus* would have reflected ongoing debates and divisions over the continuing significance of traditional artistic media, debates in which the Soviet constructivists rejected any defense of painting as a form of "easelism." Lissitzky's distancing himself from the Constructivists reflected his understanding of the operative theoretical divisions, but his grouping together of a Vladimir Tatlin *Corner Counter-relief*, Naum Gabo *Glass Construction*, and photographs from the 1921 OBMOKhU (Society of Young Artists) under the banner of Constructivism was also obscuring, especially for the European reader with no real knowledge of these groups, their positions or polemics. We will examine the heated disagreements among the Constructivists, as well as the consequences of European artists' seeming failure to grasp their significance, in the coming chapters. Here, it serves to note that one primary fault line papered over in Lissitzky's account is, in fact, the fundamental divide between the Soviet artist-constructors who sought to free themselves from the world of fine art and the "Western Constructivists," such as Gabo, who were criticized as aesthetes still relying on notions of individual artistic and painterly (or sculptural) forms of expression.<sup>12</sup>

The category, *Suprematismus*, in *Die Kunstismen* is less controversial, and it occupies a conceptually significant position. While each ism has a fairly short description, Suprematism has the longest, with Malevich's voice given the most space. The following quotation from Malevich's "On New Systems in Art" begins the entry:

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<sup>11</sup> *Kubismus* consisted of work by Picasso, Braque, Gleizes, Gris and Léger; *Futurismus* of Balla, Boccioni, Severini, and Luigi Russolo; and *Metaphysiker* of De Chirico. With *Expressionismus*, Lissitzky and Arp referred to the work of Franz Marc and Paul Klee, while Kandinsky was put into the *Abstraktivismus* section. Although the former *Der Sturm* member Oskar Schlemmer was also featured, he was placed as the sole representative of *Kompressionismus* for his Constructivist-influenced *Wandmalerei*. *Verismus* was made up of two pages featuring work by Otto Dix and George Grosz.

<sup>12</sup> Held in Moscow from May to June 1921, this is the *Second Spring Exhibition of the OBMOKhU*. Maria Gough argues that in 1921 there were "(at least) two Constructivisms," and that this exhibit represents the work of the first, which was "predominantly abstract" and, moreover produces the "spatial construction." Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 8.

The actual time is the epoch of analyses, the result of all systems that ever were established. Centuries brought the signs to our line of demarcation, in them we shall recognise the imperfections that led to division and contradiction. Perhaps we hereof only shall take the contradictory to construct the system of unity.<sup>13</sup>

By placing Malevich at the beginning of the book, Lissitzky signals that the epochal character of modern art is to be understood in terms of the radical aesthetic militancy of abstract art and, furthermore, that this abstraction is exemplified in the art of the Soviet avant-garde. “On New Systems in Art” was written in 1919, and in it, Malevich names the present as a new epoch, a time for constructing new systems. It is the achievement of a definitive break with the past, which figures not as a tradition to be drawn upon but as locus of unresolved contradictions.

Malevich’s language can be difficult to translate and interpret, as has been noted by many writers, including his own contemporaries, but putting the somewhat vague declarations of the epigraph in the context of their preceding passages can aid in parsing their significance. It reads as follows:

World energy is moving towards economy and every step it takes towards the infinite is expressed in the new economic culture of signs; a revolution is simply a conclusion of new economic energy, rocked by world intuition. Revolution never occurs without especial pretexts, and therefore reason produces all sorts of proposals for which it would not mind doing a spot of work, since nobody will come forward for the purpose of simple movement into infinity. Revolution always stands on the disintegration of all the economic reasons of the past. Art goes on uninterruptedly, since the same energy lives in it, with the same infinite aim. Cubism is art pulverising and turning into a single unit the sum or sums of old conclusions that were equal in strength, in order to produce from them a new economic material conclusion.<sup>14</sup>

“Our line of demarcation” now appears as the Russian revolution, separating the new epoch out of the ash heap of history in which lie the pulverized remains of the past whose contradictions have been made apparent, having lost its unifying life force. What is the

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<sup>13</sup> *Die Kunstismen* (1925), 8. The translation of this passage from Malevich’s “On new systems in art” is presumably by Lissitzky himself. We know that Lissitzky was translating Malevich’s writings into German, and in March of 1924 he writes of having completed the translation of “On the new Systems in Art.” See Lissitzky-Küppers, 46. An alternate translation reads: “We are living in a special time: perhaps there has never been such a time, a time of analyses and results for all the systems that ever existed; new signs will be brought to the demarcation line of our age. In them we will see the imperfections leading only to division and discord — and from them we will take, perhaps, only discord in order to build up a system of unity.” K.S. Malevich, *Essays on Art: 1915-1933*, ed. Troels Andersen, trans. Xenia Giowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (New York: George Wittenborn, Inc., 1968), 117. Arguably, Lissitzky’s translation captures the spirit of the times better, not only in its concision and tone, but also in the more evocative use of “contradiction” and the possibility of its overcoming, rather than “discord.”

<sup>14</sup> Malevich, “On New Systems in Art,” in *Essays on Art*, 116-17.

place of art in this epochal condition? “The blue color of the sky has been defeated by the Suprematist system, has been broken through, and entered white, as the true real conception of infinity, and therefore liberated from the color background of the sky.”<sup>15</sup> It might be tempting to see in the sentence on Cubism a paradoxical Jacques Attali-like view of art, in which superstructural elements are thought to anticipate changes in the base. However, the relationship between art and something called economy or politics is not so easily resolved. “New economic material conclusion” certainly evokes the radical project of the Russian revolution, but in relating conclusion to artistic practice, Malevich also points to the notion of an economy of artistic means, of coming to new conclusions about art and representation based on the material conditions of painting.<sup>16</sup>

The ambiguity of the meaning of “economy” persists in the phrase, “new economic culture of signs.” It seems to point both to an idea of a culture—art—that uses only the minimum necessary for making meaning. The *Black Square* is, among other things, painting reduced to this absolute minimum of representation. From this, one view of the new art that emerges is an immanent one, in which the formal or technical logic of art drives its development. At the same time, the phrase seems to suggest that signs—however stark in their refusal of conventional representation—are somehow mediated by developments in the social world. While a black square on a white canvas can be seen as a conclusion of one kind about flatness and painting, it signifies much more than this. That is to say, if we take Malevich’s writings and politics seriously, the adventure of abstraction is about taking art to its limits, to the brink of annihilation, and finding—or being forced to find—transcendence. The black square is both figure and ground, hard flatness and recession into depth, object and void. It is an image of contradiction that, at the same time, is also totality. In proposing a new representational order, abstract art laid claim to the idea that flatness and geometrical form had a special purchase on capturing and imagining the form of new post-revolutionary existence—the new art, the new man, and the new world. But flatness and geometrical form were also indices of a final stage of the bourgeois episteme that was to be transcended—the degree zero of representation. The abstract art that arose out of the reception of a revolutionary impetus from the east within a milieu attuned to the modernization of the metropolitan west was expressed in this ambiguation of the transcendence it evoked.

*Die Kunstismen* captures the fragile conditions of this formative context. Lissitzky was working on translations of Malevich’s essays at the same time as the book, and although the entire text of “On New Systems in Art” probably would not have been available to most readers of *Die Kunstismen*, the proposed link between aesthetic and political militancy would have been familiar. 1925, the year in which it appeared, was a year of both retrospective assessment and avant-garde renewal. The narrative is resolutely forward-looking in drawing its line of demarcation and identifying the present as the time for the consolidation of a unified radical aesthetic project. As the “last parade” of the

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<sup>15</sup> Malevich, “Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism,” in *Essays on Art*, 121.

<sup>16</sup> See T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1999), 225-229, for a discussion of the complex metaphorical uses of “economy” and “collective,” the key terms in UNOVIS’s self-reflection according to Clark.

disparate isms of 1914-1924, it is like a final homage of sorts to these precedents, which will exit the stage and fade away in favor of a new Malevich-inspired system of unity.<sup>17</sup> Suprematism is also, of course, one of the old isms, but is also understood here as the foundation from which the present-day isms of 1925, such as Constructivism and Proun, arose, and could also be understood as merging with these into a new total system.

Although the book is arranged in roughly reverse chronological order, the largest section, *Abstraktivismus*, comes after Suprematism even though it certainly contains examples of works of art from the early 20s. “Abstractivism” is a term that seems to have been conceived in keeping with the “ism” framework, and it is not one that appears widely in the literature from this period, unlike the other isms. It functions in the book as a general category for work that does not easily fit into any other distinctive grouping, and closer examination shows that the artworks included here are all two-dimensional ones and primarily paintings. It begins, for example, with one of Kandinsky’s 1914 abstract canvases. It also includes artists who could easily fit into the constructivism category, such as Alexander Rodchenko. The photographs of the OBMOKhU exhibit included in *Konstruktivismus*, for example, primarily show spatial constructions by Rodchenko, Varvara Stepanova, and Karl Ioganson, but Rodchenko’s only solo entry in the book is a *Line Construction* under *Abstraktivismus*. The other entries were all “*Räumliche Malerei*” by Lyubov Popova, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Peter Laszlo Peri (who had exhibited a Constructivist sculpture with Moholy-Nagy in 1922), and the Bauhaus painter/typographer Johannes Molzahn. Thus, while many of these works were painted after Malevich’s suprematist paintings and even as part of the first forays into Constructivism, their placement earlier in the chronology distances them from the later developments in Constructivism and Productivism that sought to define the movement in terms of a more generalized mode of production with functional and practical purposes.

We can also read the *Abstraktivismus* category as the overarching general expression of a form of abstract art out of which other distinct practices could be distinguished. Somewhat curiously, *Abstraktivismus* is used in the table of contents and marks the pages of illustrations, but the descriptive text uses the heading, “Abstrakte Kunst/Art Abstrait/Abstract Art.” It reads simply, “The abstract artists give form to the inobjective without being bound by a common problem. Abstractivism offers multiple senses.”<sup>18</sup> For Lissitzky, this lack of a common problem and multiplicity of senses is seemingly overcome by the emergence of Suprematism and a militant, revolutionary project, but his definition here also foregrounds the later, post-war fragmentation of abstract art into a variety of individual practices. This “pre-political” abstract art category—although mitigated by the presence of Constructivist artists—is then followed by Cubism, Futurism, and Expressionism, the standard precedents often invoked in telling the story of the development of pure abstract art.

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<sup>17</sup> László Moholy-Nagy was also preparing a 1914-1924 book, albeit already decried by Lissitzky as a one-sided presentation of all pre-1920 avant-garde art as only a precursor to the Bauhaus. See Müller, 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Die Kunstisten*, 9.

## *La peinture pure*

Guillaume Apollinaire was one of the first to identify modern art—the new art—with “la peinture pure” in his writings on Cubism.<sup>19</sup> In the first of a series of articles for *Les Soirées de Paris*, which would become the basis for his *Méditations Esthétiques: Les Peintures Cubistes*, Apollinaire observes that the new paintings have no real subjects and aim to produce instead a kind of pure painting.<sup>20</sup> Pureness here is understood as something achieved through abstraction, which finds its concrete expression in geometric form. While the “preoccupation” of the new paintings with geometry and its “cubes” was vehemently attacked, Apollinaire used his next article to defend the impulse towards abstraction, even if it was not yet manifesting itself as a complete purification of form:

On a vivement reproché aux peintres nouveaux de préoccupations géométriques. Cependant les figures géométriques sont l'essentiel du dessin. La géométrie, science qui a pour objet l'étendue, sa mesure et ses rapports, ont été de tous temps la règle même de la peinture.<sup>21</sup>

He is quick to point out that the new art's focus on geometry is, in fact, an old—ancient, even—concern of painting, a feature that has always been its foundation and rule. The geometric look of the new paintings does not derive so much from an intention to paint geometry—or to be geometers or scientists—but from a revelation of the structure, or “grammar,” of art.<sup>22</sup> This account, in which Apollinaire also observed that Cubist painting had not yet achieved completely abstract forms, would prove highly influential in shaping the subsequent criticism of abstract painting. It gestured towards a longer history of abstraction in art, which on one level could be read in terms of eighteenth and nineteenth century aesthetic discourses on figuration and form, and the beautiful in nature. The meaning of abstraction implied here is one of an abstraction *from* something, abstraction as a cognitive aesthetic practice arguably inseparable from the practice of art and even language itself.

A clear statement of this understanding of the relationship of abstraction to nature can be found in Sir Joshua Reynolds's eighteenth century *Discourses on Art*.<sup>23</sup> All objects,

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<sup>19</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, *Méditations Esthétiques: Les Peintre Cubistes* (Paris: Figuière, 1913).

<sup>20</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, “Du sujet dans la peinture moderne,” *Les Soirées de Paris*, no. 1 (February 1912), 1-4.

<sup>21</sup> Guillaume Apollinaire, “La peinture nouvelle: Notes d'art,” *Les Soirées de Paris*, no. 3 (April 1912), 89. Translated as “The New Painting: Art Notes” in Guillaume Apollinaire, *Apollinaire on Art*, ed. LeRoy C. Breunig, trans. Susan Suleiman (Viking: New York, 1960), 222-3. “The new painters have been sharply criticized for their preoccupation with geometry. And yet, geometric figures are the essence of draftsmanship. Geometry, the science that deals with space, its measurement and relationships, has always been the most basic rule of painting.”

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>23</sup> See Charles Cramer, *Abstraction and the Classical Ideal, 1760-1920* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 2006). Cramer provides an account of the way in which “classicism,” or the ideas of the Ancients on abstraction as “idealization” and “generalization,” are taken up from the eighteenth century, and argues that this “classical ideal” forms the basis of a continuous project of

Reynolds argues, are marred by some imperfection or irregularity, including even the most beautiful, and every object that is available to the sight is flawed in some respect when compared to its Idea, or ideal form. In order to achieve an understanding of true, or ideal, beauty, the painter must thus acquire an ability to distinguish “the one common idea and central form” of an object from the multiplicity of flawed examples that exist in the world.<sup>24</sup> The painter must effectively become, he continues, a philosopher, considering nature “in the abstract.”

Abstraction, in this sense, has a long and varied history as both a conceptual-aesthetic practice as well as an ideal. As a suggestive antecedent to the predicaments of “pure abstraction,” one might consider Jean Baptiste Chardin’s *Le château de cartes* (1737, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.), in which the disclosure of a plane of abstract space within a scene from the life-world of the ancien régime, hints at the prospect of an enlightened reconstruction of the order of human things.<sup>25</sup> Alongside space and time, “Man” was, after all, the heartfelt abstraction of that age. We might then think of the difference between the meaning of abstraction in this case in distinction from its meaning for those figures under consideration here as involving the opposition between an early bourgeois imagination of the abstract personhood of contract and legality and a later both capitalist and revolutionary ideal of production. Pure abstraction might also mark a critical new periodization in a transition from an early bourgeois to a fully capitalist life world.

The history of abstraction in art can also be seen, however, in terms of an even longer trajectory from Giotto and the origins of perspectival space up to the period of abstract painting of the twentieth century, a trajectory in which, arguably, the central impetus of Western painting is rationalization and/in the representation of space. Geometry, as Apollinaire notes, is the science of space—a means of its measurement and control, thereby, of the anxieties (*inquiétudes*) thrown up by experience of infinity and the beyond.<sup>26</sup> For Apollinaire, the dilemma of modern art arises as it is freed from its religious vocation, from serving even as a substitute for the waning of religious, sacred, in a world which otherwise doesn’t have meaning—art freed from religious vocation is the dilemma of modern art.

Voulant atteindre aux proportions de l’idéal, ne se bornant pas à l’humanité, les jeunes peintres nous offrent des oeuvres plus cérébrales que sensuelles. Ils s’éloignent de plus en plus de l’ancien art des illusions d’optique et des

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idealization underpinning a variety of abstract movements, from Reynolds to Mondrian.

<sup>24</sup> Sir Joshua Reynolds, Discourse Three, *Discourses on Art* (New York: Collier Books, 1959 [1770]), 47.

<sup>25</sup> Amy Chun Kim, “A Level of Abstraction,” (M.A. thesis, University of California, Berkeley, 2009).

<sup>26</sup> Apollinaire, “La peinture nouvelle: Notes d’art,” 90. “Jusqu’à présent les trois dimensions de la géométrie euclidienne suffisaient aux inquiétudes que le sentiment de l’infini met dans l’âme des grands artistes, inquiétudes qui ne sont pas délibérément scientifiques puisque l’art et la science sont deux domaines distincts.”

proportions locales pour exprimer la grandeur des formes métaphysiques. C'est pourquoi l'art actuel, s'il n'est pas l'émanation directe de croyances religieuses déterminées, présente cependant plusieurs caractères du grand art, c'est-à-dire de l'Art religieux.<sup>27</sup>

The turn to abstraction must be understood, thus, in terms of the drive “to express the grandeur of metaphysical forms,” from its Aristotelian beginnings<sup>28</sup> to the distinctively modern practice in which one finds a dialectical relationship between a certain ideal of formal abstraction and its political and even spiritual dimensions.

The meaning of “abstraction” in the milieu under consideration here obviously cannot be entirely set off from this longer and varied history in which it has acquired its multiple, overlapping meanings. The proponents of pure abstraction certainly capitalized on the resulting semantic indeterminacy. But the new meanings they extracted from the term should hardly be reduced to avant-garde word play. That the status of abstraction was taken to be a problem of great contemporary significance, needing to be approached anew, was the argument of Edmund Husserl's historico-phenomenological inquiry into the origins of geometry.<sup>29</sup> The parallel reflections of Apollinaire and Husserl, as well as Heidegger on the crisis of perspectival art, suggests a specific historical character to these discourses regarding mathematical and formal abstraction. While these accounts do not necessarily all align with each other, nevertheless the historicization of abstraction appearing in these various accounts suggests a wider significance to the moment of abstraction in painting. And while these figures still belong to what is an emphatically Eurocentric discourse in which the contemporary crisis of meaning is understood in terms of a specifically Greek ancient world, the variety of these reflections also allows us to broaden our understanding of abstraction beyond its aesthetic manifestations, perhaps allowing us to see it in terms of a comparative historical visual culture.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 90-91. Translated as “The New Painting: Art Notes,” 222-3: “Wishing to attain the proportions of the ideal and not limiting themselves to humanity, the young painters offer us works that are more cerebral than sensual They are moving further and further away from the old art of optical illusions and literal proportions, in order to express the grandeur of metaphysical forms.”

<sup>28</sup> See Whitney Davis, “Abstraction to the Notional: David Summers and the Principle of Art History,” Keynote address presented at the Symposium in honor of David Summers and the Principles of Art History, University of Virginia (17 April 2015). See also Alain de Libera, “Abstraction,” in *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. Barbara Cassin, et al., trans. Steven Rendall, et al. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 1-7, and Howare Caygill, “Abstraction,” *A Kant Dictionary* (London: Blackwell, 1995), 39-42.

<sup>29</sup> Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1970). See also Jacob Klein, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*, trans Eva Brann (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968).

<sup>30</sup> Here I am appropriating the term, “visual culture,” in the sense that Whitney Davis has theorized it in his *A General Theory of Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

The turn to geometry in Mondrian, Malevich and other practitioners of pure abstraction was a way of expressing this same real content of modern life. Whereas Malevich and Lissitzky's abstraction was tied to the project of revolution and sought to directly unite aesthetics with politics, Mondrian's painting evoked a connection between abstraction and a certain vision of capitalism as a problem of everyday life. I argue that pure abstraction was the attempt to create a new representational order in which form is not simply inseparable from its content, but claims to be the very content of an alienated world, a reality that could not be grasped by a traditional mimetic, or naturalistic, practice. In looking at the forms taken by abstraction over the course of the 1920s and 30s, as it unfolded in Paris, we can trace an underlying unity created by an experience of abstraction in social life itself. I argue that these new art forms were circumscribed by—if not wholly determined, and certainly not simply homologous—with this experience of the advent of a new abstract form of life.

For Mondrian, planarity was not simply a condition of painting, but its very substance in that it was also a painting of planes. Pure abstract art was created only through the achievement of unity—an equilibrium—between vertical and horizontal lines and the relation of colored and non-colored planes. Each completed painting was supposed to be the successful resolution—a Hegelian synthesis, according to Hans Jaffé—of opposing tendencies that ultimately pointed to underlying universal principles. Despite the more ambiguous references to the universal, as well as the seemingly more spiritual tendencies in his thought, Mondrian also thought of Paris—its “intense and accelerated life and material environment”—as a central influence on the development of pure abstraction.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, a structural transformation in the aesthetics of the metropolitan environment is in itself insufficient for explaining the origins of abstract painting. But the transformability of this environment and rising velocities within it lent itself to abstract imaginings of a total reconstruction. The traffic of the streets and railways as well as sped-up new forms of music and dance were felt as an exhilarating acceleration, accompanied by an experience of the accelerating obsolescence of the old. There are hints of the latter in Apollinaire's *Zone*: “Ici même les automobiles ont l'air d'être anciennes.”<sup>32</sup> Painting proposed abstract form as the image of this inchoate world: of modernity as the condition of both individual autonomy, increasingly experienced as the anxiety of isolation and loss of meaning in the aftermath of the Great War, and massification, in the forms of culture and social relations. What is special about this moment is not the proposition that “abstraction”—or even alienation—constituted a larger and embracing social logic, but that art put forth abstract form as the visual means of grasping the novelty of this situation. Again, the aesthetic option cannot wholly be

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<sup>31</sup> Piet Mondrian, “The New Plastic Expression in Painting” (1926), in *The New Art – The New Life: The Collected Writings of Piet Mondrian*, ed. and trans., Harry Holzman and Martin S. James (Boston: G.K. Hall & Co., 1986), 202.

<sup>32</sup> “Here even the motor cars look antique.” Guillaume Apollinaire, “Zone,” translated by Samuel Beckett in Samuel Beckett, *Collected Poems in English and French* (New York: Grove Press, 1977), 107.



explained sociologically, for the crystallizing factor in the inception of abstraction was an ambivalently but intensely political moment.

### *Concrete art*

Despite the relation drawn between the sensual forms of the natural world and the abstract ones of neoplasticism, Mondrian's abstract painting did not come out of a process of abstracting *from* these seemingly more concrete phenomena. What is being suggested here is not, therefore, an "iconological" reading of abstraction.<sup>33</sup> Abstract artists were, in fact, at pains to distinguish their art from abstraction as a process, and often referred to "abstract" art as "concrete" instead. However, these attempts were not always successful, and were more than often confusing.

For example, van Doesburg's *An Object Aesthetically Transfigured* is a well-known but pedantic demonstration that seems to confirm the central relationship of abstract art to these very same processes of *aphareisis*. It consists of four images in succession: the first is a photograph of a cow and the last is a painting composed strictly of rectangular planes of varying sizes and colors. Van Doesburg herein "illustrates" the progressive distillation of the fundamental relationship of forms, obscured in the first photograph but reproduced in its purity in the last.<sup>34</sup> What these images do not convey, however, is the extent to which he regarded this distillation as only an intermediate step on the way to achieving pure, concrete form.

Van Doesburg appropriated the term, "concrete art," for his group, *Art Concret*, which published just one journal issue in 1930. What little notice the group elicited was generally dismissive.<sup>35</sup> The first page of the issue consisted of a manifesto of six statements on the basis of concrete painting. It was signed by Otto Carlsson, van Doesburg, Jean Hélion, Ivan Tutundjian, and Marcel Wantz. In the following pages were six explanatory comments on the nature of concrete painting. The first one is especially relevant here. It reads:

1. *Peinture concrète et non abstraite*, parce que nous avons dépassé la période des recherches et des expériences spéculatives.

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<sup>33</sup> See Davis, *A General Theory of Visual Culture*, 45-74, for a comprehensive account and critique of the range of formalisms in art history. I would suggest that the problematics of the "historical subjectivity of formality" (72) and of such a historical formality with its own "original viscosity" (73-4) that might not be immediately available to us today would be another useful way of framing the central problem of this dissertation, namely of excavating the significance of pure abstraction and its origins in a time when those original historical and political meanings are often misrepresented or opaque.

<sup>34</sup> Theo van Doesburg, *Grundbegriffe der neuen gestaltenden Kunst* (München: Langen, 1925), 18-19 and pl. 5-8.

<sup>35</sup> Merle Schipper, *Jean Hélion: The Abstract Years, 1929-1939* (Ph.D. diss. UCLA, Fine Arts, 1974), 43.

A la recherche de la pureté, les artistes étaient obligés d'abstraire les formes naturelles qui cachaient les éléments plastiques, de détruire les *formes-nature* et de les remplacer par les *formes-art*.

Aujourd'hui, l'idée de *forme-art*, est aussi périmée que l'idée de *forme-nature*.

Nous inaugurons la période de peinture pure, en construisant la *forme-esprit*.

C'est la concrétisation de l'esprit créateur.

Peinture *concrète* et *non abstraite* parce que rien n'est plus concret, plus réel qu'une ligne, qu'une couleur, qu'une surface.

Est-ce que, sur une toile, une femme, un arbre, ou une vache sont des éléments concrets? Non.

Une femme, un arbre, une vache sont concrets à l'état naturel, mais à l'état de peinture, ils sont abstraits, illusoire, vagues, spéculatifs, tandis qu'un plan, est un plan, une ligne est une ligne; rien de moins; rien de plus.<sup>36</sup>

The idea of artistic form van Doesburg seems to attacking here is the neoplastic one, or at least neoplasticism as he had understood it. The replacement of natural forms with artistic forms is precisely the method depicted in *An Object Aesthetically Transfigured*, part of his 1924 book, *Principles of Neo-plastic Art*. Traditional naturalistic representation would always be an inadequate form of mimesis in that it sought to create “a woman, a tree, a cow” in an illusionistic space that would always be in tension with the surface of the painting and the flatness of its support. However, van Doesburg's pure painting sought to transcend these problems in attaining a concrete form: concrete because lines and planes stake no claim to being anything other than line and plane. Concrete, furthermore, in that it will use line and plane as the elements of a construction, more “real” in the convergence of signifier and signified than any representation could ever be.

Alexandre Kojève would make a similar argument about Kandinsky's paintings in 1936. Kojève also wrote that all “representative” painting—by which he means all painting leading up to Kandinsky's “non-figurative” painting, including symbolism, realism, impressionism and expressionism—is “abstract.” Kandinsky's “non-representative” paintings are “concrete” and objective because they are not abstractions of anything that has an existence outside of painting, but present “total and absolute” worlds that exist in-and-for themselves.<sup>37</sup> Kandinsky also adopted this view and over the

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<sup>36</sup> Theo van Doesburg, “Commentaires sur la base de la peinture concrète,” *Art Concret* no 1 (1930): 2. Translated as “Comments on the basis of concrete painting,” in Joost Baljeu, *Theo van Doesburg* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1974), 181: “We speak of *concrete* and not *abstract painting*, because we have finished with the period of research and speculative experience. In their search for purity artists were obliged to abstract from *natural forms* in which the plastic elements were hidden, in order to eliminate natural forms and to replace them with *artistic forms*. Today the idea of *artistic form* is as obsolete as the idea of *natural form*. We establish the period of pure painting by constructing *spiritual form*. Creative spirit becomes concrete. [...] A woman, a tree, a cow; are these concrete elements in painting? No. A woman, a tree and a cow are concrete only in nature; in painting they are abstract, illusionistic, vague and speculative. However, a plane is a plane, a line is a line and no more or no less than that.”

<sup>37</sup> Alexandre Kojève, “Pourquoi concret,” in Wassily Kandinsky, *Écrits complets* (Paris: Denoël-Gonthier, 1970), 395-400, and Alexandre Kojève, “Les peintures concrètes (objectives) de

course of his conversations with Kojève came to adopt the term “concrete art” for what he had formerly defended as “abstract art.”<sup>38</sup> Despite their differences, it is this rejection of abstract art as a simple “abstraction of/from” that unites Kandinsky and Mondrian and also points to their distinctiveness from the eighteenth and nineteenth century traditions. There, the goal was a perfection of nature and the achievement of an artistic beauty that surpassed that of nature. But for the twentieth century abstract artist, the goal was the achievement of a wholly new world and, as we shall see, nothing less than the radical destruction and transformation of the existing one.

### *Abstract art in France*

Larger histories of abstract art, especially those that have attempted to present narratives connecting early twentieth century abstract art with post-war abstract expressionism, as well as studies focused on French (by which is often implied modern) art in the first half of the twentieth century, tend to present aspects of overtly “political” art as isolated moments. This erasure leads to a downgrading of the significance of abstraction itself. Abstract art as a whole is often marginalized in these Franco-centric studies, despite Paris constituting a central site of practice for abstract artists and groups. In Green’s contribution to the *Abstraction* catalog, for instance, he neglects to discuss Mondrian, who resided in Paris from 1911-1913 and 1919-1938. Green’s essay claims it will deal only with “pure painting” in Paris from 1910 to 1922, and the justification for Mondrian’s omission lies perhaps in what Green calls “the hostility of advanced Parisian art to abstraction.”<sup>39</sup> Thus, in his larger study, *Art in France*, Green’s discussion of abstract, or non-figurative, art is also circumscribed by the observation, “no major abstract movement initiated or took over in France.”<sup>40</sup>

The pioneers and main protagonists of abstract art in the interwar period are not, in fact, French, no doubt the reason why it is so self-consciously international in its orientation. As the Belgian editor of *Cercle et Carré*, Michel Seuphor, later wrote in his *Dictionary of Abstract Painting*, between 1910 and 1920 virtually every European country had a review or journal focused on abstract art, and these reviews constituted “une sorte d’internationale de l’art d’avant-garde.”<sup>41</sup> There is, here, a slippage between “avant-garde” and “abstract.” Nonetheless, after World War I, many of the artists involved in abstraction moved to Paris, and arguably it was “la capitale de l’art abstrait naissant.”<sup>42</sup> Even as these artists remain on the peripheries of the art world there, Seuphor’s recollections give a sense of the vitality of this scene for its own members:

Le centre de toute cette activité était Paris et, dans Paris même, Montparnasse.

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Kandinsky” (1936), in *Les Cahiers du Musée national d’Art Moderne*, no. 42 (1992): 172-193.

<sup>38</sup> Georges Roque, *Qu’est-ce que l’art abstrait?* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003), 124-130.

<sup>39</sup> Green, “Pure Painting,” 22.

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Green, *Art in France: 1900-1940* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2001), 34.

<sup>41</sup> Michel Seuphor, *Dictionnaire de la peinture abstraite: précédé d’une histoire de la peinture abstraite* (Paris: F. Hazan, 1957), 51.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

Époque vivace où, à la terrasse du café du Dôme on pouvait, la même journée, rencontrer Marinetti de passage, Gabo arrivant de Berlin, Cendrars rentrant d'Amérique, Delaunay en vadrouille, Arp à la recherche de quelqu'un, Tzara et Ehrenbourg impassibles; on pouvait y affronter Hans Richter, se disputer avec Van Doesburg ou avec Kiesler, écouter les discoureurs internationaux s'enivrer d'eux-mêmes; on pouvait même s'y ennuyer.<sup>43</sup>

These anecdotes are not provided to argue that histories of French art should give a larger place to abstraction, or even that the French surveys of art written in the 1920s and 30s, such as Maurice Raynal's *Anthologie de la peinture en France de 1906 à nos jours* (1927) or René Huyghe's *Histoire de l'art contemporain* (1925), were wrong to ignore it. Rather, it is to point out that abstract art should be understood as a collective movement developing in conjunction with specific political and social ideals. It was in Paris that we can see this emergence in its most essential characteristics amidst the groups that were formed after 1925: *Cercle et Carré*, *Art Concret*, and *Abstraction-Création-Art non-figuratif*.

Even though Mondrian's neoplasticist studio became as well known as Brancusi's in the mid-1920s,<sup>44</sup> and journals and reviews skeptical of pure abstraction, such as *Cahiers d'art*, would publish excerpts from his essays, he remained on the margins of what was an increasingly glamorized and commercialized art world. The perception of pure abstraction as a non-French movement, as well as the seeming absence of any French artist within the movement who might rise to the status of "modern master," certainly contributed to this isolation, as other scholars have pointed out. Indeed, while Christian Zervos and E. Tériade sought to promote certain "*jeunes peintres*" in the pages of *Cahiers d'art* and *L'Intransigeant*—painters they saw as carrying on the legacy of Matisse, Picasso, Léger and French painting in general—abstract artists were conspicuously absent from these select few, even though their chosen heirs have nonetheless largely faded into obscurity.<sup>45</sup>

The French art historian, Marie-Aline Prat, sums up the attitude in the title of one chapter section, "L'abstraction n'est pas conforme à notre génie," of her book on *Cercle et Carré*, explaining that the obscurity in which many abstract artists operated should be

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 51-2. Translated by Lionel Izod, John Montague, and Francis Scarfe as *Dictionary of Abstract Painting*, trans. Lionel Izod, John Montague, and Francis Scarfe (New York: Tudor Publishing Co., 1957), 51. "Paris was the hub of all this activity, the centre in Paris itself being Montparnasse. It was a lively time, when on the same day, in front of the Dôme café you could meet Marinetti on a lightning visit to the capital, Gabo fresh from Berlin, Cendrars just back from America, Delaunay out for a spree, Arp trying to find somebody, Tzara and Ehrenbourg sitting there with inscrutable faces; you could risk a few words with Hans Richter or argue with Van Doesburg or Kiesler, or listen to the international speechifiers making themselves drunk with their own eloquence, or you could even manage to be bored by it all."

<sup>44</sup> Green, *Art in France*, 86. See also Nancy Troy, *The De Stijl Environment* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983).

<sup>45</sup> Among their favorites were Francisco Bores, André Beaudin, and Jean Lurçat.

seen in light of a certain xenophobia present within French art circles. “L’art abstrait nous est étranger, son altérité même le condamne à la marginalité et ne l’autorise pas à pénétrer le champ splendide et si féconde de la peinture française. Cette attitude emprunte évidemment à la xénophobie, maintes fois signalée d’une certaine critique en France.”<sup>46</sup> It is worth mentioning that those non-French artists who escape these limits and become lionized as modern masters, such as Picasso, are often interpreted and presented in the contemporary art criticism as continuations of the grand French tradition.

Prat also identifies the opposition, “Orient-Occident,” as another variant of the xenophobic reaction against abstraction but one that carries a particular political inflection, with the accusative “Orient” directed specifically against the Soviet Union. The Orient-Occident formula, Prat argues, is one of the most frequently encountered reactionary arguments, where the term “barbarie venue de l’Est” unambiguously refers to the Soviet Union, Bolshevism, and its brand of arts and architecture.<sup>47</sup> Even more significantly, Prat notes that the Soviet Union is understood, in France, to be the birthplace of abstraction, and thus its specter stands behind the attacks of orientalism, barbarism and unintelligibility: “C’est cette notion d’orient, barbare, irrespectueux de la tradition et du bon goût, qui va servir à délimiter la ‘région de l’art abstrait,’ son lieu de naissance, mettant en place l’image de l’invasion venue de terres lointaines.”<sup>48</sup> Prat focuses in on these hostile reactions in part to provide an explanation for the way in which abstract art and *Cercle et Carré* are unable to make a mark on the Paris art world, arguably considered closed in the years 1929-30 to the international overtures of abstraction and far from the spirit of 1925 and the *Exposition Internationale*.<sup>49</sup>

Another more suggestive reason for why pure abstraction became a marginal enclave might lie in the culture of the Parisian avant-garde itself in the 1920s, which revolved around a domesticated bohemianism cozily co-existing with its aristocratic and haute bourgeois clients.<sup>50</sup> What Green describes as “the sheer glamour of independent art and artists in the 1920s” is surely what leaves such a bad taste in the mouths of the Lissitzkys when they visit Paris in 1928. In recalling this visit, Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers gives us a sense of contrasting worlds of wealth and poverty:

Mit Ehrenburgs Fotoapparat fixierte Lissitzky die Eindrücke unserer Streifzüge durch die an scharfen Kontrasten so lebendige Stadt. Der Eiffelturm wurde von den verschiedensten Gesichtspunkten aus aufgenommen. Alles war überraschend für uns. Die himmelschreiende Armut und die ekelhafte Überrauffiniertheit und Kostbarkeit...Dankbar verliessen wir Paris, das nach den Worten Jean Cocteau

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<sup>46</sup> Marie-Aline Prat, *Peinture et Avant-garde au Seuil des Années 30* (Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 1984), 189.

<sup>47</sup> Prat, 191.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 190.

<sup>50</sup> Green, *Art in France*, 70, discussing Melissa McQuillan, “Painters and the Ballet, 1917–1926: An Aspect of the Relationship Between Art and Theatre,” Ph.D. Dissertation, New York University, 1979.

“am Tage durch die flimmernde Atmosphäre seine Konturen verwischt, seine Perspektiven verzerrt und den viel jüngeren Metropolen gleicht. Aber wahrlich die Stadt ist alt, von unwiderruflichem Alter! Am Abend, den nervösen Kranken gleich, hört sie auf, müde zu sein, gibt sich keine Mühe mehr, drollig zu wirken. Die Nacht, das Prestige der Schminke, der Rampen und Scheinwerfer verleihen ihr die Glorie der Tragödin.”<sup>51</sup>

The reference to Cocteau brings up associations with the *Ballets Russes*, which would have been a prime example of the kind of compromised avant-garde that consorted freely with the aristocracy—i.e., the world of the de Beaumonts, the de Noailles and their balls. But Cocteau’s observation also draws out the persistent character of the orders of the ancien régime.<sup>52</sup> It is, he says an old city, with an age that cannot be erased, even “an old age that resuscitates the past,” and the art world was part of this dynamic. Abstraction might in this context be conceived as a ruthless imagining of an absent, or insufficiently advanced modernity, and thus more indeterminate in its political orientation.

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<sup>51</sup> Lissitzky-Küppers, 85. “With Ehrenburg’s camera Lissitzky captured impressions of our excursions through this city of contrasts: atrocious poverty side by side with insolent wealth and over-sophistication... We were thankful to leave Paris. In the words of Jean Cocteau ‘In the daytime her glittering atmosphere softens her contours and distorts her perspectives, so that she resembles many a younger metropolis; but in truth the city is old, with an old age that resuscitates the past...’”

<sup>52</sup> Perry Anderson, “Modernity and Revolution,” *New Left Review* 1, no. 144 (April 1984): 96–113.

Chapter Two  
The “Soviet Effect”: *L’Exposition internationale  
des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes*

1925 is a significant year in the history of abstract art in Paris and Western Europe. In addition to the publication of *Die Kunstismen*, another 1914-1924 book was being put forward by László Moholy-Nagy. Although Lissitzky decried it as a one-sided presentation of all pre-1920 avant-garde art as only a precursor to the Bauhaus,<sup>53</sup> it is another example of both a retrospective, as well as forward-looking, publication at a time when the radical political and aesthetic possibilities of abstraction seemed to be opening up in the West. Although we know in retrospect that these possibilities had already been shut down in the Soviet Union, the year was characterized by the sense of a new era dawning. In Paris, as well, by 1925, the nationalist demagoguery of the *rappel à l’ordre* was losing its grip. As Kenneth Silver argues, “the Right’s hold on the French imagination—so powerful since August 1914—had been broken,” and the movements associated with the period of post-war reconstruction in France, such as Purism and *L’Esprit Nouveau*, also lost their *raison d’être* as this period came to a close.<sup>54</sup>

If the 1925 *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* marked the *dénouement* of Purism and the pressure of conservative nationalist tendencies on the art world, the Exposition also offered the Parisian public another powerful model in its place: Konstantin Melnikov’s Soviet Pavilion (Fig. 2-11), Alexander Rodchenko’s *Worker’s Club* (Fig. 9-11), and radical abstract art. It was a salvo of radical art on a Parisian public more used to associating Russian culture with the Russian painters of the *École de Paris* and the *Ballets Russes*. But perhaps even more influential than the specific examples set by Melnikov’s pavilion or Rodchenko’s *Worker’s Club* was the general idea embodied in these exhibits—i.e., that abstract form was not only intimately tied to the project of revolutionary remaking but that it was the art of the revolution, and was being practiced in the Soviet Union on these terms. This is not to say that all pure abstract art was manifestly “political,” or even that artists in this mode thought of their art as having a political function. Rather, I will argue that it emerged in a dialectical, or even disjunctive connection between the experience of an estranging, new modernity of everyday life and a revolutionary project that would extract and intensify this estrangement in constructions of an aesthetic-political transcendence.

Relations between France and the Soviet Union were normalized in 1924, and the Soviet Union was invited to participate in the 1925 Exposition. Although other states that had also been invited at this late stage, such as Germany, decided not to participate because of the lack of preparation time, the Soviets agreed. They saw the event as the perfect vehicle for displaying to the world the achievements of a revolutionary political

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<sup>53</sup> Müller, 1.

<sup>54</sup> Kenneth Silver, *Esprit de Corps: The Art of the Parisian Avant-Garde and the First World War, 1914-1925* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1989), 390.

state and culture that arisen out of the destruction of a backward Tsarism. The perception of Russia in Paris at the time was of a “semi-Asiatic” folk culture<sup>55</sup> on the one hand and a “sumptuous monarchy” on the other.<sup>56</sup> The last major, state-sponsored show of Russian art had been at the 1900 World Exposition, where the French press ridiculed the Russian building as “Le Kremlin de Trocadero,” a “sprawling” hodgepodge of medieval, rural, and Central Asian motifs.<sup>57</sup> The Russian entry also included the so-called “Galoshes Pavilion,” which featured a mountain of 35,000 pairs of boots, offered up as evidence of the prowess of modern industrial production in Russia.<sup>58</sup>

The other major exhibit was held in 1906, when Serge Diaghilev organized a section on Russian painting for the *Salon d'Automne*. The section was conceived as a comprehensive introduction to Russian art, beginning with icon painting, moving to eighteenth and nineteenth century court portraits, and concluding with recent work by artists associated with Diaghilev's *Mir isskustvo* (World of Art) group.<sup>59</sup> The prominence of Diaghilev in Paris, as well as the immense popularity of his *Ballet Russes*, would only have reinforced the idea that a radically different and new image had to be shown.<sup>60</sup> Although the Soviet Union had made several small forays into the international exhibition circuit, the Paris Exposition was its first attempt at providing a comprehensive view of new developments in art and architecture. The organizers of the 1925 Exposition thus wanted not only to firmly refute critics who would have liked to say that art had died out with the October Revolution but also to demonstrate that what emerged surpassed even the forms of avant-garde art and architecture that had developed in Western Europe.

The majority of the exhibits featured Constructivist works. What distinguished these works was that even as they displayed a radically new aesthetic, they also claimed to be the forms of artistic production that best represented the reality of the Soviet Union. As the French-language catalog produced for the 1925 Exposition put it, “les oeuvres ont réussi à rendre la vie nouvelle de la Russie des Soviets et le torrent impétueux des idées et des aspirations de l'époque de la Révolution.”<sup>61</sup> Soviet art embodied the vitality of the age of revolution—the impetuous torrent of its ideas and aspirations—and its subjects. There would be no more paintings of saints or icons, romantic dramas of fallen

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<sup>55</sup> S. Frederick Starr, *Melnikov: Solo Architect in a Mass Society* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), 87.

<sup>56</sup> O.D. Kamenev, “L'Exposition de Paris doit aider à faire connaître l'U.R.S.S.,” in *L'Art Décoratif et Industriel de l'U.R.S.S.*, eds. P. Kogan, Victor Nicolsky & J. Tugendhold (Moscow, 1925), 9.

<sup>57</sup> Starr, 87.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art, 1863-1922* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1986), 54-5.

<sup>60</sup> In 1922 *Die Erste Russischen Kunstausstellung* (First Russian Art Exhibition) at the Berlin Van Diemen gallery revealed developments in modern Russian art, including Suprematist and Constructivist works, previously unknown to Western European audiences. Despite the importance of this event and the generally positive reaction, it went largely unremarked upon in the Parisian art world.

<sup>61</sup> P. Kogan, “Préface,” in *L'Art Décoratif et Industriel de l'U.R.S.S.*, 5.



aristocrats, or sentimental portraits of the vagabond.<sup>62</sup> Instead what was to be shown was life in a worker's republic—i.e., “la vie des soldats rouges, la vie des ‘pionnaires’... l'électrification de la campagne qui les inspire.”<sup>63</sup>

### *The Anti-Palace*

As the center of the Soviet contribution to the Exposition, the pavilion had to embody these ideals and was charged with the task of presenting the new architecture in terms that were different from not only older aristocratic and academic models but also contemporary European structures. The location of the Soviet Pavilion meant that it would be surrounded by examples of opulence, with the Grand Palais looming directly in the background. In interviews and statements about his pavilion, Melnikov adopted this rhetoric of revolution and rupture with the past, emphasizing what he called “anti-palace architecture.” In particular, he distinguished it from the luxurious character of the Exposition as a whole, as well as the neighboring pavilions of Italy and Great Britain.

England and France constructed luxurious structures—not pavilions, but real palaces. The Italian pavilion was like that of a shopkeeper who had struck it rich. This was the tradition of many French exhibitions, and the pavilion was often officially called “The Palace of Arts,” “The Palace of Electricity.” We—the Soviet people—hated everything in architecture that reminded us of palaces. This applied not only to the exhibition, but to all architecture throughout the world. We were creating “anti-palace architecture.” So we renounced the closed-in spaces that reminded us of palace suites and the expanses of walls which closed in the narrow world of palace life; we strove to join the interior with the exterior, considering this to be democratic...<sup>64</sup>

In his criticisms of the other pavilions as palaces, Melnikov is attacking the idea that the representative structure of a national pavilion should adopt the forms of aristocratic life, in addition to the manifest inappropriateness of such constructions for the purposes of a temporary exposition. These were not exhibition pavilions but massive monuments to the “narrow world of palace life” and the consumption of luxury goods. The latter characteristic is brought out further in his comparison of the Italian pavilion to the abode

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<sup>62</sup> Kogan, 6. Kamenev, 9: “Avant la Révolution on ne connaissait en France que la façade somptueuse de la Russie monarchique...La France intellectuelle avait une idée de la ‘nichée de gentilhommes’ ruinée d'après le roman de Tourguénéff, de la famille des Karamasoff d'après Dostoïevsky, du ‘Pouvoir des ténèbres’ d'après le drame de Tolstoï, des vagabonds russes d'après les nouvelles de Gorki, mais cependant le vrai visage de la Russie ouvrière d'autrefois n'était connu de personne.”

<sup>63</sup> Kogan, 6. The full sentence reads: ““Les peintres des images saintes d'autrefois ne s'inspirent plus des sujets d' ‘icones’, du ‘bon vieux maître’ et d'autres sujets d'époque patriarcale, c'est la vie des soldats rouges, la vie des ‘pionnaires’, c'est l'électrification de la campagne qui les inspire.”

<sup>64</sup> *Konstantin S. Mel'nikov and the Construction of Moscow*, eds. Mario Fossi, Otakar Máčel, Maurizio Meriggi (Milan: Skira, 2000), 138.

of a “shopkeeper who had struck it rich.” In contrast, what Melnikov’s pavilion sought to display, with its large transparent glass walls, was Soviet life. It was a building that blurred the boundary between outside and inside, calling to mind the ideals of an opened up collective space, but also an exemplary Constructivist object whose function—to display—was reflected in its defining forms.

The main structure of the pavilion is made up two right triangular volumes situated on a rectangular plan. They point inwards towards each other, and are connected by two sets of stairs, which work to both unite them structurally as well as divide the plan again by cutting into this seeming unity along an opposing axis. The dynamic character of the triangular masses, reminiscent of Suprematist wedges, is accentuated by the change in height as the roofs angle down towards the middle, where a wooden framed tower of alternating red triangles springs up with the letters CCCP at its top. While it is difficult to see the overall unity of Melnikov’s pavilion from any one photograph or side, it has a transparency that belies the seemingly elaborate plans. The long north and south-facing walls are made up completely of glass, which make the interior visible to passersby, while the shorter east and west sides also contain large glass-paned components, rendering the two volumes filled with light and visible across the stairs.

Fêted as an example of modern construction, the use of glass was particularly striking in contrast to the often unimaginative and hulking use of reinforced concrete (*béton armé*) in the contributions of other European representatives of modern architecture, such as the *Hôtel du Collectionneur* by Pierre Patout with interiors designed by Jacques-Émile Ruhlmann. Concrete was in frequent use in Paris by the beginning of the twentieth century, and by 1925 reinforced concrete was commonly used in what came to be known as the *style moderne*.<sup>65</sup> Patout and Ruhlmann’s *Hôtel* was considered one of the most successful examples of this style at the Exposition, but its sumptuous interior and, in the words of one critic, its “luxe lourd, encombrant et faux,” revealed the emptiness of the geometry of this style.<sup>66</sup> It was, in effect, a monument to luxury goods, the market that the French organizers of the Exposition hoped to capture for Paris.<sup>67</sup> As Anthony Sutcliffe argues, the idea of Art Deco that emerged from the 1925 exposition lacked coherence and was simply “a geometrical expression of the pre-war luxury style.”<sup>68</sup>

Auguste Perret launched a similar critique of the Exposition as a whole, remarking in a 1925 interview that the simplified lines and neat geometry of the buildings belied a continuity with the ornamentality of the pre-war *Belle Époque*. Referring to the

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<sup>65</sup> Anthony Sutcliffe, *Paris: an architectural history* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1993), 139.

<sup>66</sup> Marcel Eugène, “L’exposition des Arts Décoratifs et le Pavillon de l’U.R.S.S.,” *L’Humanité*, 9 April 1925, 4. See Victor Margolin, *The Struggle for Utopia: Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Moholy-Nagy, 1917-1946* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago, 1997), 94-95 for further discussion of this comparison.

<sup>67</sup> Tag Gronberg, Review of *Authentic Art Deco Interiors from the 1925 Paris Exhibition*, *Journal of Design History* (1991), 51.

<sup>68</sup> Sutcliffe, 144.

1900 *Exposition Universelle*, he remarked, “In 1900 it was the triumph of macaroni, twirls and ornament. Now they have the *air* of suppressing ornament, but the *air* only. Nobody speaks of anything but straight lines, essentials and construction; but if one looks closely, it is obvious that ornament is still the only thing that matters, so that there are finally more useless things than ever before.”<sup>69</sup> Reinforced concrete was used in a number of pavilions at the 1900 Exposition, but it was primarily conceived of as a support for “exuberant decorative surfaces.”<sup>70</sup> Perret’s argument was that even though 1925 *looked* different, the stripping of these decorative façades did not constitute a real turn away from ornament towards a more bare and simplified aesthetic, something he himself advocated. Although, as Peter Collins points out, Perret was motivated by the belief that true “bareness” could only be achieved by a return to the models of classical antiquity and the Middle Ages,<sup>71</sup> Perret’s criticism underscores the fundamental connection between modern architecture and the ornamental world of luxury goods in the French context, a complicity that was sharply rejected by Melnikov and the Constructivists.

### *Economies of Light*

The Soviet pavilion created a sensation at the Exposition, and newspapers and art reviews across the spectrum gave space to its discussion. Many reviews focused on the glass exterior, and the dominant characterization of the pavilion was its lightness. *L’Humanité*, the newspaper of the French Communist Party, first announced the details of the Soviet participants in January 1925 and continued its coverage leading up to and surrounding the inauguration of the pavilion on 30 May 1925.<sup>72</sup> In April 1925, *L’Humanité* published the first article describing the pavilion in detail, hailing it as a triumph of lightness reflective of the “esprit révolutionnaire nouveau.”<sup>73</sup> Its criticisms of the Exposition as a whole echoed the arguments of the Soviet catalog while also honing in on the “inept” profusion of concrete throughout the majority of the other pavilions: “Comme le béton armé est à la mode, il y a dans ces bâtiments destinés à ne durer que quelques semaines une profusion absolument inepte de ce béton.”<sup>74</sup>

The reason behind the use of concrete throughout these temporary pavilions is simply that it happened to be “à la mode” at the time, and in this regard, the choice of building material completely diverged from the designated function of the structure. In fact, concrete turns out to create structures at the Exposition with the opposite traits that lay behind its actual historical emergence in the nineteenth century search for cheaper and more economical building material.<sup>75</sup> Among its original perceived advantages was

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<sup>69</sup> Peter Collins, *Concrete: The Vision of a New Architecture* (New York: Horizon Press, 1959), 257.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>72</sup> “La délégation soviétique à l’Exposition des Arts Décoratifs,” *L’Humanité*, 18 Jan. 1925.

<sup>73</sup> Eugène, “L’exposition des Arts Décoratifs et le Pavillon de l’U.R.S.S.,” 4.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> Collins, 21.

that it was “not only fireproof but also slender, tractable and light.”<sup>76</sup> However, the heavy ugliness permeating the many uses of concrete at the Exposition belied these formal characteristics of the material, which instead came to stand for, in the eyes of Eugène, the “esprit capitaliste bourgeois” of the ostentatiously commercial Exposition.<sup>77</sup> In contrast, Melnikov’s wood and glass structure represented a true economy of materials in creating a light and dynamic representation of the “esprit révolutionnaire nouveau.”<sup>78</sup>

Although one might expect the writers of *L’Humanité* to praise the pavilion and echo the arguments that the Soviets used to distinguish their exhibits from the rest of the participants, other more conservative art critics and journals also presented complimentary reviews, albeit tempered by criticisms. For example, the *Bulletin de la Vie Artistique*, an important bi-monthly review published by the Bernheim-Jeune gallery, presented extensive coverage of the Exposition over the course of 1925, and opened their enquête, “Que pensez-vous de...l’exposition?” with a consideration of Melnikov’s pavilion. The *Bulletin* was generally oriented towards the presentation of contemporary art news, and it had a “predilection for interviews and questionnaires,” whose conclusions, as Malcolm Gee notes, often coincided with Bernheim-Jeune policy.<sup>79</sup>

Felix Fénéon, the editor and ex-head of the gallery’s modern art section, conducted the interview with Melnikov, which appears largely as a platform for the architect.<sup>80</sup> Fénéon begins by asking Melnikov what idea governed the construction of the pavilion. In response, Melnikov cites the practical difficulties of the site and his budgetary restrictions before explaining that he sought above all else to maximize the circulation of light and air in the pavilion:

Par goût personnel, un goût qui est peut-être aujourd’hui national, je donnai au pavillon le maximum de clarté et d’aération. Toutes les personnes qui passent devant une boutique n’y entrent pas. Toutes pourtant sauront ce qu’il y a dans la mienne: ses murs sont de verre, et un escalier accueillant aux foules et pratiqué de part en part permet, en outre une vue plongeante. Quant à ces plans diagonaux et contrariés qui dominent l’édifice, tant pis s’ils désolent les amateurs de couvercles! Ils constituent un toit qui en vaut un autre: ils sont combinés, en effet, pour laisser affluer l’air et pour empêcher la pluie de passer de quelque côté

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>77</sup> Eugène writes, as noted above, of the Exposition’s “luxe lourd, encombrant et faux.” He also charges Charles Plumet, the chief architect of the Exposition as a whole, who constructed four towers at the entrance of the Exposition’s esplanade, of creating “unanimously” ugly designs: “les quatre tours de M. Plumet, architecte président, qui son aussi absurdes de dessin que d’utilisation des matériaux et d’une laideur unanimement reconnue.”

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Malcolm Gee, *Dealers, Critics and Collectors of Modern Painting* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1981), 115-6.

<sup>80</sup> Konstantin Melnikov, interview by Felix Fénéon, “A l’exposition que pensez vous du...Pavillon du Russe?,” *Bulletin de la vie artistique*, (1 June 1925), 231-3.

qu'elle fouette.<sup>81</sup>

The combination of glass walls and open spaces created by the central staircases allowed light and air to freely permeate the structure. Although we can speak of an interior space in terms of the two triangular volumes that housed the exhibitions, including one devoted to portraying the different nationalities of the Soviet Union, the open air staircase and its abstract crosshatched panel “roof” dissolved the boundary between a strictly exterior and interior space. The panels were introduced after concerns about the Paris rain were raised and functioned as a partial roof. However, Melnikov refused to create a completely enclosed interior staircase, allowing air, and even rain, to still enter. The upward diagonal slants of the alternating panels create a rhythmic pattern, countered by the “plunging view” through the glass into the galleries from the top of the stairs. This network of diagonals—from the slight angling of the rooftops of the two main volumes to the stairs that ascend to a centrally placed landing and its paneled “roof”—are drawn upwards visually by the wooden tower, or mast, placed next to the staircase. This crescendo of verticals creates a dynamic unification of the disparate elements of the pavilion while enhancing the sense of lightness and transparency created by the glass. Fénéon questioned whether all of these elements ended up giving the pavilion too light of an aspect, to which Melnikov responded, “Vous ne me ferez pas croire que vous le préféreriez lourd.”<sup>82</sup>

Lightness was invested with ideological significance, but it was also the result of a process of production that emphasized an economy of materials. The pavilion was “economical” in the sense that the Soviet budget was extremely limited, especially compared to amounts allocated by other countries to their own pavilions. Moreover, with the invitation coming in late November, the pavilion had to be designed and constructed at speed. The wood was pre-cut in factories in the Soviet Union and shipped to Paris, where it was put together with the glass by nine workers in just under a month.<sup>83</sup> It was also “economical” in the Constructivist sense, where it signified the use of no more material than necessary in the creation of essential form and transparent structure. Melnikov’s open wooden framework and roof are exemplary in this regard, while the use of glass as the primary material for the walls further enhanced the pavilion’s functional purpose of display and exhibition. As Melnikov noted above, not everyone passing by would enter, but all would know what was inside.

### *Suprematist precedents*

Glass was used to create an exemplary structure for exhibition, one whose material lent itself readily to notes of revolutionary transcendence, but the pavilion also drew upon a more explicit repository of innovations in form and color from the

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid. 232.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>83</sup> Melnikov, in Fossi, et al., 140. In his monograph on Melnikov, Frederick Starr rather fancifully described these wooden components as the work of axe-wielding Russian peasants, but in fact, Melnikov stated that they were pre-made in factories.

experimental agit-prop activities of the Soviet avant-garde, especially Suprematism. The glass-paned exhibition spaces, after all, could also be seen as large Suprematist wedges, driving into the Parisian consciousness. Their walls painted red and gray in a color scheme devised by Alexander Rodchenko, they call to mind the force of the central red triangle in Lissitzky's *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (Fig. 12). Indeed, for Lissitzky, Melnikov's pavilion represented the first actual realization of the new revolutionary architecture created out of the two main strands of aesthetic and theoretical experimentation in pre- and post-revolutionary Russia, represented by Malevich and Tatlin.<sup>84</sup> These two strands were united by a new understanding of the world in terms of a formal geometric order, which could be harnessed in the revolutionary task of an aesthetic and functional transformation—reconstruction—of the mode of production and conditions of life in this world.

He connects the bold red façade planes of the pavilion first to earlier developments in painting—i.e., the view that “the world is given us through vision, through color”—which begins anew with Malevich's 1915 *Black Square* (Fig. 13). Briefly looking back to 1915, we also have a Malevich *Red Square (Painterly Realism: Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions)* (Fig. 14) and a *Black Square and Red Square (Painterly Realism: Boy with Knapsack – Color Masses in the Four Dimensions)* (Fig. 15), all painted in the same year. In what relation does the *Black Square* stand to the *Red Square*? The original *Black Square* is roughly one and a half times larger, but excepting this and the color difference, the two are virtually identical—as one might expect of a Malevich “square.” A crucial and fundamental difference is, of course, the diagonal upward movement of the top edge of the *Red Square* from left to right—a straight Suprematist line. Is it possible to see in these two transformative operations of color and line the specific revolutionary content of abstraction?

The hard dynamic edge of Malevich's red: is it the dynamism of the peasant woman, or the remaking of the infinite abyss of space, the nothingness of the *Black Square*, into world and revolution? This is not to say that the red square transparently represents a peasant woman, or that form simply becomes figure, in a manner wholly at odds with “non-objectivist” precepts. We should take seriously the title Malevich gives the painting, together with the iconic status the red square has in the Suprematist system. Setting aside caution for the moment: can the red square in some sense be the realization of the black square in practical human activity, the transformation of the abstract negativity of the black square by the real subjective agency of humans? Is this how we are to understand the world picture of *Black Square and Red Square*, in which the force field of the black square inexorably draws up into its orbit the red of revolution? Perhaps “drawing up,” then, is not quite right. This is, after all, still 1915, between the failed revolution of 1905 and the triumphant one of 1917. Perhaps we have to wait until 1919 or 1920 to be sure, as T.J. Clark puts it in his discussion of Lissitzky's *Untitled (Rosa Luxemburg)*, that the symbolism is more or less transparent: Red = world = revolution.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> El Lissitzky, *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*, trans. Eric Dluhosch (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1970 [1930]), 29.

<sup>85</sup> Clark, 251.

By 1920, we have a clear statement in a UNOVIS (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva; Affirmers of the new art) flyer:

Comrades, set up the flags of UNOVIS. They will be the first signposts in the desert where we shall create the new world to succeed the red world which gutted the image of the old world. Red points the new way for man, while we point to the new creative work in art.<sup>86</sup>

Or again in November of 1920:

Let the overthrow of the old world of the arts be marked out on the palms of your hands. Wear the black square as a mark of the world economy. Draw the red square in your workshops as a mark of the world revolution in the arts. Clear the areas of the wide world of the whole chaos that prevails in it.<sup>87</sup>

In Lissitzky's children's book, *About Two Squares* (Fig. 16), an implacable "fairy tale" of destruction and renewal, this symbolism is in no terms uncertain. *About Two Squares* is "constructed," as noted on the back page, at UNOVIS in 1920. It is dedicated "to all children" and consists of six main plates. The first presents the two squares, a black square with a red square below and tilting up towards it in a configuration that resembles Malevich's *Black Square and Red Square*. Lissitzky's black and red squares, flying from afar, approach a world, shown in chaos and disorder. The red square crashes into this world, and on the ground of a black square, a new world of *Proun*-like structures appears, indelibly colored red by their encounter with the red square. The red world of the UNOVIS flyers has gutted and cleared away the old world, while the Suprematist squares, led by the red, have created a new world order.

This language was put to work in the pavilion in both recognizable and unexpected ways. The rhythmic arrangement of opposing lines and volumes that constituted the organizational principle of the pavilion evoked Suprematist conceptions of dynamism in line and form while the triangular motifs throughout were more explicit references. But the way in which Rodchenko and Melnikov's plans combined produced an effect that Melnikov described as the "inexplicable," "the true product of architecture."<sup>88</sup> The transparency of the glass allowed the interpenetrating light to combine with the red and gray exterior walls of the pavilion in a novel way. The main pavilion was bisected by the central staircase, and the large walls flanking the staircase, as well as the undersides of the roof panels, were painted in red. These walls were also

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<sup>86</sup> UNOVIS, propaganda leaflet, no date, in Larissa Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art, 1910-1930* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 298. "UNOVIS" is the abbreviation for "The Champions of the New" of "Affirmers of the New Art" (Utverditeli novogo iskusstva), and Lissitzky's *Proun* is thought to be an abbreviation of "The Project for the Affirmation of the New" (Projekt Utvershdeniya Novogo). Zhadova, 91.

<sup>87</sup> UNOVIS, "Leaflet of the Vitebsk Creative Committee, No. 1," *i20* Nov. 1920, in Zhadova, 299 (as quoted in Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 228).

<sup>88</sup> Fossi, et al., 138.

partly composed of glass panes, which allowed the plunging views into both spaces from the staircase but also, more significantly, allowed light to enter through the various glass walls, bounce off the red planes and reflect back into the exhibition space and onto the viewers. This combined effect of light and color brought together the two opposing masses of the pavilion formally and experientially: “Daylight freely penetrated in rays from various corners; it played on the red planes, and the red color was reflected on the visitors—they all went red, whether they wanted it or not. The inexplicable, which is the true product of architecture, was hidden in the opposing combinations of the homogenous masses of the pavilion.”<sup>89</sup> Red, the color of revolution, doused all visitors in its light.

### *Early constructivist precedents*

The influence of Tatlin is most strikingly apparent in Melnikov’s preliminary sketches for the pavilion (Fig. 17a-d). These show that he had initially favored plans centered on a sphere—a globe emblazoned “СССР” suspended above the exhibition hall—or a rotating spiral reminiscent of Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* (Fig. 18-19).<sup>90</sup> The symbolism of these early drawings is clear, with the sphere and other circular bands representing world and revolution. As Melnikov noted, Tatlin’s *Monument* had made the spiral into a kind of modern symbol,<sup>91</sup> and the rotating spiral plans would have been a direct allusion to the revolutionary dynamism represented by Tatlin’s structure. However, as Frederick Starr points out, all of these sketches failed to resolve the problem of integrating exhibition space with symbolic elements, and the exhibition space always appeared as a mere appendage to an independent sculpture or monument.<sup>92</sup> Melnikov thus in the end abandoned the spiral and other related curvilinear forms, and the final structure reflected Tatlin’s influence, but in sublimated form.

Tatlin’s early work on the formal problems of material construction and integrating sculpture with space led in part to the emergence of Constructivism, the first examples of which can be seen in his counter-reliefs of 1914-1915. These works broke open the sculptural volume and marshaled the surrounding space and gallery walls as part of the work. The use of the term “counter-relief,” according to Christina Lodder, was meant to indicate precisely this intensifying relationship with—an “encapsulation” of—the total spatial environment.<sup>93</sup> For Lissitzky, the connection between Tatlin and the architectural projects that were finally realized in the mid-1920s lay here: “The efforts of the new architecture to loosen up volumes and to create a spatial interpenetration between outside and inside found their early expression in this work.”<sup>94</sup> “This work” of Tatlin’s transformed spatial relations between “object” and environment, and the fluidity between internal and external spaces in Melnikov’s open, transparent pavilion can be seen as an extension of the possibilities created by Tatlin’s deconstruction of the object.

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<sup>89</sup> Fossi, et al., 138.

<sup>90</sup> Starr, 88-93.

<sup>91</sup> Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1983), 65.

<sup>92</sup> Starr, 91-93.

<sup>93</sup> Lodder, 16.

<sup>94</sup> Lissitzky, *Architecture for World Revolution*, 29.



In abandoning the sculptural elements of his earlier plans, Melnikov was working towards a conception of architecture equating form and function, and expressing any “symbolic” content through the essential forms of the structure rather than through the use of art object accessories. For this concept, material is a key component in achieving the fusion of form and content. In Tatlin’s counter-reliefs, structure—or construction—itsself is the subject, and both traditional forms of sculptural representation and narrative content are replaced with an abstract juxtaposition of different materials.<sup>95</sup> Rosalind Krauss describes this innovation as the “externalization of the structural logic of sculpture—a displacement of experientially available facts from the ideal and internal core to the visible exterior.”<sup>96</sup> The structural demands of the work drive the selection of materials but are also shaped by the specific characteristics of the materials themselves, i.e., by the “material as such, and its consequences - movement, tension and their interrelationship.”<sup>97</sup> As Krauss explains in the following example, “[i]f sheet metal gains greater compressive strength when it is folded or rolled, then this fact accounts for curved elements within the work.”<sup>98</sup>

The idea of a fusion of art object with industrial production was also at the heart of Tatlin’s counter-reliefs of 1914-1915, and it was out of these works that he developed the experimental architectural constructions such as the *Monument to the Third International*. The beginnings of Constructivism were rooted in these ideas of synthesizing traditional artistic media with industry and design. Tatlin and the Constructivists wanted to achieve a synthesis of art and industry through aesthetically driven investigations of the materials favored in modern construction techniques, such as iron and glass, dubbed the “materials of modern classicism” by Tatlin.<sup>99</sup> While Lissitzky declared that Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* proved that this synthesis could be achieved solely through the “intuitive and artistic mastery of materials” and “without having any special technical knowledge of construction,”<sup>100</sup> this view was open to attack on several different fronts. As a complete architectural realization, the pavilion could avail itself of the formal syntax of these earlier developments in painting and sculpture but sidestep the criticisms raised against these media. Before considering the disputed status of the pavilion as a Constructivist object, we will look briefly at the divided landscape of Constructivism that lay beneath the major artistic and architectural developments of Melnikov’s world.

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<sup>95</sup> The importance of selecting the proper materials is emphasized in the titles given to the counter-reliefs. Prior to 1914, many of the works were actually called *Selection of Materials*, and even after the terms “counter-relief” and “corner counter-relief” were introduced, “selection of material” persisted, as in the 1916 *Selection of Materials: Counter-Relief*. Lodder, 14-16.

<sup>96</sup> Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1977), 56.

<sup>97</sup> Tatlin, in Lodder, 64. “This investigation of material, volume and construction made it possible for us, in 1918, to move towards creating an artistic form of a selection of the materials iron and glass as the materials of modern classicism, equivalent in their severity to marble in the past. In this way there emerges the possibility of uniting purely artistic forms with utilitarian aims. An example: the Monument to the Third Communist International.”

<sup>98</sup> Krauss, 56.

<sup>99</sup> Lodder, 64.

<sup>100</sup> Lissitzky, *Architecture for World Revolution*, 29.

### *Contending constructivisms*

In her study of the emergence of Constructivism and its turn toward production art, Maria Gough highlights the difficulty of defining not only “constructivism” but also “productivism” precisely because of the heterogeneity of the positions taken even in the early 1920s. The first more specific idea of constructivism emerged in the context of the composition-versus-construction debates held at the INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture) from January through April 1921. The INKhUK was established in March 1920 under the leadership of Kandinsky, but he was soon voted out and left in late 1920 after his program was rejected by most members. Thereafter, the focus of the Institute turned to the activities of the First Working Group of Constructivists.<sup>101</sup>

Rodchenko’s crucial role in these activities is highlighted in Christina Lodder’s important study, *Russian Constructivism*:

The clearest and earliest formulation of the Constructivist position was provided by Rodchenko. At the very first session he asserted that the concept of composition was an anachronism because it was mere aesthetics and related to concepts of “taste” and other outmoded artistic ideas. In his view principles of composition had to be replaced by principles of construction and organisation. “All new approaches to art arise from technology and engineering and move towards organisation and construction.” Construction represented the culmination of centuries of artistic development. To Rodchenko it was part of the same process that had previously produced communist Russia. It was its artistic equivalent.<sup>102</sup>

In the subsequent meetings some measure of consensus was reached along these lines, and a final statement, the Program of the Working Group of Constructivists, was written and signed by the members. However, Gough also demonstrates that the composition-versus-construction debate never really reached a resolution, even in defining the terms of the debate.<sup>103</sup> In what turned out to be the final session, Nikolai Tarabukin, who had attacked Tatlin and all painting as simply aesthetic “easelism” further complicated the matter by “declar[ing] the principles of composition and construction inextricable, riddling the now-exhausted Working Group of Objective Analysis with two new terms: ‘compositional construction’ and ‘constructive composition.’”<sup>104</sup> A final session, Gough notes, was scheduled to examine these new terms and bring the debate to a close, but it never took place.

Lissitzky was still working with Malevich in the UNOVIS workshops when these sessions were being held, but with the effective closure of the Vitebsk Popular Art Institute later in 1921, he moved to Moscow and took up a brief membership at the

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<sup>101</sup> See Lodder, 78-82, for a history of the beginnings of the INKhUK.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>103</sup> Gough, 56.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

INKhUK. Through his INKhUK lectures, he entered into the composition/construction debate, arguing that *Proun* should not be seen as a kind of painting but rather as a form of construction. Maria Gough notes that this claim is met with skepticism by the Constructivists, and Lissitzky's departure from the INKhUK seems to coincide with their decision to completely abandon painting for production art.<sup>105</sup>

The Constructivist program revolved around three key terms defined by the key theoretician of the Working Group, Aleksei Gan: construction as the “Communist expression of material structures;” *faktura* as the working of material; and tectonic as a kind of elaboration of the concept of *faktura* guided by the principles of Communist production.<sup>106</sup> In November 1921, Gough recounts how the INKhUK members declared the shift to a productivist platform, based on these theoretical ideas and the idea that artists who had already rejected easelism would then move into the realm of real, practical work in production.<sup>107</sup> As both Gough and Lodder note, defining the term “production art” has proved as difficult as pinning down an exact definition of “constructivism,” but for our purposes, Lodder's general description suffices: “[T]he term ‘production art’ was not specific, and in its widest sense could be used to denote no more than a very general commitment to the idea of art being involved in industry and with the production of real objects of everyday use.”<sup>108</sup>

By 1922 Tarabukin had expanded his critique of painting, sculpture, and all other forms of “easelism” in his polemic, “From the Easel to the Machine.” Tatlin and Lissitzky's positions were explicitly attacked as a kind of formalism that could never truly achieve their proclaimed utilitarian and functional aims. In particular, Tarabukin honed in on what he perceived to be the contradictions of a Constructivism claiming to reject art but remaining tied to traditional media. Any work in this mode would remain an enterprise of aesthetes.

[C]onsciously ignoring themselves as painters, the Russian Constructivists have declared their approach “against art” in its typical museum forms and have collaborated with technology, engineering and industry without, however, possessing any specialised knowledge for this and remaining artists par excellence in all their essential characteristics. This idea of Constructivism and the form of imitating technical and engineering structures which they adopted is dilettante and naive, inspired only by our age's increasingly pious attitude towards industrialism.

Such types of construction should never have been called models because they do not represent projects for buildings — they are only self-contained objects,

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 132. See also Gough, 127-132 and Peter Nisbet, *El Lissitzky, 1890-1941* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Art Museums, 1987) for a more in-depth discussion of Lissitzky's lectures and INKhUK involvement.

<sup>106</sup> Gough, 69-73.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>108</sup> Lodder, 103. See also Gough's chapter, “Formulating Production,” in *The Artist as Producer*, 101-119.

tolerant only of artistic criteria. Their creators are quintessentially aesthetes and champions of pure art, however fastidiously they wriggle away from such epithets.<sup>109</sup>

In this passage, Tarabukin is primarily concerned with artists working in three-dimensional media, and Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* was probably foremost in his mind when criticizing the so-called models. The complex rotational scheme of its various levels seemed fantastical and impossible to actually construct, the result of a dreamy aesthetic imagination with no grounding in real, practical knowledge of the industry it exalted. As such, these schemes should never have been called models.

Tarabukin's line of criticism was taken up by Trotsky a year later in *Literature and Revolution*, where he condemned the form of Tatlin's monument as completely divorced from its proposed function.<sup>110</sup> The purpose of the building is to serve as a headquarters for the Communist International and the governing councils of the Soviet state, Trotsky notes, but why, he asks, do these meeting rooms have to rotate? "Meetings are not necessarily held in a cylinder and the cylinder does not necessarily have to rotate."<sup>111</sup> The scaffolding also comes under attack as an unnecessarily ornate support. In the Eiffel Tower, Trotsky argues, at least its eventual functioning as a radio tower mitigated what he saw as the overwhelming sense of aimlessness that marred its aesthetically striking iron girder construction. Tatlin's tower, however, had no equivalent mitigating circumstances. Although Trotsky seems to imply that the rotating glass enclosed meeting rooms might be acceptable on their own, his primary position is that the surrounding tiered spiral is nothing more than an ornate, decorative attachment that remains unintegrated with the architectural structure. Aesthetically, it obscures and negates any sense of lightness and transparency that might have been gained from the use of glass on the interior, whereas functionally it "depresses" the aim.

### *The VKhUTEMAS*<sup>112</sup>

These theoretical debates of the Constructivist working group and the INKhUK were continued among the workshops of the VKhUTEMAS (Higher Art and Technical Workshops), one of the most important centers of art and architecture in the Soviet Union

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<sup>109</sup> Nikolai Tarabukin, "From the Easel to the Machine," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, eds. Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison (New York: Icon, 1982), 138. Tarabukin completed the first draft and a major and a revision in 1922, with the 44-page text then published in 1923 (Gough, 121).

<sup>110</sup> Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1957 [1924]), 246-47.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> The VKhUTEMAS (Vysshie gosudarstvennyye khudozhestvennyye tekhnicheskie masterskie), or the Higher Art and Technical Workshops, was founded in 1920, replacing the Moscow SVOMAS (Svobodnye gosudarstvennyye khudozhestvennyye masterskiye; Free State Art Studios) which had been founded through a merger of the two main pre-revolutionary art schools in Moscow, i.e., the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture and the Stroganov School of Applied Arts.

during its years of operation, 1920-30. The faculty and personnel between the INKhUK and VKhUTEMAS often overlapped, and the INKhUK functioned, as Gough notes, as a kind of theoretical arm of the VKhUTEMAS. The first couple of years at the VKhUTEMAS saw the continued presence of a more conservative and academic school of architecture, leftover from the tsarist institution, the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. However, by 1923 the left architect and Constructivist, Nikolai Ladovski, had assumed leadership, and the VKhUTEMAS became arguably the central Soviet institution for revolutionary arts and architecture. Members of left avant-garde circles came to occupy its central positions, and faculty from other schools and cities, such as Lissitzky and Malevich, also gravitated towards it.

Ladovski was also a figure who bridged the INKhUK and the VKhUTEMAS. A member of the Constructivist Working Group, he originally laid out the key terms for defining constructivism in the 1921 INKhUK debates.<sup>113</sup> Gough notes that his first contributions immediately shaped the debate by introducing the composition/construction distinction that remained significant for all later discussions of Constructivism.<sup>114</sup> At the VKhUTEMAS under Ladovski's leadership, the years 1923-26 were ones where the unresolved theoretical debates of the INKhUK continued but also resulted in significant practical advances. In Lodder's words, the "consolidation of the experimentation of the initial period and of practical achievements based on this. Production workshops became operational in executing orders for various outside enterprises as a way to establish more concrete links with industry."<sup>115</sup> With the turn to production, Constructivists such as Rodchenko took up central positions in the Dermetfak (Wood and Metalwork) faculty. Lissitzky also joined in 1926 to teach "formal principles of architecture, design of furniture and architectural interiors" while from 1927 Tatlin taught courses on design, although his approach to furniture was very different from that of Rodchenko and Lissitzky.<sup>116</sup>

As activities focused increasingly on these new directions in production, architectural practice came to occupy a more central place. The debates that divided "formalists" from "functionalists" in the early 20s were also renewed in the architectural debates of the mid-20s. In fact, Lissitzky's book, *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution*, can be seen as a direct criticism of what he saw as a false opposition between form and function running through both of these periods of the twenties. When Lissitzky's book was published at the end of the decade, his primary target seemed to be the OSA (Objedinenie sovremennykh arkhitektorov, Organization of Contemporary Architects), which claimed at the time to be the sole bearer of the title, constructivism. Meanwhile, the polemics of the OSA, which was founded by the architects Moisei Ginzburg and Alexander Vesnin, were directed primarily against the so-called Rationalists and ASNOVA (Association of New Architects), headed by Nikolai Ladovski and associated with Lissitzky. Scholars such as Catherine Cooke reinforced the OSA

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<sup>113</sup> Gough, 39-40.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Lodder, 113-14.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 130.

claim by calling “catholic” the use of constructivism to denote non-OSA architects and works,<sup>117</sup> and others have also tended to see the OSA/ASNOVA argument as the bitter driving force of Soviet architecture in the 20s.<sup>118</sup> Starr’s rejection of the term, constructivist, to describe Melnikov’s pavilion likely stems from his association of the label with the OSA group.

It should be noted, however, that both ASNOVA and the OSA were formed out of the broader group of left artists and architects at the VKhUTEMAS. ASNOVA was founded in 1923, and Melnikov was a member from 1923-4. Thereafter he was considered to occupy an intermediate position between it and the OSA, which appeared in 1925 when the actual possibility of building materialized. But as Stephen Bann notes in his remarks on Lissitzky’s text, the supposed characteristics of one side (whether the formalist and aesthetic tendencies or the orientation towards solving practical problems of space and construction) often exhibited themselves in the other side in various, shifting ways.<sup>119</sup> While Lissitzky, for instance, was associated with ASNOVA and designed its sole journal issue in 1926, he also collaborated on a project with Ginzburg. And while the OSA is often equated with the critique of formalism, its journal, *SA (Sovremenniaia Arkhitektura, Contemporary Architecture)* features writings by Malevich.

Bann argues that the *Russia* book is important because it serves as a reminder, in the midst of these scholarly divisions and accounts, of the history of Soviet architecture leading up to the mid-1920s and its relation to the general development of Constructivism.<sup>120</sup> Lissitzky’s relationship to Constructivism is complex, and we can recall that he separated *Proun* from the activities of the First Working Group in *Die Kunstismen*. However, in *Russia*, he takes a more unifying tack in trying to reinsert a story about the origins of Constructivism into the architectural debate. It is an attempt at a retrospective history of constructivism demonstrating architecture’s relationship to the crucial prior movements in painting and sculpture in order to counter the OSA position.<sup>121</sup> It is for this reason that Melnikov’s pavilion comes to occupy a key position in the narrative: it is conceptually and visually linked to the formalistic and experimental Constructivism of the early 20s while also marking the beginnings of a new era of practical activity in which the “functionalism” of the OSA becomes more dominant.

### *Formalism and symbolism*

Throughout much of the first half of the 20s, architectural practice remained largely theoretical due to practical obstacles such as the lack of materials and funding for large-scale buildings. “Western writers have frequently regretted that Soviet architecture

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<sup>117</sup> Catherine Cooke, “Melnikov and the Changing Focus of Western Literature on the Russian Avant-garde,” in *Russian avant-garde theories of art, architecture and the city* (London: Academy Editions, 1995).

<sup>118</sup> Stephen Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Viking, 1974), 138.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Bann, 140.

of the 1920s was so hampered by the shortage of materials and funds. But, far from hindering it, austerity stimulated the modern movement.”<sup>122</sup> For Starr, these impediments are not regrettable constraints but rather the conditions that guaranteed the existence of a conceptually adventurous and experimental milieu.

The construction of Lenin’s mausoleum in 1924 provides a particularly striking example of these limiting yet productive conditions. Melnikov’s successful entry into the sarcophagus competition (Fig. 20) provided a choice between several variants of differing degrees of complexity and innovation:

On the face of it, this would seem to have been an ideal opportunity for the young professor to give free reign to his passion for using abstract and modern forms to convey the sense of raw vitality he found in contemporary Russian life... Melnikov entered into the task before him with fervor, and, conscious of the distance between what he himself preferred and what most likely would be possible, he submitted not one but five variants of ascending degrees of boldness. His strong preference was for a design consisting of a four-sided elongated pyramid cut by two internally opposed inclined planes of glass that by their intersection formed a strict horizontal diagonal, thus breaking up the static rectangle of the casket into two lively acute triangles.<sup>123</sup>

Ultimately, this “crystalline” variant, as Starr calls it, was not chosen, and a more traditionally rectilinear sarcophagus was constructed in keeping with the conservative design of the mausoleum as a whole, which a contemporary critic accused of looking exactly like the tomb of Persian King Cyrus.<sup>124</sup> The reason the more abstract and adventurous version was not chosen is partly attributable to this reversion to an older style of monumental architecture, befitting what had already shown itself to be a place of pilgrimage. But given the committee’s *preference* for this boldest version, Starr also cites imminent practical obstacles:

Prevailing aesthetic notions made these decisions all but inevitable, but a prime reason for shelving the more crystalline version of the sarcophagus may well have been that its construction would have required both skills and material that could scarcely have been found on such short notice. As it was, the Forestry Institute had to be raided for oak from which the piers could have been hewn; the Bromley Metalworking Shop, closed since the Civil War, had to be reopened to cast the frame; and when the first glass panels failed to fit, new ones had to be unceremoniously cut from the plate windows of the restaurant “The Ravine.”<sup>125</sup>

Significant for our purposes here is the committee’s preference for the most abstract, avant-garde design, and, indeed, the evidence of continuing institutional and bureaucratic support for this type of work.

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<sup>122</sup> Starr, 59.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

Although the crystalline version was not selected for the sarcophagus design, Starr goes on to make the surprising and convincing argument that the 1925 Pavilion is a formal variant—realization—of this design. The striking diagonals of the Pavilion, with its two acute triangular volumes, echo the sarcophagus design described above:

The most immediate antecedent for the floor plan of the final pavilion is to be found in Melnikov's preferred variant of the sarcophagus for V. I. Lenin. Indeed, so close is the relationship that it immediately raises certain rather startling possibilities concerning his broader intentions, namely, that he conceived the pavilion as nothing less than Lenin's sarcophagus and that he was somehow inviting the Parisian public to enter the body of "the leader of Humanity."<sup>126</sup>

The selection of Melnikov's design in the 1925 Pavilion competition is an affirmation of abstraction and, moreover, the idea of abstraction as a radical blend of form and content. Even if the link to the sarcophagus design was only apparent to Melnikov, his pavilion is seen as the best work for fulfilling the preeminent ideological needs of the 1925 Expo. It is chosen, in fact, over the designs of contemporaries who would soon go on to form the OSA group in 1925. In contrast to, for instance, the design of Moisei Ginzburg, which relied on a more simplified and unitary rectilinear construction, the complex geometry of Melnikov's pavilion—its rhythmic arrangement of opposing lines and volumes—conveys a sense of dynamism and movement.

The other selections of the Soviet contribution to the Exposition also belonged to the left avant-garde tradition of abstraction and Constructivism. Rodchenko, as noted above, was the overall designer and was responsible, as well, for the striking color scheme that distinguished the "red pavilion" from all others. Tatlin's *Monument to the Third International* was also prominently displayed at the entrance to the Soviet exhibition in the Grand Palais (Fig. 21), while Lissitzky's work constituted another significant contribution. Clothing and textile design was represented by Varvara Stepanova, also active in the First Working Group, while Malevich was even present in the form of Suprematist teacups. The iconography of the exhibit, we could say, is Suprematist and Constructivist. In fact, while Starr at times identifies the NEP with the overall clamp down on avant-garde activity, he also admits,

The radical and experimental strain not only continued to exist in architecture after the start of NEP, but it survived and flourished as never before, thanks precisely to governmental patronage. Much as Lenin criticized the avant-gardists, many of the leading exponents of Futurism and other radical tendencies in art were working comfortably in Moscow's newly formed Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops [VKhUTEMAS], with salaries from the Commissariat of Enlightenment. This is where Melnikov could be found from the day of its [the VKhUTEMAS's] reorganization.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 64.



This is not to argue that there was a synthesis of institutional and avant-garde programs as vital in 1925 as in 1921, but to point out that at this time abstraction still appeared as a viable practice, and that it was presented this way in Paris.

While many scholars have written on the Rationalist/Constructivist divide, as well as the complex fracturing of Constructivism into its Productivist and more utilitarian variants in the early 1920s—with some arguing that the disintegration of the more utopian aesthetic strands occurs as early as 1921 with the end of War Communism—the significance of these arguments for understanding Melnikov’s pavilion is that they demonstrate, nevertheless, a certain baseline understanding of the relationship between form and content, abstraction and meaning. Underpinning these disagreements is the commonly held understanding that the very idea of art—and its vocation—had been transformed. As Kogan puts it in the Soviet catalog for the Exposition, “C’est en effet notre Révolution qui a accentué cette idée que l’art doit avant toute chose incarner la vie réelle, qu’il doit construire la réalité et que la vraie beauté consiste dans l’adaptation de l’objet à sa destination.”<sup>128</sup> To make incarnate the real conditions of life means to represent them but more so, to take part in their creation. In emphasizing the role of art in constructing the new reality, Kogan adopts the language of Constructivism, and the works chosen for the Soviet exhibits, are thought to adhere to this standard of representation and realism, which is overwhelmingly abstract and Constructivist.

This raises, of course, the question of how literally we should tie together abstraction with a particular political or ideological content. Some of the best works are, after all, produced for agitprop purposes, including Lissitzky’s *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* and his 1920 Stanki Depot propaganda board in Vitebsk,<sup>129</sup> as well as proposed architectural projects such as Tatlin’s *Monument to the Third International* and Lissitzky’s vertiginous and ambitious *Lenin Tribune*. Tarabukin criticizes Tatlin and Lissitzky—the *Proun* paintings in particular—for remaining essentially *representational* works of art, but these examples only seem to underscore the idea of abstraction as the aspiration to wholly new forms of representation, which will be at the same time be forms of construction. One should not forget that the language of representation is at times rejected, and what the use of this term is meant to convey is something akin to the symbolism or even expressiveness that was affirmed.

Great efforts were made in the early post-Revolutionary years to evolve a universally intelligible symbolic language in monumental art and architecture, by means of simple geometric shapes and colour. Painters and sculptors contributed a great deal to these endeavours. Such symbolic forms also represented one of the intermediary stages or channels used by Leftist painting to make the transition from representational expression, via symbolic forms, into the language of architecture. The work of many leading artists, Malevich and Tatlin among them, passed through a “symbolist” stage.<sup>130</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> Kogan, 5.

<sup>129</sup> See Clark

<sup>130</sup> Selim Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture: The Search for New Solutions in*

The idea of construction is crucial here, for it explains why certain Soviet painters and other artists involved in the early Constructivist and Productivist groups move from painting and sculpture to architectural design and practice. Indeed, “architecture” becomes, as Lissitzky notes, a slogan alongside “constructivism” and “functionalism.”<sup>131</sup> While Khan-Magomedov’s history is an architectural one and thus has the tendency to reduce developments in painting and sculpture to events leading up to a final architectural language, the merit of his approach lies in its ability to clarify the fundamental claim on meaning asserted by abstraction, a perspective that is at times lost today. The symbolism of geometric shapes is made more apparent in the architectural context, where this tendency can be understood in the following common moves:

the recourse to severe or ascetic forms with a view to creating a new system of aesthetics which would contrast with the ‘effeminate’ and ‘pompous’ architectural forms of the past; the inclusion in the aesthetic vocabulary of features suggesting a symbolic meaning or even a story, in other words, the incorporation of architecture into Agitational Art; [and] a generous use of industrial and mechanical motifs as symbols of the industrial proletariat’s labour.<sup>132</sup>

Ladovski and Melnikov serve as two instructive examples on this relationship of abstract form to architecture. For both rationalists, the ascetic forms of geometric abstraction are preeminent. But while Ladovski focuses on pointing to architecture and engineering as the only media that can truly embody this aesthetic vocabulary, Melnikov’s main concern is, according to Khan-Magomedov, to keep alive the “appropriately expressive appearance” of these forms.<sup>133</sup>

### *The dialectic of abstraction and expressionism*

Lissitzky’s reflections on formalism, symbolism and functionalism provide another vantage point from which we can return to a consideration of Tarabukin and Trotsky’s criticisms, in light of architectural developments. Trotsky’s critique of Tatlin’s monument is brief and could, of course, be dismissed on the grounds of its seemingly willful philistinism. If we consider Trotsky and Tarabukin’s criticisms in terms of Melnikov’s pavilion—part of the “formalistic wing”<sup>134</sup> of architecture and the Constructivism that drew Tarabukin’s ire—there are also easy responses. As a successfully completed work, it is immune to Tarabukin’s charge of dilettantish and naïve imitations of technical structures. If Tatlin’s works could be seen as the products of an aesthete interested only in playing with the juxtaposition of contrasting materials and other impractical formal experiments, the actual architectural projects that were produced

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*the 1920s and 1930s*, ed. Catherine Cooke, trans. Alexander Lieven (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 101.

<sup>131</sup> Lissitzky, *Architecture for World Revolution*, 70.

<sup>132</sup> Khan-Magomedov, 74.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 74, 233.

<sup>134</sup> Lissitzky, *Architecture for World Revolution*, 35.

within the larger Constructivist movement in the mid-1920s demonstrated a certain level of accomplishment in technical and engineering knowledge. In fact, Melnikov's pavilion was designed and constructed even in the face of notable technical difficulties, as he recounts:

The territory on which we were building the “red pavilion” was not only small (29.5 by 11 metres), but also to the highest degree unsuitable for building. The square was crossed by tram lines, which it was forbidden to remove, in accordance with the conditions laid down by the Parisian authorities. Consequently, the dimensions of our building were limited not only in the horizontal, but also in the vertical plane. It was impossible to put a foundation under the building because of the tram lines.<sup>135</sup>

Furthermore, Trotsky's calls for sculpture to “lose its fictitious independence” and “revive in some higher synthesis its connection with architecture” read like program notes for the pavilion, which abandoned the use of quasi-sculptural symbolic elements such as the sphere and spiral.

But what is interesting about these criticisms is that they demonstrate certain shared ideas about form and content with their “formalistic” targets. Trotsky's text, for instance, implicitly attributes meaning to glass, which often assumes an ideological role in modern architectural and Constructivist practice. Although he expressed hostility to the alleged formalism of Constructivism, the approach to material and structure that came out of its experiments is accepted, perhaps unwittingly. Of course, Trotsky does not explicitly articulate this meaning, referring only to simplicity and lightness, and Tatlin's previous remarks on iron and glass are characterized by a vague boilerplate language identifying iron and glass with a kind of modern social content.

However, the common assumption here, which we can trace back to ideas about abstraction, is that material in the abstract becomes the bearer of, as Adorno put it, “what aesthetic terminology once called subject matter [*Stoff*] and Hegel the subject [*Sujet*].”<sup>136</sup> These concepts, he continues, are “not to be apodictically excluded from the concept of material.” Reflecting on changes in aesthetics “since Kandinsky, Proust, and Joyce”—a designation that we can also understand in terms of the breakdown in traditional forms of narrative, as well as the advent of abstraction—Adorno notes that the concept of art in which subject matter would be treated “in its immediacy, as a theme that can be lifted over from external reality and worked upon” had all but disappeared.<sup>137</sup> Where the traces of subject matter would be found—even as its external manifestations were expelled from the work of art—would be in the developments of form, ever more indistinguishable from an alienated content. “In the dialectic of form and content, the scale also tips toward form—against Hegel—because content, which his aesthetics wanted to salvage, degenerated to a positivistic given, a mold for the reification against which, according to

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<sup>135</sup> Melnikov, in Fossi, et al., 138.

<sup>136</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 149.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*

Hegel's theory, art protests..”<sup>138</sup>

Adorno is arguing against accusations of formalism in which form is set in opposition to content. From today's vantage point, when the political and social content of abstraction is not always apparent, it is a useful argument to remember. However, although the debate between Adorno and some of his antagonists—in particular, Lukács—dates back to the 1920s, the understanding of the relationship between form and meaning operated differently in the debate over formalism in the context of abstract and Constructivist art and architecture. In this context, form is not opposed to content but rather is seen as attempting to “express” a specific content. The problem of formalism is thus its apparent symbolism. This charge is not necessarily surprising and underscores the development of abstraction in terms of a kind of radical content as it emerged out of the work of Malevich, Lissitzky and the UNOVIS workshops at the Vitebsk Popular Art Institute. Tatlin's tower was also accused of an overly romantic symbolism, and while Melnikov had rid his pavilion of the more obvious traces of Tatlin's influence—i.e., the spiral and circular bands—its final, abstract architectural syntax was still seen as symbolic. While the word “symbolism” was used negatively, the response to this criticism did not come in the form of a rejection of the charge but an affirmation of the relationship between form and meaning. Abstraction, a neutralized style today, was for Melnikov and his contemporaries a quasi-expressive syntax.

To call it expressive is not to claim a direct link to the earlier twentieth century movements of German Expressionism or Fauvism, although some argue for this connection more explicitly. Starr, for instance, identifies Melnikov and the “bolder spirits at the VKhUTEMAS”<sup>139</sup> with a kind of underlying “Romantic Classicism...reinforced by the poetic language and naturalistic imagery of German Expressionism.”<sup>140</sup> By putting it this way, Starr attempts to draw out the symbolic side of abstraction, which is often ignored. However, while there is an aspect of romantic voluntarism to the utopian side of abstraction, he overstates the influence of Expressionism as a specific historical movement, perhaps forgetting the stridently anti-naturalistic—and often anti-Expressionist—polemics of abstract and Constructivist artists.<sup>141</sup> In an interview conducted during the Paris exposition, Melnikov describes the influence of Classicism in

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>139</sup> The VKhUTEMAS (Vysshie gosudarstvennye khudozhestvennye tekhnicheskie masterskie), or the Higher Art and Technical Workshops, was founded in 1920, replacing the Moscow SVOMAS (Svobodnye gosudarstvennye khudozhestvennye masterskiye; Free State Art Studios) which had been founded through a merger of the two main pre-revolutionary art schools in Moscow, i.e., the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture and the Stroganov School of Applied Arts.

<sup>140</sup> Starr, 67.

<sup>141</sup> Interestingly, Maria Gough also invokes the broader context of German Romanticism in understanding the formation of Constructivism and its early debates at the INKhUK (Institute of Artistic Culture) but in order to make an opposing claim, namely that the influence of German Romanticism is seen in the importance of the autotelic principle more generally, “the general motor of modernism's increasing valorization of genesis over mimesis, or process over product.” Gough, 56-7.

terms of a past formation overturned by the spirit of the Bolshevik revolution:

Lors de la révolution d'octobre 1917, nous dit-il, j'avais depuis peu terminé mes études et naturellement étais imprégné de classicisme palladien. Or, le régime bolchévique ne bouleversa pas seulement les institutions, mais les esprits. Dans les milieux artistiques son influence fut immédiate et intense; elle détermina un orientation vers d'inédites manières de penser et d'exprimer.<sup>142</sup>

In the context of being interviewed about his pavilion, one might expect Melnikov to take a more polemical stance. Nevertheless, his disavowal of classicism here speaks to a theoretical and political alignment that eludes Starr's attempt to divide the VKhUTEMAS into "bolder spirits" and NEP (New Economic Policy) drones<sup>143</sup> based on their relationship to the romantic tradition of expression. Pure abstraction and expressionism stand in a more complex dialectical relationship to each other, which Starr simplifies into an either/or opposition.

The central role of Rodchenko, who was crucial to the formation of both Constructivism and Productivism and was a faculty member in the more avant-garde sections of the VKhUTEMAS, in the design of the pavilion and other Soviet exhibits at the Exposition exemplifies this relationship. Melnikov allied himself with Rodchenko, drawing a parallel between his work in the sphere of architecture and Rodchenko's against the art world. Noting that Rodchenko was the main artist for the pavilion, he remarks, "We understood each other, were quick on the uptake, as they say, for Rodchenko considered exhibition compositions to be a variety of architecture. My struggle in architecture was with 'the palace,' while his struggle in exposition was with 'the shop,' for previously every exhibition was no different from a large shopping arcade."<sup>144</sup> In other words, the two are related as the exhibition is a marketplace for the luxury goods—whether paintings or furniture—which fill the palaces of the Russian aristocracy and haute bourgeoisie.

The analogy also works by drawing Melnikov and Rodchenko, architecture and art, together in a new unified practice and purpose, in the service of revolution and communist reconstruction. In this new context, any unmediated reference to the past—classical or romantic—would certainly be considered regressive. The mood of the moment is captured in a formulation by Melnikov from the same interview, describing the practical and aesthetic considerations driving the pavilion design: "Par goût personnel, un goût qui est peut-être aujourd'hui national."<sup>145</sup> The personal and the

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<sup>142</sup> *Bulletin de la vie artistique*, 1 June 1925, 231-2.

<sup>143</sup> For instance Starr also describes Melnikov's practice, along with those of the bolder spirits, as "so out of step with the dominant political mood of the times." By the dominant political mood, he is referring to the institution of the New Economic Policy, in place from 1921 to 1928, which he seems to unilaterally associate with a kind of deadening of creativity and innovative practice. This is a contentious simplification.

<sup>144</sup> Fossi et al., 139.

<sup>145</sup> *Bulletin de la vie artistique*, 1 June 1925, 232.

collective have become merged.

The expressive, or symbolic, tendency might be better thought of, then, as a more general drive towards meaning or signification that was not contradictory with abstraction/constructivism but rather an essential aspect of these movements. The case for this argument is particularly strong in Melnikov's pavilion in its design to project an ideological and political message. Lissitzky certainly argues that any opposition between constructivism and symbolism is false. He notes that the attacks on formalism and symbolism are launched from the perspective of the "present 'constructivist' generation of professional architects."<sup>146</sup> However, he argues that the polemical opposition, or "dialectic," between formalism/symbolism and constructivism is false. Melnikov's pavilion is the first example in the account that then follows of the realization of a new, reconstructed architecture—an architecture for world revolution—in which these terms are united.

### *Reactions to the pavilion*

Both positive and negative responses in Paris to Melnikov's pavilion start from the premise of this union of form and content. The most extensive coverage is found in *L'Humanité*, which publishes no less than seven articles, with accompanying images devoted to covering in detail the various exhibits from April through July 1925. Marcel Eugène, a member of the editorial board of the journal, *Clarté*, is the author of the first major *L'Humanité* article from April 1925, which is a version of his "Les palaces bourgeois et la maison soviétique," which appears around the same time in the April 1925 issue of *Clarté*.

*Clarté* can be broadly described as representing the Sorelian French Marxists who attempted to establish a continuity between the tradition of French utopian socialism and the culture of the Third International. For instance, Paul Vaillant-Couturier—who is also on the *Clarté* editorial board and later serves as the editor of *L'Humanité* and the mayor of the Communist municipality, Villejuif—is one exemplary figure in this transition, having belonged to the older version of the French Socialist Party, the French Section of the Workers' International (SFIO), which ultimately voted to join the Third International at the 1920 Congress of Tours. With the rapprochement of the SFIO and the Third International, *L'Humanité* (previously the paper of the SFIO) became the central press organ of the French Communist Party (PCF). Vaillant-Couturier is one of the original founders of *Clarté* in 1919, which is sometimes remembered for its association with André Breton, Louis Aragon and the Surrealists beginning in late 1925. While *Clarté* is sometimes described as a party organ,<sup>147</sup> this kind of negative typecasting does not adequately capture the way in which Bolshevism supplied a revolutionary imagination and energy necessary, as Geoff Eley argues, for jolting European Marxists out of their fatalism.

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<sup>146</sup> Lissitzky, *Architecture for World Revolution*, 29.

<sup>147</sup> See, for example, William Lewis, *Louis Althusser and the Traditions of French Marxism* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005), 91.

Bolshevism broke the mold of the socialist tradition, jolting European Marxists from their fatalism. Socialism was no longer the necessary exit from inevitable capitalist crisis; instead, revolutions could now be made. Not simply the objective result of history's laws, they required a creative political act. For the radicals of European socialist parties, for working-class militants of 1917-18, and for many younger intellectuals fresh to the Left, the Russian Revolution enlarged a sense of political possibility. It created a new horizon. It incited a general sense of movement and opportunity, of pushing on the frontiers of political imagination.<sup>148</sup>

The writers of *Clarté* are no exception to the world of young intellectuals described here, and both of Eugène's articles adopt a militant tone in keeping with this spirit of Bolshevism. They begin by attacking the commercial, luxury object peddling of the Exposition, along with the unimaginative architecture and its banal adherence to what is on trend, namely reinforced concrete. The *Clarté* article, for instance, opens with, "Le plus ridicule des spectacles se prépare,"<sup>149</sup> while the *L'Humanité* one begins, "En visitant l'exposition cette année, le prolétariat pourra être fier du pavillon des Etats qu'il gouverne, du pavillon de l'U.R.S.S. qui en sera un des 'clouds.'"<sup>150</sup> *Les Annales*, a general interest literary and political journal, also notes this phenomena, declaring, "French workers, without knowing the Russian language, are head over heels at the sight of the pavilion."<sup>151</sup> For abstract artists in Paris and Western Europe, the Pavilion might have seemed an intoxicating confirmation of the integral role abstract art was to play in the reconstruction of the imminent post-revolutionary social life. The Pavilion's apparent appeal to French workers might have seemed proof, as well, that abstract art, far from being rarefied or esoteric, constituted a truly modern, universal language of form that transcended national boundaries, claimed by the working classes as *their* art.

Laudatory extracts from the speeches of Kogan and Leonid Krasnin, the Soviet ambassador to France as well as Melnikov's acquaintance through his chairmanship of the Lenin mausoleum committee, are also published at the time of the official inauguration of the Soviet section in June. They bore titles such as "Un nom domine notre art: Lenine!"<sup>152</sup> The architectural historian Catherine Cooke offers a weak and simplistic dismissal of Starr's connection of Lenin's sarcophagus and the pavilion,

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<sup>148</sup> Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850-2000* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2002), 152.

<sup>149</sup> Marcel Eugène, "Les 'Palaces Bourgeois' et la 'Maison' des Soviets," *Clarté* no. 73 (1925), 169.

<sup>150</sup> Eugène, "L'exposition des Arts Décoratifs et le Pavillon de l'U.R.S.S.," 4.

<sup>151</sup> *Les Annales*, 19 April 1925, cited in Starr, 101. See also Christina Kaier, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 240, for another similar anecdote from a Soviet journal. In addition to positive coverage, there were attacks in the conservative press, such as *L'Intransigeant*, which had become a right-wing newspaper at this time. See, for example, André Laphin, "Une maison pour un escalier," *L'Intransigeant* (9 May 1925), p.1-2. At the end of a string of insults, Laphin ridiculed the Soviets for constructing a structure with walls of glass when they had been so foolish as to do away with the maids who would be needed to clean the glass panes.

<sup>152</sup> "Un nom domine notre art: Lenine!" *L'Humanité*, 6 June 1925, 4.

arguing that any similarities are simply due to the “natural tendency of a designer...to circulate a constant set of formal themes throughout a certain period of work,”<sup>153</sup> but the presence of Lenin’s image and thought throughout the exhibits suggests a kind of ongoing mourning, with his death in January 1924 still looming large.

Tributes to Lenin in 1925 continued to be published—for instance, Trotsky’s on Lenin in a 1925 issue of *Clarté*—and while mourning is perhaps too strong, the exhibits certainly display a desire to honor the “grand fondateur.” Anatole de Monzie, France’s Minister of Education and Fine Arts in 1925 as well as the head of the Russian Affairs commission, objects “Nous ne permettrons pas que sous le couvert de votre exposition soit entreprise une propagande néfaste,” to which *L’Humanité* retorts, “Cette ‘propagande’ c’est l’image de Lénine qui marque la plupart des oeuvres de l’U.R.S.S.!!! M. de Monzie, voudrait-il empêcher que le peuple russe honore son grand libérateur!”<sup>154</sup> The reactions in the major newspapers thus lined up rather predictably along ideological lines, including the oft-referenced diatribe in *L’Intransigeant*, declaring that the pavilion should be burned.<sup>155</sup> Nevertheless, the reactions on the whole are positive, with the Soviet pavilion and exhibits among the most talked about contributions at the Exposition.

The professional reviews also reflect these general tendencies, with the majority proving positive. For instance, the pavilion was awarded the Grand Prix, a perhaps grudging acknowledgment by the French architectural establishment, which was in charge of the Exposition as a whole. *L’Architecte* provides a good example of this attitude. *L’Architecte* was a monthly architectural review and the semi-official organ of the graduate society of the *École des Beaux-Arts*. Its editor-in-chief is Michel Roux-Spitz, a student of Tony Garnier and follower of Auguste Perret, while its editorial committee was composed of both revered figures in the French tradition, such as Garnier, as well as the mediocre establishment masters Charles Plumet (President of the Exposition), Pierre Patout, Louis Bonnier (Director of architecture, parks, and gardens), Louis-Hippolyte Boileau (Pavillon de Bon Marché), and Henri Sauvage (Pavillon de Printemps), among others. In an article on the non-French pavilions, the critique begins with the premise that a common cause unites the defaults of many of these contributions, “le manque de simplicité, l’idée fixe mesquine du nouveau.”<sup>156</sup> The Soviet pavilion is held up as the prime example of this problem, the confirmation of this premise:

Il reçoit de l’exposition russe une confirmation singulièrement forte. Le pavillon, sur lequel on a beaucoup écrit, et jusqu’à de graves dissertations philosophiques, n’est tel que par la volonté bien arrêtée de l’architecte de rompre avec tout ce qui, même de loin, aurait pu rappeler le passé : sinon pourquoi cet escalier oblique si gênant, ce toit qui n’abrite rien, cette crainte malade de l’angle droit? Tout cela, quoiqu’on en ait dit, n’a aucune utilité pratique, ne se justifie par aucune raison de

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<sup>153</sup> Cooke, 149.

<sup>154</sup> “Krassine inaugure la Section soviétique aux ‘Arts décoratifs,’” *L’Humanité*, 5 June 1925, 1.

<sup>155</sup> Laphin, cited in Starr, 102.

<sup>156</sup> J. Porcher, “L’Exposition des art décoratifs et industrielles modernes: Visite aux pavillons étrangers,” *L’Architecte* 11 (November 1925), 102.



structure... il n'y a qu'une explication possible : on s'est appliqué à ne pas faire comme tout le monde.<sup>157</sup>

Dismissive and simplistic in his response, this critic can only imagine that Melnikov was motivated by a pure contrarianism. Only Rodchenko's club merits some meager praise, having demonstrated some evidence of the "pensée constructive" in supposedly forgetting the regrettable demands of revolutionary art.<sup>158</sup> This critics must surely have ignored the portrait of Lenin also clearly hanging in the club, but to such critics, Melnikov's pavilion would indeed appear strange, a far departure from the entries of the other French architects at the *Exposition Internationale*, such as Robert Mallet-Stevens, whose neo-classical buildings were supposed to evoke the spirit of the new architecture but appeared as heavy, monolithic and truly mausoleum-like structures.

The *Bulletin de la vie artistique* includes a similar, albeit brief, critique by Patout, but much more space is devoted to the Melnikov interview, as well as a commentary by Albert Gleizes, the cubist painter. Gleizes comes to the opposite conclusion, praising not only the use of wood when it would have been easy to fall into the trap of reinforced concrete but finding in it "la vérité du principe architectonique:"

Dans ce cas où la construction est forcément simple, on en aperçoit le premier état. La domination du rythme est sensible dans la symétrie des deux éléments dégagés du solide brut initial par la coupure de l'escalier diagonal. Ainsi le groupe construit est le fait de deux volumes creux de poids égaux qu'un intervalle de temps éloigne et rapproche. Le caractère de toute réalisation dans l'espace — de la danse à l'architecture — est d'origine plastique.<sup>159</sup>

Gleizes is supposed to represent here the voice of the avant-garde, but his comments also pick up on the qualities of the pavilion that are widely praised in the French press, including leading figures of European architecture such as Le Corbusier, Robert Mallet-Stevens and Auguste Perret.<sup>160</sup> Indeed, the full-length floor-to-ceiling glass walls, as well as the deployment of a kind of purified volumetric form, speak to the kind of structural simplicity that Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co later describe as the ingredients of modern architectural classicism. Glass provides the moment of transcendence.

In focusing on the rhythmic dynamism of the pavilion, Gleizes also hits upon what turns out to be a recurring topic of conversation among not only contemporary critics but also the later scholarly literature, i.e., symbolism and the diagonal cutting lines and the staircase around which much of this discussion centers. As Cooke notes, the "stress placed by contemporary commentators on the pavillion's 'symbolism'... has been nurtured by most writers ever since."<sup>161</sup> There are, as we have seen, good reasons for this

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<sup>157</sup> Ibid.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>159</sup> Albert Gleizes, *Bulletin de la vie artistique* 6, no. 11 (1 June 1925): 236.

<sup>160</sup> Starr, 101-102.

<sup>161</sup> Cooke, 143.

emphasis, and the “serious philosophical discussions” dismissed in *L’Architecte*<sup>162</sup> are a reference to this symbolism. Melnikov’s interview in the *Bulletin de la vie artistique* links these expressive elements to the physical limitations of the plot given to the Soviets and in doing so presents the realized pavilion as a union of formal innovation and technical achievement, as well as form and function. The passage cited above, for instance, is a response to the question, “Quelle idée à présidé à sa construction?”, to which Melnikov responds, “Eh! cette boîte vitré n’est pas née d’une idée, d’une abstraction. Je me suis confié à la vie et adapté aux circonstances. Je pris en considération l’emplacement qui m’était dévolu, un emplacement encombré d’arbres: il fallait bien que mon édicule se dégagât de leur fouillis par sa couleur, par son altitude, par l’artifice de ses volumes. Mon budget était restreint: cela limitait le choix de mes matériaux.”<sup>163</sup> He then continues with his remarks quoted above on personal and national taste.

The land allotted to the Soviet Union was small (29.5 x 11 meters) and contained irremovable tramlines, making it impossible to put down a foundation and also, Melnikov recalls, “to the highest degree unsuitable for building.”<sup>164</sup> It contained, moreover, a number of tall trees, which can still be seen in the documentary photos of the completed pavilion. His extremely limited budget also meant that the utmost economy was necessary in its design and construction. Employing a necessary economy of means and materials does not mean, however, that formal or even expressive aspects take on a secondary importance, as some would argue. For her part, Cooke cites these same passages to argue that Melnikov was deliberately diverting attention away from any suggestion of symbolism, only including some prefatory “obligatory ramblings about how the October Revolution has changed the world” to satisfy, the implication is, unnamed Soviet authorities.<sup>165</sup> However, another more plausible interpretation of these statements is that Melnikov, swept up in the excitement of the exhibition as a kind of summing up and presentation to the West of the revolutionary fervor of Lenin and Bolshevism, is attempting to explain how “formalism” is not divorced from real life—thus not simply born of an idea, an abstraction—and to use his pavilion as a demonstration for how the previously experimental syntax of purified form and volume, along with their interrelations can be put in the service of the new productive economy. “Symbolism” is no longer the subjective cry of the individual but the expression of the collective. In the words of Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co:

The *Prouns* of Lissitzky, the Constructivist stage sets, the experiments carried out by Rodchenko in the Metfak (the metal laboratory of the Vkhutemas), the tower designed by Tatlin as *Monument to the IIIrd International*, all expressed their common vocation, the artist’s duty to proclaim that the age-old spell had been broken once and for all by a new world ruled by organized and planned labor. The technique of alienation, give a theoretical justification by the Formalists, was

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<sup>162</sup> Porcher, 103.

<sup>163</sup> Melnikov, interview by Fénéon, 232.

<sup>164</sup> Melnikov, in Fossi et al, 138.

<sup>165</sup> Cooke, 143.

carried over into propaganda.<sup>166</sup>

*A warning against literalism*

This reading is indebted to Tafuri and Dal Co's chapter on the Russian avant-garde in their landmark study, *Modern Architecture*, which also offers, however, certain warnings against an overly literal reading of abstract form as symbolic message in Melnikov's pavilion.

This was a dynamic building based on the intersection of deformed geometrical masses that obliged the visitor to move along specific diagonals. There is no point in reading those "intersections" as metaphors of the socialist dynamic: the preparatory drawings for the pavilion show circular buildings which are broken up, inclined and interconnected in informal manner, indicating beyond a doubt that what interested the architect was only experimentation with a language made up of alienated objects, of volumes designed to deform their own geometry and in fact clashing with each other.<sup>167</sup>

Although it is not clear whether Tafuri and Dal Co are referring to a specific interpretation here, the interpretation, we can surmise, would see the visitors' movements along the different and opposed axes with these paths leading to the collective spaces of the pavilion's interior, such as the workers' club. These "intersections" would then be a metaphor for the classless utopia of communism. Tafuri and Dal Co correctly point to the weakness of such an interpretation, but they do not argue that Melnikov's work as a whole, which is primarily associated with workers' clubs in the years immediately following the 1925 Exposition, has no relation to these ideas or to the understanding of architecture as a political committed practice of the reconstruction of society. Instead, they put forth a more complex explanation of the contradictions of avant-garde architecture, noting "his workers' clubhouses were at one and the same time, 'social condensers,' as they were defined, and experiments having nothing to do with any revolutionary or propagandist aims."<sup>168</sup>

While Catherine Cooke has long been considered an authority on the Russian avant-garde and Soviet architecture, it should be noted that her use of Tafuri and Dal Co to support her argument about Melnikov's disinterest in symbolism borders on the deceptive. She reproduces, for instance, a lengthy quote from *Modern Architecture* on Melnikov, with both minor and more significant errors, with the crucial one coming in this sentence on social condensers and propagandist aims. Using ellipses, she simply omits the clause, "In that sense his workers' clubhouses were at one and the same time, "social condensers," as they were defined, and experiments," connecting the preceding sentence only with what follows, i.e., "having nothing to do with any revolutionary or

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<sup>166</sup> Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture*, trans. Robert Erich Wolf (New York: Abrams, 1979), 208.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 214.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 214-15.

propagandist aims.”<sup>169</sup> She thus alters the meaning of the passage to agree with her own belief in Melnikov’s complete detachment from “ideas” and politics.<sup>170</sup>

Should Tafuri and Dal Co’s statement, however, be read as saying that Melnikov had no interest in revolutionary or propagandist aims? This seems to contradict their declaration that Melnikov, in his treatment of geometrical forms, “rendered active and expressive by a skillfully programmed play of oppositions,” and was also “the most coherent analyst of the architectural syntax of the 1920s and 1930s in Russia.”<sup>171</sup> For Tafuri and Dal Co, Melnikov’s focus on form independently of all other aspects—a rigorous attention, they write, to the discipline of architecture itself—was bound to clash with the backward-looking traditionalism that began to dominate the art institutions with the start of the First Five Year Plan in 1928.<sup>172</sup> Their judgment of his distance from politics should thus be understood in terms of this periodization. At the same time, the divergence between propaganda and avant-garde art and architecture can be traced to the fact that Constructivism had its own “autonomous ideology.”

But it should also be noted that Russian Constructivism—using the term in an empirical manner to designate the totality of experiments with form carried out by the Formalist avant-garde—had its own autonomous ideology... [From] the early 1920s Constructivism inherited an awareness of the need for reconciliation between anarchy and plan, between revolution of the objects and planned production, between liberation of the forms and codification of new programmed modes of living.<sup>173</sup>

These passages appear even more suggestive when we consider the crucial role Rodchenko played in actually bringing the pavilion to completion. We know something of his role from Melnikov’s description of the him as the overall artist of the pavilion, but Jean-Louis Cohen has further underscored the importance of Rodchenko’s color plan for truly unifying the disparate elements of the pavilion, giving them a coherence of design enabling the pavilion to appear as the unified, total structure in the end. Moreover, as Cooke points out while making reference to Cohen’s work, Rodchenko’s direction is most crucial for actually completing the pavilion and its interior exhibits, implying that while Melnikov’s plans may have provided the basic design idea, it was actually Rodchenko’s principled Constructivism and practical onsite activity that “made” the

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<sup>169</sup> Cooke, 148.

<sup>170</sup> In another strange distortion, Cooke claims that Lissitzky’s *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution* only includes several illustrations of Melnikov’s pavilion, but makes no actual reference to Melnikov: “Thus for all Melnikov’s peripheral relationships to Asnova, with whom Lissitzky had earlier associated himself in Moscow and propagandised abroad, Melnikov is never mentioned in the text.” *Ibid.*, 145. This is simply not true, however, as we have seen that Melnikov occupies an important place—at least symbolically—in Lissitzky’s narrative of the passage from theoretical to realized Constructivist architectural practice.

<sup>171</sup> Tafuri and Dal Co, 214.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 215.

<sup>173</sup> *Ibid.*

pavilion.

Rodchenko's letters from Paris to his partner, Varvara Stepanova, give a sense of the extent of this background activity. On April 17, for instance, he writes Stepanova, complaining somewhat about the amount of work he is doing, seemingly without acknowledgment:

They have painted the pavilion like I painted the design—red, gray, and white; it came out wonderfully, and no one said a word, that I was the one, but when they need to ask advice—they're always asking me.

Grand Palais, six rooms, the entire color scheme is mine, and again total silence about me...

I'm mad today, I even left and went home at three. I'm sick of it, they all talk but there's no one to work. I'm sick of Melnikov, all he talks about is a visa for his wife...

But all in all I'm calm: let them thrash it out—that's the way things should be with me, after all; I have to give what I have a lot of, and they don't have a damn thing.<sup>174</sup>

While Rodchenko may have exaggerated in claiming everything was his work, his direction was crucial, and these anecdotes highlight the collective nature of the enterprise, with the engineer, B. V. Gladkov, also collaborating in completing the structural designs.<sup>175</sup> Even more so, in Rodchenko's March letter, where he tells Stepanova of the need to depart from the original plans, we can perhaps see evidence of the tension within the constructivist ideology and the need for its reconciliation, as proposed by Tafuri and Dal Co.

For Tafuri and Dal Co, this necessary reconciliation between anarchy and plan presents an ultimately insurmountable obstacle for Constructivism. For both the Constructivists and Productivists in ASNOVA and later the OSA group, architecture is a means of the organization of social life, of the reorganization of production itself. In this production-oriented understanding, activity moves from the sphere of art to architecture, and the pure geometric form is deployed in this project of the reconstruction of the world. Melnikov might object to Lissitzky's view of architecture as the creation of social order and an ideological superstructure erected along side a reconstructed socio-economic substructure,<sup>176</sup> preferring instead to approach the problem of construction primarily through a formal approach concentrated on a purified, abstract syntax deployed in

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<sup>174</sup> Alexander Rodchenko, Letter to Varvara Stepanova, 17 April 1925, in Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future: Diaries, Essays, Letters, and Other Writings*, ed. Alexander N. Lavrentiev, trans. Jamey Gambrell (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2005), 163-64.

<sup>175</sup> Starr, 98-9.

<sup>176</sup> Lissitzky, *Architecture for World Revolution*, 68: "In our architecture, as in our entire life, we are striving to create social order, i.e., to raise the instinctive to a conscious level. The ideological superstructure protects and secures work. The socio-economic reconstruction, mentioned earlier, represents the substructure of the renewal that has to be accomplished in architecture."

nevertheless expressive ways. The intertwined charges of formalism and symbolism in the architectural context make plain this character of abstract art, which could perhaps be more easily ignored in the medium of painting, especially from the perspective of another century.

The problem of unifying form and content, or form and function, in architecture is not a new one and was a preoccupation for Western European avant-garde architects as well. In the *Deutsche Werkbund* we can even see examples of the use of the same “modern” materials for quite different purposes, as Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co have argued convincingly in terms of the relationship between the *Werkbund* architects and the capitalist reorganization of production in post-WWI Germany.<sup>177</sup> What distinguishes the Soviet avant-garde is its approach to the task of reorganization, which it confronted with the opposite goal of creating a form of production based in nonalienated labor. Lodder suggests that Gan’s theory of Constructivism was based on a certain interpretation of Marx, which drew from both the early texts, such as the *German Ideology*, and quoted extensively from the *Communist Manifesto* and other writings by Engels and Lenin:

The Constructivists did not limit their activity to the creation of material values for the new society. They also considered that it was their task to incorporate the need for “inspiring work,” studying the aesthetic aspects of labour and its transformation into “the exultant work” of communism. It is here that we have evidence of an interpretation of Marx and the passages in the *German Ideology* where he put forward his most utopian interpretation of what the nature of art would be following the ultimate establishment of communism. He suggested that man would be utterly liberated and that the division of labour which made one man an artist and another a factory worker would be abolished, so that one man would be both a worker and an artist. In this way the distinction between art and work would vanish.<sup>178</sup>

Underlying the constructivist platform was an idea of production as an orchestrated total social process. The Saint Simonian ideal of an organization of labor opened out into a vision of production beyond the imperatives of instrumental rationality—collective yet artisanal.

While many have pointed to the shutting down of the most avant-garde strands of Constructivism under the New Economic Plan beginning in 1921 and then even the more utilitarian stands of Productivism under Stalin’s First Five-Year Plan of 1928-1932, the reasons for the failures of these movements lie beyond a simple lack of appreciation or support by Soviet officials. While outside the scope of this study, it seems that deeper problems arise from the central goals of these movements—namely, fundamental limitations of the attempt to practically implement notions of nonalienated labor and joy in work, as a means of overcoming the forms of alienation and domination in capitalist

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<sup>177</sup> Tafuri and Dal Co, 95.

<sup>178</sup> Lodder, 94-95.

production. The supersession of alienated labor is not found in nonalienated labor but the abolition of labor itself. Here we come against the imaginative limits of productivism, at least as seen from the a more contemporary perspective. The constructivist utopia of entering the realm of production—the fundamental idea behind the shift to production art and productivism—cannot be realized, and not simply because artists fail to truly move from the object world of art into the industrial world but because the ideology of Constructivism and Productivism could not on its own overcome this fundamental problem of alienated labor itself. The antinomy that stalked the meaning of abstraction from its onset could be formulated as follows: abstraction as the product of the division of labor, of the alienation of mental from manual; abstraction as the transcendence of this division pointing to a real beyond labor.

The significance of this distinction comes into play in Tafuri and Dal Co's account of abstraction. The latter introduces the term alienation and often uses it synonymously with the term, abstraction. The techniques of geometric abstraction that first appeared in the Russian avant-garde of the 1910s and formed the basis of the formalist Constructivist method are described as techniques of alienation, while Melnikov's pavilion is described as a relation of alienated objects.<sup>179</sup> This substitution of alienation for abstraction, however, seems to lie somewhat askew of the self-understanding of the practitioners of these techniques themselves. It does not capture the utopian, almost heroic voluntarism of the project of reconstructing the world with the purified forms of geometric abstraction. But as the utopian projects of revolutionary Bolshevism seem discredited, perhaps it is this latent content—alienation—that survives. Thus, the content of abstract art reveals this other level, even if only seen from the later perspective of defeat, which tinges the interpretations of Tafuri and Dal Co. It is only from this late perspective, which Adorno shares, that he, too can declare, "Those features of modern art on whose account it has been ostracized as formalistic derive without exception from the fact that in them content flickers incarnate, instead of having been peremptorily adjusted by an easily marketable harmony."<sup>180</sup> The neutralization of the revolutionary east by the metropolitan west finds its adequate expression in this substitution.

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<sup>179</sup> Tafuri and Dal Co, 214.

<sup>180</sup> Adorno, 145.

Chapter Three  
The Neoplasticist Moment: *L'Art d'Aujourd'hui*, Mondrian, and Paris

*L'Art d'Aujourd'hui*

In December of 1925, the first exhibition devoted to abstract art in Paris opened at the Antiquarians' Syndicate headquarters at 18, rue de La Ville-l'Évêque. Titled *L'Art d'aujourd'hui*, it represented a fairly wide ranging selection of artists and movements, and roughly half of the works shown can be described as abstract. With the name, “the art of today,” and the significant number of non-abstract works and artists, the exhibit can be seen as a more broadly defined attempt at presenting modernist or avant-garde art. However, its organization was also largely an attempt to present these other movements in terms of a prehistory leading up to geometric abstraction, with a sprinkling of contemporary competing developments, such as surrealism. The modernist exhibition was never a neutral exercise, though, but was built on the idea of demonstrating ongoing change, and in this instance, the rhetorical argument pointed to abstraction as the conclusion of what had come before it. Thus, despite the inclusion of some Surrealist artists, most notably Max Ernst and André Masson, in the exhibit, the Surrealists staged a demonstrating at *L'Art d'aujourd'hui* by sitting on the floor and playing tarot cards, perhaps in protest of this seeming attempt at establishing abstraction as the art of today.<sup>181</sup>

The Surrealist action also points to a tension in the modernist and avant-garde relationship to exhibitions. Exhibition culture arose in conjunction with the modern dealer-critic system. As Christopher Green notes and as is documented in Malcolm Gee's study of the rise of modern painting, the art press, exhibition culture and private galleries came to be symbiotically interrelated moments of a specifically capitalist art world.<sup>182</sup> From their onset, exhibitions provided the necessary publicity for artists to attract collectors. The format of smaller shows, including one-artist shows, emerged as private art gallery dealing became the primary mode of collecting, superseding the older practice of private visits to the studio:

[A]ctual sales were not the most important economic function of the *Salons*: the publicity they provided attracted collectors to the artist's studio and it was there that the bulk of his sales were effected. Various developments caused this system to decline in the twentieth century. There were far more artists and consequently far more paintings, of which fewer were portraits. The potential collector, therefore, was less likely to put his relationship with a painter on a personal footing—visiting him in his studio had become unnecessary. From the painter's

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<sup>181</sup> Sophie Lévy and Christian Derouet, *A Transatlantic Avant-garde: American Artists in Paris, 1918-1939* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2003), 47.

<sup>182</sup> Green, *Art in France*, 50-51; Gee, *Dealers, Critics and Collectors of Modern Painting*.



point of view the system was nerve wracking and time-consuming—particularly as paintings became on average smaller, hence cheaper. These factors favoured the extension of art dealing, as did the emergence of *avant-garde* art which was not immediately saleable to the public. For the dealer, and particularly the dealer in the *avant-garde*, the *Salons* were largely superfluous, and even downright harmful. When an artist could have a personal show in a gallery once a year, and have his paintings permanently on sale at his dealer's, sending to the *Salon* became a gesture rather than an economic necessity. The only primary function which now devolved to the *Salons* was that of being a sort of art-trade fair, a stepping stone for the painter to the private gallery.<sup>183</sup>

As this passage intimates, the exhibition and personal show were the central instruments of dealing, particularly for the *avant-garde*. Because the *avant-garde* was so strongly identified with newness—i.e., representing the vanguard of developments in art—it was also necessary to organize shows against other exhibitions, as well as in some instances against the exhibition format itself. Thus, *avant-garde* exhibition culture is a somewhat divided practice, as something like an “anti” exhibition also appeared. We can see both the *Art d'aujourd'hui* exhibit, as well as the Surrealist reaction, in a way as anti-exhibitions, directed against the larger events of the 1925 *Exposition Internationale*. Although the Surrealists did not mount their own show at this time, they certainly protested the celebration of the Exposition as the major art event of 1925, and Louis Aragon attacked it as a “huge joke” in the July 1925 issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste*.<sup>184</sup>

The Soviet pavilion was, as we have seen, a notable exception at the Exposition, and the rest of the exhibits, in particular the overwhelmingly French ones, were seen as “official art” by most modernist and “independent” artists and critics, such as the influential Louis Vauxcelles. How meaningful the term “independent” was in 1925 in terms of its distance from “official” art, however, is not clear. This distinction first emerged in opposition to the *École des Beaux-Arts* system with the *Salon des Indépendants* (founded 1884) and *Salon d'Automne* (founded 1903) in the late nineteenth century, but by 1925 independent art appeared as a quasi-establishment category. It had come to signify primarily French masters of modernism, such as Matisse, Derain and Dufy, as opposed to a still evolving *avant-garde*, including the emerging abstract and surrealist artists. Indeed, Malcolm Gee argues, “So establishment was the *Salon d'Automne* [from the early 1920s], in fact, that several members of its committee represented ‘modern art’ on the committee of the more liberal of the two ‘official’ *Salons*—the *Nationale*.”<sup>185</sup> Within the French art establishment, then, the designation between official and independent was breaking down, as the independents, led by figures such as Vauxcelles and André Salmon, began to become more favored by the *Beaux-Arts*

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<sup>183</sup> Gee, 22-23.

<sup>184</sup> Silver, 390-91.

<sup>185</sup> Gee, 17. The *Nationale* was a salon for French traditional painting founded in 1890 under the patronage of the state and the *Ministère des Beaux-Arts* and was conceived as a rival to the *Indépendants* and the *Automne*. See Gee, 12-22 for a history of the salons.

administration and finally entrenched in the state network of support.<sup>186</sup>

In 1925, the struggle between independent and official art was still ongoing, although the distinction was fast disappearing, as evidenced by the organization of the independents' anti-*Exposition Internationale* exhibit.<sup>187</sup> Designed to coincide with the Exposition, *Cinquante ans de peinture française* opened in June 1925 and was "officially endorsed."<sup>188</sup> As the title indicates, it claimed to focus exclusively on French painting, but this category included the assimilation of foreign currents and masters such as Picasso. Green's description of the contents of *Cinquante ans* gives a sense of the more established nature of the artists who showed there: it was divided into two parts, and the first comprised sixty pre-1914 "modernist" works and fourteen from official art schools while the second consisted of one post-1914 work per selected artist, such as the French "masters" of independent art Vuillard, Bonnard, Matisse, Derain, Vlaminck, Dufy, Friesz, Picasso and Braque.<sup>189</sup>

With the *Exposition Internationale*, the conditions of possibility for alternate exhibits such as *L'Art d'aujourd'hui* were created, and it, too, was a participant in this modernist/avant-garde circuit of exhibition and opposition. Within the larger context of 1925, which had at least a nominal openness to foreign art currents, *L'Art d'aujourd'hui* attempted to both present abstraction in its pure geometric form as well as insert it into a larger narrative of French and modern art. Mondrian was in Paris from 1919, having returned with the end of World War I, but there were few opportunities to exhibit. He received some support from Léonce Rosenberg and his Galerie de l'Effort Moderne,<sup>190</sup> which also in 1923 opened its doors to Van Doesburg and his organization of a De Stijl exhibit. The repercussions of this show were mainly seen in the French architectural world, however, and abstract painters lived out on the margins of the more established private dealer-gallery world. After 1925, also, there would be no other show devoted to abstract art until the 1930 *Cercle et Carré* exhibition. Thus *L'Art d'aujourd'hui* represents a singular moment for abstract art in 1920s Paris, whose art world remained elusive to abstract artists even as they found in the city a kind of home, the "capital of abstract art" as Seuphor called it.<sup>191</sup>

*L'Art d'aujourd'hui* was organized not by a major dealer but by Victor Poznanski, a Polish painter and student of the Cubist and sometimes abstract painter, Albert Gleizes.<sup>192</sup> Seuphor remembers the show as one in support of abstract art and provides a

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<sup>186</sup> See also Christopher Green, *Cubism and Its Enemies*, 127-31.

<sup>187</sup> Green, *Art in France*, 47; Green, *Cubism and Its Enemies* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1987), 130-31.

<sup>188</sup> Green, *Art in France*, 47.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Correspondance with Mondrian, Fonds Léonce Rosenberg, Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Musée National d'Art Moderne/Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris. This included letters from Mondrian dating from 1921 requesting cash advances and offering paintings for sale.

<sup>191</sup> Seuphor, *Dictionary of Abstract Painting*, 27.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 48-9 (see for a more complete list of the works exhibited). See also Green, *Art in*

fairly detailed list of the participants and works, noting that roughly half can be described as abstract. More recent scholars have characterized precisely this pretension of the show as less than successful. John Elderfield, for instance, remarks that it had a “pretty catholic selection of modern art, including work from some half a dozen groups and countries,”<sup>193</sup> whereas Christopher Green is harsher, calling its title “portentious” and its attempt at establishing abstraction as the art of today in France a manifest failure.<sup>194</sup> In particular, Green focuses on its inability to demonstrate pure abstraction as the so-called art of today *in France*, arguing that Kupka’s refusal to participate in the exhibit rendered the French contingent incomplete and incoherent, while the presentation of Picasso, Gris and Léger as the Cubist and Orphist precursors of abstract painting was simply unconvincing.<sup>195</sup> Apart from Gleizes, he writes, none of the French artists had committed to abstraction, or “pure painting.”<sup>196</sup>

Initially, the exhibit was supposed to carry the title, *L’Art Abstrait*, and the De Stijl and neoplasticist versions of pure geometric abstraction were well represented. There were works by all of the De Stijl members, including Mondrian, Van Doesburg, Vilmos Huszar, Georges Vantogerloo, Friedrich Vordemberge-Gildewart and Cesar Domela.<sup>197</sup> Van Doesburg had moved to Paris after his *L’Effort Moderne* show, seeking to establish a center for abstract art in Paris, and served on the selection committee. The other members consisted of Poznanski, Gleizes, Léger and the Czech painter and future Surrealist, Joseph Sima. The composition of this committee provides several indicators of the major fault lines that come to define the debates around abstract art in Paris—namely the opposition between pure abstraction and cubism, as well as abstraction and surrealism.

Cubism was the major avant-garde force that abstraction confronted in its attempts to make a mark on Paris, and nearly all abstract painters saw their art as an extension and even fulfillment of Cubism. This was especially true of those working in a geometric style like Mondrian, whose neoplasticism emerged in relation to the Cubist grid. This attitude was reflected in the committee’s selection of paintings from the 1910s, which included a large number of Cubist paintings. Whether or not this line of argument would have been convincing to the Cubist painters, the arrangement of Cubism and other avant-garde movements, such as Futurism, as stops on a path to abstraction was not uncommon. At *L’Art d’Aujourd’hui*, paintings by Gris, Picasso, Gleizes, Léger, Villon, Laurens, Lipchitz, Marcoussis, Metzinger were put alongside other early abstract developments, such as *Simultaneous Colors* by Robert and Sonia Delaunay and Rayonist works by Mihkail Larionov and Natalia Goncharova.<sup>198</sup> Futurism also made an

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*France*, 33, and John Elderfield, “Geometric Abstract Painting and Paris in the Thirties, Part I”, *Artforum* 8, no. 9 (May 1970): 71, for brief descriptions of the exhibit.

<sup>193</sup> Elderfield, “Part I,” 71.

<sup>194</sup> Green, *Art in France*, 33.

<sup>195</sup> Green, *Art in France* 33.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>197</sup> Seuphor, 48-9.

<sup>198</sup> Seuphor, 48-9.

appearance as a precursor to Rayonism and abstraction. However, the decision to change the title of the exhibit from *L'Art Abstrait* to *L'Art d'aujourd'hui* may reflect more ambivalence about this rhetorical ascendance of abstraction over Cubism and other contemporary trends, which were more sparsely represented by Dada (Arp and Janco), the Bauhaus (Moholy-Nagy and Klee) and Surrealism. Indeed, Cubism would have presented a major sticking point if the exhibit had gone forward as “L'art abstrait,” as few Cubist artists would have aligned themselves with “abstract art.”

### *Léger and Abstract Art in Paris*

In the period from van Doesburg's *L'Effort Moderne* show and leading up to the *L'Art d'Aujourd'hui* exhibit, there seems to have been an openness to abstract painting on the part of some Cubist painters, most notably Gleizes and Léger. Léger, in particular, was notable for welcoming abstract artists into his *Académie Moderne*, founded and directed together with Amédée Ozenfant. Seuphor cites the significance of the *Académie Moderne* in producing a number of young artists who “pushed Cubism to its logical conclusions,”<sup>199</sup> and Green's details on the Constructivist-influenced painters working under Léger supports this account. He argues:

The fact remains, however, that Léger was open and positive about the arrival of abstract and non-objective art after 1923 in France: positive enough to welcome into his classes at the Académie Moderne in the rue Notre-Dame-des-Champs between 1924 and 1926 those young artists who we have seen were already working in such a way, among them Marcelle Cahn, Otto Carlslund, Franciska Clausen, Axel Olson, Joseph Mellor Hanson and the Poles Stanislas Grabowski and Nadia Khodosslevich Grabowska. With their ready-formed post-Suprematist and Constructivist ideas, the willingness of many of these to accept non-objective art (even as easel painting) was often much stronger than Léger's.<sup>200</sup>

Cahn, Carlslund, and Clausen all exhibited mural compositions at *L'Art d'Aujourd'hui*, along with Willi Baumeister and Léger, and it is this form of abstract painting that seems to have constituted the other major strand next to neoplasticism and De Stijl at the exhibit.

Green bookends Léger's most intense engagement with abstraction and non-figuration with van Doesburg's 1923 move to Paris and the 1925 *L'Art d'Aujourd'hui* show. But while Léger may have been open and positive about non-objective art, as Green argues, the Cubist reworking of abstract painting as a kind of mural painting by both Léger and Gleizes underscores the ultimate divergence between it and geometric abstraction—whether in the Soviet, Constructivist or neoplasticist sense. By pursuing

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<sup>199</sup> Seuphor, 47. “During the nineteen-twenties, when it was directed by Léger and Ozenfant, the Académie Moderne turned out a large number of young abstract artists. Thanks to their youth, they were not slow in pushing Cubism to its logical conclusions, and I know that they were not discouraged by Léger in their pursuit of abstract art.”

<sup>200</sup> Green, *Cubism and Its Enemies*, 241.

abstraction through the medium of mural painting, they lent credence to the criticism that pure abstraction constantly fought, namely that it was purely decorative.

Both Léger and Gleizes's form of "pure painting" affirmed the status of easel painting and its value as an independent art object. Moreover, seen through the lens of Constructivist polemics, Léger's painting is still a form of easelism. Rodchenko, in fact, said as much in his letters back to Moscow, written in Paris while setting up the 1925 Exposition. Mentioning in one letter that only Picasso, Léger and Braque stood out from the generally provincial and uninteresting art in Paris,<sup>201</sup> he starts off in another talking about exchanging work with Léger, "a wonderful guy." But he concludes, "I talked with Léger and got all conceited. I'm an artist...What Léger's doing I gave up a long time ago."<sup>202</sup>

Léger was also a contributor to the 1925 Exposition, and one of his mural paintings, *Le Balustre* (1925), is often featured in the documentary photographs of Le Corbusier's *Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau*. The presence of Melnikov's and Le Corbusier's pavilions made the 1925 Exposition into a kind of meeting ground for diverging tendencies in abstraction, with the Soviet constructivist objects housed in Melnikov's pavilion sharing the field with the Purist paintings and sculpture in the *Pavillon de L'Esprit Nouveau*. However, the Purists, unlike the Soviet avant-garde, demanded a return to order and classical models. In this respect, Purist "abstraction" charted a different course for itself, as it embarked on a search for "absolute synchrony" and a "settling down into the *civilization machiniste*" rather than the path of total social transformation.<sup>203</sup> The terms of the argument are familiar, as the Le Corbusier of *Vers une architecture* (1923) is also motivated by the "spirit of geometry," and defines modernity in such terms: "This modern feeling is a spirit of geometry, a spirit of construction and of synthesis."<sup>204</sup> Le Corbusier's admiration for and exaltation of geometric forms and the aesthetic of the engineer served ultimately different senses of synthesis and reconciliation, as the outer forms of buildings such as his pavilion adhered to machinist and urban collective sensibilities while its interior fittings bespoke a resolutely bourgeois form of life.

In fact, these two faces of the *L'Esprit Nouveau* pavilion—developed out of the cellular Immeuble-Villa living unit of Le Corbusier's Saint-Simonian *Ville Contemporaine*—are what Kenneth Frampton describes as its "condensation of the Purist sensibility," explained in the following terms:

[W]hile machinist in promise and urban by implication, since it was designed ostensibly for mass production and aggregation at high density, it was furnished in accordance with the Purist canon of *objets-types*, that is with English club

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<sup>201</sup> Rodchenko, Letter to Stepanova, 23 April 1925, in Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future*, 165.

<sup>202</sup> Rodchenko, Letter to Stepanova, 1 June 1925, in Rodchenko, *Experiments for the Future*, 182.

<sup>203</sup> Tafuri and Dal Co, 140.

<sup>204</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

armchairs, Thonet bentwood furniture and standard Parisian cast-iron park pieces, with *objets-tableaux* of Purist origin, with oriental rugs and South American pottery.<sup>205</sup>

Central among these objects are, of course, the paintings, and they highlight a key difference in Purist sensibilities about the relationship of the arts. For Le Corbusier, painting could be attentive to the work of architecture, but it could never achieve its syntheses. Thus, there is no integration of painting and architecture, such as in the notable 1923 De Stijl collaboration of Gerrit Rietveld and Vilmos Huszar for a Berlin exhibition.<sup>206</sup>

Although Léger's position should not be conflated with Le Corbusier's, he also ultimately sees mural painting's relationship to architecture in similar terms. Léger envisions a "harmonious alliance between painter and architect," but he also betrays a conservative stance when he declares that painting in architecture should not broach the same problems as easel painting. Instead, through murals, the architectural painter's aim is "to create a calm and anti-dynamic atmosphere."<sup>207</sup> For example, we can see that some of these paintings contain simplified settings "adapted" from the architectural settings of Léger's classical still-life or figure paintings. These isolated settings function as a backdrop for the real objects and persons in the house/pavilion, in a mimicry of their function of offsetting the world and subjects of Léger's more elaborate figure paintings from their imaginary architectural surrounds. In *Le Balustre*, the figure of the painting is an architectural element itself, the decorative function transferred from a three dimensional existence to the painting's canvas.

And yet, in practice Léger's *Peintures murales* do not always conform to this static vision. In fact, over a decade after publishing *Léger and the Avant-Garde*, Green argues in another book that Léger's mural paintings are dynamic and explosive, and in the end "failed to offer the hope of a complete integration of painting and architecture."<sup>208</sup> The reduction of elements to their planar constituents in the mural paintings closely approaches a Mondrian-style abstraction, and the ambiguous juxtaposition of flat planes, whose relative positions in space cannot always be fixed, gestures towards the three-dimensional De Stijl-like play with abstract and concrete space in, for instance, Rietveld's 1924 Utrecht house with its moving panels and room

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<sup>205</sup> Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*, 4th ed. (London: Thames and Hudson, 2007), 156.

<sup>206</sup> As Green describes it, the Rietveld/Huszar interior and other avant-garde designs of the time were concerned with creating "abstract" spaces in a radically different mode than their French colleagues: "The creation of new 'abstract' spaces was perhaps *the* central aesthetic concern... [the spaces] were designed to be moved through, their corners opened up to encourage movement, so that the experience of 'concrete' and 'abstract' space created by overlappings of colored wall planes constantly changed, introducing the factor of time as a crucial element." Christopher Green, *Léger and the Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976), 302-3.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 298.

<sup>208</sup> Green, *Cubism and Its Enemies*, 240.

configurations.

This ambiguity and the apparent contradiction between Léger's purported views about mural painting and his actual practice of it may be a sign of the deficiency of the concept itself. Although he seems to have sought a way in which painting and architecture would be combined, the mode of their integration is one that depended on a reduced vision of painting seemingly bound to fail, with the paintings themselves often turning into something beyond the narrow task assigned to them. Abstraction, the form taken by mural painting, is not conceived as a wholly new form of painting or art that surpasses the old artistic mode of production, as in the Soviet or, as we shall see, neoplasticist sense, but rather a style suited to a limited form of art, strictly confined to the easel and its frame.

### *Cubism against abstract art*

Léger turned away from geometric abstraction in his own painting around 1925, even though he would continue to write in support of it. Thus, while the influence of Léger and the French engagement with abstraction through mural painting was highly visible at *L'Art d'Aujourd'hui*, this exhibit is also, like the Exposition Internationale, a high water mark for 20s geometric painting in Paris. The Cubists were largely hostile, and any so-called French tendencies in abstraction were forestalled. Abstract artists sought to situate themselves within a line of development emanating out of Cubism, as seen in the arrangement of rooms at *L'Art d'Aujourd'hui*, and were also seemingly more inclusive in their relationships vis-à-vis other developments in the avant-garde. Despite these overtures, the French establishment and Cubists closed ranks against them. Green even suggests that the resurgence of subject matter—the so-called return to the subject—in Cubist painters such as Gris and Braque was encouraged by the perceived need to reject the alternative posed by abstraction:

The Cubists' dismissal of abstraction and the non-objective was conveyed with comparable ease, by no more than asserting the presence of subject-matter, of whatever kind. It could well be significant in this connection that subject-matter became so much more obvious a factor in the Cubist work of Gris, Braque, Marcoussis and others between 1923 and 1925. With the need to compromise in the direction of Naturalism in its more sensual forms there went a complementary need to amplify resistance to the abstract and non-objective, then so strongly in evidence as a new avant-garde phenomenon.... With the process of distillation that characterized the development of late Cubism there went a tendency to close off other avenues, or to turn back for support rather than to look forward for new challenges. Both Picasso and Léger were major exceptions here, but generally the tendency is clear enough in the Cubist circle. The contrast with Van Doesburg and Mondrian is noticeable, as it is with Breton and the Surrealists. Where the Cubists looked at new alternatives either with obvious hostility or with, at best, a strictly limited kind of interest, the radicals tended to look at anything new confidently,

positively and without instantly applying limitations.<sup>209</sup>

A quick glance at the contents of *Cahiers d'Art*—whose editorial board represented the modernist position against the other two major reviews in interwar Paris (*L'Amour de l'Art* and *L'Art Vivant*)<sup>210</sup>—underscores the bias against abstraction among supporters of Cubism, as well as their interest in a return to the subject. This topic crops up, for instance, in multi-part articles spanning several issues by Christian Zervos, director of *Cahiers d'Art* along with E. Tériade, over the course of the 20s and 30s. For Zervos and Tériade, Cubism is, as Gee puts it, “the yardstick by which all contemporary art should be judged...[and] the joint creation of supremely gifted individuals.”<sup>211</sup> Interestingly, a number of articles on Soviet architecture are featured over the course of the 20s, beginning with the very first issue of *Cahiers d'Art*, published in January 1926, but this openness to Constructivism and abstraction in architecture was not extended to painting. Abstract painting was in the end for them only the result of a foreign misappropriation of Cubism, a Cubism misunderstood and taken to extremes by the non-French.

The biases of this attitude are evident from the first issue, where the section, “La Chronique des Expositions” is devoted to Zervos’s review of *L'Art d'Aujourd'hui*. It is roughly divided into two parts. The first half begins with Zervos distancing himself from the “orthodox” critics who dismissed the exhibit altogether. Arguing that the results of the *L'Art d'Aujourd'hui* group itself are not what should interest the viewer, he singles out Léger as the clear leader of this group—“le chef de file incontestable de ce groupe—and what unfolds is a laudatory review of Léger.<sup>212</sup> The second half of the article then connects the development of neoplasticism, “without a doubt,” to Léger’s work but concludes that the neoplasticists—i.e., Van Doesburg, Domela and Mondrian—have pushed Cubism to the extreme, ultimately subordinating art to architecture: “Si le cubisme avait poussé les peintres vers l'esprit architectonique, le néoplasticisme a fait de l'architecture l'art essentiel dont la peinture est l'humble servante pour parler le langage scholastique.”<sup>213</sup>

For Zervos, Léger’s work reengaged painting with the problem of structure, as well as reintroduced themes of construction and architecture after impressionism—i.e., the most anti-architectural movement that ever existed in painting.<sup>214</sup> At the same time, it was committed to the object world of painting. Neoplasticism under the spell of the architectonic spirit, however, went so far in his view as to undermine painting itself, making it the “humble servant” of architecture. While Mondrian would disagree with this portrayal of the relationship of his painting to architecture, the French Cubists did seem

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<sup>209</sup> Ibid., 242.

<sup>210</sup> Gee 106-110.

<sup>211</sup> Ibid., 109-110.

<sup>212</sup> Christian Zervos, “La Chronique des Expositions,” *Cahiers d'Art* 1, no. 1 (Jan. 1926): 16.

<sup>213</sup> Ibid.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid.: “l'impressionisme, le mouvement le plus anti-architectural qui ait jamais existé en peinture”



to hold these views as they either rejected abstraction or confined it to the special category of mural painting. Only there was it acceptable—where painting was, indeed, put in the service of architecture.

Léger's experiments with geometric abstraction and mural painting largely ended by the midpoint of the decade. He remained positive in his assessment of abstraction, defending it as necessary and calling it a "fragile, luminous creation."<sup>215</sup> But he explicitly situated himself on the outskirts of this phenomenon, not partaking of its extremes or its idealism:

Personnellement je suis resté à la "frontière," sans jamais m'engager totalement dans leur concept radical, qui va boucler la boucle des recherches tendancieuses. La porte restant entr'ouverte, ils ont mené leur expérience jusqu'au bout. A chacun son oeuvre.  
Les vrais Puristes, ce sont eux. Le dépouillement est total. L'activité extérieure réduite à sa plus simple expression. L'évolution devait aller jusque là. Ils ont créé un *fait plastique* indiscutable. Le néoplasticisme devait exister. C'est fait.<sup>216</sup>

As he says, to each his own, and of the two major types of abstract painting presented at *L'Art d'Aujourd'hui*—the *peinture murale* and neoplasticism—Mondrian's neoplasticism was the immediate and primary representative of abstraction in Paris going into the second half of the 20s and the 30s. The French artists of a younger generation who took up geometric abstraction did so under the influence of Mondrian and van Doesburg in Paris. The rest of the chapter, then, will look deeper into Mondrian's contributions to *L'Art d'aujourd'hui* and his theory of neoplasticism, which assumed a central importance in the history of abstraction in Paris as well as abstract painting more generally.

### *Mondrian at L'Art d'aujourd'hui*

Mondrian exhibits two paintings at *L'Art d'aujourd'hui*: *Tableau No. I: Lozange with Three Lines and Blue, Gray, and Yellow* (1925, Fig. 22) and *Tableau No. II, with Black and Gray* (1925, Fig. 23).<sup>217</sup> Both paintings were completed in November 1925, shortly before the opening of the exhibition on 1 December, and both turned to a significantly simplified linear structure, especially compared to the paintings of the

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<sup>215</sup> Quoted in Seuphor, *Dictionary of Abstract Painting*, 47-8: "The abstract programme is governed by that desire for perfection and for complete liberty which turns men into saints, heroes or madmen. It is an extreme position in which few artists or their supporters can thrive. The very idealism of the abstract programme is its greatest danger. Modern life with all its turmoil and urgency, its dynamism and variety, has no mercy on this fragile, luminous creation rising from chaos."

<sup>216</sup> Fernand Léger, "De l'art abstrait (II): Réponse de Fernand Léger," *Cahiers d'Art* no. 3 (1931): 151-2.

<sup>217</sup> I have chosen to use the paintings' titles as they are labeled in the Mondrian *catalogue raisonné*. See Joop M. Joosten and Robert P. Welsh, *Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of 1911-1944* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998).

previous three years.

The most striking aspect of *Tableau No. I* is the sense of openness and vertical extension into space. One horizontal and two vertical lines divide the canvas. They meet to form a large white rectangular plane, placed slightly off-center and with an implied top edge somewhere outside of the painting. Below this plane is part of a faintly bluish grey rectangle, and to the right of this is a small, bright yellow-colored triangle in a corner made by two intersecting black lines. The vibrant primary hue is balanced by a darker blue triangle set off on the left by a heavy black line. The physical constraints of the diamond-shaped canvas—its edges set at a diagonal and its pointed tips—cut off all five planar areas at the edges of the painting but also lend a dynamism to the feeling of spatial expansion by directing vision horizontally and vertically out to points beyond the painting's edges. Upward movement or extension is accentuated, also, by the central dominance of the large white plane. Perhaps the gray polygon underneath also has a bit of a grounding element to it. A sketch, which E.A. Carmean, Jr. suggests is a preliminary study for *Tableau No. I*, experiments with the central white plane being pushed even more off center to the left (*Sketchbook 1925, Sheet A, verso, left, Fig. 24*).<sup>218</sup> But by positioning it closer to the center in *Tableau No. I*, elevation through the top point of the canvas is emphasized and given a stronger directional force.

Although we can surmise that both *Tableaus* were conceived of as companion pieces of a sort, there exists another sheet of sketches that provides more direct clues about the links between the two (*Sketchbook 1925, Sheet C, Fig. 25*). The drawing in the upper left is almost exactly the same as *Tableau No. II*. Both the drawing and painting contain a large central square, open on its left edge, a black square or rectangle in the upper right corner, and a long sliver of a black plane at the bottom. In the painting itself, the peripheral area on the right is colored a very light gray. The diamond sketch on *Sheet C* employs the same basic structural units but seemingly modified by the physical differences between a square canvas and a diamond one. There is a version of the black square in the upper right, but now cut off by the diamond's diagonal canvas edge. The central plane has lengthened, as has the painting's central vertical axis. There are faint markings showing Mondrian's experimentation with other higher placements of the bottom line of the plane, the highest seeming to correspond roughly to a square shape,

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<sup>218</sup> E.A. Carmean, Jr., *Mondrian: The Diamond Compositions* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1979), 42. The identification of the relevant diamond drawings discussed here is based on Carmean, Jr.'s work, which argues for the larger significance of the diamond paintings in Mondrian's work as a whole. The drawings discussed here are taken from a sketchbook containing seven pages and dated to 1925. However, there is a discrepancy between the ordering of the pages in Carmean, Jr.'s study and the more recently completed *catalogue raisonné*. For example, the verso of *Sheet A* in the *catalogue raisonné* is *Page C* in Carmean, Jr., and *Sheet C* in the *catalogue raisonné* is *Page B* in Carmean, Jr.. Whether the order of the drawings says anything about when the respective sketches were completed is uncertain, but I have used the titles and order indicated in the *catalogue raisonné*. The order suggested by the *catalogue raisonné* also corresponds to Mondrian's numbering of the two paintings, *Tableau No. I* and *II*. See Carmean, Jr., 42-43 and Joosten and Welsh, 421.

like the central square element in *Tableau No. II* and its drawing, but he decides on the more elongated form. Compared to *Tableau No. I*, space in this drawing appears more constrained as a result of the articulation of all four sides of the central plane, but if one were to rotate the image ninety degrees, it would very closely resemble *No. I*. Simply removing the line and shaded planar form at the top now achieves the same openness of the painting.

Of course, determining the precise relation between the sketches and the final paintings or even the potential order in which they were completed is less important than seeing the more noteworthy transition to an open compositional principle, which eliminated much of the complicated divisions of the peripheral space surrounding the central planar element. This development was prefaced by work from 1922 to 1925 that began to organize the composition around a dominant central plane, usually white or gray.<sup>219</sup> For example, *Tableau 2, with Yellow, Black, Blue, Red, and Gray* from 1922 (Fig. 26) establishes a large gray square at the center, but the bordering areas are more varied. There are little glimpses of red, blue, yellow, and black planes that have an existence much more outside the picture space.

The crucial difference between the two *L'art d'aujourd'hui* canvases and the preceding ones arises from the linear structure. Carmean, Jr. argues that determination of this structure was, in fact, the most crucial step in Mondrian's creative process and that color, although important in creating a sense of balance between different areas of the canvas, was something decided after the fact.<sup>220</sup> Mondrian himself also wrote, "It is a great mistake to think that Neo-Plastic constructs rectangular planes set side by side—like paving stones. The rectangular plane should be seen rather as the result of a plurality of straight lines in rectangular opposition."<sup>221</sup> In both *Tableau No. I* and *No. II* (1925), the three black lines unite the painting as a whole, whereas in *Tableau 2* (1922), the lines appear more like an arbitrary grid—or a section of a grid—whose total image remains out of sight and out of the implied space of the painting. Also, Mondrian was at this time still toying with the use of lines that stop before the canvas edge. As a result, each colored plane extends beyond its linear articulation, intimating that the planes exist as independent separate forms within the painting. The restriction of the palette to black, gray, and white in *Tableau No. II* throws a spotlight on the primacy of straight-line oppositions, and the drastic reduction of linear oppositions in *Tableau No. I* frees up the painting space.

### *Real abstraction and the absolute*

These moves serve, more importantly, to isolate and focus on the core elements of Mondrian's painting and thinking, in both their formal and "spiritual" senses. For Mondrian, disequilibrium, whether in the form of an overly dominant vertical or wide

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<sup>219</sup> Carmean, Jr., 33.

<sup>220</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>221</sup> Piet Mondrian, "Realist and Super-realist Art [Morphoplastic and Neo-Plastic]," in *The New Art-The New Life*, 230.

horizontal, is equated with the tragic in nature. Or more specifically, nature is the source of the tragic, and naturalistic painting, which claims to represent a realism of the world as it appears before the eyes, reproduces the tragic in its forms without revealing the underlying structures that are the cause of this disequilibrium. He thus used the term “abstract reality” to distinguish from this “natural reality.” In an essay dating from 1919-1920 entitled, “Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: A Trialogue (While Strolling from the Country to the City),” Mondrian explained the inherent realism in neoplasticism through the character Z (an “Abstract-Real Painter”):

Z. In general, natural appearance *veils* the expression of relationship. If one wants to express relationships determinately, then a more *exact* plastic of relationships is necessary. Ordinary vision cannot perceive the *relationships of position* determinately in this landscape.

Y. What do you mean by “relationships of position”?

Z. Not the relationships of the dimensions of the lines and planes but the relationship of their *position* with respect to one another. The most perfect of these relationships is the perpendicular, which expresses the relationship of the two extremes. In this landscape, the horizontal—in relation to us—appears *determinately* only in the line of the horizon. In this way only the one position is expressed determinately. Neither its *opposition, the vertical*, nor any other position is exactly expressed in this landscape as *line*. Nevertheless, the opposition is expressed by the *sky*. Its elevation is expressed *as plane*. The sky asserts itself as an indeterminate plane, but the moon appears on it as *a point*, that is, in an *exact way*. The plane is thus determined *from this point to the horizon*; this defines itself as *a vertical line*. Although it does not appear as such in nature, it is actually a line. Seen in this way, it is the opposition to the horizontal, *determinately* expressed.<sup>222</sup>

The abstract-real painter reveals the underlying structure of the world, distilled down to its primary elements of line and color. Ordinary vision, he argued, does not see these relationships, which are obscured in the natural landscape. There, they are experienced *indeterminately*. This, in a sense, is the experience of the tragic—an indeterminate sky stretching overhead or a limitless horizon. Abstract painting thus takes a crucial step towards transforming this experience by offering a form of resolution in its harmonized arrangement of these elements. Pure abstract compositions can overcome tragic disequilibrium by balancing the vertical plane and the horizontal line. In this way, it is for Mondrian both a more true representation of reality—whose conflicts and structures are obscured by naturalistic representational painting—as well as a kind of future-oriented practice looking towards a time when art dissolves into life.

Particularly intriguing in this dialogue is Mondrian’s expression of the idea of making determinate in terms of the horizon and the sky. The horizon, where ground and sky appear to meet, seems an impossible, unreachable beyond, but “we,” in fact,

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<sup>222</sup> Mondrian, “Natural Reality and Abstract Reality: A Trialogue (While Strolling from the Country to the City),” in *The New Art-The New Life*, 84-5.

determine it. That is to say, it is a beyond that springs out of our minds and is of our own construction. The horizon only takes shape in relation to the human figure standing on the ground. Furthermore, what was an immaterial infinite space—the heavens—can be rendered concrete and brought down to earth in the vertical line. Imagined as an abstract relation, the point at which these horizontal and vertical lines meet might still be a forever receding one. But painted on Mondrian's insistently flat canvases, this point is brought forward to meet the viewer. It serves here to recall Mondrian's innovative use of recessed strip frames, which he began using as early as 1917, in order to counteract the illusion of depth created by a traditional frame. In a well-known letter to J.J. Sweeney, an American art critic and curator at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Mondrian tells Sweeney that this method of framing brings the painting to a "more real existence."<sup>223</sup> Pulling the painting forward into the viewer's space seeks to eradicate the picture plane and to make the planar surface of the canvas equivalent with the image. The original frame of *Tableau No. I* has been lost, but it is highly likely that Mondrian gave it a recessed strip frame, if not the twice-recessed double strip frame found on its companion, *Tableau No. II*.<sup>224</sup>

In *Tableau No. I* there is, in fact, only one depicted intersection of vertical and horizontal lines. This is in the lower right corner, highlighted by the bright yellow triangle. The advancing yellow color almost pulls the point out into the viewer's room space and, arguably, to a "more real existence," creating a dynamic tension independent of the cutting function of the edges or any sensation of diagonal movement. Instead, the dynamism or sense of movement is directed towards the viewer, and the line on the left, in crystallizing the central plane into a vertically extending rectangle, creates a bodily allusion to the viewer. We know that Mondrian was concerned with the way that his paintings would "face" and address the viewer, and in a letter from December 1925, we hear him wishing that *Tableau No. I* could be hung a bit lower.<sup>225</sup> Perhaps this meant closer to eye-level? Although one doesn't want to overstate the case for an interest in verticality translating into bodily presence in this painting, it does seem that there is an attempt to hold together and have the painting mediate between a kind of individual position and collectively determined (i.e., social) representation of being in the world.

The painting unifies two opposing, even contradictory, formal moments: the positing of a central singular form in the plane vs. a point of intersection, the condensed expression of a human relation to the surrounding world and the beyond. That Mondrian used the metaphor of landscape—its modern tradition traced back to the "god's-eye view" paintings of Joachim Patinir and the Northern Renaissance and, in the Dutch context, the confident man-made horizons of Philips Koninck—is significant. It conjures a social relation from the spare statement of neo-plastic landscape. Here, at the point of intersection, is concentrated a radically transformed notion of man's relation to space, pulled up to the surface of the painting and into the viewer's room: no faraway horizon is posited here but rather the abstract concrete—the abstract-real, to use Mondrian's

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<sup>223</sup> Joosten and Welsh, 192.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

<sup>225</sup> *Ibid.*, 318.

phrase—an immediate experiential point of the absolute, made palpable in its surface materiality.

Mondrian's understanding of the tragic in nature and abstraction as a means of overcoming the tragic is shaped in part by his well-documented interest in theosophy. M. H. J. Schoenmaekers published the theosophical text, *New Image of the World*, in 1915, and met Mondrian in 1916.<sup>226</sup>

The encounters between Schoenmakers and Mondrian at Laren in 1916 only confirmed the painter's personal ideas that he had worked out two years earlier. Nature, and with it all reality, appeared to Mondrian to be dominated by conflict, by the tragic sense due to the loss of a pristine harmony caused by the maturation of man. This is the theme of Thomas Mann and of the culture of Weimar: civilization counter culture. For Mondrian, the task of the artist is therefore to reveal metaphorically the possibility of a new harmony, of a new *concordia discors*.... The famous Neo-Plastic paintings by Mondrian were therefore pedagogical indications of a possible future collective comportment which, once realized, would render art itself superfluous.<sup>227</sup>

Theosophy remained an interest of Mondrian's throughout the 20s and for the remainder of his life, although its influence on his paintings was more removed. They do not, for instance, invoke theosophical symbols or images, such as stars or auras.<sup>228</sup> This more distant relationship can be explained in part, as Carel Blotkamp documents, by Mondrian's failure to establish a lasting rapport with any actual theosophical circle, at times having his articles rejected by them and at others denouncing them himself.<sup>229</sup> This failure, however, also indicates a divergence in views, and Blotkamp suggests that what Mondrian took from theosophy was the more general idea of evolution itself, "the firm conviction that all life is directed towards evolution and that...it is the goal of art to give expression to that evolution."<sup>230</sup> As Blotkamp goes on to argue, this concept of evolution was closely bound up with the idea of the destruction of old forms. Most immediately, destruction was directed against the old forms of painting with the goal of creating new forms of art.

But crucially, for the early practitioners of abstract art—and most relevant for this study, Mondrian and Malevich—the mysticism that tinged their ideas about destruction, purification, and a new form of art crucially converged with world historical events of revolution and ideas about the creation of new forms of social life. Yve-Alain Bois, in fact, makes the argument that despite the apparent differences between the Soviet and Dutch avant-gardes, they shared a vision of a collectivist future, including art's role in constructing this society. He claims, "Both groups rebelled against 'individualism' and

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<sup>226</sup> Tafuri and Dal Co, 126.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

<sup>228</sup> Blotkamp, 14-15.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 15.

advocated an ethical role for art; both believed in humanity's progress and in the future elaboration of a 'collective' society in which art would eventually dissolve into life. And for members of De Stijl as well as for many Russian artists, abstract art was the essential means of achieving this goal."<sup>231</sup>

There are, of course, differences between the two movements, as Bois goes on to note, and there was no significant contact between the two groups, with the exception of van Doesburg and Lissitzky's collaborations in the effort to establish Constructivism in the West. De Stijl under van Doesburg's leadership also remained an independent group and never committed to the Communist political positions of the Soviet artists. Bois's account is intriguing, as he reveals the wider interest among the Dutch avant-garde in the Russian Revolution, as well as the correspondence between van Doesburg and Mondrian discussing the specific problem of Bolshevism:

It is all the more surprising, then, that the De Stijl movement on the whole showed so little interest in the art and ideas of their foreign colleagues, for there was a lot of discussion and enthusiasm about the Russian Revolution in Dutch vanguard circles during the late teens. New organizations were formed to support the Soviet regime and the avant-garde generally approved of the revolution. This approval took different forms, from a vague sympathy to an unconditional fanaticism. At the end of 1919, a petition protesting the rupture of postal communication with Russia was circulated by the artist Chris Beekman to be sent to the Dutch parliament. It was signed willy-nilly by most members of De Stijl, but not by Mondrian. His explanation for his refusal to sign the petition is given in a letter to van Doesburg dated October 11, 1919: "Ideal bolshevism seems very beautiful, but the name is already corrupted by its bad applications. You were right to keep De Stijl out of those links with bolshevism or anything of the sort—no matter how necessary such things might be."<sup>232</sup>

Mondrian followed events in the Soviet Union throughout the twenties,<sup>233</sup> and his letter raises the question of how to interpret his stance towards Bolshevism. Bois reads it as a "sign of Mondrian's political naïveté—his incapacity to understand compromise, to deal with Realpolitik," but the key seems to lie in another detail Bois reveals, namely that Mondrian's political beliefs, although unsophisticated and limited, tended more towards anarchism than communism. Holding onto the position that the Soviet Union had not achieved "true socialism," Mondrian's views seem to have been influenced most by one of the leading Dutch anarchist militants of the time, Arthur Müller-Lehning, with whom he maintained a correspondence throughout the 20s and 30s.<sup>234</sup> Müller-Lehning also later

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<sup>231</sup> Yve-Alain Bois. "Lissitzky, Mondrian, Strzeminski: Abstraction and Political Utopia in the Twenties," in *Cadences: Icon and Abstraction in Context* (New York: The New Museum, 1991), 94.

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*, 94-95.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

<sup>234</sup> *Ibid.*, 95. fn 15. Bois notes that Mondrian's *magnum opus*, "The New Art—The New Life," written during the 20s and revised over the 30s directly borrows from Lehning brochure about the

edited the remarkable but short-lived periodical *i10*, which brought together essays on art, literature and politics in multiple languages. Taking the first issue as an example of the unique, high-level character of the journal, we find essays by Trotsky and Mondrian side by side with an excerpt from Ernst Bloch's *Geist der Utopie*.<sup>235</sup>

In the late 1910s and early 1920s, Mondrian had a more utopian stance about neoplasticism and its relationship to socialism, which these earlier letters cited by Bois evidence. Here, true neoplasticism, including its idea of a dissolution of the individual arts and architecture into life, will only be achieved in the future, a future in which true socialism is also achieved. But according to Bois, in the mid-20s, around the time that we see the shift in painting signaled by the *L'Art d'Aujourd'hui* canvases, there is a significant shift in Mondrian's theory:

[N]ot only is socialism the future golden age in which neoplasticism will blossom, but this golden age is *announced* and conceptually *expressed* by neoplastic art, for this art is only, according to Mondrian, a pale reflection, albeit the most advanced possible, of the *principle* of neoplasticism. This principle, which Mondrian also called "the general principle of plastic equivalence," consists of a kind of dialectics loosely deriving from that of Hegel.<sup>236</sup>

While acknowledging Mondrian's weaknesses as a political thinker, Bois is insistent on the point that Mondrian saw socialism as a future golden age that society should strive for. The shift to a view of neoplastic art as the expression of the principles of this future is, moreover, seemingly echoed in his move to a more stark presentation of the horizontal and the vertical in his 1925 and 1926 paintings. In particular, it would be possible to make a case for the *L'Art d'Aujourd'hui* pair as a part of working out this new stance,

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organization of labor. The sentence Bois notes is the following: "In all areas of life, social and economical, we must create new organizations—not in the old way, dominated by other organizations—but as true socialism envisions, *self-governed organizations composed of producers and consumers in equivalent mutual relationships*." The brochure, *Rationalisatie en de 6urige arbeidsdag* [Rationalization and the six-hour working day] was published in 1931 by the Nederladsch Syndicalistisch Vakkerbond, a leftist press. On this issue and on the friendship between Mondrian and Lehning, see also Yve-Alain Bois, *Arthur Lehning en Mondriann—Hun vriendschap en correspondentie* (Amsterdam: Van Genneep, 1984).

<sup>235</sup> *i10* ran from 1927 through 1929. It also contained, among other things, Moholy-Nagy's reflections on technique and an account of Eisenstein's *Potemkin*. The second issue included not only texts by architects J.J.P. Oud and Mart Stam, and by Vilmos Huszar (*i 10* published a lot of material by ex-members of De Stijl), but also Walter Benjamin's analysis of the situation of literature in postwar Germany, as well as one of the first serious articles published in the West about Russia after Lenin. From the beginning to the end of its short life, *i 10* never failed to intervene with equal adequacy, and in a parallel manner, on the artistic and political front, without ever attempting to pose an immediate relationship between the two domains but always insisting on the utopian role of art. The journal was reprinted in 1979 (Amsterdam: Van Genneep). For more information, see Toke van Helmond, ed., *i10 et son époque*, (Paris: Institut Néerlandais, 1989).

<sup>236</sup> Bois, *Cadences*, 95.



especially if we consider the role of the diamond format in Mondrian's work.

Because of the diagonal edges that result from using the diamond format, scholars have debated the relation of these paintings to Mondrian's quarrel with van Doesburg over the use of diagonals. In well-known remarks, Mondrian states that van Doesburg's use of diagonals demonstrated that he did not understand neoplasticism. Blotkamp, for example, maintains that Mondrian's diamond paintings of 1925-1926 are a clear reaction to van Doesburg's challenge.<sup>237</sup> Carmean, Jr., however, argues that Mondrian uses the diamond format in order to work through and introduce new ideas, and he specifically points to the diamond compositions of 1925-1926 as playing a crucial role in changing the direction his art was taking—a change that would be fully realized in the paintings of the early 1930s.<sup>238</sup> *Tableau No. I* is the first in this particular diamond series. Subsequent diamond paintings are certainly more spare, such as the elegantly austere *Shilderij No. 1: Lozenge with Two Lines and Blue* (1926, Fig. 27). The blue and yellow triangles of *Tableau No. I* can be seen as vestiges of the aforementioned 1922-1925 period, especially if looked at in comparison to a painting such as *Lozenge Composition with Red, Black, Blue, and Yellow* (1925, Fig. 28). What the diamond paintings do here is to isolate the central dynamic of the horizontal and vertical, beginning with *Tableau No. I*, while its “companion” *Tableau No. II* reinserts this dynamic into a larger spatial context.

These theoretical and aesthetic changes date to the mid-20s, which leads to the question of why 1925, or why the mid 20s? I have argued that 1925 was a significant year in the history of abstract art, especially for the Soviet introduction to Paris. Mondrian's canvases were completed at the end of this year, after the closing of the *Exposition Internationale*. While it would be too much of a stretch to causally link these two events, it does not seem too farfetched to say that there was an atmosphere in which the possibility of radical change—social, political, and aesthetic—seemed to present itself. In this light, Mondrian's shift to seeing neoplasticism as an announcement of the age of socialism becomes a militant expression of the union of politics and art.

At the same time, a crucial difference between the Soviet form of pure abstraction and Mondrian's ideas about neoplasticism remains. Mondrian was a figure ultimately detached from real political movements. The closest affinity, as noted above, was with anarchism and his friend, Müller-Lehning. Müller-Lehning's *i10* was both a publication that featured the most radical political and artistic texts and also one that maintained an editorial separation between these two spheres. Art's role was reserved to a utopian stance. What is commonly described as Mondrian's spiritualism or Mondrian's mysticism, including his links to theosophy, is perhaps better understood in this light. Whereas the Russian Revolution provided the context in which the mysticism of Malevich gave way to the real political work and transformation of abstraction at Vitebsk and the UNOVIS workshops, there was no comparable conjuncture for Mondrian, for whom socialism would always be a dream of the future.

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<sup>237</sup> Blotkamp, 35.

<sup>238</sup> Carmean, Jr., 17, 43.

## *The crisis of “inquiétude”*

Indeed, the larger intellectual landscape of post-war Paris seems to run in parallel to these tendencies of Mondrian, including both his rejection of Bolshevism and the Communist Party, as well as his Hegelianism. Before moving on to consider the role of Hegelian dialectics in Mondrian’s thought, I will provide a brief sketch of some of the larger relevant intellectual and political tendencies in Paris at this time. Zervos’s review of the *L’Art d’aujourd’hui* exhibition identified neoplasticism as an art from Holland, but when he wrote that the neoplasticists substituted for the dramas of the heart the anxieties—“les inquiétudes”—of the intellect, he was perhaps unintentionally situating these painters at the very center of a problem and debate that also consumed post-war French life.

In 1919, Paul Valéry gave a name to the overwhelming feelings of doubt and civilizational collapse, and the restless search for new bases of meaning, in the aftermath of the wrenching dislocations of irrational and futile trench warfare. Writing for *La Nouvelle revue française*, he called it “*la crise de l’Esprit*.”<sup>239</sup> Valéry identified a “mental disorder,” an anguish plaguing intellectual life, which led to the rapid and manifold resurrections of various spiritualisms, idealisms, and mysticisms: the “three hundred ways of explaining the world, one thousand and one nuances of Christianity...exposing with a strange contradictory flash the agony of the European soul.”<sup>240</sup> Valéry could identify no solution for this general malaise—the crisis of “inquiétude” was “le nouveau mal du siècle” that could find no resolution but only continuously express the problems of individual isolation and personal anguish.<sup>241</sup> Writings of the interwar period are scattered throughout with reference to the problem of “inquiétude” and the generation of the “inquiétés.” As Bud Burkhard argues,

Intellectual doubt, psychological confusion, and anguished isolation remained a fixture of French intellectual life until the Nazi occupation...An almost schizophrenic fascination with and rejection of “orientalism,” “americanization,” “bolshevism,” “munichois culture,” various classicisms, and the myriad other ill-defined and contradictory possibilities were inescapable features of the entire era after the war.<sup>242</sup>

In an interesting parallel to the way in which the seemingly dross spiritualisms of the radical abstract painters, including but not limited to those of Malevich and Mondrian, have led many to dismiss the political or “philosophical” content of their painting as utopian naïveté, Burkhard’s study identifies the way in which the activities of the *Philosophies* group (eventually, *La Revue Marxiste* in 1929) were also dismissed. He

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<sup>239</sup> Paul Valéry, “La Crise de l’Esprit,” *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, no. 71 (August 1919).

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*, 323-4. Translation from Bud Burkhard, *French Marxism Between the Wars* (New York: Humanity Books, 2000), 20.

<sup>241</sup> Burkhard, 20-1. The phrase is Marcel Arland’s, writing five years after Valéry and reproaching him for not having found any solution.

<sup>242</sup> *Ibid.*

argues, for instance, that they have been largely ignored because of their initial embrace of mysticism as a solution to the problem of *inquiétude*, as well as for the Hegelian dimension they introduced to the understanding of Marxism. Despite the group including many of the most prominent twentieth century figures of the French left, including Henri Lefebvre, Georges Friedmann, Paul Nizan, and Charles Rappoport, the group itself was considered an embarrassing reminder of the existential humanism of the interwar period. When they first came together as a group in 1924, Burkhard notes,

they were searching for a philosophic and religious solution to the *inquiétude* plaguing French intellectuals after the Great War. Worse still, they embraced mysticism... They brought Hegel into their Marxism, and worse still into their Leninism. Among the first in France to read the famous “1844 Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts,” they saw in Marx’s concept of alienation the key to understanding their own *inquiétude*. When Friedman, Lefebvre, and Gutermann read Lenin, they turned to his Philosophic Notebooks on Hegel’s Science of Logic. And, in committing themselves to the Communist movement, the *Philosophies* worked to overcome and to dispel the conditions of not just their own personal, cultural, and intellectual confusion, but that of their postwar generation as well.<sup>243</sup>

Burkhard’s study provides a fascinating look into the group and the internal arguments of French Marxist and Communist groups in the 1920s and 30s. It offers, as well, another perspective on the “Hegel revival” in France, a phenomenon that has been largely overshadowed by and understood in terms of Alexandre Kojève’s influential, but idiosyncratic, lectures on Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* at the Collège de Sociologie from 1933 to 1939.<sup>244</sup> But the larger, and unspecified, subtext that emerges is that of the decline of possibilities for radical Marxism in the interwar period.

1925 was a baptism of fire for the members of the *Philosophies* group, as they became politicized in their opposition to the French government’s decision to intervene in Morocco, aiding the Spanish in suppressing the rebelling Rif tribesmen. The disparate groups of the Parisian and French left were finally united. *L’Humanité*, the daily newspaper of the PCF, printed the first letter of protest on 2 July, and the PCF witnessed an uptick in activity and enrollment.<sup>245</sup> Tellingly perhaps, although the French government braced themselves for a surge in militant actions, carrying out a number of preventive arrests in the fall of 1925, the 12 October “general strike for peace” was “neither massive enough to meet the Party’s expectations nor effective enough to influence government policy.”<sup>246</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>244</sup> Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, assembled by Raymond Queneau, ed. Allan Bloom, trans. James H. Nichols, Jr., (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1980 [1933-39]).

<sup>245</sup> “Les travailleurs intellectuel aux côtes du prolétariat contre la guerre du Maroc,” *L’Humanité*, 2 July 1925, 1.

<sup>246</sup> Burkhard, 50.

Despite the 1920s being a period characterized by far more revolutionary optimism and potential than the 1930s, the decade also saw a gradual decline in Party membership. With the exception of the brief rise in 1924-25, attributed to the PCF's anti-militaristic activities, by the late 20s the Party was in crisis. From a high of more than 100,000 member in October 1921, membership declined to 45,000 in 1929, 38,000 in 1930, and 30,000 in 1931.<sup>247</sup> From 1928, the French government had led a concerted attack against PCF members, making mass arrests of both rank-and-file and leading figures. In 1929, the government closed the *Banque ouvrière et paysanne*, sending *L'Humanité* into full crisis mode, as it was confronted with the demand to immediately repay operational debts of more than six million francs.<sup>248</sup> As PCF publications floundered, *La revue marxiste* was flourishing, publishing previously untranslated and unknown texts by Marx, Lenin, and other major Soviet intellectuals, even as it asserted its independence from Party control.<sup>249</sup> The specific circumstances surrounding the sudden and comic-tragic demise of *La revue marxiste* at the roulette tables of Monte Carlo are still unknown, but the larger context of crisis and defeat facing the PCF in 1929 seems decisive.<sup>250</sup> The expulsion of several of its members from the Party was also a disciplinary signal to any potentially "independent" militants. In Paris, then, the actual project of Communism was facing crises on several fronts, from state attacks to a shifting relationship between left groups and the Party itself, which would, as we will see later, affect the way in which artists who identified abstraction with communism would come to shape their practice.

### *Parisian Geographies*

Zervos's criticisms in his review of the *L'Art d'aujourd'hui* exhibition focused in on the supposed cerebrality of abstraction:<sup>251</sup>

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 111.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 113.

<sup>249</sup> These writings were sent to *La Revue Marxiste* by David Ryazanov, the director of the Marx-Engels Institute, and friend of Charles Rappoport, who was now on the editorial board of the *Revue*. Ibid., 107.

<sup>250</sup> See Burkhard, 115-125. What is verifiable are the immediate events that served as pretext for the Party inquiry into the *Revue* and the expulsion of several members. In the spring or summer of 1929, a comrade who may have been Stefan Minev, the Latin Secretariat of the International in late 1928, suggested that the *Revue* would need far larger sums of money to continue and succeed. Up to this point, it had largely been financed from the personal funds of one its members, Georges Friedmann. In the first money-making scheme, some small profits were made off of playing the stock market at the Bourse. Next was the "foolproof system" of winning at roulette in Monte Carlo. After initial success with a small sum, 200,000 francs was put on the table, but lost in one night. It was widely known that the money lost was Friedmann's, but the Party inquiry concluded by expelling three members for the "dissipation of funds destined for revolutionary propaganda." André Breton was not above castigating the *Revue* in his second surrealist manifesto for dropping "in one day at Monte Carlo a sum of two hundred thousand francs which had been confided to them for purposes of revolutionary propaganda."

<sup>251</sup> The following statement from the manifesto is particularly relevant: "2. The work of art should be fully conceived as spiritually formed before it is produced. It should not contain any natural

Il y a dans les oeuvres des néoplasticiens, avec le mépris de l'anecdote et du sentimentalisme, un dédain total des images qui naissent de la passion sensuelle de la vie. Van Doesburg, Domela, Mondrian suppriment dans leurs oeuvres toute signification naturelle et humaine. Les drames du coeur sont remplacés chez eux par les inquiétudes de l'intelligence. Leur oeuvre échappe toujours à toutes nos formules picturales et à notre attachement à l'apparence extérieure des choses.<sup>252</sup>

Although Zervos reserved judgment on the future works of neoplasticism, he nonetheless found the ones shown in the exhibit overly intellectual, and bound by the strictures of their own system. Along with the “total disdain” for sensuality—and the “dramas of the heart”—these would be the very claims that E. Tériade would repeat in his take-down of abstract art in *Cahiers d'Art* and *L'Intransigeant* in 1930.<sup>253</sup>

In what was effectively his response to Zervos, Mondrian returned to a formulation of the relationship between abstract art and the modern world stated in his first published essay. “The New Plastic in Painting” (1917) began with, “The life of modern cultured man is gradually turning away from the natural: life is becoming more and more *abstract*.”<sup>254</sup> In 1926, he re-presented this idea, but with Paris and the modern city as its backdrop:

The tendency [neoplasticism] developed in Paris showed the influence of Cubism but also of Paris as a city. The enormous planes of the buildings, often colored by advertising, also encouraged painting in *planes*. This was only one of the external causes—basically it was the *spirit of the new age* that was being manifested in many countries in many different ways but always homogeneous in their trend to the abstract.<sup>255</sup>

Modernity as a dynamics of the increasing abstraction of life, or to put it another way, a dynamics of increasing social abstraction, presses itself forward in a particular way in Mondrian's Montparnasse.

For Mondrian, the idea of the concrete—the “abstract-real”—stands in a more

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form, sensuality or sentimentality. We wish to exclude lyricism, dramaticism, symbolism and so forth” (Baljeu, *Theo van Doesburg*, 180).

<sup>252</sup> Christian Zervos, “La Chronique des Expositions,” 16.

<sup>253</sup> E. Teriade, “Documentaire sur la jeune peinture: III. Conséquences du cubisme,” *Cahiers d'Art* no. 1 (1930): 17-22. This was one article out of a larger five-part series, “Documentaire sur la jeune peinture,” and the one most focused on abstract art. The entire series is as follows: I. Considérations liminaires no. 8-9 (1929): 359-361; II. L'avènement classique du cubisme no. 10 (1929): 447-453; III. Conséquences du cubisme, no. 1 (1930): 17-22; IV. La réaction littéraire, no. 2 (1930): 69-77; V. Une nouvelle heure de peintres? no. 4 (1930): 169-176.

<sup>254</sup> Piet Mondrian, “The New Plastic in Painting” (1917), in *The New Art-The New Life*, 28.

<sup>255</sup> Piet Mondrian, “The Plastic Expression in Painting” (1926), in *The New Art-The New Life*, 203. Originally published in *Cahiers d'Art* (July 1926).

complex relation to the idea of Paris, present in both the origins and result (albeit in somewhat obscured form) of abstract painting. Paris as a city was filled with different sensory experiences: the accelerated pace of modern life, and the particular views it offers the artist from a concatenation of rooftops to the scaffolding of construction and the exposed façades of structures subject to “renovation.” The sense of modernity as an ongoing and intensifying process would have been accentuated by the comings and goings of the railway yard at the Gare Montparnasse—scenes visible from the windows of Mondrian’s studio (Fig. 29-31).

Mondrian lived at 26 rue du Départ, where he had a view of the Gare Montparnasse, from 1911-1914 and 1920-1936. Although Montparnasse is identified as the center of Parisian literary and artistic life from the 1910 through the 1920s, *les Années Folles*, the old faubourg Montparnasse had a much less defined character, unevenly developed with unclear boundaries, where the contrast between country and city was visibly apparent even late into the nineteenth century. Eric Hazan argues that this uneven development, split by the Boulevard Montparnasse, goes back to the origins of the quarter in the 1830s, when urbanization along the northern side created the rather more bourgeois dwellings of the 6th Arrondissement, directly facing the still unsubdued scenes of the *guingettes* and the streets of ragpickers and prostitutes to the south.<sup>256</sup> The semirural character of the area persists in the names of some of the streets—for instance, Rue du Moulin-de-la-Vierge and Rue du Moulin-du-Beurre—and the demolition of the old border of the city (the military fortifications built in the 1840s) in 1919 was accompanied in the 1920s and 30s by a massive construction effort of social housing in this area known as “the zone.”<sup>257</sup> The sense of Montparnasse, and the city, being rocked by a fundamental transformation would have been apparent to Mondrian.

Older pictorial modes of representation would have been out of sync with these new conditions, but abstract art proposed a new representational order in which form exhibited a paradoxically mimetic relation to “content” in what might be called a social geometry. As the old architecture of the city was being torn down, leading to new developments in Montparnasse but also leaving gaps and exposed walls in formerly connected structures, painting moved away from the old forms to the planes “encouraged” by these external stimuli (Fig. 29). Paris, where the tendency of life “toward the abstract [was made apparent] because of its intense and accelerated life and material environment,” was, thereby, sublated. At this point, a couple of formulations from Adorno might help us grasp the contours of this simultaneously negated and preserved social dimension.

A. At the risk of its self-alienation, radical modernity preserves art’s immanence by admitting society only in an obscured form, as in the dreams with which artworks have always been compared.<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>256</sup> Eric Hazan, *The Invention of Paris*, trans. David Fernbach (London: Verso Books, 2010), 163-4.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 163, 222-23.

<sup>258</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 226.

B. Art's double character as both autonomous *and fait social* is incessantly reproduced on the level of its autonomy. It is by virtue of this relation to the empirical that artworks recuperate, neutralized, what once was literally and directly experienced in life and what was expelled by spirit.<sup>259</sup>

Mondrian also points out that the universality of the experience of abstraction in everyday life means that abstract art tends toward an expression of a universal “law” and transcends the national-specificity of a “French” art.<sup>260</sup> But it is also more than this: it demonstrates the proper dialectical relationship of abstract and concrete in Mondrian's painting, something that van Doesburg was unable to capture with his formulation of concrete art. Like the Hegelian system, Van Doesburg's triad, natural form-abstract form-spiritual form concludes in Absolute Idea. In van Doesburg's schema, artistic form is the first expression of the logical general forms of art—line and plane—deduced from the impressionistic form of objects as they appear naturally in consciousness. But artistic form still contained elements contradictory with the pure expression of line and plane, for it retained traces of symbolism and continued to rely methodologically on “intuition.” Spiritual form is thus the negation of this incomplete expression and the true realization of the real, or concrete, in the positing of line as nothing more than line and plane as nothing more than plane.

What is interesting about Mondrian's account of neoplasticism is that neither the immediate “external causes” of Parisian stimuli nor the idea of simply “painting in planes” are considered adequate, in and of themselves, to understanding the origin and development of abstract painting. Instead, its origin is related to an abstract *Zeitgeist*, for which abstract painting would improvise a representational order—a “cognitive map.”

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<sup>259</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>260</sup> The reference to Paris comes partially in response to the outsider status of abstract artists in Paris, also described in “The Plastic Expression in Painting” essay as “the gathering point of all races” (202). The question of the non-French character of abstract art has often been noted in the secondary literature and will be discussed further in Chapter III. Christopher Green in *Art in France: 1900-1940* and Marie-Aline Prat in *Peinture et Avant-garde au Seuil des Années 30* provide two different perspectives on the degree to which abstract art was accepted in France. Green argues that the idea behind the *L'art d'aujourd'hui* exhibition, positing abstract art as the art of today in France manifestly failed, along with all other attempts to establish abstract art in France. Because the framework of Green's book is organized around the category of “Frenchness,” the international character of the abstract art circles in Paris renders the phenomenon structurally outside of his paradigm. Although he makes no claim to offering an explanation for his statement that there were no significant abstract art movements originating or taking root in France, he suggests that it was, in fact, the philosophical idealism of painters such as Kandinsky or Mondrian that could not take root in France (34). Although Green's argument, which focuses on the successive history of artistic movements, has merit on this point, I argue that the appeal of philosophical idealism and an idea of transcendence through painting were actually more pervasive than Green supposes among the intellectual and literary circles of Paris in the 1920s. Prat, for her part, argues that neoplasticism was the only abstract art movement that pierced the wall of French indifference (185).

This is not to say that this “meaning” of abstraction was a fully determinate conception for Mondrian. His delight in jazz, the Charleston, and Josephine Baker would seem to suggest otherwise. Perhaps it is only in retrospect that geometrical formalism stands out from the more eclectic social world of the capitalist metropole or that Paris appears as a necessary point of origin in the development of abstract painting, but obviously an adequately framed retrospection can identify alignments and vectors not wholly apparent to contemporaries.

This becomes clearer when recognize that certain utopian aspects of abstract painting can only be accentuated in retrospect with foreknowledge of the impossibilities of its program. The wager of abstract painting was that its own formal limitations—flatness, planarity, the hitherto central tension between surface materiality and spatial illusion—were the most adequate forms for concentrating the tendencies of a new social reality, but also that in capturing a concrete totalized image of these new relations, painting could point to something beyond them. Of course, in 1914 Paris or 1915 Moscow, in 1920 at UNOVIS or 1925 at the *Exposition Internationale*, it was not clear that this would end in failure. Black certainly evoked nihilism and pure negativity. A formulation from *Aesthetic Theory* captures the kernel of intransigence in the idea of abstraction:

To survive reality at its most extreme and grim, artworks that do not want to sell themselves as consolation must equate themselves with that reality. Radical art today is synonymous with dark art; its primary color is black.<sup>261</sup>

The consideration of Suprematism and the Soviet contribution to the *Exposition Internationale* is meant to spotlight the aesthetic and political militancy at the origins of abstract painting and art, and to suggest that the claims of abstract painting to a new form of concreteness and realism—putting a strain on representation as what is thinkable in the traditional mode—emerged in an obscure, dialectical liaison between a new phase of capitalism and the virtual subjectivities of a fading revolutionary moment. A certain locution of the Absolute in abstract painting as it developed in Paris, understood in this light, might also become more interesting, as a figure to be understood outside of the spiritualisms of certain modernist ideologies. Mondrian himself was wont to say that there was not enough *destruction* in painting. Even as the scene of abstract painting shifted decisively to Paris in the interwar period, the truth of aesthetic procedures in the waning adventure of abstraction emerges somewhere between Paris and Moscow as the two poles of modernity: the form-principle of the capitalist metropole and the revolutionary drive to create through rupture and purification.

From one perspective, the short-lived nature of the radical militant project of pure abstraction confirms the high modernist credo of medium-specificity. For the formalist critic or historian, the increasingly academic tendencies of abstract painting in the 1930s in Paris, strictly divorced from any political aspiration, seem only confirmation of a purifying shift away from “philosophy” as a supplement to artistic production to internal

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<sup>261</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 39.



problems of “formalization.”<sup>262</sup> John Elderfield has argued that 1930s Paris abstraction was characterized by a formal “mannerism” that developed “to an extreme the decorative possibilities of synthetic Cubism.”<sup>263</sup> He contends, moreover, that theoretically and politically attuned interpretations of Malevich and the Russian avant-garde have effectively given these artists a formal “free pass.”<sup>264</sup> From another perspective, however, the rise and fall of pure abstraction in the 1920s and 30s throws light on the actual historical conjunction between aesthetic abstraction and the political horizons of the interwar period in Paris. Regardless of the intentions of abstract artists—either for or against any programmatic commitment—abstract art could not continue, as radical art, along the formal path it had staked out at its beginning. The fantasy of pure abstraction—that it could overcome the contradictory relationship of its form to the concrete totality of its conditions—failed. There was no “internal” or “stylistic” necessity to the passage from a philosophical to a formalistic art, as Elderfield called it. The idea of an autonomous modern art only develops out of—as a negation of—the idea of art as a socially mediated fact.<sup>265</sup> In this way, the social intrudes into even the most “pure” formal expressions, and radical art cannot hope to escape this dialectic of autonomous art and art as *fait social* by way of transcendence.

### *Neoplasticist developments in France*

Jean Gorin (1899-1981) studied at the *Académie de la Grande Chaumière* in Paris from 1914 to 1916 and at the *École des Beaux-Arts* in Nantes from 1919 to 1922. But upon encountering Mondrian’s writing and paintings at a bookshop on the boulevard du Montparnasse in 1926, he was immediately—and permanently—converted to neoplasticism. Reading the description of his encounter with Mondrian’s work at this time, we are pointed to another key problem in Mondrian’s painting: equilibrium. If the opposition between vertical and horizontal lines that formed the compositional law of Mondrian’s painting was dynamic, each painting was, nevertheless, an attempt to bring these contradictory tendencies into balance, even if only temporarily. For Gorin, of the generation of *inquiéts*, Mondrian’s paintings were a powerful expression of a much-needed “equilibrium.” He wrote of his first encounter with them in the following terms: “I was so intensely overwhelmed by the beauty of the great serenity that was revealed to me through Neo-plasticism that, having returned home to my province, I immediately wrote to Mondrian, to express my profound emotion regarding his work and to request additional technical information.”<sup>266</sup>

<sup>262</sup> See John Elderfield’s interpretation of the shift in Mondrian’s art between the 1920s and later 1930s, and the general character of abstract art in Paris in the 1930s, particularly pp. 54-55, in John Elderfield, “Geometric Abstract Painting and Paris in the Thirties, Part I.” See also John Elderfield, “Geometric Abstract Painting and Paris in the Thirties, Part II,” *Artforum* 8, no. 10 (June 1970).

<sup>263</sup> Elderfield, “Part I,” 74.

<sup>264</sup> Elderfield, “Part II,” 57.

<sup>265</sup> Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 210.

<sup>266</sup> English translation from Marianne Le Pommeré, *L’oeuvre de Jean Gorin* (Zurich: Waser

Mondrian's *Schilderij No. 1* of 1926 (Fig. 27) is far better than *Tableau No. 1* (Fig. 22) in the sense illuminated by Gorin's experience. The openness gestured at in the latter painting is achieved in an all-at-once image in the diamond painting of 1926, using the utmost economy of means. Mondrian deploys just two lines, crossing at right angles in the lower left corner, punctuated by a small blue triangle. Situating the point of intersection off center, closer to the bottom of the diamond than the left, and making the horizontal line slightly thicker than the vertical one avoid complete symmetry. Space is freed up by removing the vertical line that was on the right in *Tableau No. 1*. There is also no longer any need for the thick black line on the left, which partially seemed to be working with the blue triangle to balance the yellow fragment in the lower right of that painting. Instead, the small point of blue in *Schilderij No. 1* concentrates and represents all the weight of the transcendental aspirations of the earlier painting. This becomes clear when comparing it to *Lozange Composition with Two Lines* (1931, Fig. 32). In the 1931 painting, Mondrian restates the *Schilderij* composition, but excludes the blue. If the 1931 canvas appears stark, the blue triangle completely transforms the 1926 one. Instead of the intense, active primary yellow of *Tableau No. 1*, blue lends itself to a "great serenity," a sense of resolution but also transcendence out of oppositions. Both the 1926 and 1931 paintings imply that space continues equally outside the limits of all four edges, but as the blue triangle anchors the lower left of *Schilderij No. 1*, it also enhances the directionality of movement and opening up and out of the painting.

For Gorin, the painting of pure relationship in Mondrian's art, and Mondrian's idea of achieving equilibrium in abstract form as a means of overcoming the inherently tragic (i.e., unequal) form of relations in nature and "natural" vision, was directly connected to radical political commitments. The spiritualism of pure abstract art was equated with the idea of communism, and the "new plastics" worked from the assumption that "real abstract life was but a *preparation* for the transformation of social life, as well as of our surroundings."<sup>267</sup> The experience of the Great War had put into question the official mythologies of collective life, but neoplasticism—based on a "pure plastic vision [that] sees *everything as a world event*"—would be the means for proposing new forms of totality and collectivity.<sup>268</sup> As Gorin put it in the title of an essay he wrote for *Abstraction-Création*, the world was being steered towards a "universal social and collective art."<sup>269</sup> Each painting or work of art proposes a form of relation, an equilibration of opposing tendencies, that seeks to present itself as a total and complete image. To see everything as a world event means both that everything is encapsulated in

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Verlag, 1985), 8. The original French reads: "Je fus si intensément bouleversé par cette beauté d'une grande sérénité que me révéla le néo-plasticisme que, rentré chez moi, dans ma province, je me mis tout de suite à écrire à Mondrian, pour lui témoigner la profonde émotion éprouvée devant son oeuvre, et lui demander des compléments d'information technique. [...] un échange de correspondance s'ensuivit." The majority of letters received by Gorin were first published in Yve-Alain Bois, "Lettres à Jean Gorin: Mondrian, Vantongerloo, Torres-García, Bill, etc....," *Macula*, no. 2 (1977). See page 128 for this particular text.

<sup>267</sup> Le Pommeré, 48.

<sup>268</sup> Mondrian, "Natural Reality and Abstract Reality," 98.

<sup>269</sup> Jean Gorin, "Vers un art social et collective universel," *Abstraction-Création* 4 (1936).

the forms of pure abstract art and also that its images strive to become events of a world historical nature. The drive to totality is the attempt to posit a new image of the world, and to make this positing a real Event.

It was perhaps Gorin's emphasis on the real transformative possibilities of abstract form that led him to begin experimenting with reliefs and eventually to architecture. While Mondrian pushed the painting into the viewer's space through the use of various experiments with recessed frames, the fundamental idea behind his "new plastics" was that it would be articulated within the flat parameters of painting, renouncing any allusion to three-dimensionality and the sculptural. The "new plastic" is flat. In an exchange of letters between Mondrian and Gorin in early 1933, this difference was highlighted. Gorin emphasized "la *qualité* des rapports," and "*l'expression*, qui s'en dégage," while Mondrian emphasized "la forme du tableau" and "la composition *elle-même*," i.e., the principle of horizontal and vertical opposition.<sup>270</sup>

Beginning in 1930, Gorin tackled the problem of space by introducing three-dimensionality in his shallow-relief *tableau-objets*. *Composition No. 28* (1930, Fig. 33) is one of the first reliefs, and an earlier version was reproduced in the second issue of *Abstraction-Création* (Fig. 34). It is a diamond composition with equal sides of 60 centimeters. The central structure of two orthogonally intersecting red lines, positioned off-center to the left and below, echoes the Mondrian diamond compositions, but the effect is rather different. Gorin's *Composition* reflects a similar kind of openness, but it also, necessarily, gives the impression of overlapping spaces. The fundamental neoplastic term—i.e., intersecting horizontal and vertical lines—is put in a bright red, which transforms the universal and stable element of Mondrian's paintings into an active one, with a deliberately stated dynamism. We might want to recall a similar move from Malevich's *Black Square* to *Red Square* (*Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions*) or Lissitzky's *Tale of Two Squares*. The horizontal red line in Gorin's *Composition* also cuts through a painted light gray plane. In the upper left is a black line, set in relief. In the earlier version from the *Abstraction-Création* yearbook, this line is white, and the gray plane in the lower right appears much darker, and might have been black. The white line may have been changed to black in order to make the effect of relief more apparent, but the change also emphasizes the different quality of the line. For another interesting aspect of this work is that each color points to a different type of line, which may show that Gorin was experimenting with the relationship of line to form, suggesting that line was also form. The black line in the upper left is set in relief, while the red "lines" are actually concave, and the gray plane demonstrates an implicit, painterly straight-edge line.

For some scholars, Gorin's reliefs constitute the only truly original and interesting development of neoplasticism, outside of Mondrian's works.<sup>271</sup> As Yve-Alain Bois has unearthed in his publication of correspondence between Gorin and Mondrian, Mondrian

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<sup>270</sup> Joosten and Welsh, 153, citing Bois, "Lettres à Jean Gorin," 128-30.

<sup>271</sup> See, for example, Le Pommeré, 52; Blotkamp, 201; Elderfield, "Part II," 1-2; and Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 171.

himself approved of this development of neoplasticism, although he also argued that it was no longer “painting” and that he was not tempted to go in this direction.

Around 1930, Jean Gorin realized his first neoplastic reliefs, whose hollowed lines (often white on white, thus shadowed) pleased Mondrian enormously, Mondrian said, “It goes farther than my work, which in the end remains *tableau*.” [...] But it is of primary importance that, in the first place, in both cases, Mondrian associates these three-dimensional works much more with architecture than with sculpture, and, in the second, that he was never tempted to pursue such a path. For sculpture as such has the bad habit of constituting itself as figure against the surrounding space, which thus functions as background. Having no predetermined limit, sculpture is only conceivable from a neoplastic viewpoint as inscribing itself in an architectural space that it articulates (thereby avoiding the figurative menace). Such is not the problem of the *tableau*, which is necessarily limited and which functions, according to Mondrian, as a “substitute for the ensemble.” In short, it is not sculpture that Mondrian is after. He is seeking the sculptural in painting: he strives to give to his works, which are autonomous entities, the literal quality of an object that will render them optically impenetrable. To make sculpture per se would, for Mondrian, have been a renunciation.<sup>272</sup>

In Gorin’s *Composition No. 8* of 1934 (fig. 35), the architectural character of the reliefs is much more apparent, and it was around this time that he began to focus more exclusively on his architectural projects. The relief introduces a new method of presenting the neoplasticist perpendicular. There are faint reminders of intersecting lines in the white lines that cross near the center and right of the composition, but the line has been transformed into a three-dimensional construction. Instead of marking out a division of the canvas into different planes, the vertical and horizontal elements have been built up into complex structures composed of different depths and planar elements. Planes—red, blue, yellow, bluish gray, gray and white—constitute the unified building blocks of the composition, rather than being the corollaries of linear structure. That Gorin had achieved a significant transformation of Mondrian’s neoplasticist painting is evidenced by Mondrian’s decision not to participate in an exhibit with him in 1934. While Mondrian told Gorin that he did not have any works ready for exhibition, he also wrote that he was uncertain about the use of relief and concerned that exhibiting with Gorin and Domela, who was also employing relief in his work, might risk confusion.<sup>273</sup>

### *Neoplasticism and communism*

Mondrian disagreed, furthermore, with Gorin’s linking of neoplasticism and communism. Gorin participated in a trip to Moscow organized by the Communist *Association des écrivains et des Artistes Révolutionnaires* (AEAR) in 1932 for a celebration of the fifteenth anniversary of the October Revolution. He attended two days

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<sup>272</sup> Bois, *Painting as Model*, 171-2.

<sup>273</sup> Mondrian, Letter to Gorin, 31 J. (January?) 1934, in *Le Pommeré*, 499.

of celebrations on 7 and 8 November, visited exhibits designed to demonstrate the “triumph of the 5-year plan, completed in 4 years,” and met Soviet artists and architects such as Konstantin Melnikov and Moisei Ginsburg. Although Gorin was surprised that artists seemed to be working primarily in traditional, figurative styles and that the work of Malevich and Lissitzky was not more visible, he was nonetheless impressed by other aspects of his visit, including his visit to a Workers’ Club and the Meyerhold Theater. In an unpublished manuscript of this visit, he makes the tantalizing remark, “Today, for reasons that I hope to explore, these movements [Suprematism and Constructivism] are being developed outside of the USSR.”<sup>274</sup>

In 1933, however, he was still writing to Mondrian of his hopes for the future, and a communist art of abstraction. Mondrian replied with skepticism. On one occasion Mondrian wrote that what he heard of art in the Soviet Union was not encouraging, and on another he explicitly said that communism was not the path for Western civilization, and France in particular:

Comme tu le comprends, je suis avec tout d’accord, seulement je te demande si c’est bien de lier le N.P. ainsi au communisme, parce que les gens ne le connaissent que tel qu’il se manifeste aujourd’hui. Et encore, je ne crois pas que pour la civilisation occidentale, la France en tête, le communisme est la voie.<sup>275</sup>

There may be a bit of ambiguity in the first sentence, which implies that there might be a future and different form of communism possible, but the question of Mondrian’s political views is tricky, as noted above.<sup>276</sup>

This is not to say that Mondrian was not interested in social questions or to refute the argument previously made about the relation in Mondrian’s painting between a kind of spiritual and political Absolute. Mondrian wrote to J.J.P. Oud, for instance, that his correspondence with Arthur Müller-Lehning had encouraged him to write more explicitly about the social character of his painting. The first result of this was Mondrian’s 1926 essay, “Home—Street—City,” in which he elaborated a conception of an open, unified, and equilibrated society. In a letter to Oud on 22 May 1926, Mondrian wrote:

[Müller-Lehning] is an anarchist, but not of the anarchist party.... He is very broad-minded.... and in our own direction (against convention, capitalism in the wrong sense, bourgeoisie, etc....). *i 10* is not an art periodical, which is good. I plan to write on Neo-Plasticism in society. Like myself, Müller-Lehning wants to assist in the creation of a new society, along the path of ideas.<sup>277</sup>

The visit he received in September 1931 from Sven Backlund, a Swedish

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<sup>274</sup> The details of Gorin’s visit are from Le Pommeré, 462-3.

<sup>275</sup> Mondrian, Letter to Gorin, 1 April 1933, in Le Pommeré, 498.

<sup>276</sup> Yve-Alain Bois, *Cadences*, 81-105. Bois makes the offhand remark that Mondrian was a socialist, but this is may be more of an extrapolation from Mondrian’s friendship with Arthur Müller-Lehning, anarchist and editor of *i 10*.

<sup>277</sup> Mondrian, “Home—Street—City,” in *The New Art-The New Life*, 205.

sociologist and journalist who represented the Swedish socialist press at the League of Nations in Geneva, and the ensuing conversations also “spurred Mondrian to redouble his efforts to finish his new book”—*L’Art nouveau - la vie nouvelle (La culture des rapports purs)*.<sup>278</sup> In this work, Mondrian wrote most explicitly on the problem of capitalism and disequilibrium:

Capitalism as cultivated until now is a limiting form that is abolishing itself and will be abolished in the culture of equivalent relationships. Already, today’s disequibrated social and economic conditions show that this form has matured and is about to transform itself. This form, instead of becoming open, so as to make possible an equivalent distribution of values, will probably remain a “form”—as art clearly shows by its transformation of particular form into purified form before its destruction of all limited form. Although a more stable world equilibrium will follow, the new form will still be too dominated by money to allow it to spread equivalently through the world. For the future, Neo-Plastic demonstrates for every area *an organization of equivalent relationships and not a new form*.<sup>279</sup>

In articulating neoplasticism as a kind of “non-form,” Mondrian departs from earlier discussions of abstract form. This departure also suggests a new perspective into Mondrian’s shift beginning in the 1930s from an increasingly reductive mode of painting to a proliferating linear structure. The doubling of lines, the introduction of colored lines, and the gradual convergence between “line” and “plane” suggests that rather than the “mannerism” of a previously achieved style, Mondrian’s painting in the 1930s was moving towards a new conception of form—a negation of form even.

That the political views of the various artists of pure abstraction in the 1920s and 1930s differed is not to be denied. For example, one of Mondrian’s most ardent supporters, Michel Seuphor, explicitly wrote in the opening essay of the first issue of *Cercle et Carré* against any link between revolution, or “social war,” and art, repeating this point several times.<sup>280</sup> Marie-Aline Prat has also argued in her study of *Cercle et Carré* that while there may have been a “more or less revolutionary” orientation among the artists, there was also a great divergence among them in terms of how they conceived of the relationship between art and society.<sup>281</sup> Jean Hélion, on the other hand, applied a more blanket statement in noting his surprise at meeting Tristan Tzara in 1931, when he realized that Tzara, as a surrealist, was as passionate for communism as “us on the side of abstraction.”<sup>282</sup> But in a way, these views also take us back to the dialectic of autonomous art and art as *fait social* that Adorno so eloquently sketched. For even if artists deny pure

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<sup>278</sup> Joostens and Welsh, 150.

<sup>279</sup> Mondrian, “The New Art—The New Life,” in *The New Art—The New Life*, 267.

<sup>280</sup> Michel Seuphor, “Pour la défense d’une architecture,” *Cercle et Carré*, no. 1 (15 March 1930): 1-3.

<sup>281</sup> Prat, 161.

<sup>282</sup> Jean Hélion, *À Perte de Vue*, eds. Claire Paulhan and Patrick Fréchet (Paris: IMEC Éditions, 1996), 55-56.

abstraction any political content, even affirming the autonomy of art, society as such always presents itself as a problem that must be addressed, theorized, explained away.

## Chapter Four

### From Pure to Figural Abstraction: Jean Hélion

After *L'Art d'Aujourd'hui* in 1925, the next exhibit devoted to abstract art in Paris did not take place until April 1930 with the *Cercle et Carré* show at the Galerie 23 (23, rue de La Boétie).<sup>283</sup> In the intervening years, abstract art also did not make many inroads in the established Paris dealer-critic system, although activity continued in small scale meetings at cafés and individual studios. As one of the founders of *Cercle et Carré* and one of the major promoters of abstract art at this time, Seuphor's history of this period seems to exaggerate somewhat the extent to which these were all "abstract" art events, but it nevertheless offers a sense of the excitement and energy felt by the partisans of abstraction themselves. Describing this activity as "carried in the face of hostility from the established critics of the day," his recollections also provide a glimpse into the way in which these artists created a world of their own alongside and within the fluid groupings of the avant-garde:

Paris was the hub of all this activity, the centre in Paris itself being Montparnasse. It was a lively time, when on the same day, in front of the Dôme café you could meet Marinetti on a lightning visit to the capital, Gabo fresh from Berlin, Cendrars just back from America, Delaunay out for a spree, Arp trying to find somebody, Tzara and Ehrenburg sitting there with inscrutable faces; you could risk a few words with Hans Richter or argue with Van Doesburg or Kiesler, or listen to the international speechifiers making themselves drunk with their own eloquence, or you could even manage to be bored by it all... At the *Sacre du Printemps*, an art-gallery which has now disappeared but which was at 5, rue du Cherche-Midi, Paul Dermée and I used to hold exhibitions of abstract art and literary meetings in 1927. Marinetti, Walden, Kassak, Schwitters and many others had their turn at holding forth with recitations and speeches accompanied by catcalls or applause. Canvases by Werkman, Huszar, Vantongerloo, Mondrian, Arp, Sophie Taüber and others who are now forgotten were shown and eagerly discussed.<sup>284</sup>

By the end of the decade, Mondrian and van Doesburg reconciled, and both Seuphor and van Doesburg announced the formation of two separate groups of abstract art, *Cercle et Carré* (Seuphor) and *Art Concret* (van Doesburg). These two groups, both emerging in 1929, and *Abstraction-Création-Art non-figuratif*, which published its first issue in 1931, formed the nucleus of what abstraction came to mean in the Paris of the 30s. In this chapter, I trace the development of abstract art in this period by looking at the work of

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<sup>283</sup> According to Seuphor, there were 130 exhibits by 46 artists. There was a core of older abstract artists such as Mondrian, Kandinsky, Pevsner, Sophie Taüber and Arp, "newcomers" such as Gorin and Stazewski, as well as entries by less strictly abstract but well established artists like Léger and Le Corbusier. Seuphor, *Dictionary of Abstract Painting*, 49.

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.*, 51-2.



Jean Héliion, considered a more minor figure today.

Héliion was a significant participant in these groups and their journals, and as one of the few French artists practicing abstraction, often served as a “point of contact” between the predominantly international group of abstract artists and the Parisian art world. He was the editor on behalf of van Doesburg’s *Art Concret*,<sup>285</sup> and was involved, along with Gorin, in forming the *Abstraction-Création* group. Héliion was also in charge of editing *Abstraction-Création*’s first yearbook in 1932. More importantly, though, Héliion, another young French painter whose turn to geometric abstraction was mediated by the idea of communism, embodies the fraught relationship between art and politics that I argue constitutes the core project of abstraction at its origins.

“*Origine de mon abstraction*”

In 1921, at the age of seventeen, Héliion moved to Paris, leaving behind his engineering and chemistry studies in Normandy and taking up work as an architect’s apprentice. This involved practice in drawing and draftsmanship, and he enrolled in night classes at the *École des Arts Décoratifs*.<sup>286</sup> Although this was initially done with the goal of aiding his architectural studies, it was this school, along with the Louvre, that became his entry point into the world of fine art. Héliion would always cite his visits to the Louvre, where the French tradition of painting made a particularly deep and lasting impression in catalyzing his turn to painting. In the early 1920s, he began a course of self-study, focusing particularly on close studies of Poussin and producing small paintings in the naturalistic tradition.<sup>287</sup> In 1925, he decided to devote himself completely to painting and enrolled in figure drawing classes at the *Académie Adler*. Although he now abandoned its practice, architecture remained a background figure in his painting, especially after his discovery and adoption of geometric abstraction, which was defined for him in terms of construction, underscored by a nexus of mathematics and art.

Prior to meeting the half-Uruguayan, half-Catalan artist Joaquín Torres-García, then, Héliion’s knowledge of painting was limited to the academic *Beaux-Arts* tradition and the artists enshrined in the Louvre. It was Torres-García who introduced Héliion to modern painting and avant-garde movements such as Cubism in 1926. The two went on to share studio spaces in Montparnasse and even living space when Héliion briefly housed Torres-García and his family.<sup>288</sup> At the end of 1928, Torres-García met van Doesburg, after which both artists began to adopt a *De Stijl* influenced constructivism. Héliion’s painting at this time quickly evolved towards pure geometric abstraction in 1929, especially after his own meeting with van Doesburg in the fall of 1929. By 1930, Héliion was deeply embedded in van Doesburg’s circle in Paris, playing an active role in the small *Art Concret* group and meeting Mondrian for the first time as well.<sup>289</sup>

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<sup>285</sup> Ibid., vii.

<sup>286</sup> Schipper, 11-12.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 12-13.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 13.

Hélión's introduction to modern painting and the avant-garde via Torres-García is one part of the story of his development in the 1920s and is certainly the more well-known part as it directly relates to his adoption of a geometric, Constructivist style. However, another important although less well documented side to this decade is his relationship to the French left. His knowledge of French communist literary circles, for instance, predates his meeting with Torres-García. In the archives of Hélión's personal library, as well, are a number of issues of *Clarté* dating from 1921, the year Hélión first arrived in Paris, through 1928.<sup>290</sup> The two issues from 1925 include articles on architecture and urbanism, the *Philosophies* group, and literature of the Russian revolution, as well as Breton's short essay "La Force d'attendre" and letters by Lenin and Aragon. There is little information about these issues, other than Hélión's possession of them, or their significance for him, but their existence does suggest an avid reader of *Clarté* and follower of debates in art and literature on the left. In fact, Hélión's interest in literature and poetry in particular from his youth, which preceded any interest in architecture, drawing or painting, may have led him to pick up *Clarté* on his arrival in Paris.

We can look, however, to some of his recollections of this period to fill out his relationship to this material. In 1925, Hélión became friends with Tristan Rémy, a major figure in the French proletarian literature debates and, according to Hélión, the first to have the idea of founding the *Association des Écrivains et des Artistes Révolutionnaires* (AEAR).<sup>291</sup> Hélión dated this idea to 1926, although the project of forming a literary group of "workers and peasants" actually dates back to Rémy's first meetings with the anarchist writer, Henri Poulaille, in 1922. Poulaille would go on to be known as one of the founders of the "école prolétarienne" of literature, laying out his theory of proletarian literature most explicitly in the 1930 essay, "Nouvel âge littéraire," and forming the *Groupe des écrivains prolétariens* with Rémy and others in March 1932. The AEAR, on the other hand, was organized around the same time under the official auspices of the French Communist Party (PCF) and was a section of the *Union Internationale des Écrivains Révolutionnaires*, founded in Moscow in 1927. Rémy would eventually join the AEAR, under the leadership of Paul Vaillant-Couturier, and other friends and founding members of the proletarian literature movement, such as Henri Barbusse (novelist and editor of *Clarté*) and Marcel Martinet (writer and literary editor of *L'Humanité* from 1921 to 1924), were also PCF stalwarts, although they would continue to defend Poulaille as he faced increasingly virulent attacks from the partisans of socialist realism in the PCF ranks and official literary groups in the 30s.<sup>292</sup>

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<sup>290</sup> Côte HLN1-revues, Fonds Jean Hélión, Institut mémoires de l'édition contemporaine (IMEC), Caens (hereafter cited as Fonds Hélión).

<sup>291</sup> Hélión, *Mémoire de la chambre jaune*, 18. When the AEAR was finally established in 1932, Paul Vaillant Couturier led the meetings, although Rémy later joined. Hélión was also a member of the AEAR from its beginnings.

<sup>292</sup> See Nicole Racine, "The Clarté Movement in France, 1919-21," *Journal of Contemporary History* 2 (April 1967): 195-208, for a history of the beginnings of *Clarté* and background on the principal "pioneers of the Clarté movement," Henri Barbusse, Paul Vaillant-Couturier and Raymond Lefebvre.

Héliion's knowledge of the complex web of tangled left and Communist loyalties in this period is not clear, but he was clearly a part of this milieu, sympathetic to both the *Clartéistes* who refused to join the party and those among them like Barbusse and Vaillant-Couturier who adopted Bolshevism immediately in the aftermath of the Congress of Tours. Héliion, for his part, joined the AEAR and described himself as communist, although he apparently never became a card carrying member of the PCF. In a text from 1975, he reflects nostalgically on these days, mixing memories of the AEAR with *La Bellevilloise*,<sup>293</sup> a cooperative founded in 1877 in the aftermath of the Paris Commune and an important center for political meetings and cultural activities in the interwar period:

Qui se souvient en une, à part nous, de l'A.E.A.R. (Association d'Écrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires) au début des années '30? On se réunissait autour de Vaillant-Couturier ardent et généreux.  
 Il y avait Herbin, violent et franc mais dogmatique, farouchement abstrait.  
 Valmier, sentimental. Seligman, surréalisant et moi qui croyait à une construction neuve des tableaux et du monde... On citait Marx, ou plutôt on répétait des citations. Il n'y avait pas en une de bureaucratie entre le peuple et moi.  
 Avais-tu participé, chez Edouard, à la première tentative de la "Bellevilloise" en 1926 ou 1927? Inspiré par Tristan Rémy, Votero [sic] l'ancien marin de la mer noire ne vaît de réunir tout simplement ces forces neuves de l'air et de la vie. Dans la grande salle de la Coopérative on lisait des poèmes à des ouvriers. Robert Caby, faisant chanter "Le Mort de Socrate" d'Eric Satie par Maria Freund. Ça à l'air de remonter au temps des cerises. Où sont les neiges d'antan?<sup>294</sup>

In this excerpt, which constitutes the majority of the text, Héliion moves from the AEAR to *La Bellevilloise*, evoking the figures in an elegiac mode. Asking who would remember these figures and spaces, "apart from us," he seeks to rekindle memories of not only the specific people who inspired these times but of the unique spirit that animated these collectives of political revolutionaries, poets, artists, musicians and workers. The passage starts out with Vaillant-Couturier, "ardent and generous," as the leader of the diverse group of writers and artists—of, in Vaillant-Couturier's own words, "ouvriers qui écrivent"—and tying in Héliion's own understanding of the intertwined projects of communism and abstraction.<sup>295</sup> Auguste Herbin, Georges Valmier and Kurt Seligmann were all members of *Abstraction-Création* in the early 30s, although Héliion and Herbin

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<sup>293</sup> The *Bellevilloise*, named after its location in the 20th Arrondissement, Belleville, began as a cooperative centered around the distribution of food products and developed over the course of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in organizing social works as well as educational and cultural programs. It is one of the most famous institutions of the cooperative movement in France, and in the 20s it was particularly noteworthy for the avant-garde cultural programs it hosted. See Jean-Jacques Meusy, ed., *La Bellevilloise (1877-1939): Une page de l'histoire de la coopération et du mouvement ouvrier français* (Paris: Éditions Créaphis, 2001).

<sup>294</sup> Jean Héliion, Fevrier 1975, Folder 8 - notes de carnets et textes divers, Côte HLN B 25, Fonds Héliion.

<sup>295</sup> Paul Vaillant-Couturier, "Qu'est ce que l'AEAR," in *Ceux qui ont choisi* (Paris, 1933), 4.

seem to have been more active members.<sup>296</sup> Moving back in time to the *Bellevilloise* of the 20s, he calls up names still familiar today, such as Eric Satie, as well as less familiar ones such as Robert Caby, a composer and art critic in circles shared by Satie and Picasso.

Another less familiar name, Pierre Vottero was an important figure in the history of the *Bellevilloise*. He was brought into the cooperative in 1924 at the age of twenty-five by Georges Marrane, the future Communist mayor of Ivry,<sup>297</sup> and was the secretary of social works (*secrétaire des oeuvres sociales*).<sup>298</sup> This post involved a number of duties, but one that stood out among his activities was the support he gave to Léon Moussinac and Jean Lods in establishing the Ciné-Club at the *Bellevilloise*, which became known for its showing of “non-authorized” films including Sergei Eisenstein’s *Battleship Potemkin* and other Soviet avant-garde works from the mid-20s on.<sup>299</sup> Instead of highlighting one of these activities, though, Héliion opts for a more poetic and heroic mode, identifying Vottero with his service in the Black Sea mutinies, when French sailors in 1919 rose up against their commanders and the French government’s intervention on behalf of the Tsarist Whites around Odessa and declared their support for the Bolsheviks instead. Héliion’s gesture here, evoking the Bolsheviks and the Communards as well in his “Ça à l’air de remonter au temps de cerises,”<sup>300</sup> is wistful but romanticizing also. He ends, too, with the famous refrain from François Villon’s “Ballade des dames du temps jadis,” asking “où sont les neiges d’antan,” or “where are the snows of yesteryear,” but having

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<sup>296</sup> Ibid. The full list mentioned by Vaillant-Couturier runs as follows: “Notre Association est maintenant une force qui groupe à côté d’un nombre important d’ouvriers qui écrivent, des hommes comme Adam, Aragon, Audard, Barbusse, Bénichou, Blech, Boiffard, Jean-Richard Bloch, André Breton, Bunuel, Crevel, Eluard, Eugène Dabit, Delons, Elie Faure, Rogern Francq, Fréville, Friedmann, Louis Guilloux, Héliion, Herbin, Francis Jourdain, Henri Lefebvre, Lods, Jean et André Lurçat, Man Ray, Moussinac, Nizan, Louis Paul, Benjamin Péret, Politzer, Pomiés, Priacel, Jules Rivet, Romain Rolland, Sadoul, Servèze, Signac, C. Suarès, P. Unik, J. Vigo, Vildrac, Willard, pour ne citer qu’eux, représentant des origines et des formations très diverses.”

<sup>297</sup> Marrane became the first Communist mayor of Ivry in 1925 and remained in the position until 1965, with the exception of the years of occupied France. He was most notably the PCF candidate in the 1958 presidential election against de Gaulle.

<sup>298</sup> Meusy, 95-6.

<sup>299</sup> In keeping with its affiliation with the Communist Party in the 20s, it was one of the few places where one could see, for instance, Soviet films, and hosted a Ciné-Club organized by Léon Moussinac, who had first introduced the films of Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein to France at the 1925 *Exposition Internationale*. It also hosted another of Moussinac’s later cinema clubs, *Les Amis de Spartacus*, formed in 1928 in the face of attempted French police repression of the showing of “non-authorized” films in private venues. For further reading, see Alain Weber, “Cinéma, théâtre et concerts à la salle Lénine,” in *La Bellevilloise (1877-1939): Une page de l’histoire de la coopération et du mouvement ouvrier français*, Ed. Jean-Jacque Meusy (Paris: Éditions Créaphis, 2001). See also, Michel Dreyfus, “Autour de La Bellevilloise: la coopération communiste entre les deux guerres,” in *La Bellevilloise*.

<sup>300</sup> “Le temps des cerises,” one of the most well known French chansons, was originally written in 1869 by Jean-Baptiste Clément with music by Antoine Renard, as a chanson d’amour, but quickly became a sort of hymn of the Paris Commune, particularly in the aftermath of the “semaine sanglante,” the week of the bloody repression of the Commune beginning on May 21, 1871.

substituted for Villon's mythological and historical women the artists and militants of his own youth.

This passage is one of the few on the 1920s in Héliion's memoirs and is especially notable for the specifics it names. It also allows us to fill out some dates to his encounters with both left and avant-garde artists. From another account we know that he seems to have met for instance the abstract German painter, Otto Freundlich, sometime in 1926 at Rémy's house.<sup>301</sup> We do not have an exact date for this meeting, but it comes between references to 1925 and 1926, and if we take Héliion's statement that he was unaware of any modern painting movements before meeting Torres-García, 1926 seems to make sense. Around the same time that he started to devote himself to painting and received introductions from Torres-García, then, he is also beginning to encounter another world through Rémy and *La Bellevilloise*. It is at Rémy's house that he first met Freundlich, and crucially, it is through Freundlich that he first became aware of such a thing as abstract art: "[Freundlich] est bien le premier peintre abstrait que j'ai connu avant d'avoir vu les gravures en noir et les dessins qu'il avait donnés à Tristan Rémy. Je ne savais pas que l'art abstrait pouvait exister."<sup>302</sup>

This encounter is important as most accounts of Héliion's trajectory emphasize the importance of Torres-García's mentorship and the path from him to Van Doesburg and Mondrian. Although the encounters with van Doesburg and Mondrian are crucial, they should be put side by side with his frequenting of meetings at Rémy's house and *La Bellevilloise*. It is not clear what projects Héliion mentions that are beginning at the *Bellevilloise* in 1926 and 1927 (the "première tentative" above), but it might be that this is when Héliion himself first begins going there. It could also refer to Vottero's support for Moussinac, who wrote introductions for Dziga Vertov and Sergei Eisenstein's films at the 1925 *Exposition Internationale* and began showing Soviet films in the aftermath of the Expo. Thus, although Héliion did not begin painting in an abstract geometric style until the spring of 1929, it was around 1926 that he first encountered abstract art as a form with a definite link to communism.

### *Encounter with the East*

In 1930, Héliion began giving French language lessons to Vladimir Barkov, a diplomat at the Soviet embassy in Paris, in order to supplement his income.<sup>303</sup> As Héliion tells the story, the painter William Einstein, a friend of Mondrian and a convert to abstraction, had been trying for several years to get a visa to travel to the Soviet Union. When Héliion raised the problem with Barkov, it was quickly resolved, and together with Einstein, Héliion soon set off for Moscow, stopping for three days in Berlin to see Naum Gabo.<sup>304</sup> They spent two and a half months in the URSS, and Héliion was clearly

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<sup>301</sup> Héliion, *Mémoire de la chambre jaune*, 18.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Héliion, *À Perte de Vue*, 61.

<sup>304</sup> Jean Héliion, interview in English by Gail Stavitsky (June 1986), Côte HLN15-1986, Fonds Héliion, 76.

captivated by what he saw—cooperatives, schools, prisons, ports, factories, etc.<sup>305</sup> He carried this excitement back to Paris, where it was shared by comrades like the painter, Auguste Herbin:

Je rentrai pourtant à Paris émerveillé de mon voyage des promesses que nous avions vu esquissées de toutes parts qui arrangeaient le monde, redressaient les misères, corrigeaient l'ignorance. Tout cela pourtant conduisait au Goulag. Que croire? Mais à ce moment-là, Herbin et moi-même croyions que le monde avait enfin trouvé le chemin de la justice et qu'on ne pourrait plus s'en départir.<sup>306</sup>

While Hélión has recounted his enthusiasm for the Soviet Union in different memoirs and does not seek to rewrite his personal history by renouncing his communist sympathies, we also see in this passage his impulse to insert into most narratives of this time—and certainly all accounts of this trip—the signs of Stalinist repression and the gulags which would intensify over the course of the 30s. His “que croire” seems to indicate some ambivalence about whether communism in the 30s had to end in the gulags, but in general, we will see over the course of the 30s a gradual association of Communism with Stalinism and the extinguishment of his enthusiasm for the Party and its organizations, such as the AEAR. Communism, which seemed “une sorte de beauté dont on privait arbitrairement le monde,” is tied to abstraction for Hélión, and we will see that both come to carry the same negative qualities of rigidity and dogmatism for him.

At the time, however, the trip fired his enthusiasm for communism and a kind of abstract, or constructivist, painting that would be the foundation of a new art in this new social order. One could say that the introduction to van Doesburg, Mondrian and neoplasticism in 1929 catalyzed Hélión's turn to geometric abstract painting in the environment of the Soviet enclave in Paris, but that the 1930 trip served as confirmation of his new found conviction. His paintings from 1930 are among his first based on orthogonal principles of composition, employing only a series of rectangular planes and intersecting lines. As early forays into abstraction, they are neither particularly original nor assured, but they do show that he was grappling with the core concerns of abstraction, namely planarity and flatness as the central terms out of which a pictorial space is constructed. Look, for example, at the two paintings entitled *Composition Ouverte* (Fig. 36-37).

The first, from 1930 (Fig. 36), was later included by Hélión in the 1934 issue of *Abstraction-Création* and must have been seen as something of a statement of his early period. The painting is a square of 50 cm by 50 cm, and in the upper left is a smaller square partitioned into two smaller rectangles of black and dark gray, set against a cream colored background. The impression that the square seems superimposed on the background rather than continuous with it is reinforced by the three black lines of unequal length jutting into the painting from the bottom and right. The “openness” of the painting is not the kind of openness in Mondrian or Gorin's works, where space spills

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<sup>305</sup> Hélión, “Origine et fin de mon abstraction,” 175.

<sup>306</sup> Hélión, *À perte de vue*, 64.

over the edge of the canvases, and Héliion's painting actually seems less open in the way that the lines seem to point to an empty and enclosed space in the center of the canvas. *Composition Ouverte* of 1930-31 (Fig. 37) is even more pronounced in producing an effect of a receding ground plane. The superimposition of black lines over a blue and green square in the upper right corner seeks to create a certain dynamism in a multi-dimensional space, but somehow the painting seems gripped by a kind of static force, perhaps an effect of the overlaid black bars.

The years 1929-1932 constitute roughly the first period of Héliion's abstract painting. The deployment of black lines is clearly influenced by Mondrian's grid, including his foregrounding of the central opposition of verticals and horizontals. But while Mondrian's spare asceticism was driven by a desire to create an image of totality—of space and spatial relations captured in their essence and pushed forward, literally, into the viewer's consciousness—Héliion's paintings look decidedly like “compositions” in the negative sense given to the word by the Soviets, semi-precious arrangements of lines and planes on a canvas. For all the radical enthusiasm driving Héliion's practice, the paintings seem to fall flat, or short, of their aspirations. Could it be that the conditions in 1930 in France, where the left was already seemingly in retreat, and Western Europe, on the verge of fascism, simply could not foster the kind of explosion of aesthetic and political creativity unleashed by the Russian Revolution? Or is it that by 1930, abstraction under the pressures of art in the capitalist metropole was already turning into another form of painting, best represented by Mondrian's more distant perspective of an abstract, perhaps even alienated, world?

Pure abstraction in Héliion lacked the destructive and purifying side seen in both Mondrian and Malevich's paintings, and even in this period, his most strictly geometrical phase, neither planarity nor flatness carry the same ontological burdens. Geometrical forms are deployed in painting to construct imaginary worlds and constellations that are animated by the same ideals as the constructions of communism, but the material form of painting itself, represented and restated in abstraction as both limiting and enabling condition, does not have any descriptive purchase on the world. We see a contraction of space in these paintings, an image of the finite, rather than the infinite. The development of Héliion's painting in this restricted direction can be partly related to his deployment of concepts of architecture and construction. If certain Soviet artists rejected art and reached the conclusion that they would have to move into practical work in industrial production or architecture, Héliion instead perhaps sought after the impossible task of making painting like architecture.

He completed 45 abstract paintings from 1929 to 1932, and most of them carry titles of some variant on *Abstraction* (17), *Composition* (11), *Composition Orthogonale* (6), *Composition Ouverte* (2). It is highly unlikely that Héliion or any other western European artist would have been familiar with the terms of the Soviet composition-vs-construction debate. While he cites Lissitzky, Malevich, and Tatlin as influences, the other two in the list named above—i.e., Gabo and Pevsner—were much more easily accessible, and their version of international constructivism, which they developed in

Berlin after leaving the USSR in 1922, was far more of a purely aesthetic endeavor than what they left behind in the Soviet Union. Héliion's titles are by no means decisive, and the use of "composition" is rather generic, but we can also read them as indicative of a more general experimentation with aesthetic form and line.

*Composition Constructiviste* of 1930-31, the only painting with this title, is a square like the *Compositions Ouvertes* of 1930, and is clearly related to them, particularly in the way that the black lines enter the canvas space. It would have been completed after his return from the Soviet Union, and this may be the reason for the inclusion of constructivism in the title. In *Composition Constructiviste*, the canvas is a square, which provides a form of stability, or equality, between all sides, and provides the logical container for the pairs of lines coming in from each side of the square. The use of the primary colors red, yellow and blue, along with a sage green that figures often in Héliion's paintings of the 30s, as well as the varied width of the lines, points to the influence of neoplasticism and its emphasis on finding equilibrium between vertical and horizontal, line and color. At the same time, this doubling of the lines, which provides a kind of frame that the color then "fills," also makes them look a bit like iron girders and the painting almost like a literal exercise in construction. The square is the starting point, the "degree zero" in a way of Héliion's abstract painting as well, with the *Compositions Ouvertes* the first experiments in working out a three dimensional space from the original square and *Composition Constructiviste* an attempt at building in this new space. However, the painting's literalness makes it seem a bit flat-footed, unlike the vertiginous character of some Malevich constellations or the force fields that seem to unite some of Lissitzky's *Prouns* in their search for an image of a new world.

#### *Productivism vs. "Western" Constructivism*

If we look back to Héliion's account of his trip to Moscow, there is a telling detail that reveals a gap between his understanding of constructivism as a primarily aesthetic endeavor and the actual ambitions of the Soviet Constructivists. In their 1931 Moscow trip, Héliion and Einstein were part of a larger group of Western European tourists—"touristes de notre genre"—brought together by a group called *Volks*.<sup>307</sup> It was through a *Volks* meeting that Héliion was able to meet Tatlin. The same language barriers that hampered van Doesburg's meeting with Rodchenko at the 1925 Exposition were present at Héliion's with Tatlin, and the meeting seems to have consisted of only a brief introduction, neither being able to communicate with the other directly. Thus, what Héliion recounts of this encounter is only the introduction he was given, namely that Tatlin was described to him as a worker in an aviation factory. For Héliion, this is recalled in a rather negative light, as a lack of understanding of the greatness of Tatlin and his artistic work. He remarks:

Je ne recontraï que Tatline à une réunion de Volks où Ronskaya mon interprète me le présenta en me disant qu'il était ouvrier dans une usine d'aviation. C'était donc là l'homme de la tour de la troisième internationale vue à Paris en 1925,

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 63.



l'homme dont on disait qu'il avait introduit le mouvement dans ses sculptures et dont j'ai vu depuis des oeuvres admirables à l'exposition Paris-Moscou. Il ne parlait que russe et moi qu'anglais ou français...<sup>308</sup>

Lissitzky and Malevich were supposedly on vacation at this time, so Tatlin was the only one of the three Héliion met. His “here, then, was the man of the tower of the third international” is tinged with regret and disappointment, alluding to the sidelining of avant-garde artists and pioneers in abstraction and Constructivism.

Héliion could not have been fully aware of developments in the Soviet Union at this time, but by 1930, not only had Tatlin been seemingly marginalized but also the so-called utilitarian and functionalist OSA constructivists of the mid to late 1920s. Furthermore, the VKhUTEMAS was closed in 1930 after undergoing an earlier reorganization as the VKhUTEIN (Higher Artistic and Technical Institute). 1925, as Christina Lodder describes it in her history of the institute, is a high point with the Paris Expo representing the VKhUTEMAS's “great public triumph abroad,” but after this point, internal divisions and political pressure resulted in a curtailment of the theoretical and avant-garde artistic programs that had distinguished the VKhUTEMAS and led to its earlier success and international recognition.<sup>309</sup> Its reorganization as the VKhUTEIN is an attempt to turn it into a “more narrowly industrial and technological training institute,” although this lasts only a couple of years as well before it finally closes.<sup>310</sup>

At the same time, Héliion's remarks also reveal his lack of knowledge about the theoretical debates that had taken place among the Soviet constructivists in the early 20s, especially the turn to production. While he seems to think it tragic that Tatlin is reduced to being considered a worker in an aviation factory, Tatlin himself, like his constructivist comrades, had attempted to move into the spheres of production of everyday objects. Rodchenko, Lissitzky and Tatlin were all members of the Wood and Metalwork Faculty at the VKhUTEMAS, where they taught courses on the design of furniture as well as items for everyday use such as metal dishes and teapots.

Tatlin was, moreover, at the time of his meeting with Héliion in the process of constructing his machine for human flight, *Letatlin*, both a kind of air bicycle and air swimming machine. The name, *Letatlin*, is a compound of his name with the Russian verb meaning “to fly,” or “letat,” and it was first conceived of in the first half of the 1920s.<sup>311</sup> It was based on long ongoing studies of birds and baby cranes in particular, as well as even consultation with a Russian aeronautics expert.<sup>312</sup> A prototype was built between 1929 to 1931. From 1931 to 1933 Tatlin was the head of Narkompros's Scientific Laboratory for Investigating the Plastic Arts, and in this capacity he was given

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

<sup>309</sup> Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 113-114.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 114.

<sup>311</sup> Larissa Zhadova, “Tatlin, the Organizer of Material into Objects,” in *Tatlin*, ed. Larissa Zhadova (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), 149.

<sup>312</sup> Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 215.

a location near Moscow where he could work on the machine.<sup>313</sup> *Letatlin* is seen by some as a last gasp of utopian idealism in the face of socialist realism and pragmatism, but it is also continuous with Tatlin's ideas of artistic construction, a fusion of science and art in the construction of wholly new modes of life and relation to the world:

He called it an air bicycle because it was not motorised but propelled by man like a bicycle. Tatlin moreover intended it to become an item of everyday use, liberating man from the confines of gravity and enabling every man to fly and to move freely in space. It was deliberately not motorised because his primary objective was to give man the freedom of individual flight, the feeling of moving through space like a bird, without the noise of aeroplanes or the loss of feeling of being surrounded by space that was incurred by travelling in them.<sup>314</sup>

Tatlin's "organic constructivism," as Lodder calls it, certainly differs in its refusal to subordinate artistic production to that of the machine and takes its inspiration from forms in nature, but at the same time it is also squarely located within a productivist project of creating objects for a new kind of everyday collective life.

The productivist side of constructivism was never, in fact, fully understood in the West at this time, and the fierce rejection of art objects that was central to the Russians was not part of Constructivism as Héliion knew it. Héliion's language about communism and abstraction is replete with references to beauty and art, terms anathema to the Soviet avant-garde. As Lodder points out in her history of constructivism, the 1922 *Erste Russische Kunstausstellung* in Berlin was successful in first presenting Suprematism and Constructivism to the West, but the understanding of these works was severely hampered by not only the lack of accompanying background and theoretical knowledge but also the grouping together of works by the First Working Group of Constructivists and Gabo, who clung to notions of art and aesthetics.<sup>315</sup> "Constructivist" and "constructive" art objects were grouped into a single category, reinforcing the idea of Constructivism as an aesthetic concept, while Gabo's own aesthetic theory, coupled with an émigré's lack of political commitment, erased the very real distinctions between these two categories.<sup>316</sup> Even though the 1925 Paris Expo would present for the first time the results of Constructivist laboratory work, not visible at the 1922 Berlin exhibition, and make apparent the relationship of this work to communism, the idea of Constructivism in the West would remain primarily aesthetic. Gabo's role in this respect is not to be underestimated, and he was particularly influential in Paris after moving there in 1932 and joining *Abstraction-Création*.

Putting aside the polemical judgment in Aleksei Gan's 1922 criticism of "western constructivism," his characterization of its relationship to art and politics matches up surprisingly well with Héliion's attitudes. The tendency towards geometric design in

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 213.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 227-230.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 230.

Constructivism, and its connection of art and architecture, constitute an easily transmissible visual aesthetic that does find its reflection in the paintings of western constructivist artists like Héliou. The radical critique of the art object itself, however, was not as easily translatable and was, indeed, neutralized by the presentation of Soviet Constructivist work in the context of art exhibitions. The 1925 Paris Exposition attempted to make clear the political and ideological dimensions of the work, as well as the turn to Productivism in exhibits from Rodchenko's workers' club to innovations in textile, clothing and porcelain design, but the lack of knowledge about the debates and reasons behind this turn meant that the idea of art and artistic creation remained intact. The necessity of destroying the idea of art, and its rarefied object world, as part of the Constructivist ambition of participating in a revolutionary reorganization of the spheres of production and everyday life was not grasped. But if Soviet artists ran up against the limits of production art in the ways that we have seen in the first chapter, artists such as Héliou faced another set of difficulties already foreseen by Gan and inherent perhaps in their fundamental belief in preserving the idea of art:

The social and political structure of the R.S.F.S.R., and the structure of capitalist Europe and America are completely different. Naturally Constructivism is not the same. Our Constructivism has declared uncompromising war on art, because the means and properties of art are not powerful enough to systematise the feelings of the revolutionary milieu. It is cemented by the real success of the Revolution and its feelings are expressed by intellectual and material production. In the West Constructivism fraternises with art... In the West Constructivism flirts with politics, declaring that the new art is outside of politics, but that it is not apolitical.<sup>317</sup>

Héliou, like Gan's Constructivists, believed he, too, was "fighting for the intellectual and material production of a communist culture," but he saw communism through the lens of art—as a kind of beauty. As the communist project faltered, so did abstraction.

### *Beyond the straight line*

John Elderfield describes Héliou's paintings of this period as "very much reveal[ing] the formulistic and anonymous premises of Van Doesburg's side of the De Stijl tradition," and notes that Héliou's subsequent move away from this kind of strict geometric painting based on straight lines, rectangular planes and orthogonal composition was also characteristic of abstract art in Paris in the 1930s. "This relaxation of *established* geometric currents is what typifies Paris thirties art."<sup>318</sup> What was it that led to this "relaxation"? Elderfield points to the increasing "mannerism" of the younger generation of abstract painters, a defect that also appeared in the paintings of the "old masters," such as Mondrian.<sup>319</sup> By invoking mannerism, Elderfield's explanation implies that pure abstraction had reached a stylistic point of exhaustion, characterized by "extreme

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<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>318</sup> Elderfield, "Part II," 75.

<sup>319</sup> Elderfield, "Part I," 54.

decorative” tendencies, and while his account remains internal to the history of art as a history of successive movements and styles, he points out the symptom of a very real problem for abstract painting—i.e., a growing distance between the idea of pure abstract painting and its radical political commitments, although not articulated in these terms by Elderfield. The boundary between abstraction and decoration—a distinction that early abstract artists had been anxious to maintain—begins to dissolve as abstract painting loses its connection to its original radical projects. Paradoxically, Héliion’s dissatisfaction with the square, as he put it, may have been motivated by such a fear of descending into decoration, but his gradual movement towards a “softer” kind of abstraction subsequently coincided with a turn to a more conformist affirmation of republican political life.

In moving away from the square and straight-edge geometry, Héliion was attempting to devise his own form of abstract painting, one inspired by the revolutionary politics of Communism but rooted in the social and political climate of France. He introduced curving lines into his paintings for the first time in late 1931, explained later in 1937 in the following terms:

A square, I could not bear. I lifted up one side, retaining something of the square and associating it with something of a trapeze; this tried with each side, not coldly, but heart beating, trying to breathe in it, led progressively to a new form with some curved edges, in which I felt much better, and that could meet the original square with great power of opposition. Later it got shaded from one end to the other, thus providing its inner surface with a speed and its colour with a modulation. I have taken it further by intensifying the shading into a modelling, which in turn worked back on the edges, and produced closed forms entirely three dimensional.

The *Équilibre* paintings first completed in 1932 fully incorporate the curved lines and trapeze-like forms described in this passage. While Héliion’s first abstract paintings were never limited to the use of primary colors only, the use of color becomes more varied here and the forms more volumetric through the use of shading and modeling. This modulation of color, as Héliion puts it, to create illusions of volume and mass lead then to the appearance of distinctly figural compositions in which the abstract space first posited in the early compositions is populated by individual figures as well as groups in the late 30s.

This may be part of the relaxation that Elderfield identifies, but it needs to be placed beside a proper understanding of the meaning of geometry and abstraction in the 30s. While Elderfield equates Héliion’s painting with a formalistic De Stijl tradition, Héliion himself would emphasize the Constructivist influence on his work as well. Here we could say “East” met “North.” He describes his turn to abstraction in 1929 as the outcome of his encounter with the “North” in Paris, as well—i.e., Holland with van Doesburg and Mondrian, Sweden with Carlsund, etc.<sup>320</sup> These northerners, he writes, are dominated by “l’esprit,” talking only of structure, relations, and purity in a “quest for the

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<sup>320</sup> Jean Héliion, “C’est à la fin des années 20...”, Côte B24 HLN 1978, Fonds Héliion.

absolute.”<sup>321</sup> But he also remembers these years as ones of fidelity to constructivist ideas, when he was filled with admiration for Lissitzky, Malevich, Pevsner, Gabo, Tatlin and others:

Dans les années trente et surtout au début de celles-ci, lors de ma fidélité aux idées constructivistes, dans l’admiration des travaux de Lissitzky, Malevitch, Pevsner et Gabo, Rossiné et Tatlin, et bien d’autres, il m’avait semblé que cet idéal nouveau, remplaçant le souci de décrire le monde par celui de le bâtir, de le construire à neuf avec les moyens les plus généreux possibles, cadrait avec ce que je croyais avoir compris du projet communiste.<sup>322</sup>

His strictly geometric and non-figurative painting from late 1929 through 1934 is animated by architectural Constructivist metaphors and also the common ideas of building a new world, one in which the constructions of painting are homogeneous with those of communism. If the curve was anathema to De Stijl and neoplasticism, it was certainly not “banned” in Suprematist or Constructivist works, and Hélión’s practice is in some ways an attempt to assimilate the ascetic forms of neoplasticism with the Soviet Constructivist political project.

Looking back at these formative years at the turn of the decade, which were significant for Hélión, as well as the formation of Paris abstract art circles, we tend not to differentiate much between *Cercle et Carré*, *Art Concret* and the later *Abstraction-Création*, like Elderfield. *Cercle et Carré* and *Art Concret* were both formed in 1929 and shared much in common, the leaders of both groups recruiting from largely the same pool of artists and writers. Seuphor invited, for instance, van Doesburg to join *Cercle et Carré*, and Torres-García ended up a member of *Cercle et Carré* even though he had been in discussions with van Doesburg over forming an abstract art group since 1928. *Art Concret* was without doubt the more partisan, and smaller, of the two organizations, but this cannot be attributed solely to the quirks of van Doesburg’s personality.<sup>323</sup> *Cercle et Carré* adopted a more conservative approach to abstract art, building on the reputation of the greater artists like Mondrian and seeking to preserve in a way their legacy, whereas *Art Concret* was more oriented towards the development of new young recruits who would be able to adapt abstraction to new circumstances.<sup>324</sup>

An even starker disagreement appears, though, on the level of politics. Seuphor’s writings in *Cercle et Carré* contain no particularly brilliant or stirring formulations, and the ideological positions he attempted to inject into the journal read much like some of the boilerplate statements of his postwar histories. For example: “There is, however, one dominant idea that permeates the apparent disorder of our time, an idea that determines its spiritual outlook and controls all its reactions whenever they show the slightest hint of

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<sup>321</sup> Ibid.

<sup>322</sup> Jean Hélión, “Origine et fin de mon abstraction,” 176.

<sup>323</sup> *Cercle et Carré* numbered around 80 artists according to Seuphor (*Dictionary of Abstract Painting*, 49). *Art Concret* comprised a much smaller membership of van Doesburg, Hélión,

<sup>324</sup> Prat, 20.

seriousness. That is the idea of liberty.”<sup>325</sup> For Seuphor, the terms “architecture,” “structure,” and “construction” constituted the primary line of defense against disorder, but while his language bears some resemblance to and, indeed, borrows from Soviet constructivism, it voids the latter of all its political and historical determinants. In place of the militant language of revolution and the overthrow of the old, Seuphor marshals architecture in the service of establishing order and that more neutral and conciliatory term, “liberty.” In the opening article of the first issue of *Cercle et Carré*, titled “Pour la défense d’une architecture,” Seuphor makes sure to repeat, no less than four times, the dangers of revolution. Revolution is equated with folly and romanticism, and in its place, we need to put order and the will to perfection.<sup>326</sup> But we can still, he argues, salvage the idea of revolution but only by turning it to another, better purpose: instead of a revolution that seeks recourse to romantic gestures and brutal force—a revolution that is, in effect, a social war—we can have a revolution that is simply one phase of the evolution of the world.<sup>327</sup>

Such anodyne statements may have made it easier to recruit members to *Cercle et Carré*, and certainly the later *Abstraction-Création* with its four hundred plus members would follow in the steps of this trend towards political and aesthetic neutralization. However, it was this inoffensive stance that drew the ire of *Art Concret* members like Héliion. In fact, Héliion would always deny any links between *Art Concret*, “ardent” and “pure,” and *Cercle et Carré*, an assembly of opportunists.<sup>328</sup> For him, they were two completely separate movements.

If both abstract painting as constructivism and communism were thought to be the means of constructing the world anew with “the most generous means possible,” it was perhaps inevitable in the Paris of the 1930s that both projects would be discredited, and that simultaneously for Héliion. The *Équilibre* paintings (1932-1934) examined in the next section are an attempt to break from the apparent scholasticism and dogmatism of Mondrian and the neoplasticist straight line, orthogonal composition. They were attempts to trace a middle way between Mondrian and Arp by “softening” the architectural, constructive syntax of the earlier abstract paintings.<sup>329</sup> This was still the period of his membership in the AEAR, and he was also, by his own accounts, still an ardent supporter of Communism and abstraction. However, this new series and his understanding of equilibrium and balance in it already diverges from the more radical ideas at the heart of

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<sup>325</sup> Seuphor, *Dictionary of Abstract Painting*, 12.

<sup>326</sup> Michel Seuphor, “Pour la défense d’une architecture,” *Cercle et Carré* 1 (15 mars 1930): 2.

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.*, 3: “On peut très bien concevoir une révolution sans gesticulation romantique, sans recours à la force brutale: un ordre supérieur supplantant méthodiquement et irrésistiblement un ordre inférieur: une révolution qui n'est pas guerre sociale, mais une phase de l'évolution du monde.”

<sup>328</sup> Héliion: “Art concret était une chose ardente et tout à fait pure alors que Cercle et Carré était un rassemblement assez opportuniste,” in Daniel Abadie, *Héliion ou la force des choses* (Bruxelles, La Connaissance, 1975), 20. Cited in Prat, 42.

<sup>329</sup> Jean Héliion, “Les contemporains,” interview by Catherine Selosse, 30 April 1979, Folder “Entretiens avec C.S.,” Fonds Héliion.

the pure abstraction of the early to mid-1920s. Although Héliion blasted Seuphor's *Cercle et Carré* for its politics, we also see the appearance of a similar language of liberty in Héliion's thinking. Equilibrium in these paintings is more of a neutral idea of balancing, consonant with modern norms of "freedom," divorced from the particular demands of revolutionary struggle. We shall see that between the moment of the inception of his variant of abstraction and its abandonment by the end of the decade, the advent of the anti-Fascist Popular Front would occasion a greater openness to the motifs of liberty and the pedigree of figural painting, manifested in his turn to a kind of figural abstraction in the mid-30s.

Because the idea of abstraction is so bound up with communism for Héliion, the defeats and failures of the political project would lead, necessarily to the end of the artistic one. Or, the failures of communism allowed the latent faith in art—art as an enclave—to emerge. Despite Héliion's foregrounding of his communist political commitment, this element—the "Soviet effect," perhaps—as catalyst has faded out, and what remains is a Parisian moment, embodiment of a modernity more contained by legacies of the past. In this context, the forms of pure abstraction (and communism as Stalinism) came to seem only rigid limitations. As an emblematic artist of Paris abstraction in the 1930s, the path he took provides insight into the conditions of the end of geometric painting, and in a way he stands as a concluding figure in the story of abstraction for the project of radical aesthetic militancy.

Painting and art remain the ultimate truths for Héliion, outlasting any brief movement, whether abstract, constructivist or communist. Thus, he would respond in 1938 to a question about the connection between political trends and their expression through art forms that while the creation of a work of art is about achieving a unity between an artist's "ideas, feelings, opinions," how these opinions on society can actually "be detected in the play of forms and colours, outside of any literary allusion, remains to be seen."<sup>330</sup> He continued, furthermore, by saying:

Except by the collaboration to cartoons, and such means not to be considered as painting or sculpture, I doubt that any artist can do much. Beauty, if achieved, is arresting, inviting to meditation, not action. The more beautiful the painting, the more convincing its subject is rendered for the masses; it is dominated by the plastical activity. The subject can take sides; not its beauty. And the subjects have not helped the best paintings of the museums to become the most popular. The help given, if any, is vague.<sup>331</sup>

### *Équilibre*

Even as the newer generation of abstract artists such as Gorin and Héliion articulated a fundamental connection between aesthetics and politics, the connection

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<sup>330</sup> Jean Héliion, "Answers to a Questionnaire of George L.K. Morris, for 'Partisans,'" [1937], Fonds Héliion.

<sup>331</sup> *Ibid.*

between the actual forms of art and politics was breaking down. Héliion's retrospective musings on pure abstraction reveal the full change in attitude, which is critical of the "total rigidity" of Mondrian's painting, its puritanical and self-absorbed character, and the "awful scholasticism" of "our serious geometry."<sup>332</sup> But evidence of the beginnings of this shift are visible even in the spring of 1933, when he was writing of the limited and closed nature of "geometry, Mondrian, Vantongerloo." For instance, in a notebook entry from March 1933, we can see that the impulse towards a rationalization of art is still present. However, he uses a mathematical concept, part of a theoretical apparatus inherited from his involvement with *Art Concret*, to criticize the milieu of pure abstraction:

Tout nombre vivant est complexe comme 3.1416.

Il y a une "décimale, etc." à incorporer à chaque objet vivant.

J'avais commencé la peinture, entre 1924 et 1929, par cette décimale, l'infiniment variable. J'ai fini, en 1929, par évoluer jusqu'au corps fixe du nombre, la structure stable, le "3" de 3.1416. C'est la géométrie, Mondrian, Vantongerloo. C'est le plan et le volume, enfermés dans leurs deux ou trois dimensions métriques. Mais ce n'est en aucun cas l'espace.

[...] Il faut mettre le ".1416" mais pas à la queue. Il faut manier la structure, l'ébranler d'une secousse égale à "0.1416."

Quand j'ai compris cela, j'ai commencé à pencher des lignes dans mes tableaux et à incliner des couleurs: rouge vif, rouge moins vif; noir brillant, noir mat; couleur vive, gris.

Et depuis il me semble que mes tableaux qui, de 1930 à 1932, furent comme des grains secs, se mettent à gonfler, à respirer, à vivre. Je ne sais pas comment ils fleuriront.<sup>333</sup>

While the geometry of Mondrian and De Stijl focuses on unambiguous oppositions, such as the horizontal and the vertical, and forms such as the straight line, square and flat planes, Héliion here chooses the *irrational* number, pi, to express the complexity of painting. The number *pi*, for example, might be expressed and reduced to a definite relation between the diameter and circumference of a circle, but to focus only on this would be to exclude what Héliion sees as the truly wondrous character of this mathematical constant—i.e., its ultimately inexpressible value, whose decimal representation continues in an infinitely variable sequence.

For Héliion, abstract painters such as Mondrian and Vantongerloo latched onto a "fixed" idea of structure in seeking to express the universal in planar relations and geometric representations. Héliion himself, began with this idea, focusing only on the stability of the whole number, 3, and ignoring what came after the decimal point. He thus presents a narrative of painting, the period 1929-1932 acting as a momentary way station

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<sup>332</sup> See, for example, Héliion, "Origine et fin de mon abstraction," 177, and Héliion, *À perte de vue*, 55, 64-8.

<sup>333</sup> Jean Héliion, 24 March 1933, in Jean Héliion, *Journal d'un peintre: Carnets 1929-1962*, vol. 1, ed. Anne Moeglin-Delcroix (Paris: Maeght Éditeur, 1992), 41.



in the career of an art that takes inspiration from the infinitely variable source of sense impressions given by nature. Pure abstract painting, whether through neoplasticism or De Stijl, at this time is seen as the attempt to reduce this variability. These pioneers of abstraction foregrounded the problem of structure in a necessary correction of overly naturalistic forms of art (represented in this passage by Héliion's entry into painting from 1924 to 1929), but they misunderstood the relationship between art and nature. Instead of putting the “.1416” at the end, Héliion writes, painting should be led by the “.1416,” the maximum complexity of relations and sense impressions that constitutes the “superiority of nature.”<sup>334</sup> Primary colors and the straight line, and the oppositions between vertical and horizontal and black and white, are the foundation of painting and its stable structure, likened to the “fixed body” of the 3 in pi. But instead of focusing only on this structure, Héliion is arguing that it should be the ground for a return to an exploration of color and line. Thus, he writes that he began to tilt his lines and introduce variations in color. In a later recollection, this thought is repeated but in a more direct analogy to nature. Abstraction, as he describes it, is like a white snow blanketing the natural world, but like melting snow reveals the ground underneath, the dazzling effect of abstraction also wears off and painting returns to figuration: “Au fond de moi, après avoir été ébloui par la blancheur de neige de l’abstraction, c’était comme si, la neige fondant, réapparaissait dessous un arbre, une maison, un nu, dans la splendeur de leur contraste.”<sup>335</sup> The .1416 also is an exit out of this snow-covered world of abstraction. Abstraction or geometry is not yet to be abandoned, but instead, in the form of straight line geometry, or “structure,” pushed to the background.

Turning away from the orthogonal composition and primary colors that dominated his *Art Concret* phase, Héliion completed his first *Équilibre* painting at the end of 1932. The title, *Équilibre*, was actually used for the first time for an abstract painting of 1929, but it generally refers to the series of paintings completed between 1932 and 1934 (some also extend it to 1935). Héliion described them in the following terms: “[D]ans les années trente, il m’arrivait de balancer une forme pleine et lourde avec une forme très légère sur des sortes d’épis d’angles courbes qui les soutenaient, les mesuraient, les fixaient dans l’espace. Ces tableaux, qui ont reçu le nom d’*Équilibre*.”<sup>336</sup>

Evoking “equilibrium” as a concept is not novel in itself, and it had a more immediate prior history in Mondrian’s painting of the 1920s. Schipper contends, “the balance of unequal opposites equilibrium continued to reflect Mondrian well after Héliion had abandoned the limitations of his Principles of Neoplasticism. The lessons of Mondrian’s esthetic were lasting, especially in terms of the artist’s attention to formal relations or rapports to achieve compositional harmony.”<sup>337</sup> The *Équilibre* paintings are, as Héliion describes them, works that balance heavy forms with a lighter curving structure of connecting lines, heavy dark forms with more brightly colored ones, or ones rendered more translucent by the use of *dégradé* coloring. However, the relation to Mondrian

<sup>334</sup> Héliion, 30 March 1933, in *Journal d’un peintre*, 41.

<sup>335</sup> Héliion, *À perte de vue*, 74.

<sup>336</sup> Héliion, *Mémoire de la chambre jaune*, 49.

<sup>337</sup> Schipper, 17.

might best be seen in terms of Héliion's opposition, as he articulated it. Mondrian's neoplasticism and pure abstraction had come to be equated with a stultifying rigidity, and Héliion wanted to create a different kind of pictorial space. By introducing curved lines that reach across the canvas to connect his more organically shaped "planes," Héliion sought to create a sense of movement in his pictures, in a return of sorts to illusionistic space.

Behind the shift from orthogonal composition to *Équilibre* was also Héliion's enduring admiration for the tradition of French and European painting:

C'est au nom de l'opposition entre la rigidité totale de Mondrian et les courbes molles et variées de Hans Arp que je trouvais, me semble-t-il, une voie intermédiaire qui accédait par les obliques, les courbes, les dégradés, les volumes, à un chant plus puissant ou plus complet, plus apte à soutenir la comparaison avec ces oeuvres du passé [au Louvre, ex. Cimabue, Fouquet, Rubens, Rembrandt, Poussin Véronèse, Tintoret...] que j'admirais tellement sans vouloir me soumettre à leur imitation ou au désordre de leur richesse.<sup>338</sup>

On the one hand, Mondrian's geometric pure abstraction represented a doctrinaire rejection of non-primary colors and anything outside of perfectly horizontal and vertical lines or the spaces formed by these lines. Arp's curving and biomorphic abstraction, on the other hand, was too formless. The middle road that Héliion sought incorporated elements of both of these other paths in order to discover a truly modern form of painting that could convey the classical "plastic organization" of a Poussin landscape, without resorting to imitation of its mode of "descriptive" detail—a *passé* form of art.<sup>339</sup> The purpose of raising this passage here is not to join in on an "Héliion and the old masters" discussion, or to assert that from 1934, Héliion's palette should be understood in its increasing resemblance to Poussin's.<sup>340</sup> Rather, it is to suggest another way in which Paris as a specific ideological site inserts itself into the story.

For Lissitzky, if we recall, Paris was a city of contrasts—of abject poverty and insolent wealth, of modernity and historical legacies. Caught in the latter duality, its cultural advances were threatened with isolation. The professed reactions of Soviet artists to Paris—whether as symbol of the *ancien régime* or modern commodity world—is neither straightforward nor simple, as Christina Kaier demonstrated in her study of Rodchenko in Paris.<sup>341</sup> For Mondrian, Paris embodied modernity and the trend towards

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<sup>338</sup> Héliion, "Origine et fin de mon abstraction," 177-8.

<sup>339</sup> Jean Héliion, "Seurat le devancier," in Abadie, *Héliion ou la force des choses*, 89-90.

<sup>340</sup> Much of the secondary literature likes to mention the influence of Poussin on Héliion, and argue that Héliion was attempting to paint as a sort of modern Poussin. See, for example, Donna Stein, Introduction, in *Jean Héliion: Abstraction into Figuration, 1934-1948* (New York: Rachel Adler Gallery, 1985). Stein argues in her introduction that "Héliion successfully reinterpreted the tonal painting and classical serenity of his seventeenth century mentor, Poussin."

<sup>341</sup> See Kaier, *Imagine No Possessions*, 199-240.

abstraction in all spheres of life, “despite its old conventions and old buildings.”<sup>342</sup> If, as Benjamin thought, Haussman’s arcades gave a visual self-consciousness to Paris, turning the city into a series of perspectives and buildings into images seen through the arcades and boulevards,<sup>343</sup> Mondrian’s neoplasticism was in another oblique way an image of the city: an abstract space but also an attempt at quintessentializing the angular shapes of twentieth century Parisian modernity.

By the time Héliion is painting his *Équilibre* paintings in 1933 and 1934, the convincing force of the models and ideals of the first generation of pure abstract painters had diminished. Neither Soviet revulsion for the capitalist metropolis nor the utopian project of constructing an architecture of the future provide a source of meaning for painting or art. In place of these receding models, we see an increasing focus on painters of tradition, including Poussin. In part, this development is part of a larger trend within French modernism, as Christopher Green has argued. “From the beginning of the century, modernism in France was as regularly linked to notions of tradition as it was to notions and experiences of modernity.”<sup>344</sup> While the content of this tradition was constantly being reinvented, the idea of tradition itself “was often treated as universal.”<sup>345</sup> In the twenties and thirties, this content was often described as a return to “classicism,” figured in the monumental paintings of Picasso and Léger, as well as the quotation of ancient busts in Léger. Publications such as *Cahiers d’Art* also featured essays on Greek architecture, and Le Corbusier and *L’Esprit Nouveau* reproduced images from Auguste Choisy’s *Histoire de l’architecture*, first published in 1899.

While Classicism is a broad and vague term, especially when applied to modernist painting, it was this feature of antiquity—architecture—that Héliion identified with. In an interview from 1979, in fact, he traces his first childhood interest in architecture to reading “the classics,” especially Choisy’s history.<sup>346</sup> Choisy’s rationalist, or structural, approach differed from that of his *Beaux-Arts* contemporary, Julien Gaudet, in privileging construction and technique, i.e., *l’art de bâtir*, over form and composition.<sup>347</sup> According to Héliion, Choisy’s idea of construction exerted a great influence on his abstract paintings, especially his idea that methods of construction corresponded to the spirit of an era, whether Doric, Corinthian, Gothic or Renaissance.<sup>348</sup> When Choisy

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<sup>342</sup> Mondrian, “The New Plastic Expression in Painting,” in *The New Art-The New Life*, 202.

<sup>343</sup> Walter Benjamin, “The Arcades of Paris,” *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Harvard Univ. Press, 1999), 877.

<sup>344</sup> Green, *Art in France*, 185.

<sup>345</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>346</sup> Héliion, “Les contemporains,” interview by Catherine Seloisse, 30 April 1979.

<sup>347</sup> Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1980), 23.

<sup>348</sup> Héliion, Interview with Catherine Seloisse, 30 avril 1979, Fonds Héliion: “Choisy tenez, voilà quelqu’un qui m’a influencé! Il y a un type qui a fait une histoire de l’architecture au siècle dernier qui s’appelait Choisy et j’ai lu ça très attentivement. Durant mon abstraction, cela m’a beaucoup influencé. Il est arrivé à expliciter comment depuis un arbre qui était la première colonne on est passé à la colonne et au chapiteau, au fronton et comment cette architecture elle-même a pu devenir romane, gothique et renaissance. Un homme qui a compris, en suivant les

comes to replace the Soviet or Western Constructivists as the embodiment of the idea of construction for Héliou is uncertain. This interview, after all, takes place in 1979, and there may be a tendency to retrospectively exaggerate the influence of Choisy, but it is certain that Choisy, Poussin and the idea of returning to the path of French tradition was beginning at this time to exert a greater influence on Héliou.

The *Histoire de l'architecture* is particularly noteworthy for its illustrations, and the presentation of the Acropolis in a series of perspectives, a "succession of pictures (*tableaux*) seen by the visitor approaching the Parthenon,"<sup>349</sup> is the particular subject of study by both Le Corbusier and Sergei Eisenstein. As mentioned above, Le Corbusier republished Choisy's images of the Parthenon and the Acropolis in *L'Esprit Nouveau* and *Vers un architecture*, while Eisenstein's essay, "Montage and Architecture," took off from Le Corbusier's analysis of Choisy's "promenade architecturale" to demonstrate the way in which the succession of perspectival views of the Parthenon constituted a "montage effect."<sup>350</sup> These striking appropriations of Choisy's history and imagery, however, stand in contrast to Héliou's more prosaic fixation on the elements and methods of construction. In fact, Héliou's painting from the *Équilibre* paintings are marked by a departure from the open, expansive presentation of space in the Mondrian paintings examined earlier or the utopian constellations of Malevich or Lissitzky's *Prouns*.

In the *Équilibre* paintings, there is a decisive shift towards an emphasis on movement between and among forms linked by curving lines in a limited, shallow space. The lines, as Héliou noted previously, are meant to sustain, measure and fix the forms in space. In a journal entry dated 4 May 1933, Héliou includes what looks to be a sketch, including three painted curved bars, of an earlier painting completed at the end of 1932 or beginning of 1933 (Fig. 38-39).<sup>351</sup> First, on the right is a long rectangular shape with an outward curving bottom edge, painted a bright primary yellow. The bottom edge draws the eye into and along the long sweeping curve connecting the yellow form—or surface?—to a much smaller black oblong form with an outward curving left edge. In the absence of another curved line connecting this form to its neighbor, the third and central element of the grouping, a black bar extends out from the top right corner. The three main forms—yellow, black and dark shaded turquoise—are held together by the two lines at the top and bottom of the structure, the unity of the construction emphasized by its placement in the center of the drawing against what, at least in the finished painting, is a

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moyens de construction, que ceux-ci pouvaient correspondre à une évolution de la pensée. C'est une chose à laquelle je suis toujours très sensible, c'est que la matérialité corresponde à la spiritualité."

<sup>349</sup> Banham, 24-25.

<sup>350</sup> Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 119-121.

<sup>351</sup> The completed painting is dated 1933 in the online *catalogue raisonné* of Héliou's work, but is also said to have been exhibited at the John Becker Gallery in New York from 9 to 31 January, 1933 (<http://helion-cat-rais.com>). The Museum of Modern Art, New York, photo files date the painting to 1933-34, but provide no other information. The painting is currently held in a private collection.

neutral background. The combination of straight and subtly curved edges in the contours of the shapes adds to the overall elliptical sense of connection. In the central form, which is placed slightly higher than the other two shapes, a more sharply angled bottom edge contributes another dynamic element.

In the same journal entry, Héliion wrote that his “imaginative domain” was, above all, about offering the viewer new paths of looking:

Enfin je suis arrivé aux courbes et aux obliques qui, d’une part, répondaient au simple besoin d’élargir mon univers et, de l’autre, à l’exacte conscience qu’il fallait faire réagir l’espace et le mouvement sur la structure peinte qui le définissait.

En effet, trois barres et une tache géométrique peuvent produire un énorme mouvement optique, mais tant qu’elles demeurent strictement géométriques, il y a une coupure entre elles et le mouvement. L’image explose et ne chante pas; elle ne coule pas, elle est ta-que-ta-que-tac, tapotée, égrenée, divisée. Alors, en cherchant la réaction de l’espace et du mouvement sur les éléments, c’est-à-dire en construisant l’oeuvre en mouvement, ou plutôt en équilibre sur le mouvement, mes images sont devenue plus souples, plus perméable et du même coup mon univers coloré. Pour établir des relations entre des surfaces aussi complexes que celles qui sont définies par des courbes, il faut disposer des nuances.

Voici donc pourquoi mes couleurs sont redevenues de la lumière.

Alors mes tableaux ont recommencé à sentir la nature et moi-même, sous leur influence, j’ai recommencé à la désirer ardemment, sans toutefois concevoir comment je pourrais la rencontrer.<sup>352</sup>

“Three bars and a geometric spot can produce an enormous optical movement.”<sup>353</sup> Apart from the two sweeping lines, movement can be created by a modulation of the forms themselves from rectilinear planes to shifting “surfaces” in space. *Dégradé* colors suggest volume and tilting away from the picture plane. Straight edges are pushed out into curves, accentuated by a geometric spot—a small black bar directing vision and the construction as a whole. Héliion criticizes “strictly geometric” painting for dividing space and elements from each other, and suggests another kind of equilibrium, one that is found in movement and rhythmic relation within the construction. This is an equilibrium of pure aesthetic forces. What Héliion is also rejecting, though, is the all-at-once image of pure geometric abstraction: its cold dream of totality, its impossible fantasy of transcendence.

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<sup>352</sup> Héliion, 4 May 1934, *Journal d’un peintre*, 45.

<sup>353</sup> I have translated “tache” as “spot,” following Héliion’s suggestion to Albert E. Gallatin: “I am sending you herewith the preface you asked me, hoping that you will find it clear and substantial. There is my first writing in French and its translation into English, for which I required the assistance of my wife. The only trouble we had, I think, is about the translation of “tache” and “touche” which, I hope, can be understood as “spots” and “strokes.” Jean Héliion, Letter to Albert E. Gallatin, 13 September 1933, Albert E. Gallatin Papers, New York Historical Society, New York.

By the end of 1933, the *Équilibre* paintings had developed into a complex system of contrasts and interlocking parts. In early 1934, Héliion realized one of the key paintings of this period (*Équilibre*, 1933-34, Fig. 40). At the same time, he wrote in his journal that it had become impossible to be completely sincere in his abstract painting, which seemed inadequate compared to figurative painting, even his own figurative painting of the 1920s.<sup>354</sup> The painting was first shown at the *Cahiers d'Art* gallery in July 1934 and was purchased later by Peggy Guggenheim for her collection. Measuring 97.4 x 131.2 cm, it is fairly large, and larger than many of the other *Équilibre* canvases at 65 x 81 cm. There are several distinct groupings on the left, connected by a single red line to a heavy structure dominated by a black block on the right. The architectural aspect of Héliion's painting appears clearly here. The basic elements—bars, lines, curves—are present, but they have been multiplied and built up and out of the grounding, foundational monolith on the right. The right half of the canvas pulls the left down to earth. Red unites the disparate parts of the structure, and the red lines are also stand-ins of sorts for movement in space, horizontal and vertical. Different shades of olive and a grayish blue-green are also repetitive, unifying elements. The painting is generated out of a succession of color contrasts and alternations between curved and straight lines, and lines and bars, but is there any other generative source? Héliion complained in his journal of the feeling of constriction and meaninglessness in painting with just these few, limited “invented signs”:

Ce que j'ai souffert en essayant de me limiter à quelques signes inventés! On croit que dès qu'on lâche la nature pour partir en pleine abstraction on est libre! Cette liberté est comme le vide. Ayant tracé un rectangle, choisi un point et mis la pointe d'un crayon dessus, de quel côté aller? Pourquoi à droite, pourquoi à gauche, et que faire?<sup>355</sup>

Abstraction appeared at first a kind of freeing from nature and the limitations of naturalistic representation, but this liberty, he writes, is like a void, a vast empty expanse like the snow-covered world described above. One is at a loss in this world, not knowing where to go or what to do. In effect, he asks, what is the point of abstract painting? Several other *Équilibre* paintings followed the 1933-34 one, but contained no further development, except for the last one, which is really part of the new phase of *Figure*. In November of 1934, Héliion affirms this return to a kind of figuration and reincorporation of the body, remarking that he did not find it inconvenient that his paintings appeared to

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<sup>354</sup> Héliion, 8 March 1934, *Journal d'un peintre*, 50: “Je m'aperçois qu'il m'a été impossible d'être complètement sincère, jusqu'à présent, parce que la peinture abstraite que je faisais ne répondait pas à toutes mes aspirations. Il y a longtemps que je sais qu'elle n'est pas plus complète que la peinture figurative que j'ai faite auparavant. Je vais m'efforcer de m'ouvrir et de développer chacune de mes aspirations. J'ai déjà dit plusieurs fois, depuis un an, à Pierre Loeb et Jakovsky entre autre, que les jours de la grande période abstraite étaient comptés. D'ores et déjà je sais que je vais l'abandonner. C'est mal m'exprimer. Je ne veux pas l'abandonner. Je veux la développer jusqu'au concret. Un concret chargé d'esprit comme la pile est chargée d'électricité, en puissance. Un concret générateur d'abstrait.”

<sup>355</sup> Ibid.

contain “personnages” and, furthermore, that he was certain that they contained individuals, albeit still oriented towards a collective life.<sup>356</sup>

### *Retreat into beauty*

The *Équilibre* series demonstrates Héliion’s development beyond the more derivative style of his first forays into abstraction and his attempt to create his own vocabulary of color and form, still underpinned by a geometric grid but no longer constricted by the directives of straight lines, orthogonal composition, and primary colors. The introduction of the curved line to connect the colored shapes, also no longer strictly rectilinear planes, floating within a clearly multidimensional space, is particularly noteworthy in this respect. 1934, however, signals a marked shift in Héliion’s painting. While it is not the end of abstraction altogether, especially as Héliion continues to think of his painting as a kind of abstraction, it is, nevertheless, the definitive end of non-figurative abstraction. The flat colored planes along with the slightly modeled forms of 1933, balanced and contained within a larger armature of lines, quickly proliferate on their way to becoming fully modeled forms suggesting not just volumes but bodies. Héliion explains in 1937, “the achieved pictures are either individuals, that is, compositions amounting to a definite single personality dominating the canvas, or groups, that is, compositions associating a certain number of those individuals, in a particular way.”<sup>357</sup> As he moved away from the geometry of his *Cercle et Carré* and *De Stijl* or neoplasticist-influenced paintings, his attraction to a certain form of machinic figuration becomes more apparent, and many of the paintings after 1934 carry variations on the title, *Figure*, with one example containing an even more direct allusion, *Chimney Sweep* (1936).

1934 is also the year that Héliion quits *Abstraction-Création* and the AEAR. *Abstraction-Création* was from the beginning a fairly loose grouping, and as Héliion noted, there was very little political discussion among the group as a whole, even though the members with whom Héliion identified most belonged to the left and the AEAR.<sup>358</sup> Comprising over four hundred members, there was no unifying program, aesthetic or political, and reading the editorial statements of the journal, one gets the sense that it is governed more by the kind of liberalism and compromise that would characterize the Popular Front more generally. “Freedom” and “liberty” are frequent bywords, and the most significant commonality between art and ideology in the non-totalitarian states of the 1930s was, as Charles Harrison argued, a generic principle of “freedom.”<sup>359</sup> Although Héliion’s final break with communism did not come until later in the decade, in 1934 both

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<sup>356</sup> Héliion, 20 novembre 1934, *Journal d’un peintre*, 52: “Mais il paraît que ce tableau représente des personnages. Je n’y vois pas d’inconvénients. Je suis seulement sûr qu’il contient des Individus, menant là une vie collective sans altérer leur personnalité.”

<sup>357</sup> Jean Héliion, “Avowals and Comments” [original in English], Folder 1937, Côte HLN B24, Fonds Héliion.

<sup>358</sup> Héliion, *Mémoire de la chambre jaune*, 61.

<sup>359</sup> Charles Harrison, “Abstract Painting in Britain in the early 1930s,” *Studio International* 173 (April 1967): 185.

pure abstraction and communism were discussed in the same terms—of dogmatism and the strangulation of the spirit of liberty.<sup>360</sup> And while *Abstraction-Création* sought strength in numbers rather than in any theoretical or practical agreement, by 1934 Héliion’s painting diverged from the oft omitted third term in the group’s title, “art non-figuratif.”

The specific catalyst for Héliion’s departure from the AEAR is typical enough of the period. He had joined, he recalls, believing that he could convince his political comrades of the validity of pure abstraction. Herbin “courageously defended total abstraction” against the “odious interference” of Party leaders, but after several “epic discussions,” it was apparent that there would be no room for abstract art in the Party.<sup>361</sup> In another not unfamiliar episode in the history of the stand-off between abstract art and socialist realism, Héliion recounts a worker telling him at one of these meetings, “Je crois que vous avez raison, que l’art un jour sera abstrait, mais nous qui voulons révolutionner le monde, nous avons besoin que les artistes nous aident avec des images politiques. Ce n’est pas l’heure de faire de l’art pur.”<sup>362</sup> In 1934, there would be no equivalent to Lissitzky’s propaganda board of 1920.<sup>363</sup> For Héliion, the possibility of a painting free from the imperatives of propaganda was inconceivable, and whether willingly or not, he is pushed into the position of defending a quasi-pure art.

Héliion himself seems to have adopted a conflicted view on the relationship between art and politics during the 30s. Taking stock of his trip to the Soviet Union seven years later, he states, “painting did not seem to play much part in anything but helping propaganda.” Painting is reduced to propaganda, or the only kind of painting that was visible he now claims is held captive by the demands of propaganda. He continues, “If all I saw of propaganda was poor, it is probably because the best painters declined to do it; which should be a mistake,” implying the possibility of a different, transformative relationship between propaganda and painting.<sup>364</sup> There is little evidence of the radical agitprop projects that involved Malevich, Lissitzky and UNOVIS and continued in the work of the Soviet productivists and architects at this time, and Héliion himself, unaware of the developments that led some of the “best painters” to seek to destroy painting and fine art, is fixated on the problem of achieving beauty instead. His sentences here are followed, in fact, by a passage cited above where Héliion doubts that artists “except by the

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<sup>360</sup> Héliion, *À perte de vue*, 64-5.

<sup>361</sup> Héliion, “Origine et fin de mon abstraction,” 176: “Mais je crus quelque temps que l’on pourrait convaincre les révolutionnaires en politique de la validité d’un art qui l’était en peinture. C’est dans cet espoir que j’adhérai à l’A.E.A.R. où, sous la direction de Vaillant-Couturier et de Léon Moussinac, nous eûmes à quelques-uns des discussions épiques. Herbin, qui défendait courageusement l’abstraction totale, parlait d’ingérence odieuse de la part des dirigeants communistes: Jdanov, Plekhanov..., et réclamait la liberté pour l’art de se développer selon lui-même.”

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, 176-7.

<sup>363</sup> Clark, “God is not cast down,” in *Farewell to an Idea*, 225-253.

<sup>364</sup> Héliion, “Answers to a Questionnaire.”



collaboration to cartoons” can do much.<sup>365</sup> But painters, Héliion wants to remind us, do not aspire to create mere cartoons. They aspire to the most beautiful—i.e., the best—works, and in doing so, politics, “the subject,” or propaganda can only work in a more oblique, background way. Beauty, we should recall, invites to meditation, not action, and furthermore, if a painter decides to participate in propaganda, it “should help the artist himself more than his cause.”<sup>366</sup>

While Héliion’s attachment to beauty and the historical glories of painting are at odds with the Soviet artist-constructors of the twenties, his attitude is not necessarily at odds with his own conception of abstraction. Abstraction for Héliion represented a purification of form and color, which he hoped would somehow be able to communicate through its beauty. Communism, too, was a kind of beauty for him, and the two projects were linked, both representing a perfection of form in their separate spheres. The disappointments with both were entangled, and Héliion’s paintings in 1934 are evidence of the rejection that will be complete by the end of the decade. In a journal entry from March 1934, he writes:

Je m’aperçois qu’il m’a été impossible d’être complètement sincère, jusqu’à présent, parce que la peinture abstraite que je faisais ne répondait pas à toutes mes aspirations...J’ai déjà dit plusieurs fois, depuis un an, à Pierre Loeb et Jakovsky entre autre, que les jours de la grande période abstraite étaient comptés. D’ores et déjà je sais que je vais l’abandonner. C’est mal m’exprimer. Je ne veux pas l’abandonner. Je veux la développer jusqu’au concret. Un concret chargé d’esprit comme la pile est chargée d’électricité, en puissance. Un concret générateur d’abstrait.<sup>367</sup>

Although we know that Héliion will soon begin painting in a more figurative style, the degree to which he has already distanced himself from abstraction is surprising. According to this passage, he has been arguing since spring 1933 that the grand era of abstract art is over and that the adventure of pure abstraction has come to an end. In 1925 it seemed that Paris would be the new home for radical abstract art, but even in 1930, as more and more artists relocated to Paris, the growth of “abstraction” in general was matched by a weakening bond between the forms of radical aesthetics and politics. Héliion’s abandonment—or rather, as he corrects himself, development—of abstraction was perhaps an attempt to stymie the tides here, and the return to figuration an attempt to grasp an experience of the concrete that was slipping away from abstract painting.

### *Figure*

The human figure was the embodiment of the concrete, and the individual became the focus of a new practice based in a kind of figural abstraction. In one sense, space and spatial structures were the subjects of Héliion’s painting leading up to the post-1934

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid.

<sup>367</sup> Héliion, 8 March 1934, *Journal d’un peintre*, 50.

period, when he shifted to space as a taken-for-granted backdrop for the objects that fill it. The colored planes and modeled forms of the *Équilibre* paintings underwent a rapid evolution in 1934, when they multiply and are then reassembled into “figures” that call to mind the human body. *Figure Bleue* (1935-36, Fig. 41) is an exemplary work out of the thirteen *Figure* paintings from 1934-36.<sup>368</sup> The subtly shaded blue-green background looks like a modern update of traditional portraiture: light diffuses subtly across the canvas, the darkest tones in the top allowing the figure to stand out more sharply, while the neutral but brilliant backdrop evokes the blue paper and white light of the pastel portraiture so popular in eighteenth century France. This “pastel” quality, however, also creates an overall impression of coldness. The figure has a hard, cold quality with its central “arm” that curves around to the front of the picture like a sleek machine part. This arm, with its white, barely blue surface modeled into an illusionistic three-dimensional appendage, looks strikingly like something from the bodies in Léger’s “machine-informed classicism” of the early 1920s paintings, such as *Three Women* (1921, Fig. 42).<sup>369</sup>

Thought to embody both the dynamism of capital as well as the possibility of its overcoming, the machine and mechanical form becomes the locus of an artistic practice that reaches for a vision of subjective agency in this conflicted register. For a modern, or avant-garde, art practice that can no longer pretend to lay claim to any straightforward representational practice, the motif of machines or machinism stand in as a figure for a monumental but also possibly apolitical modernity. Marc Le Bot’s *Machinisme et peinture* argues that the term “machinism”—most often seeming to refer to either “révolution industrielle” and the shift in modes of production or “civilisation industrielle” and its new modes of social relation—has been used somewhat vaguely by most historians of art but that it is, ultimately a central one. The history of modern art, he argues, is both circumscribed and determined by the nature of art’s relation, both objective and imagined, to the development of industrial capitalism from the 18th to the early 20th century. The significance of the machine in this story is that it has replaced the role traditionally played by nature: “Comme la nature et les objets de nature pour les romantiques, la machine devient une manière de divinité, ou bien le double de l’homme, ou bien objet ludique. Il faut la séduire, l’appivoiser, la dominer.”<sup>370</sup> The double of man: The passage from a more strictly geometric abstraction in his early paintings to the “figural” machinism beginning in 1934 can be seen, on the one hand, as a development out of the disappointingly unrealized ambitions of pure abstraction and, on the other, as a kind of modern *Bildungsroman* of the modern culminating in a satisfying reconciliation with tradition.

The following passage is Hélicon’s description of *Figure Bleue*, and we see that the emancipatory dreams of this period are linked to the search for a way to paint the

<sup>368</sup> In 1934, he completed one, entitled *Les Trois Figures*; in 1935, two *Figure Debouts*; in 1935/36, *Figure bleue*; in 1936, eight paintings with variations on the word “figure” in addition to *Chimney Sweep*; and in 1936/37, one *Figure Cruese*.

<sup>369</sup> Carolyn Lancher, ed., *Fernand Léger* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998), 190.

<sup>370</sup> Marc Le Bot, *Machinisme et peinture* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1973), 159.

human figure, one suggestive of a more true reality:

Sous cette tête bleue, il y a évidemment un torse de bandes rythmées qui ne définit précisément aucune humanité mais qui en suggère une. J'ai rêvé, j'ai souhaité ardemment, à ce moment-là, peindre une figure humaine, mais il fallait que mon abstraction devienne humaine progressivement pour que je puisse le faire honnêtement.<sup>371</sup>

A head and a torso of rhythmic bands not exactly human but suggestive of humanity, he remarks. "My abstraction," as he calls it, is on the path to becoming more human, and the impulse to draw from the imagery of the machine world is significant. Rather than thinking of the machine or machines as simply productive of the central dynamics of capitalism, the motif of machines is an attempt to "figure" or make concrete the abstract dynamics of a modern society but also transform these dynamics by altering the conditions of their representation in the form of a suggestive but still abstract machine-man form, one which is part mechanical but also part individual agency.

In fact, for Héliou, the turn to this kind of machinic, abstract figuration seems part "call to order" against the encroachments of fascism and also part of a not yet fully abandoned communist politics. With his departure from both the AEAR and *Abstraction-Création*, his position on art and politics was in flux. For instance, in November 1934, Héliou also wrote to Albert E. Gallatin, the wealthy collector and founder of the first museum of modern art in the United States, the Gallery of Living Art at New York University, that he was "convinced that art has nothing to do with politics."<sup>372</sup> Doubts had begun to creep in, and he sought a new, more cautious relation of aesthetics to politics:

How could he [the painter] defend a system under which he is more or less starving? This does not prevent his keeping faithful, friend, in harmony with the individual people who understand his effort and help it seriously. This is the material side of the question. On the other hand the general structure of society carries potentialities that the painter receives. The general atmosphere of war, domination of a certain part of the society and over exploitation of the rest of it, causes a general feeling of injustice, drama, bitterness, obscurité, dirtiness that affects him. Capitalists or not, it is always a matter of taste, culture, understanding and natural gift that makes the collector as we both understand it: The system does nothing to this personal [sic] point.<sup>373</sup>

Of course, there is a bit of concession, of "the artist to his patron" in this letter, but one can also detect in his references to a system that both starves the artist and creates wealthy individuals like the creator a remaining left political sensibility. This sensibility

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<sup>371</sup> Héliou, *Mémoire de la chambre jaune*, 98.

<sup>372</sup> Jean Héliou, Letter to Albert E. Gallatin, 21 November 1934, Albert E. Gallatin Papers, New York Historical Society, New York.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*

still informs the hope with which Héliion turned to the project of “figuring” the individuals that populate this capitalist landscape. Pure abstraction is no longer the source of any exit from injustice, drama, bitterness, etc. It has been stripped of its utopian ideals, and only appeared as a means of flight from a world become “so violent, so ugly, so incomprehensible.”<sup>374</sup>

But we can also read a deeper significance in Héliion’s gesture to his friend, the capitalist collector, which comes out of reaction to the “general atmosphere of war.” What Héliion describes in various texts and notes as his disillusionment with communism is actually a refracted expression of the larger trendlines of the 30s, which oversaw a major revision of revolutionary politics from 1917-1921 in the direction of a reconciliation with bourgeois democracy and an affirmation of more general principles of universal humanism in the face of fascism. In France, the majority of the SFIO voted to join the PCF at the 1920 Congress in Tours, but a minority under Léon Blum remained independent and intransigent. Up until the formation of a left United Front in 1934, animosities remained high between the SFIO and PCF, which followed the Comintern’s denouncement of the SFIO as bourgeois puppets.<sup>375</sup> The communist left was also experiencing its own defeats as the Stalinist purges began in earnest.

The threat of fascism, however, provided the impetus to a unity pact between the various weakened parties of the left. The Alexandre Stavisky scandal of 1933-34, which led to the dismissal of Jean Chiappe, the right-wing Préfet de Police and friend of the fraudster Stavisky, played something of a catalytic role in the formation of the United Front. Chiappe’s dismissal led to large-scale rioting by far right organizations on 6 February 1934 in what many described as a fascist putsch that toppled Édouard Daladier’s Radical government the next day, despite Daladier winning a vote of confidence in the Chamber of Deputies.<sup>376</sup> The subsequent mobilization of the left against fascism saw the electoral victory of the Popular Front in 1936, in which the PCF made the largest and most startling gains, especially notable when contrasted with the sharp declines in membership witnessed in the late 20s.<sup>377</sup> The success of the Popular Front can be attributed to its fundamental character, in Eley’s words, as “a defensive regroupment—for raising obstacles to fascism’s spread and encouraging resistance where it had won. It was meant to overcome CP isolation by finding the Left’s common ground.”<sup>378</sup>

Héliion’s lingering attachments to communism should be seen in this context of defensive regroupment by the left. His break with the AEAR is part of a larger feeling of defeat within the PCF ranks, where dissent and independent thought were increasingly

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<sup>374</sup> Héliion, *À perte de vue*, 85.

<sup>375</sup> Eley, 263.

<sup>376</sup> See Philippe Bernard and Henri Dubief, trans. Anthony Forster, *The Decline of the Third Republic, 1914-1938* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), 224-228 for a more detailed account of these events.

<sup>377</sup> *Ibid.*, 300-06.

<sup>378</sup> Eley, 265.

suppressed. At the same time his rhetoric and painting embraces the universal humanism of the Popular Front. Liberty, freedom and individuality are the keywords here. Eley sums up the essence of the transformation from the militant revolutionism of the early 20s to the conciliatory parliamentarianism of 1936:

Popular Frontism recast socialism as the highest form of older progressive traditions rather than their implacable opponent, and this affirming of universal humanist values also implied a different politics for culture and the arts. In marking the distance from “bourgeois” culture, the Third Period’s sectarian isolation had forced Communists into greater inventiveness, embracing agitprop, a formalistic left modernism, and the avant-garde. In contrast, Popular Fronts now resutured the Left’s cultural imagination to the progressive bourgeois heritage, rallying it to the antifascist banner.<sup>379</sup>

The return to figuration, the search for an adequate painting of human individuality, and the classicizing machinist aesthetic are born of a politics of defeat as well as a nationalist Popular Frontist rallying to the grand traditions of bourgeois democracy.

From the hopeful and festive atmosphere of June 1936—a “holiday feeling” Henri Lefebvre called it<sup>380</sup>—following the election victory, the fortunes of the Popular Front tumbled rapidly in the face of what some saw as political missteps by Léon Blum, head of the SFIO, and Maurice Thorez, secretary general of the PCF, both of whom failed to grasp the mandate for revolution in the wave of worker-led factory occupations and the enormous swelling of union ranks to 90 to 95 percent of the workforce.<sup>381</sup> Furthermore, the Blum government’s attempt to resuscitate the economy by increasing purchasing power and productivity failed, as capital flight from France caused a sudden and dramatic drop in gold reserves.<sup>382</sup> In Eley’s account at least, the capitalists went on strike, precipitating the downfall of the Popular Front.

### *Figure Tombée*

In July 1936, Hélión severed his connection with communism and departed for the United States, which may have appeared as the embodiment of new world freedom and democracy. He remained in the United States, based first in Virginia and then New York, until war mobilization returned him to France in 1940. Working largely in isolation in the United States, he brought the period of both abstraction and communism to a close during this time. He completed his last abstract painting in 1939, *La Figure Tombée* (Fig. 43): a painting of collapse and a document of the sentiment in his retort to an American critic’s remark that he abandoned abstraction because of his communism. On the contrary, Hélión declares, “C’est en cessant d’être communiste que je cessai d’être

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<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>380</sup> Bernard and Dubief, 307.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., 307-8.

<sup>382</sup> Eley, 269.

abstrait.”<sup>383</sup> *La Figure Tombée* is a monumental statement and a dramatic painting of the end of the grand projects of both abstraction and communism. It is a large painting, especially in comparison to his previously executed paintings, and measures approximately four feet by five feet (126.2 x 164.3 cm exactly). It is both a conceptual and visual summing up. While the rationalized presentation of space hearkens back to the once more open-ended ideas about construction and space, now limited and confined to a kind of interior setting, the “fallen” figure set within this space marks the end of the *Figure* series and the last attempt at creating a realistic abstract painting. The placement of the figure may gesture towards the reclining nude in the tradition of classical French painting, but it is decidedly a “fallen” figure, a figure broken in two.

While the *Figure* series employed increasingly complex combinations of modeled, machinic forms which bore distinct affinities with the human body, its treatment of space followed the opposite principle of simplification and even neutralization of the very problematic of spatial construction that had preoccupied his first abstract paintings. In *La Figure Tombée*, what Héliion describes as the “sum,” he attempts to bring together the different strands of his abstraction, from its origins to its end. Héliion’s own description here is useful:

L’objet tombé, c’est celui qui est au coeur de la dernière abstraction que j’ai appelée “Figure Tombée.” Ça avait beaucoup de sens pour moi. Dans ce tableau il y a l’abstraction telle qu’elle a commencé pour moi. Les formes sont un domaine si vaste et si puissant qu’elles génèrent un espace à partir du plat. Et à côté il y a un espace plus près du descriptif dans lequel on a une figure, qui par les angles qu’elle porte, détermine un nouveau rapport avec cet espace. Et par terre, tout ça est tombé, s’est écroulé. C’est une sorte de figuration simpliste—c’est bien la première fois que je les dis—mais de mon aventure à moi, en tant que peintre abstrait. Dans cet écroulement je trouvais une certaine monumentalité. La “Figure Tombée” c’est toute l’abstraction qui s’écroulait en moi. C’est mental et réel. Ce sont des formes que j’avais pratiquées verticalement ou à plat qui se sont effondrées en une sorte de monument?<sup>384</sup>

In this painting, Héliion remarks, we can see abstraction as it began for him—i.e., with forms, he says, that are themselves a domain so vast and powerful that they generate a space out of the plane. His language is striking here, as we can clearly see “form” in terms of the complex of colored planes and rounded shapes that make up the “figure,” but by using a spatial description—“domain”—for form, he identifies it with space and the central problematic of painting, the figure/ground relation. The dark brown rectangular plane dominating the upper right is transformed from the kind of neutralized portrait backdrop of the earlier *Figure* paintings into a kind of dynamic reprisal of Malevich’s *Black Square*. Set off against the cool grey-blue tones of the plane below and the faded sage green on its left, it generates along with these other forms space out of flatness and

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<sup>383</sup> Héliion, “Origine et fin de mon abstraction,” 181.

<sup>384</sup> Jean Héliion, “La couleur,” interview by Catherine Selosse, 5 March 1979, Folder “Entretiens avec C.S.,” Fonds Héliion.

two-dimensionality. Here we have not just the “beginning” of Héliion’s abstract painting but Malevich’s ground zero: the creation of form—figure and void—out of flatness, planarity, and the limit conditions of painting itself. But if in Malevich, flatness was a field of force in which the new system, the non-objective world of Suprematism, had triumphed over the old world of things, the world generated out of Héliion’s figuration of flatness is more uncertain, populated by fallen objects and figures.

Out of this original condition of depiction Héliion moves us to a space closer, as he puts it, to the descriptive. In part, this is a space more clearly corresponding to a kind of recognizable interior or room structure. Flat planes of color become walls and floors, a container for the figure that lies within. This figure, Héliion explains, achieves a new relation with the space, but we can elaborate even further on this point by seeing the angles Héliion points to as both a constructive expression and transformation of the space. What substantializes the vertical column of pale green into a wall, after all, but the dark charcoal gray triangle running along its bottom? Imaginatively part of the lower half of the figure, its left edge also creates the impression of running along a wall back into space. At its tip it anchors the two large green and dark brown planes deep in a point of perspectival recession, while the bottom that now reads as part of the foreground space angles around to the left to connect with the interlocked triangles of brown, white and pink tracing the bottom edge of a new wall of bluish gray. The size of these fragments and the manner of their rhythmic interconnection is clearly related to the principles that constitute the other parts of the figure, such as the swirl of icy blues, whites and green found in the “head” in the topmost right. At the same time, their straight edge geometry connects them to the world of orthogonal composition and the realization of a “realistic” or “descriptive” space for the figure.

Should we read the figure as growing up and out of this corner in which it is intermeshed with spatial structure, or is this bottom half a development of the abstract bodies that dominate the *Figure* series? On the one hand, if the painting is an encapsulation of the various forms that abstraction takes in Héliion’s work, it makes sense to see the rounded, machinic forms of parts he has described elsewhere as torsos and heads in terms of the culmination of abstract painting. On the other hand, the achievement of a new relation with the surrounding space, as he describes it, is the realization of the aspirations of the earlier constructivist and neoplasticist influenced paintings, which sought in abstraction the means of creating new worlds and spaces for new forms of life, both individual and collective. Perhaps this is the wrong question to ask. For Héliion there would, in any event, be no development of abstraction from this point forward. The painting was a way of closing accounts with the problems and ideas of both abstraction and politics, and Héliion recalled, “[a]près ça je savais qu’il n’y aurait plus d’abstraction.”<sup>385</sup>

The dominant metaphors of the painting are, furthermore, ones of collapse: “et par terre, tout ça est tombé, s’est écroulé.” In *Figure Bleue*, the body is unified even in its arrangement of strongly contrasting colors and shapes. The vertical core forms a solid

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<sup>385</sup> Ibid.

central presence out of which the head and arm radiate. The rosette of whites and blacks enlivened with a slash of green forms a base that anchors the whole figure. Héliion often employs this configuration at the bottom of many of his *Figure* paintings, and we see a version of it also in *Figure Tombée* in the central bottom grouping of blues, black, grey and white, intercut by a jagged brown. However, in *Figure Tombée*, this complex of colors and shapes is transformed. It is not the compact, coherent grouping we see in the previous paintings, and even seems to have sprouted a kind of “limb,” a bent arm, that visually echoes the large cylindrical ones of the upper torso. Or perhaps it is better seen as a kind of stunted truncation of the great arm looming above it. The body here is fragmented and in a state of disrepair. The figure may have managed to achieve a new relation with space, but on the ground, everything has collapsed. The new relation, if it exists, is only partial and is itself broken, lying in a defeat symbolized by the monumental fall of the figure whose parts lie scattered across the earth. In this collapse, Héliion declares, he found a kind of monumentality, fitting as a statement bringing to an end the adventure of art and politics, abstraction and communism.

The *Figure* paintings began as a search for humanity in a time when Héliion was uncertain about the future of both abstraction and communism, and *La Figure Tombée* marked the end of both projects. The defeats of the left in France, including the Popular Front, would have played a role in Héliion’s changing views, but the Stalinist purges of the thirties were even more striking symbols of the end of ideals. When Selosse pointed out the seeming simultaneity of Héliion’s political evolution away from communism and his aesthetic turn to figuration, Héliion affirmed this observation.<sup>386</sup> In particular, many of his memoirs light upon 1936 and 1937 as the definitive years of these changing positions. 1936 and 1937 are the height of the purges, and Héliion’s recollections merged memories of these events with a later acquired knowledge of the extent of the gulags.<sup>387</sup> Asked at what point he began to distance himself, Héliion responded, “from the first purges,”<sup>388</sup> but it is more accurate to say that it is from the time of the most spectacular show trials beginning in 1936.

These trials targeted not only potential political rivals, including Trotsky and anyone associated with “Trotskyism” but sought to effectively wipe out the entire ranks of the party leadership and the Red Army. Beginning with the first staged trial against Kamenev, Zinoviev and the “Trotskyite-Zinoviev United Center” in summer 1936, the “Anti-Soviet Trotskyite Center” of leading Comintern officials in January 1937, and the case against the “Trotskyist Anti-Soviet Military Organization” specially convened to try Mikhail Tukhachevsky and eight other Red Army generals in June 1937, the purges eliminated 1,907 of 1,966 party delegates and some 35,000 Red Army officers, as well as convicted and executed 98 of 139 Central Committee members.<sup>389</sup> Many outside of the heights of the leadership were also caught up, with Eley giving the estimate of 680,000

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<sup>386</sup> Jean Héliion, “L’art et la politique: Le rôle social d’art,” interview by Catherine Selosse, 30 April 1979, Folder “Entretiens avec C.S.,” Fonds Héliion.

<sup>387</sup> See, for example, Héliion, “Origine et fin de mon abstraction,” 175-6.

<sup>388</sup> Héliion, “L’art et la politique: Le rôle social d’art,” interview by Catherine Selosse.

<sup>389</sup> Eley, 280-81.



executions just in the years 1937-38.<sup>390</sup> For Héliion, these trials were assassinations of not only his heroes, Tukhachevsky among them, but also the individuals he met on his trip to the Soviet Union.

En 1937, on assassina justement tous ceux que j'avais pris pour des héros. Bien sûr, je ne restai pas sympathisant communiste. J'avais déjà quitté Abstraction-Création. D'une certaine façon les choses sont parallèles. J'en étais à ce point de mon abstraction où, parvenu à une petite célébrité, je commençais à en douter; je voyais partout les interdits. Je voyais l'habitude enkyloser l'esprit de mes camarades, les maniérismes abstraits étranglés les élans de liberté. En 1936 déjà, j'avais quitté le mouvement et j'étais parti pour l'Amérique prendre de la distance avec mes camarades.<sup>391</sup>

Intermixing references to abstraction and communism, the passage ends with his quitting the movement and leaving for the United States to distance himself from his comrades, presumably of both movements.

Without detracting from Héliion's clear rejection of Stalin's trials and his multiple references to the Great Purges as the basis for his break with communism, it is interesting to draw out the note of ambiguity in his position vis-à-vis communism even in the late 30s. Using language that echoes his descriptions of *La Figure Tombée*, Héliion describes how his faith in communism collapsed with the executions of his friends, but he also speaks of a nostalgia and regret for a Soviet Union that still fired the imagination with its "formidable resistance" in the Battle of Stalingrad.<sup>392</sup> He implies that at the time, he still believed in an alternate path for the Soviet Union and communism. Indeed, in his last memoirs, dictated as his eyesight completely failed him, Héliion says that he was revolted by the purges but that he was still committed to the promise of communism, albeit described in more neutral, social democratic terms:

L'oeuvre parfaite est celle qui, tout en étant ce qu'elle est complètement, promet quelque chose d'autre, un dépassement. L'idée de vivre en art contient toujours celle de survivre. Il se trouve qu'historiquement cette révolution se fit claire en moi au moment où, en U.R.S.S., on emprisonnait, on jugeait, on fusillait, ceux que j'avais admirés, les Xermanius,<sup>393</sup> les Toukhatchevski; cela me révolta bien sûr mais davantage que je ne m'en rendis compte ouvertement. Pendant quelque temps, je continuai à proférer des promesses communistes: le bonheur pour tous, la justice, l'égalité, que sais-je? quand le pays dont j'avais cru que c'était le rôle de démontrer prouvait exactement le contraire.<sup>394</sup>

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<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 280.

<sup>391</sup> Héliion, *À perte de vue*, 61-65. See also Jean Héliion, "L'art et la politique: Le rôle social d'art," interview by Catherine Selosse, 30 April 1979.

<sup>392</sup> Héliion, "Origine et fin de mon abstraction," 175-6.

<sup>393</sup> Xermanius is a name that crops up several times in Héliion's memoirs and appears to be a general of the Red Army that Héliion met on his trip to the Soviet Union.

<sup>394</sup> Héliion, "Origine et fin de mon abstraction," 181.

This train of thought begins with an idea that crops up in his writings, i.e., *dépassement* or supersession, transcendence. At times, it can be understood as a kind of unassimilable excess, detected in his description of his memoirs as “ceux qui dépassent de l’atelier,”<sup>395</sup> but it is also present in this form of a modernist longing for escape from the impasse, the end condition, of painting declared by the nineteenth century.

As Yves Chevrefils Desbiolles draws out in his review of the body of Héliion’s writings, Héliion saw the history of twentieth century painting as caught between the dilemma, “détruire ou dépasser,” an unescapable choice “consecrated” by Mondrian, Picabia and Duchamp.<sup>396</sup> Mondrian and Duchamp are here both figures of negation in which Mondrian’s austere, purifying destruction of painting is opposed by Duchamp’s more playful interventions. While Héliion would come to reject both of these paths as affirmations of the end of painting—i.e., of only destruction and not overcoming—the dilemma they identified could not be superseded<sup>397</sup> and he conceived of his painting in terms of the quest for a perfect work which would be the path to something else, a form of transcendence.

The desire for a work which could trump or explode this dialectic is followed, significantly, by a reflection on the disappointments of the Soviet Union. The utopian dream of radical rupture and revolution, whether aesthetic or political, has receded. The U.S.S.R. proved to be the exact opposite of what he hoped for. Although this is the overriding judgment of many of Héliion’s writings, I want to suggest that this passage also betrays a regret, a flash of ambiguity even, over his former politics. I intimated before that Héliion’s accounts of the 20s and 30s are mediated by the retrospective knowledge of a later historical period, but it is worth drawing out this point more explicitly.

Héliion was a prolific writer of private journals and diaries, often conceived in the mold of the tradition of artist writing such as Delacroix, van Gogh and Cézanne. He also composed a number of memoirs, such as the English-language account of his exceptional escape from a German POW camp, *They Shall Not Have Me*, and towards the end of his life more self-consciously reflective auto-biographical writing, such as *À Perte de Vue*.<sup>398</sup> The *Bibliothèque Nationale de France* (BNF) has over two hundred of his notebooks, published in 1992 as the two-volume *Journal d’un peintre, 1929-1984*, while the *Institut*

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<sup>395</sup> Yves Chevrefils Desbiolles, “‘Ce qui dépasse:’ Le projet scriptural de Jean Héliion,” in *Les Écrits d’artistes depuis 1940*, ed. François Levaillant (Caen: IMEC Éditions, 2004), 289.

<sup>396</sup> *Ibid.*, 284.

<sup>397</sup> *Ibid.*, 284, citing Héliion’s journal entry of 25 April 1976: “Telle qu’on l’avait formulée au XIXe siècle, la peinture annonçait sa fin que Mondrian, Picabia et Duchamp consacrent. Au même point, j’ai senti qu’on pouvait les dépasser avec leurs propres termes, et repartir au lieu de finir comme ils avaient cru. Mais ceux qui ont repris la peinture dans les termes formulés auparavant aboutiront en progressant à la même fin, au même dilemme: détruire ou dépasser.” Jean Héliion, *Journal d’un peintre: Carnets 1963-84*, vol. 2, ed. Anne Moeglin-Delcroix (Paris: Maeght Éditeur, 1992), 241.

<sup>398</sup> Desbiolles, 277.

*Mémoires de l'édition contemporaine* (IMEC) holds the rest of the extensive Héliion archive, including his correspondance, manuscripts, notes, interviews, photographs, as well as both published and unpublished texts.<sup>399</sup>

Out of this archive, contemporary material on the interwar period is surprisingly sparse. There are a few short entries from 1929, 1933-34, and 1937-38 in the BNF's *Journal d'un peintre*, as well as Héliion's published contributions from the period and a few documents in the IMEC's *Fond Héliion*. This latter group includes a piece titled "Avowals and Comments," dated 1937 from Virginia, and the relatively long "Answers to a Questionnaire of George L.K. Morris," which was published as an interview by *Partisan Review* in 1938.<sup>400</sup> By 1937 and 1938, however, Héliion was already effectively leaving behind abstract painting and communism, and many more specifics, including discussions of his actual political activities and ideas from the mid-20s through his trip to the Soviet Union, are gleaned from the later extensive unpublished interviews with the art historian, Catherine Selosse, in the IMEC archives (March-July 1979), and the two dictated memoirs *À perte de vue* (1983) and *Mémoire de la chambre jaune* (1983), including the postface, "Origine et fin de mon abstraction."

In fact, it turns out that Héliion destroyed and burned a great part of his pre-World War II writings in 1946 in the United States, where he had traveled after his escape and with the help of Resistance fighter who gained safe passage for him through Vichy France. He was able to return to Paris in April 1946, "with joy," but before this return a journal entry from 22 February records, "J'ai déchiré mes *diaries* depuis toujours, et la plupart de mes papiers et écrits du passé. Je veux vivre tout entier dans mon présent. J'ai, sans peine, jeté plusieurs milliers de pages qui étaient parfois très belles. Sans peine, parce que, malgré mes soucis, je suis heureux."<sup>401</sup> On 25 March, the entry reads, "Brûlé tous mes précédents 'journaux.' Trop compliqué, prétentieux, lourd de garder son passé autrement qu'à l'état de souvenirs."<sup>402</sup> The break with abstraction is complete. The break with communism is as well. These acts of destruction speak to the fervent desire, in 1946, of starting anew and completely leaving behind the failed endeavors of the past. We can only imagine what was in these papers, consigned to the bin for being too complicated and pretentious, but this judgment provides a hint at their content. For these are the very terms that Héliion would use to condemn abstraction and communism, and the ideals underpinning his painting up until this time. Perhaps there was an account of his trip to the Soviet Union, deemed overly enthusiastic, naïve, and thus in need of disavowal. We know that such an account did at one time exist and, indeed, filled an entire book according to Héliion,<sup>403</sup> but the only contemporary document of the trip that now remains is a photograph in the IMEC archives.

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid.

<sup>400</sup> Jean Héliion, interview by George L.K. Morris, *Partisan Review* 4, no. 5 (April 1938): 33-40.

<sup>401</sup> Quoted in Desbiolles, 289, fn. 23. See also Héliion, *Journal d'un peintre*, vol. 1, 95.

<sup>402</sup> Ibid.

<sup>403</sup> Héliion, *À perte de vue*, 63-64. Héliion writes that the many events of his trip to the Soviet Union filled a book but was destroyed later by his second wife.

It is only near the end of his life that Héliion sought to return to these moments, reconstructing the record of the movements he renounced. The “triptych” of memoirs date from 1983, when Héliion had become blind and stopped painting, and were published posthumously as *Mémoire de la chambre jaune*, *À perte de vue*, and *Choses revues*. *Choses revues*, edited and published by IMEC Éditions, was issued in the same volume as *À perte de vue* and is primarily a recollection of his captivity in Pomerania from 1940-42. Desbiolles suggests that in the end Héliion was moved by “a sort of intuition of the archive,” i.e., by the idea of presenting a certain image of himself, perhaps even transforming himself, through a self-consciously formed archive. The phrase, “ceux qui dépassent de l’atelier,” is connected to this project of the archive and its numerous artifacts which the researcher, critic or biographer of Héliion would be forced to confront.<sup>404</sup>

The archival record he left behind is in many ways consistent, with 1936 and 1937 as the dates associated with his disillusionment with the Soviet Union. For instance, in the extensive 1979 unpublished interviews, he argues that around this time he wrote a letter to a communist friend declaring that the purges of ’36 made him less and less convinced that the Soviets were on the path of truth, a letter which resulted in the end of their friendship. This confession is repeated in a more stark, extreme form in the passage quoted above, where Héliion effectively declares that the historical truth of the revolution for him became clear at the time that his heroes, the Xermaniuses and Tukhachevskys, were imprisoned, condemned and shot. This wholesale rejection of the revolutionary project is followed, however, by the admission that while he was revolted, he did not “openly” realize the extent of its failure. “Openly” here should be understood not in terms of holding back from a public renunciation of his beliefs but in its pairing with the verb, “se rendre compte,” more in terms of a full or conscious realization. Thus, he says that he continued, “for some time” (“pendant quelque temps”), to profess the communist promises of happiness for all, justice, and equality.

On the one hand, these memories, from the *Bellevilloise* to his trip to the Soviet Union and his involvement with the AEAR, seem to want to reinsert into the history of his painting an understanding of the utopian ideals at the basis of his commitment to abstraction. After all, he had burned any documents that would have attested to the intense radicalism of this bygone era, and his paintings were subject at times to the judgment of those like the American critic, Michael Gibson, blasted for misunderstanding the link between abstraction and communism. On the other hand, these trains of thought are often interrupted by Héliion, questioning himself, “que sais-je,” “que croire?” Communism is presented in the more palatable language of post-political democracy even as he uses a turn of expression—*proférer de*—most often reserved for objects of hostility. The archival impulse is betrayed by its own temporality, marked by the signs of retrospective interventions.

The perfect work of art, Héliion said, is something that offers forth the promise of *dépassement*, and perhaps we can read his writings, conceived as something which will

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<sup>404</sup> Desbiolles, 289.

or can *dépasser l'atelier*, as a way of grabbing hold of this elusive achievement. Begun as a series of reflections on paintings left incomplete as blindness overtook him, *Mémoire de la chambre jaune* and the subsequent *À perte de vue* also returned to the original site of painting and politics seeking radical forms of transcendence. *La Figure Tombée* is the last abstract painting, and it has a sense of finality about it. Reading through Héliion's prodigious "projet scriptural," as Desbiolles calls it, the arc of Héliion's thought and practice of abstraction seems neatly concluded in the image of fallenness captured in the painting. However, in concluding this chapter I would like to suggest that in a way *La Figure Tombée* is still the document that exceeds the written project, and not the other way around as Héliion seems to suggest. While he would later come to the conclusion, presented so clearly in his memoirs, that abstraction and communism were finished in the mid-30s, the painting itself retains traces of another possible future. Why could not the new relations with space, drawn out in the left corner, have marked the beginnings of another transformation, a realization of the aspirations first mobilized at the beginning of the 1920s? We could see the figure not as a body drawn down and held back by this corner, with its rigid geometric planes, but one in the process of transformation, turning back from figural machinism to the utopia of pure abstraction. In the end, the metaphor of collapse proved right for both the defeats of the left and the collective aspirations of abstraction, which would end in Europe in the interwar period to be born again in the completely different form of individual subjectivity and "expression" in post-war America. It is a fitting culmination of the adventure of abstraction that Héliion's most decisive contribution to it would be the sombre finale of his abandonment of it, but one which contained a cryptic signal pointing to an effaced origin and an openness to its unfulfilled promise.

## Conclusion

Seules les leçons de la réalité peuvent nous apprendre à transformer la réalité.

– Bertolt Brecht, *La décision*<sup>405</sup>

Euer Bericht zeigt uns, wieviel  
Nötig ist, die Welt zu verändern:  
Zorn und Zähigkeit, Wissen und Empörung  
Schnelles Eingreifen, tiefes Bedenken  
Kaltes Dulden, endloses Beharren  
Begreifen des Einzelnen und Begreifen des Ganzen:  
Nur belehrt von der Wirklichkeit, können wir  
Die Wirklichkeit ändern.

– Bertolt Brecht, *Die Massnahme*<sup>406</sup>

In the summer of 1933, a new children's school was inaugurated in the Communist municipality of Villejuif, just outside Paris and also where Paul Vaillant-Couturier was mayor. Called the *Groupe Scolaire Karl Marx*, it was widely fêted and its opening day festivities were a major event for the PCF. Its opening was covered extensively in *L'Humanité* and other left-leaning periodicals throughout France. Constructed over the course of 1930 to 1933, it came to carry a heavy symbolic and ideological charge, which was only sharpened in the decision taken mid-construction to change its namesake from the original Jean Jaurès to Karl Marx.

Its architect, the French André Lurçat (1894-1970), was well integrated in both French and international avant-garde and constructivist architectural groups. For example, he was an active and prominent member of the *Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne* (CIAM). It was often within the fora of CIAM that he clashed with Le Corbusier. At the heart of these conflicts was Lurçat's political commitments. In fact, what was so notable about Lurçat's work at Villejuif was, according to Tafuri and

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<sup>405</sup> Quotation of the last line from Bertolt Brecht's play, *Die Massnahme*, in various notes held in the *Fonds André Lurçat*. *La Décision* is the French title given to *Die Massnahme*. Notes prises par Lurçat sur divers thèmes, Boîte 200 Ifa 310, Fonds André Lurçat, Centre d'archives de l'Institut français d'architecture, Paris, n.d.

<sup>406</sup> The full passage from which Lurçat's note was copied. An English translation can be found in Bertolt Brecht, *The Measures Taken*, in *The Measures Taken and other Lehrstücke*, trans. Carl R. Mueller (London: Methuen Drama, 1977), p.34: "And yet your report shows us what is / Needed to change the world: / Anger and tenacity, knowledge and indignation / Swift action, utmost deliberation / Cold endurance, unending perseverance / Comprehension of the individual and comprehension of the whole: / Taught only by reality can / Reality be changed."

Dal Co, “not so much the conception of architecture as an aspect of technical-productive organization, but rather as an effort to provide a politico-institutional base for the kind of projects [he] chose to do by affiliating with the ... French Communist parties.”<sup>407</sup> If in Héliou’s rejection of geometric abstraction and return to figuration he seemed to succumb to the allure of the traditions of French painting, Lurçat’s unwavering opposition to Le Corbusier can be understood in part as a rejection of a diluted notion of geometry as simply an expression of classical principles. Instead, he maintained a polemical opposition to the doyens of French modern and avant-garde architecture, as evidenced in his attack on Le Corbusier’s 1925 *Appel aux industriels* as reactionary and his continuous wrangling with Le Corbusier over the course of the 1930s.<sup>408</sup>

Despite his connectedness with a range of Soviet and Western constructivists, he appears to have had little interactions with abstract or constructivist artists in France. The archive reveals an acquaintance with van Doesburg and architects associated with the De Stijl movement, but there is no evidence of any meaningful relationship with figures such as Mondrian or other abstract painters. While he must certainly have been aware of abstract painting in some form, especially through his friendship with Lissitzky and his own membership in the AEAR, his views of French painting are likely to have been influenced by his brother Jean Lurçat. Jean was, if we recall, one of the favored *jeunes peintres* of Zervos, Tériade and *Cahiers d’Art*, and he was also called upon to design and execute the mural paintings for the *Groupe Scolaire*. André also shared space with the offices of *Cahiers d’Art*, which was next to his studio in the second half of the 20s.

How, then, should we understand the fact that there is no mention of abstract art or abstraction in his work? Visually and conceptually, it draws on the same syntax of abstract and constructivist form deployed in Melnikov’s pavilion. A comparison with that 1925 structure might lead one to see Lurçat’s structure as not quite achieving the same radical union of abstract form, meaning and concrete collective life. However, there is even in his perhaps more technocratic approach, familiar features. The symmetrical structural plan is purified of any concessions to ornament or nonfunctional impulses, and its cool, economical use of concrete is enlivened by an extensive use of glass. This resulted in a building with a lightness and airiness evoking the emancipatory aspirations proper to the new Communist municipality and its citizens. Lurçat attempted to turn the functional innovations of modern architecture to ideological use in creating an appropriately collective style. For example, in constructing the walls of windows on the ground floor which gave the building a transparency connecting it to the landscape around it, for example, he also created windows that were divided and opened horizontally, rather than vertically, a formal innovation that added to the sense of “passage” and opening into the surrounding space.

The school appears, thus, to mark another achievement in the synthesis of abstract

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<sup>407</sup> Tafuri and Dal Co, 173-4.

<sup>408</sup> This *appel aux industriels* was first announced, in fact, on the occasion of the 1925 *Exposition Internationale* and in the context of the Esprit Nouveau pavilion, calling generally for the application of industrial methods of mass production in the building of modern architecture.

form and politics. Completed in 1933, the school along with Héliion's paintings can make the period 1930-34 begin to appear as a kind of peak period for abstraction in the interwar period. However, I argue that the school is better understood as the embodiment of an already drained practice—politically and aesthetically—in which the force of abstraction as both a negation of the existing order and a desire to refashion the new was already neutralized. The disappearance of the term, abstraction, seems to confirm the failure of abstract art to solve the fundamental contradiction that was its premise. Abstract art sought to overcome its limiting conditions as art. While abstract painting and art are often regarded today in terms of their formal medium specificity, one goal of this dissertation has been to highlight this desire for transcendence. The purifying impulses of the will to abstraction sought not only the destruction of old forms of art but also the very abolition of the art object itself. As seen in the Soviet constructivist debates of the twenties, the turn from painting to architecture was part of the rejection of “easelism” and the move to production, the deployment of abstract form in the real world.

But in Paris abstract painting struggled under the sign of architecture. Mondrian deferred the question of the end of painting and the realization of a utopian synthesis of the arts to a future socialist *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Héliion, however, assimilate painting to the geometric forms of Western constructivism, but those paintings of the early 30s seem only stifled under the metaphors of construction and architecture. Lurçat's work, which certainly merits closer investigation in a longer study, can be read in a way as declaring the end of the adventure of painting in abstraction. But this conclusion does not mean that this language would thrive in the sphere of architecture. Indeed, the success of the *Groupe Scolaire* could be attributed to a unique confluence of “fortunate opportunity and a formal system simplified to the maximum.”<sup>409</sup> It did not constitute any formal innovation but rather was the result of a successful codification of the means of a radically abstract and inventive AgitProp, necessary in the new directly institutionalized relationship of art and the party. Lurçat and Héliion thus each from their own opposed corners provide a sense of closure to the 30s movements.

Indeed, Lurçat, like Héliion, was also inspired to travel to the Soviet Union, and soon after the completion of the *Groupe scolaire*, he departed Paris. He did not return until 1938, presumably also disillusioned with the project of “socialism realized.” Upon returning to France, Lurçat was arrested and held at both the *Prison de la Santé* and the *Camp des Tournelles*, a central prison for Resistance fighters and other political dissidents. During his time there, Lurçat worked on his five-volume theory and history of architecture, *Formes, Composition et Lois d'Harmonie*. Although a substantial portion of this work is devoted to an examination of the classical tradition, Lurçat did not clearly call for a return to this tradition in a manner akin to Héliion, despite the apparent similarity between their paths. His return to France appears in a rather more ambiguous light, exemplified, I argue, in the quote he pulled from one of Brecht's *Lehrstücke*, *Die Massnahme*, or *The Measures Taken*. Centered and typed neatly on a page of its own, it reads, “Seules les leçons de la réalité peuvent nous apprendre à transformer la réalité.”

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<sup>409</sup> Tafuri and Dal Co, 175.



*Die Massnahme* occupies a central place among Brecht's *Lehrstücke*, or learning plays. The French title, *La Décision*, captures the key dynamic of the *Lehrstück* form, which Fredric Jameson has described as a demand on the actors and audience for "a radical simplification of experience, a reduction of action and gesture alike to the very minimum of decision itself."<sup>410</sup> In *Die Massnahme* itself, the decision is a young comrade's call for his own execution for endangering his comrades and the collective revolutionary cause. As such, the play has been subject to criticism ranging from calling it a defense of Stalinism to an affirmation of mass murder. However, the play is better understood, Jameson argues, in terms of its precursors: the pair of mirror-plays *Der Ja-Sager* and *Der Nein-Sager* modelled on traditional Noh plays which offer alternating gestures of yes and no. Seen in the context of this dialectical opposition of for and against, the political lesson of the *Lehrstück* is not the "yes" of the comrade but rather the situation itself: it is a "dramatization of the dialectic, the primacy of the collective situation over individual ethics."<sup>411</sup>

*Die Massnahme* premiered at the end of 1930, and there was an acclaimed performance of *Der Ja-Sager* in Paris in December of 1932. Lurçat's note is an undated, and admittedly fleeting, reference, and it is unclear when he might have seen or read either *Lehrstücke*. Nevertheless, his post-Soviet return is tinged by the kind of ambiguous dialectical situation identified by Jameson. The post-Soviet period was clearly marked by disappointment at the foreclosure of avant-garde architectural possibilities in the Soviet Union, as well as the increasingly apparent effects of Stalinization. While there were no more articles praising Stalin's first five-year plan, he also did not revert to the language of bourgeois democracy. Instead, the judgment once reserved solely for Europe—i.e., that it was stagnating and that the failure of constructivism there was due to the lack of advancement in political thinking—seemed to be applied to the Soviet Union now also.

In contrast to Hélión's turn to figuration, then, which also focused on the revival of a kind of classical humanism and a more commonplace rejection of Stalinism, Lurçat's return appears more enigmatic, if decidedly anti-humanist. It appears even more ambiguous if we take into account Brecht's original wishes for the performance of the play. While the counterplay to *Der Jasager* was *Der Neinsager*, Brecht had wanted *Die Massnahme* and *Der Jasager* to be performed together in Berlin before 1933.<sup>412</sup> Is this juxtaposition to be interpreted as shifting the focus to the "yes," rather than leaving open the alternation between yes and no? Perhaps, but not in the sense meant by some of Brecht's critics. Instead, it suggests an intensification of focus on the idea behind the "yes" itself, namely on the idea of commitment to the revolution and even the party, against the backdrop of the rise of Hitler and the Nazis.

Ultimately, the heroic projects of this period played themselves out on a limited horizon, drifting between the seeming intellectual dead-ends of capitalist societies and the

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<sup>410</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (London: Verso, 1998), 60-61.

<sup>411</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

<sup>412</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Journals 1934-1955*, ed. John Willett, trans. Hugh Rorrison (New York: Routledge, 1996), 511.

contradictions of “socialism in one country” and utopian collective space. Perhaps it was in this context of this world that the Brechtian lesson seemed to strike a chord. Another nineteenth century figure, as interpreted by a twentieth century theorist of modernity, provides a measure of insight into the condition of abstraction in an alternative reading of the “French” tradition. Henri Lefebvre has only been briefly mentioned but is present in much of the backdrop of French intellectual and political life discussed in this dissertation, particularly in the *Clarté* group that influenced artists like Héliou. In his “preludes” on modernity, Lefebvre formulated the significance of Baudelaire in terms of the rise of abstraction and alienation in modern art. This understanding began from an analysis of Baudelaire and poetry but was also extended to take hold of all the arts, including painting:

Thus Baudelaire’s poetry inaugurates a pathway for poetry and modern art which Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Mallarmé and Valéry (to name but a few) will later pursue. In these poets, and in poetry since Baudelaire, there is a demented hope which is disalienating in terms of the everyday life they reject, and the bourgeois society they despise, but alienating and alienated in all other respects. It is a powerful hope, fruitful yet ineffectual: the hope of turning the abstract into everyday reality, since everyday reality itself is nothing more than an abstraction. . . . Poetic language aims to transform everyday reality. This operation has a double character. The everyday is rejected, in the process of this rejection it is “born into language”, and language is made an absolute. But once it has been fetishized in this way, language becomes an object of doubt and anxiety. The shadow of eternal silence falls on the word, threatening it, enshrouding it.<sup>413</sup>

It might be hard to recall now why this language of abstraction was once experienced as an intimation of the unrepresentable. Lefebvre’s reflections suggest that this attempt to figure the absolute was bound to fail—“demented,” “hope,” “fetishized.” Even the sympathetic critic could not conceal his disappointment. The intent of this study was to show the meaning of abstraction before and beyond this experience of defeat.

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<sup>413</sup> Henri Lefebvre, *Introduction to Modernity: Twelve Preludes, September 1959-May 1961*, trans. John Moore (London: Verso, 1995), 175.

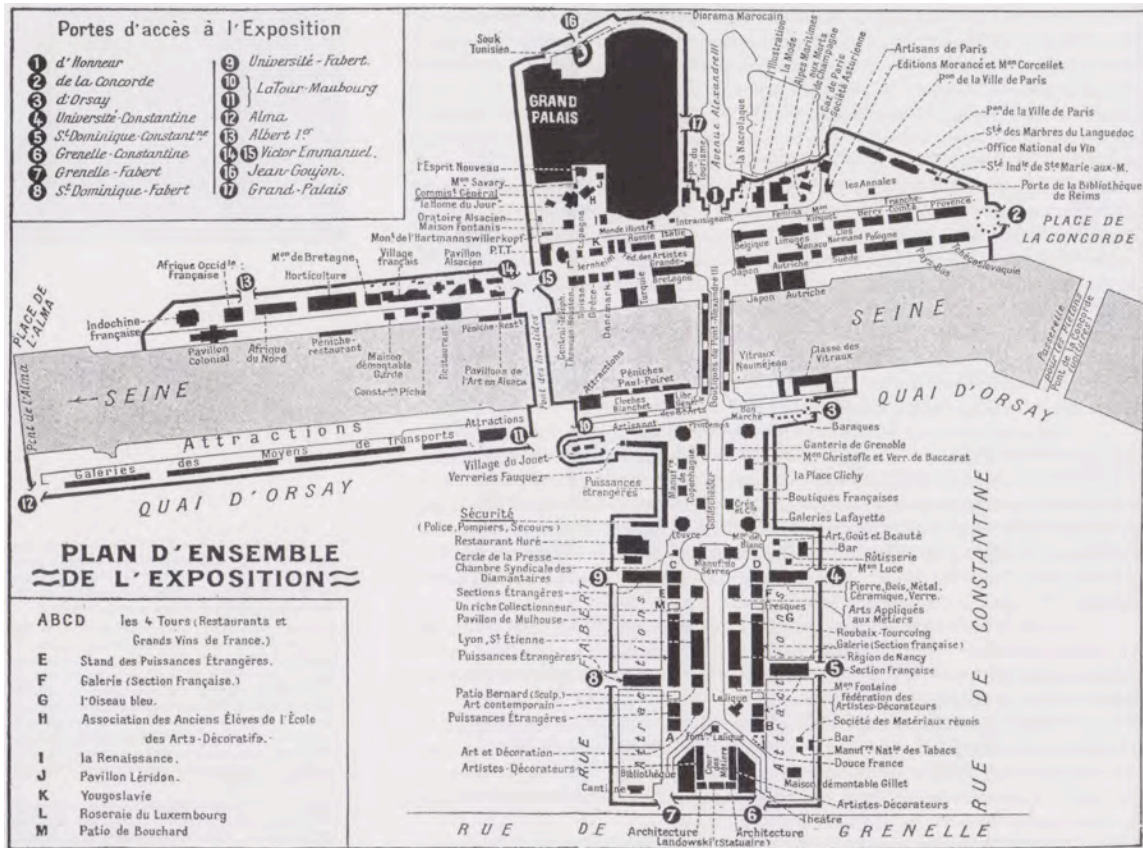


Figure 1. Overall plan of the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes, 1925. Paris.

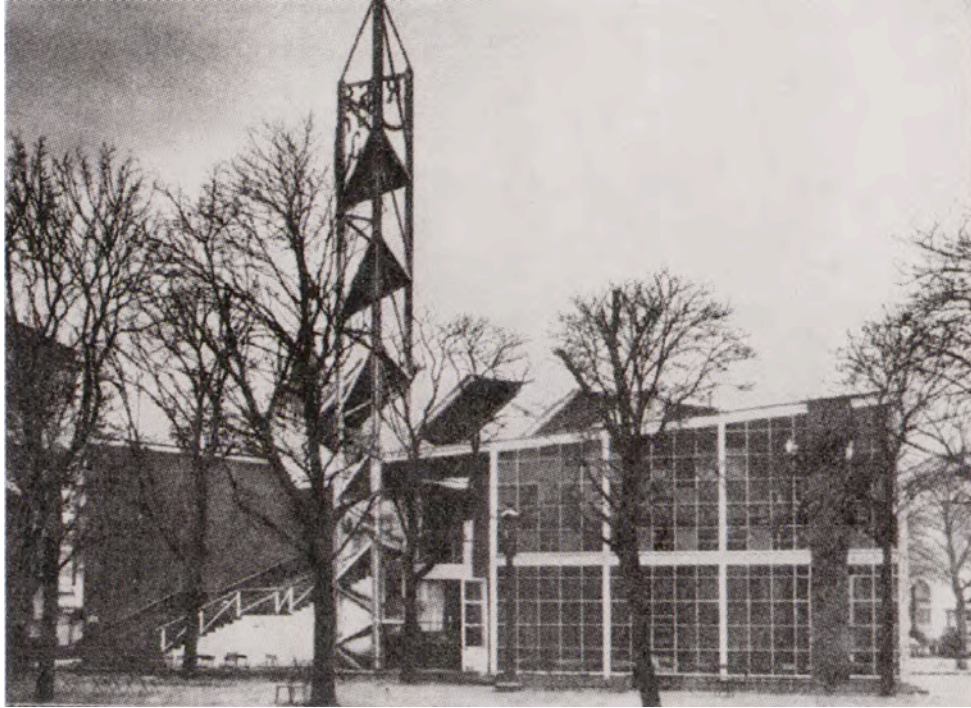


Figure 2. Konstantin Melnikov, Soviet Pavilion, North side, 1925. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris. From Ginés Garrido, *Mélnikov en París, 1925* (Barcelona: Fundación Caja de Arquitectos, 2011), 153.

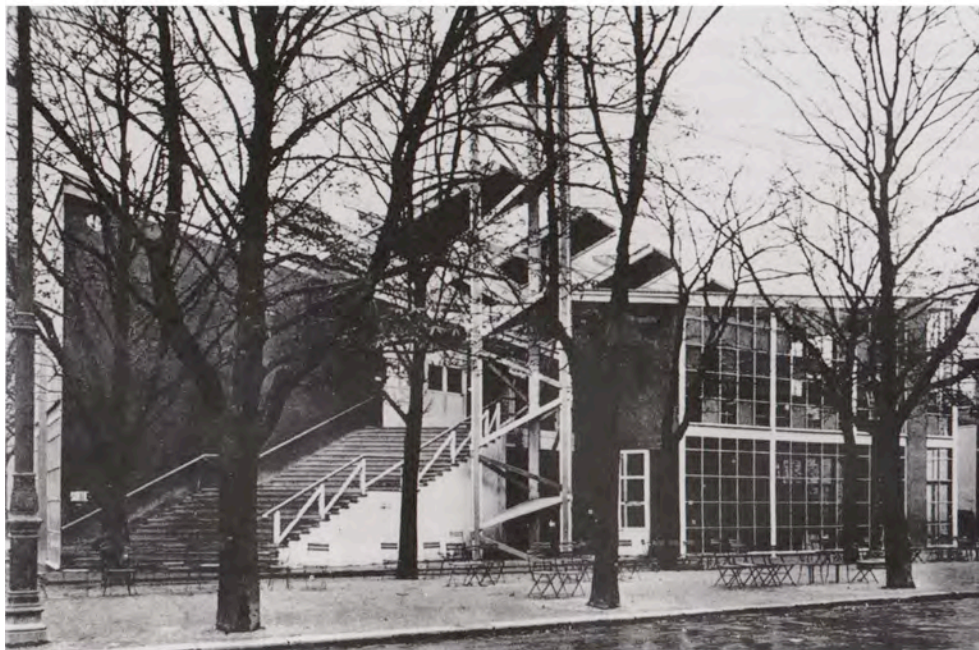


Figure 3. Aleksandr Rodchenko, Photograph of north side of Melnikov's Soviet Pavilion, 1925. From Garrido, 132.



Figure 4. Konstantin Melnikov, Soviet Pavilion, West side (before the inauguration), 1925. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris. Grand Palais in the background on the left. From Garrido, 128.

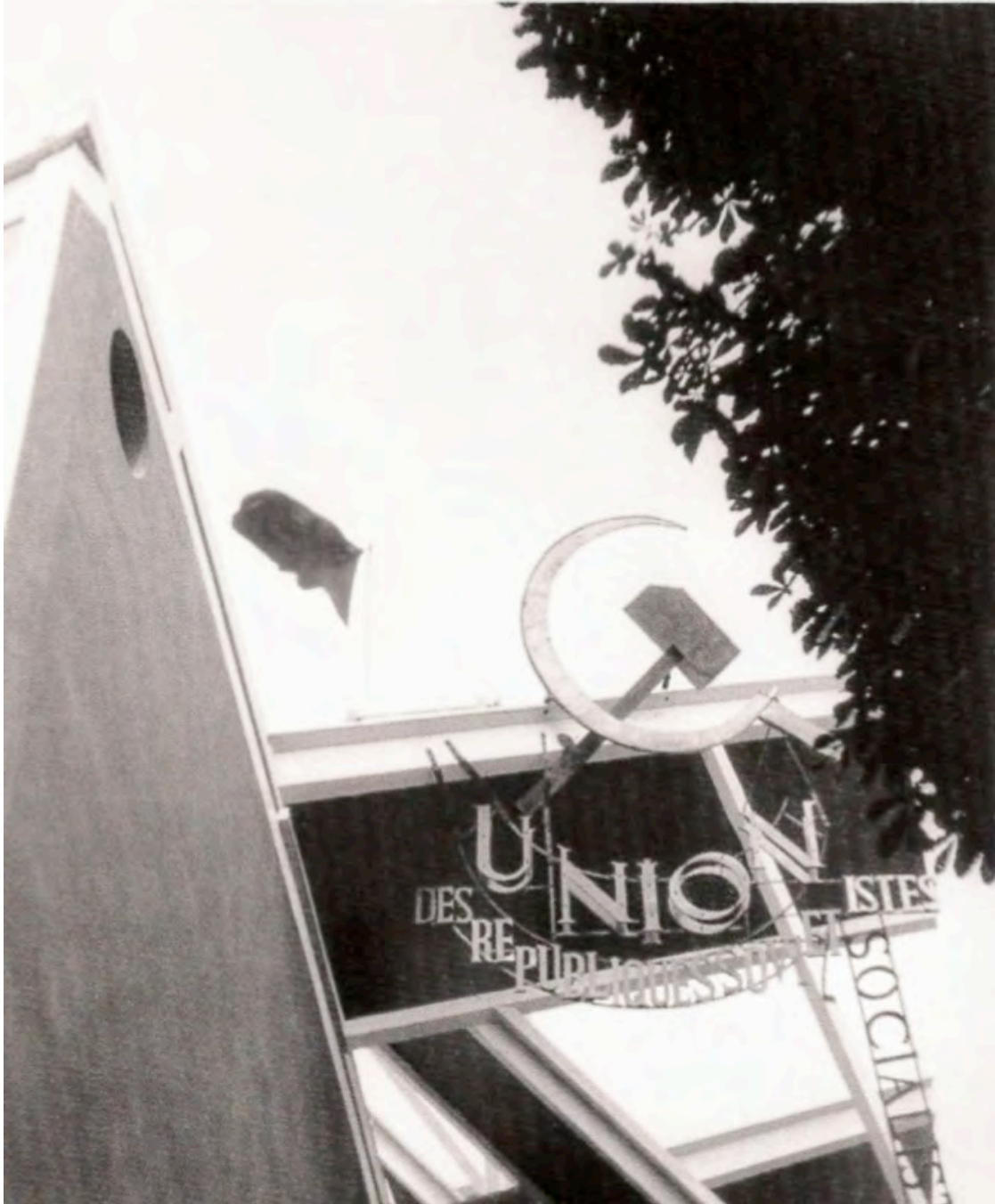


Figure 5. Aleksandr Rodchenko, Photograph of a detail of Melnikov's Soviet Pavilion, 1925. From Garrido, 100.



Figure 6. Konstantin Melnikov, Soviet Pavilion, Detail of staircase and covered passage, 1925. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris. From Garrido, 153.

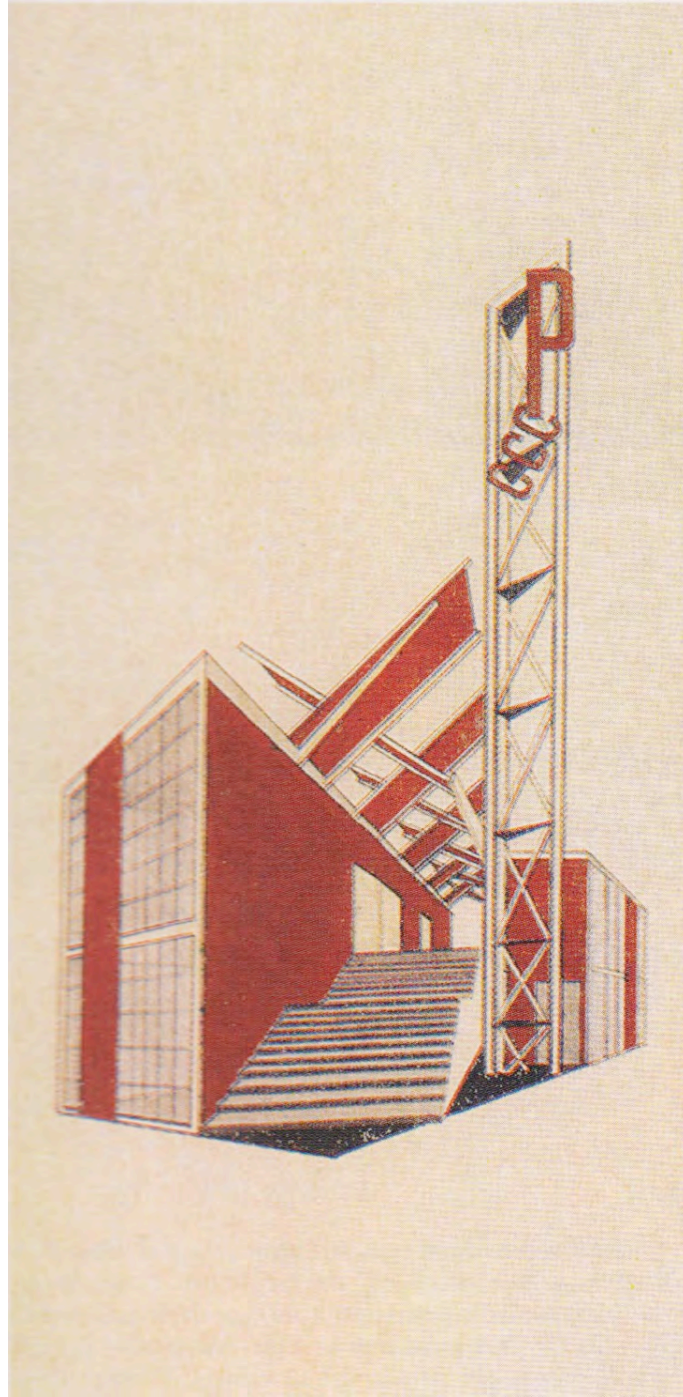


Figure 7. Konstantin Melnikov, Final perspective drawing (north), Soviet Pavilion, 1924. Pencil and watercolor on paper. From Garrido, 116.



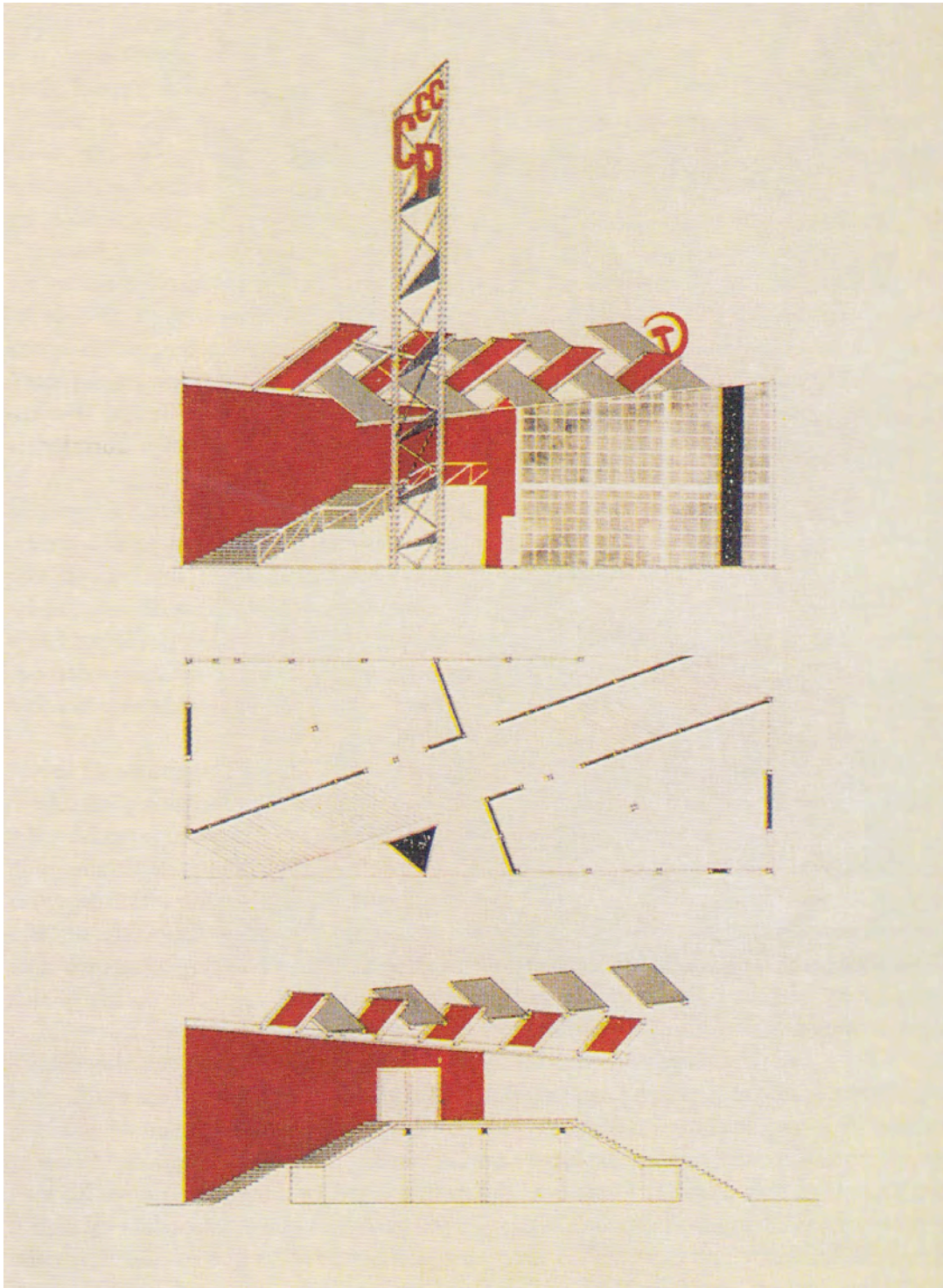


Figure 8. Konstantin Melnikov, Final published Pavilion plan and longitudinal sections, Soviet Pavilion, 1924. Pencil and watercolor on paper. From Garrido, 116.



Figure 9. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Workers' Club*, Soviet Pavilion, 1925. Portrait of Lenin seen on back wall. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris. From Garrido, 101.



Figure 10. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Workers' Club*, Soviet Pavilion, 1925. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris. From Garrido, 101.



Figure 11. Aleksandr Rodchenko, *Workers' Club*, Soviet Pavilion, 1925. Photo taken day of inauguration. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris. From Garrido, 142.



Figure 12. El Lissitzky, *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*, 1920. Lithograph on paper, 49 x 49 cm. Lenin Library, Moscow. From T.J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 232.



Figure 13. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 79.2 x 79.5 cm. State Tret'iakov Gallery, Moscow. From Clark, 254.

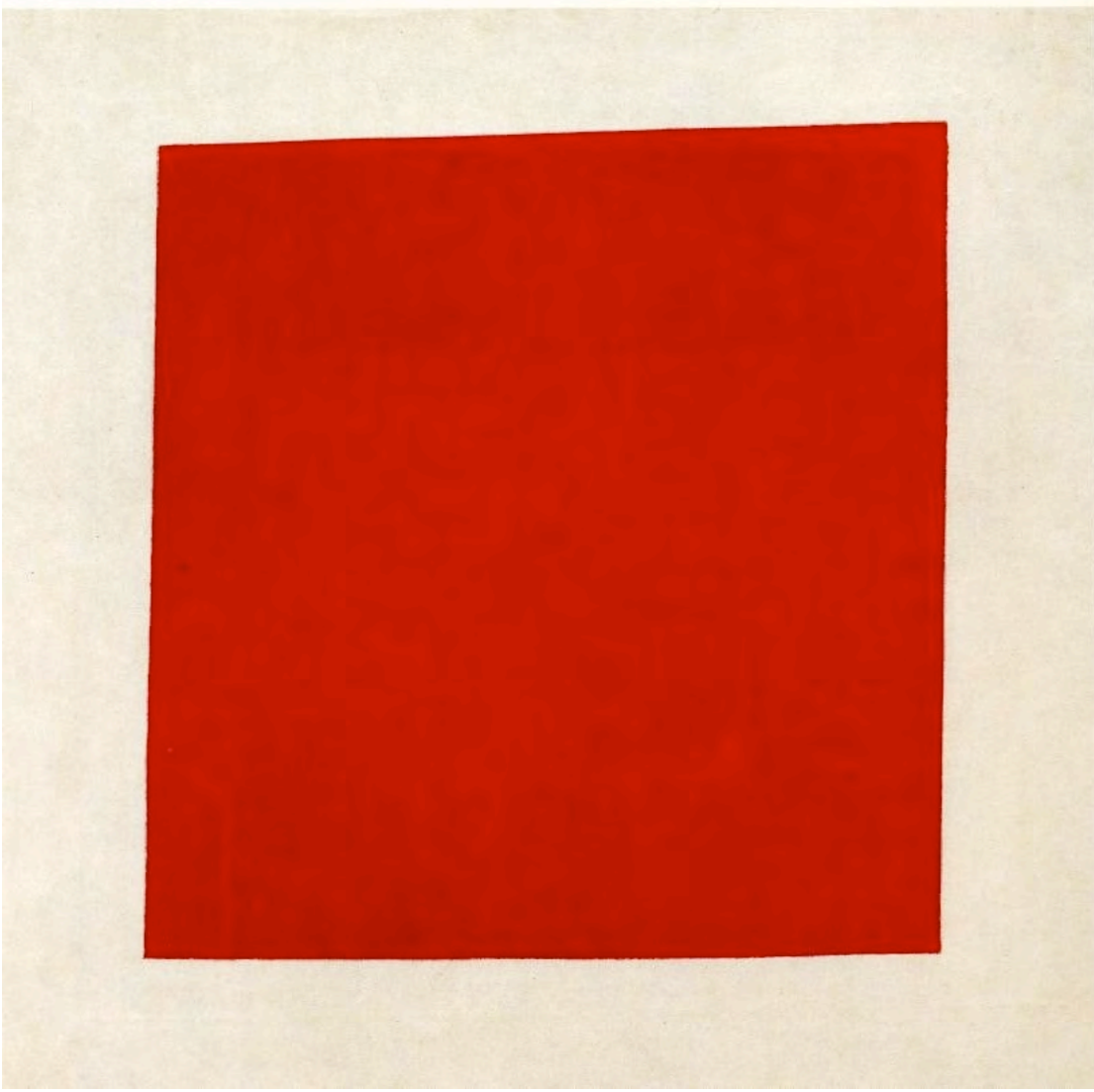


Figure 14. Kazimir Malevich, *Red Square (Painterly Realism: Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions)*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 53 x 53 cm. State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

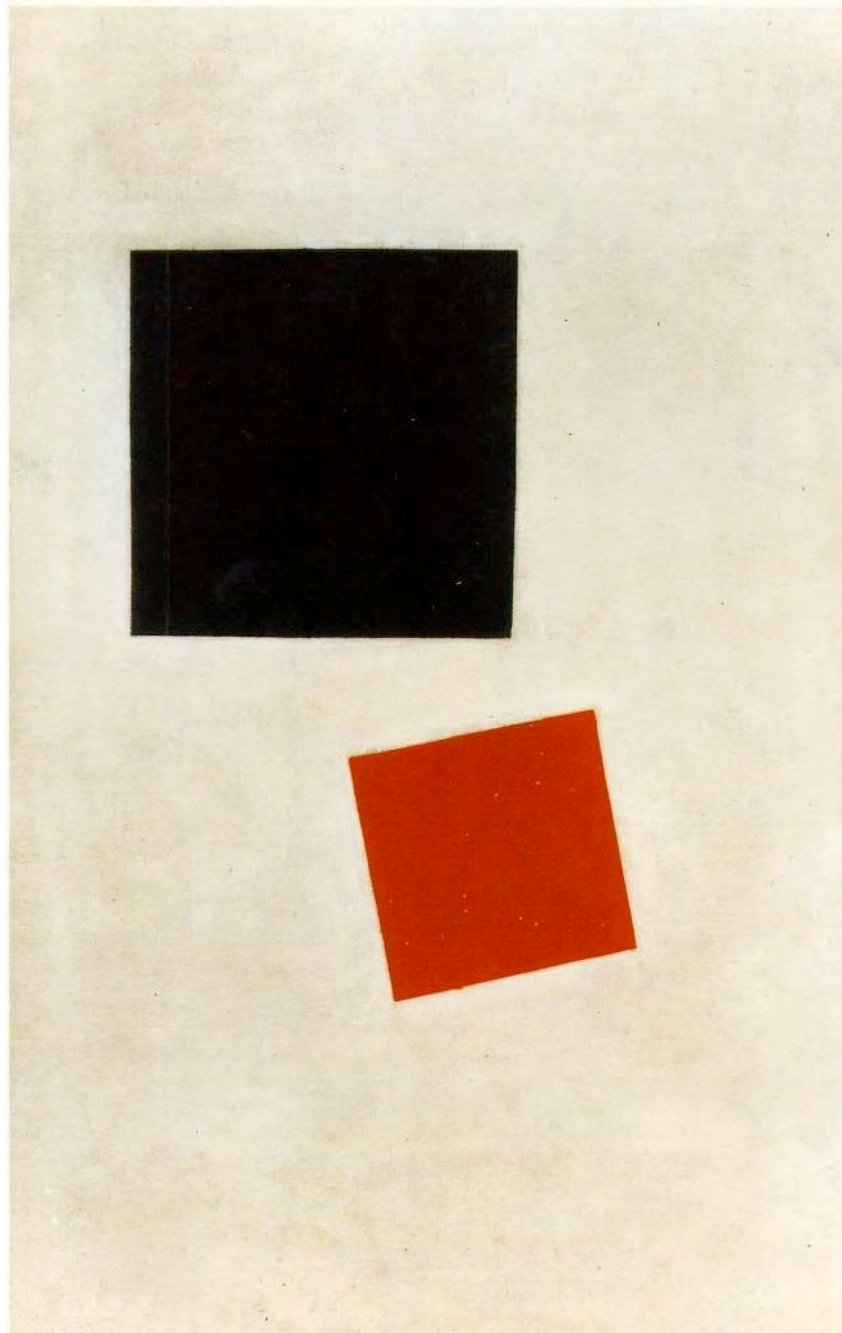


Figure 15. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square and Red Square (Painterly Realism: Boy with Knapsack – Color Masses in the Four Dimensions)*, 1915. Oil on canvas, 71.4 x 44.4 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.

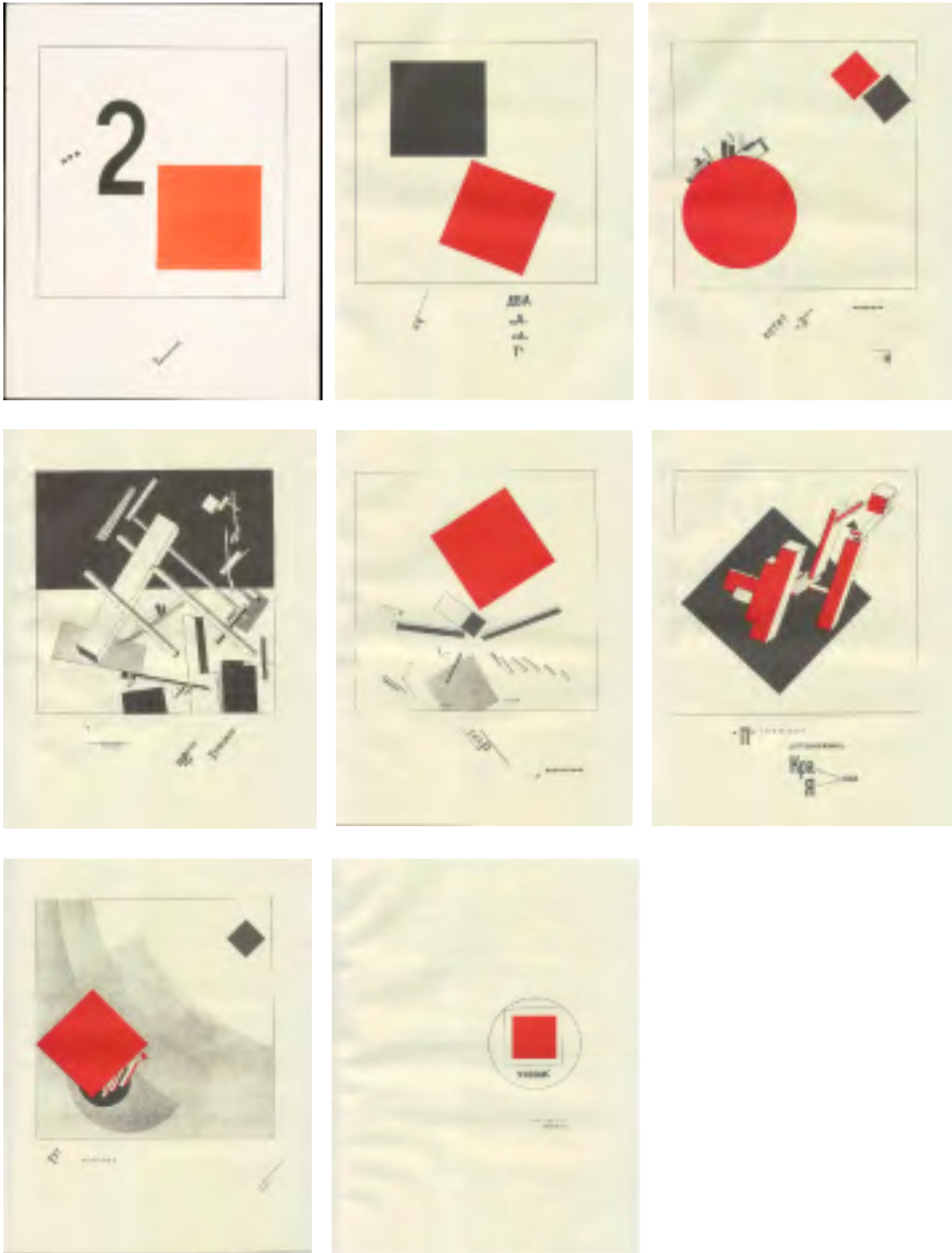


Figure 16a-h (left to right, top to bottom). El Lissitzky, *About 2 Squares*, designed and produced at UNOVIS, 1920 (Berlin: Scythian Press, 1922). From El Lissitzky, *About 2 Squares*, trans. Christiana Van Manen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).



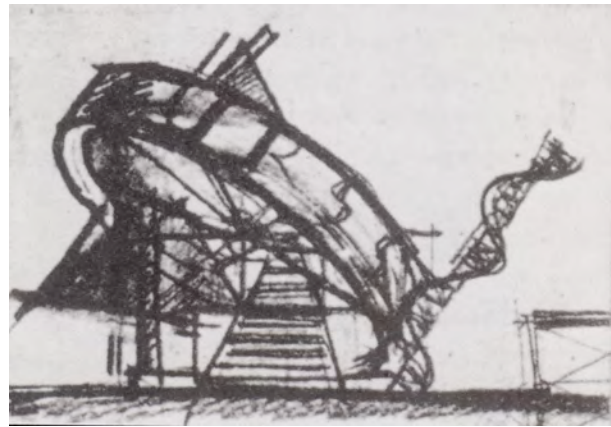
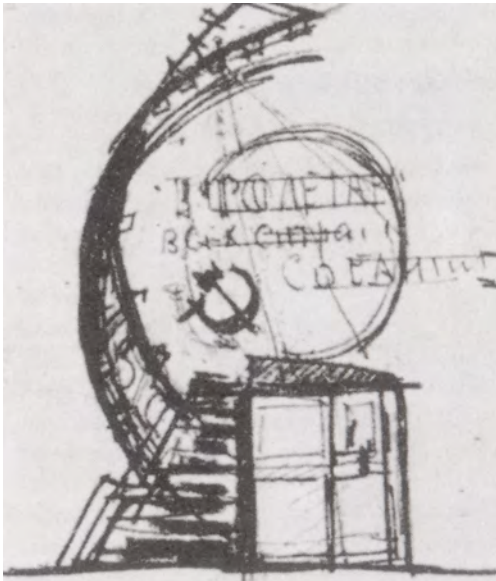
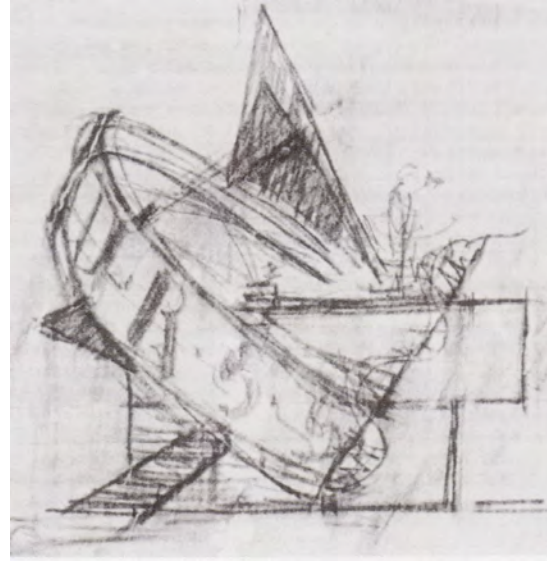
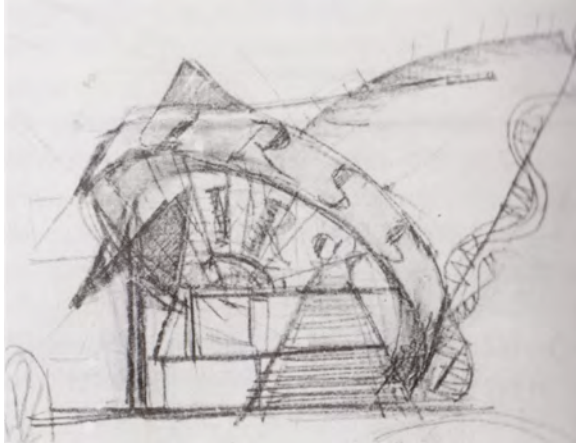


Figure 17a-d. Konstantin Melnikov, Preliminary Sketches, Soviet Pavilion, 1924. Pencil on paper. From Garrido, 70, 78.

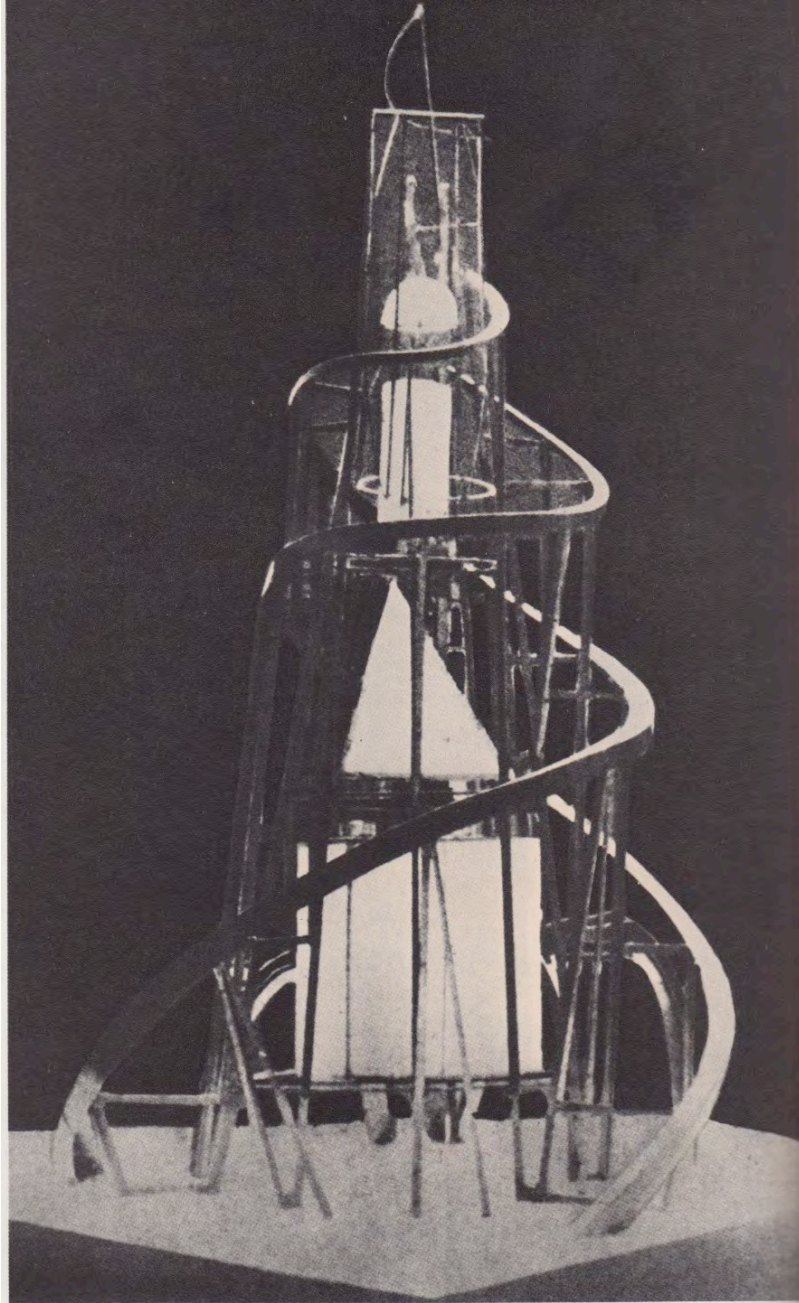


Figure 18. Vladimir Tatlin, *Monument to the Third International*, Second model prepared specifically for the Soviet exhibits, 1925 (first model completed in 1920). Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris. From Larissa Zhadova, ed., *Tatlin* (New York: Rizzoli, 1988), pl. 186.



Figure 19. Vladimir Tatlin, *Monument to the Third International*, Second model prepared specifically for the Paris Exposition Internationale, 1925. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris. From Garrido, 36.

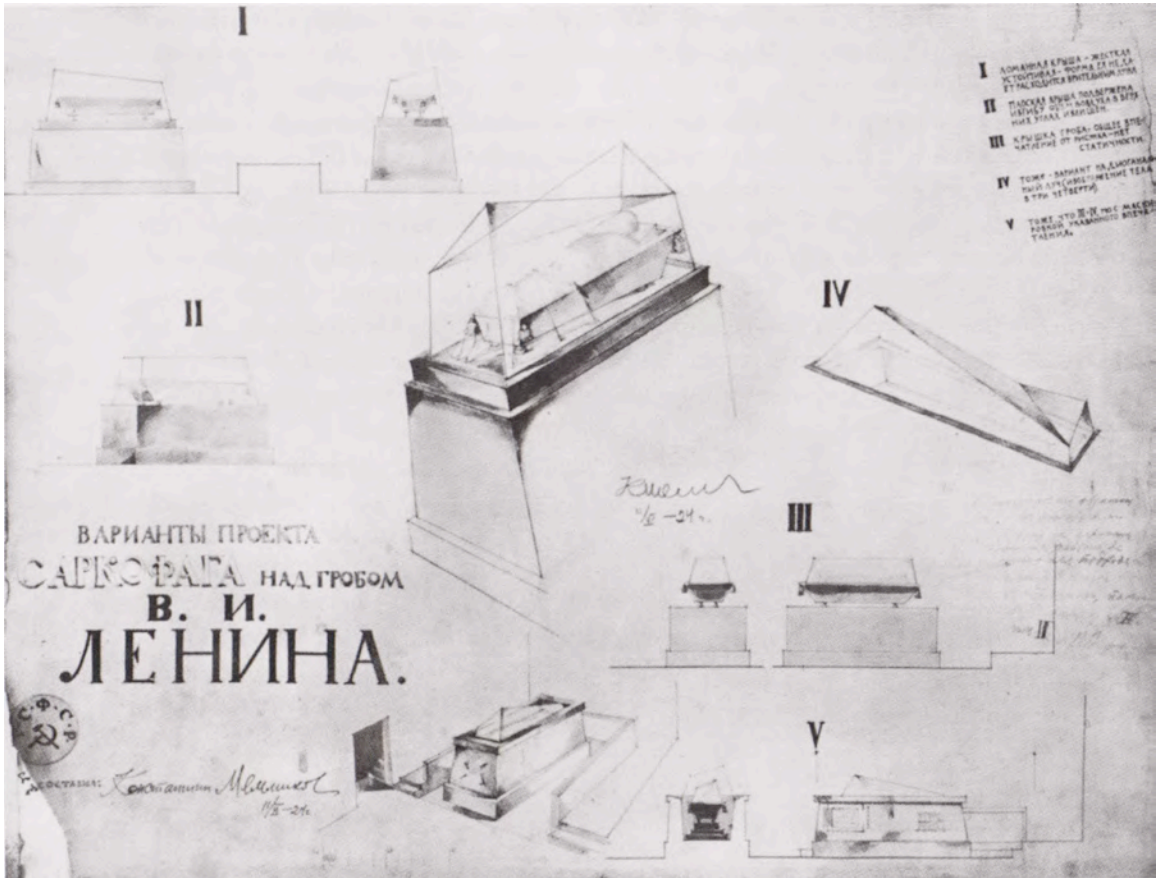


Figure 20. Konstantin Melnikov, Preliminary variants of sarcophagus for V.I. Lenin, 1923. Melnikov's preferred variant is in the center. From S. Frederick Starr, *Melnikov: Solo Architect in a Mass Society* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1978), 82.



Figure 21. Photography of entrance to the Soviet Section in the Grand Palais, 1925. Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Moderne, Paris. From Zhadova, pl. 187.

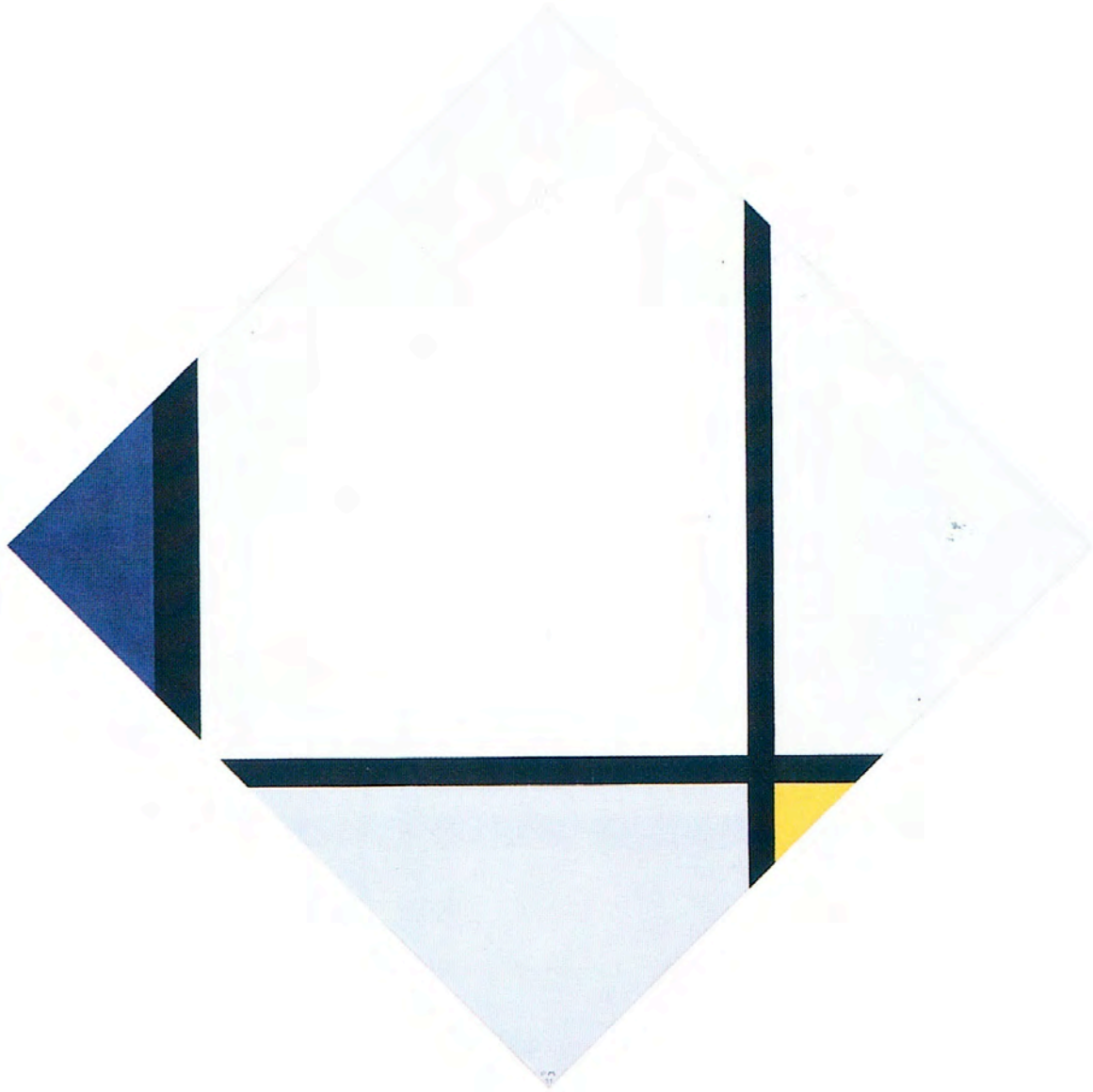


Figure 22. Piet Mondrian, *Tableau No. I: Lozenge with Three Lines and Blue, Gray, and Yellow*, 1925. Oil on canvas, diagonal: 112 cm, sides: 80 x 80 cm. Kunsthaus Zurich.

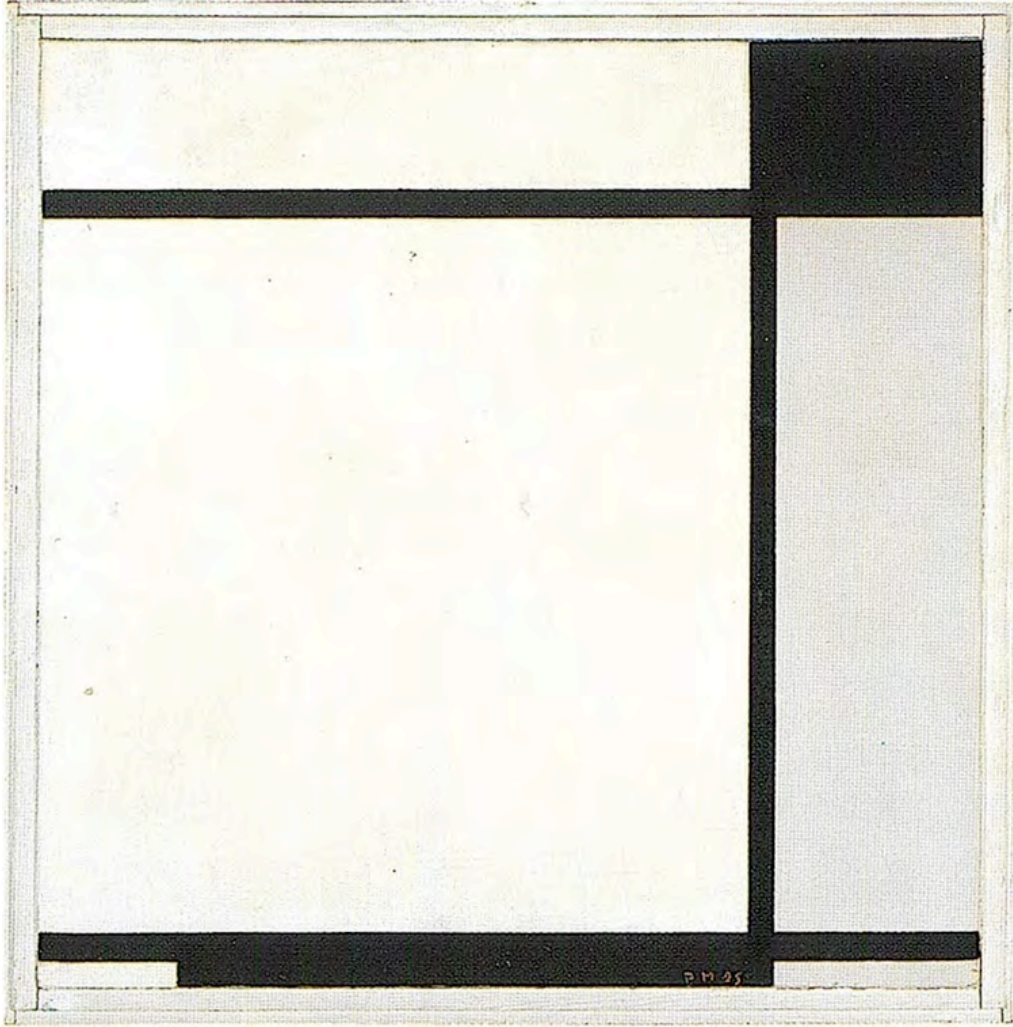


Figure 23. Piet Mondrian, *Tableau No. II, with Black and Gray*, 1925. Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm. Kunstmuseum Bern.

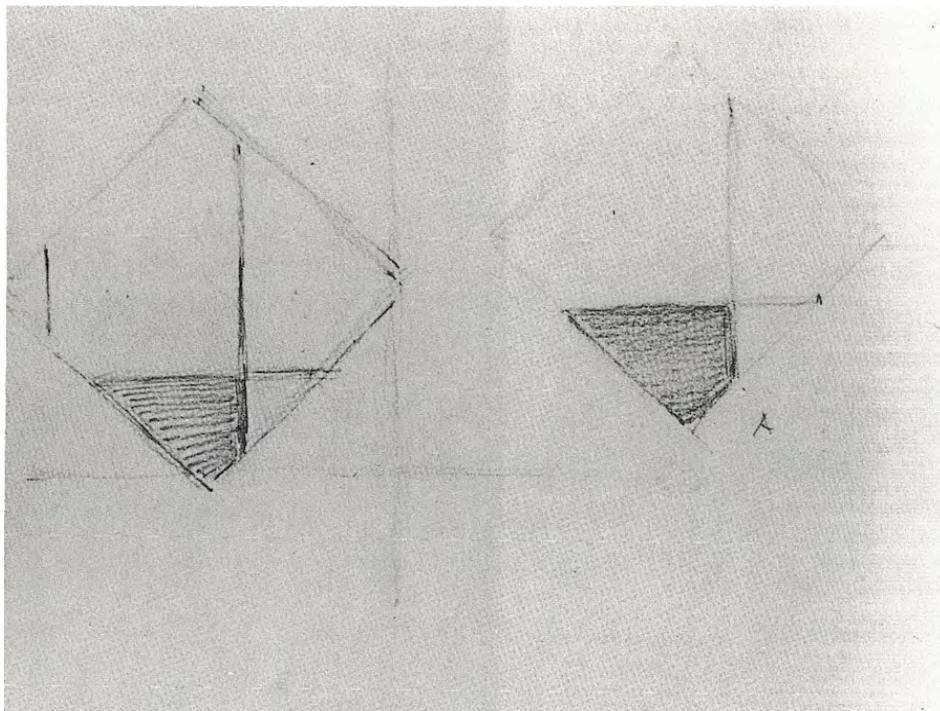


Figure 24. Piet Mondrian, *Sketchbook 1925, Sheet A*, verso, 1925. Charcoal on paper, 23 x 29.8 cm. Private collection. From E.A. Carmean, Jr., *Mondrian: The Diamond Compositions* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 1979), 43.

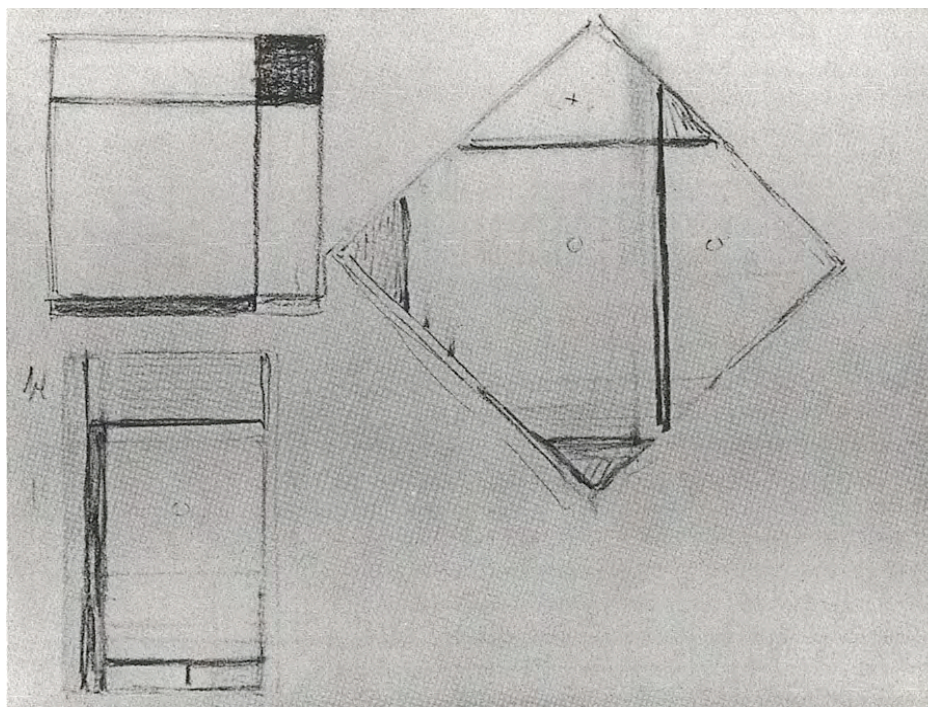


Figure 25. Piet Mondrian, *Sketchbook 1925, Sheet C*, 1925. Charcoal on paper, 23 x 29.8 cm. Whereabouts unknown. From Carmean, Jr., 42.



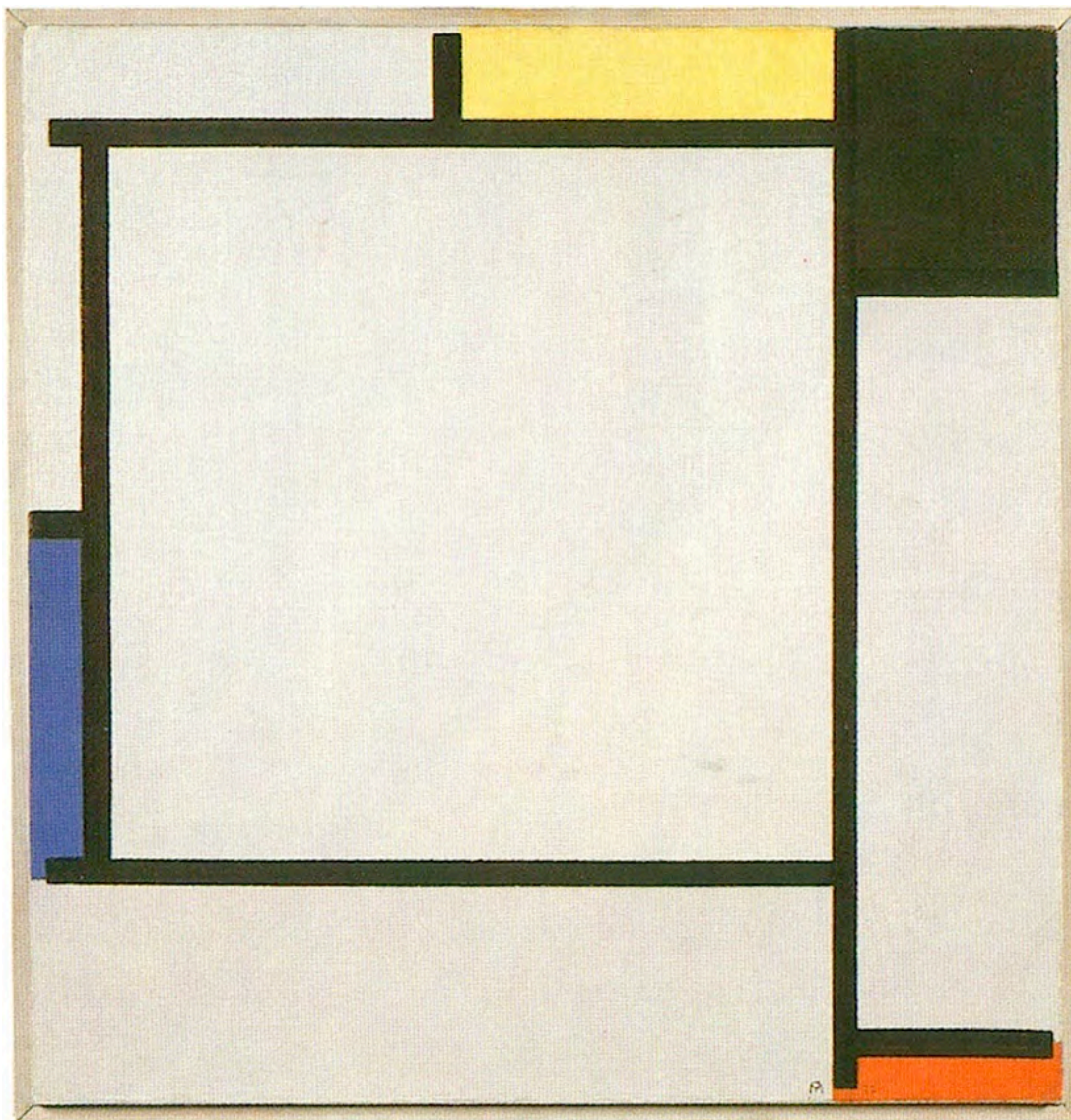


Figure 26. Piet Mondrian, *Tableau 2, with Yellow, Black Blue, Red, and Gray*, 1922. Oil on canvas, 55.6 x. 53.4 cm. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

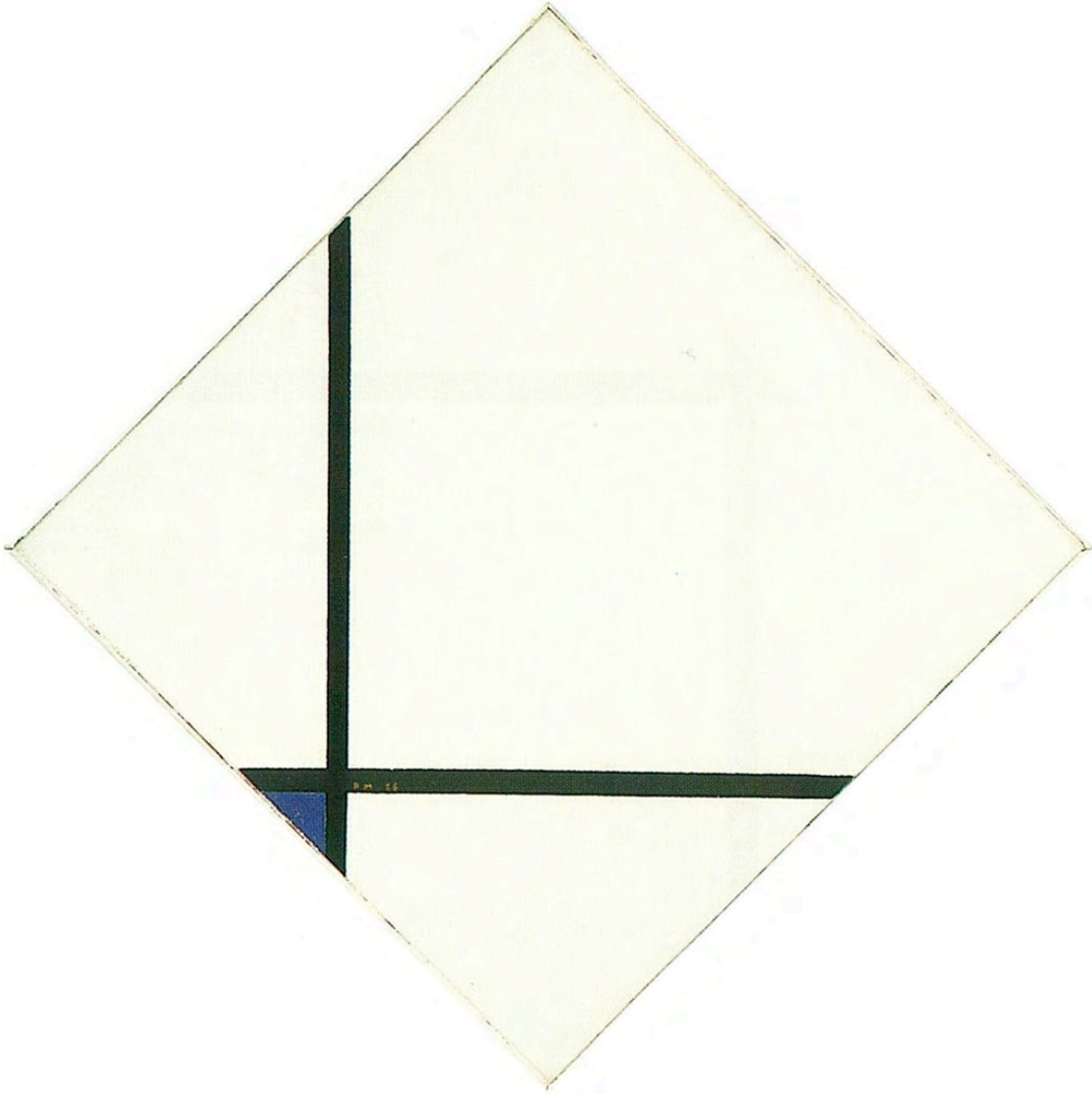


Figure 27. Piet Mondrian, *Shilderij No. I: Lozenge with Two Lines and Blue*, 1926. Oil on canvas, diagonals: 84.9 x 85 cm, sides: 60 x 60 .1 cm. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

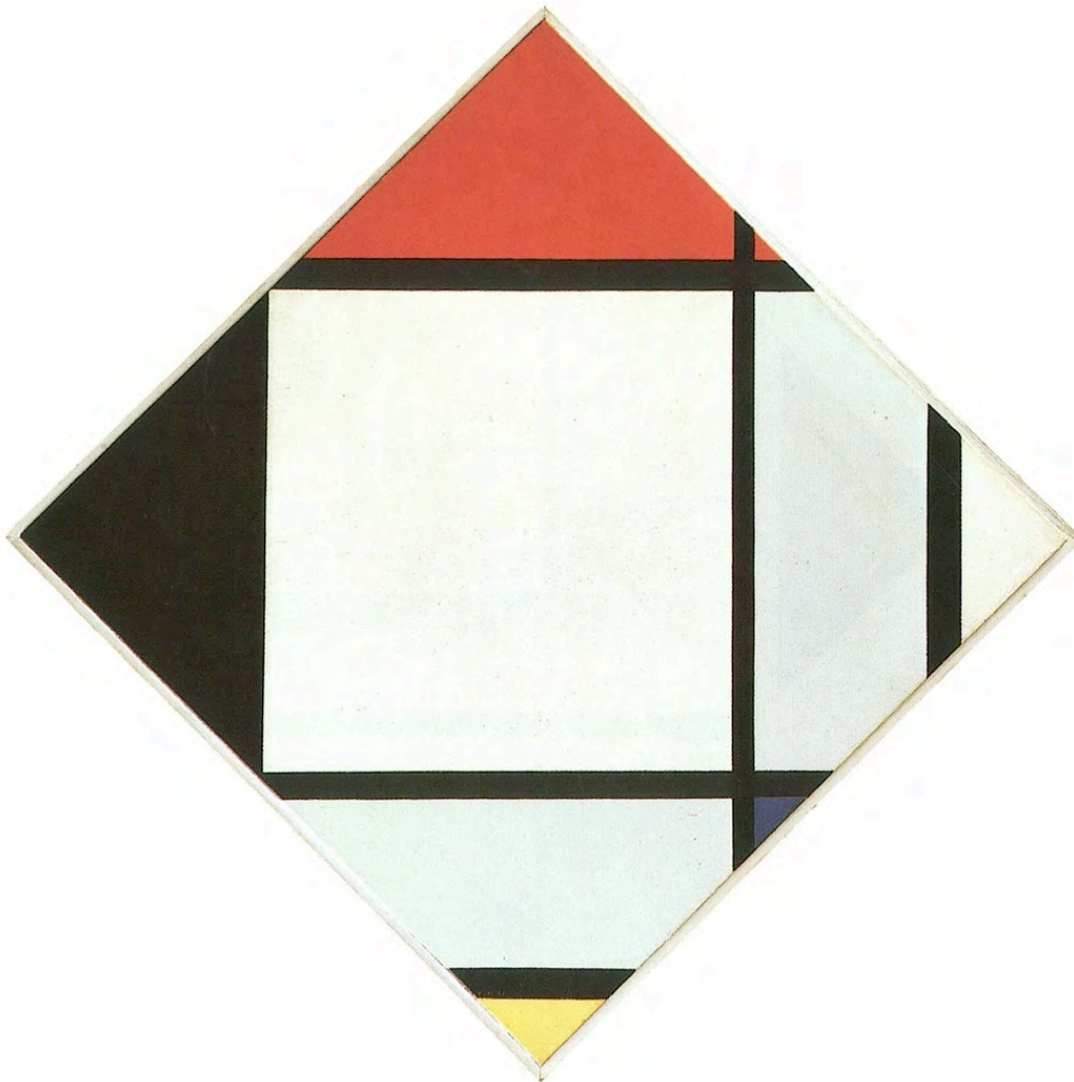


Figure 28. Piet Mondrian, *Lozenge Composition with Red, Black, Blue, and Yellow*, 1925. Oil on canvas, diagonal: 109 cm, sides: 77 x 77 cm. Private collection.



Figure 29 (left). Photograph of an exposed wall with advertising on the rue du Départ. From Robert P. Welsh, *Catalogue Raisonné of the Work of 1911-1944* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1998), 238.

Figure 30 (right). Piet Mondrian, *Paris Courtyard Façades, Rue du Départ*, 1913-14, pencil on paper, 23.6 x 15.4 cm (Private collection). From Welsh, 238.



Figure 31. László Moholy-Nagy, Photograph of the view of the railway yard from Mondrian's studio, c. 1925. From Welsh, 225.

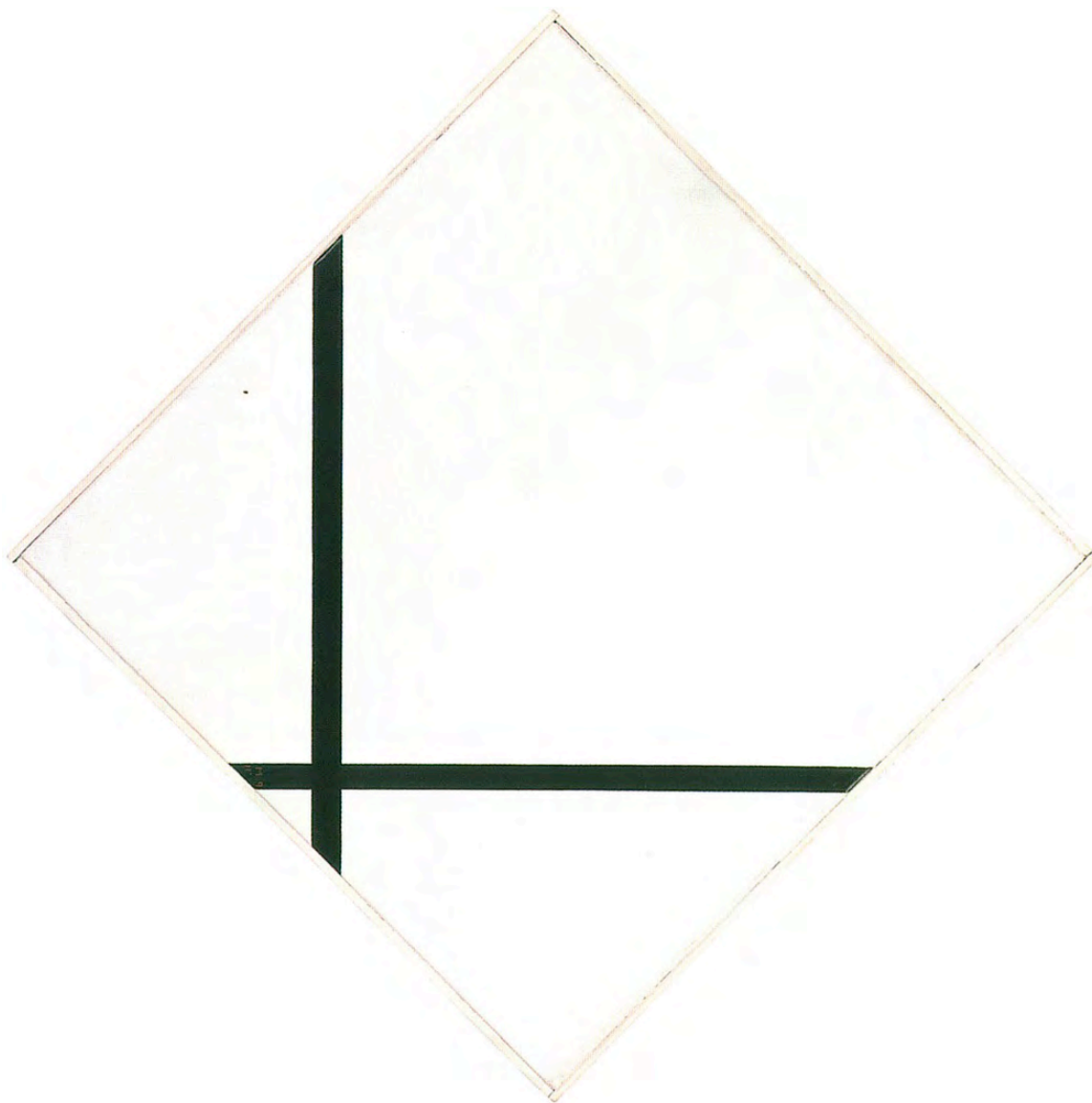


Figure 32. Piet Mondrian, *Lozenge Composition with Two Lines*, 1931. Oil on canvas, diagonal: 112 cm, sides: 80 x 80 cm. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

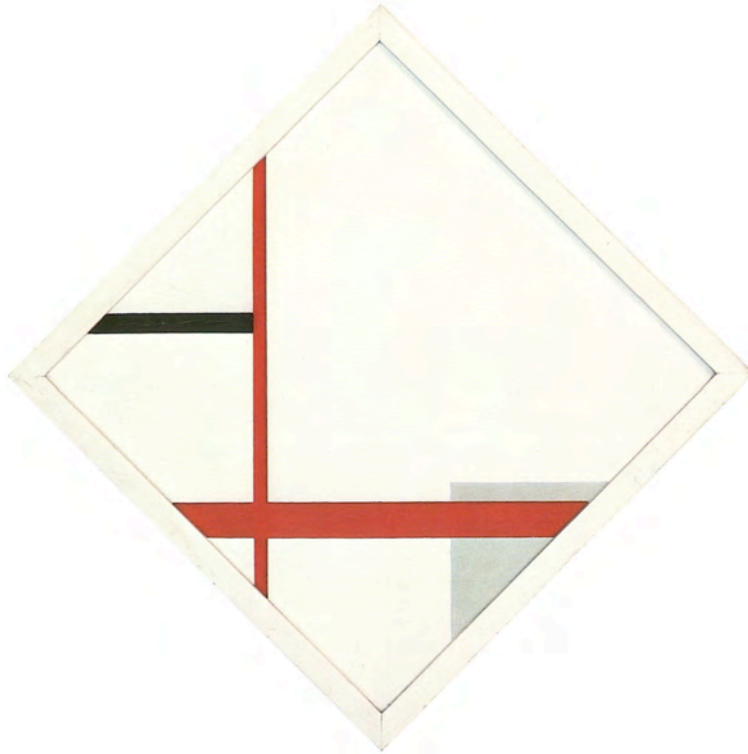


Figure 33. Jean Gorin, *Composition No. 28*, 1930. Oil on wood, 60 x 60 x 3 cm. Private collection.

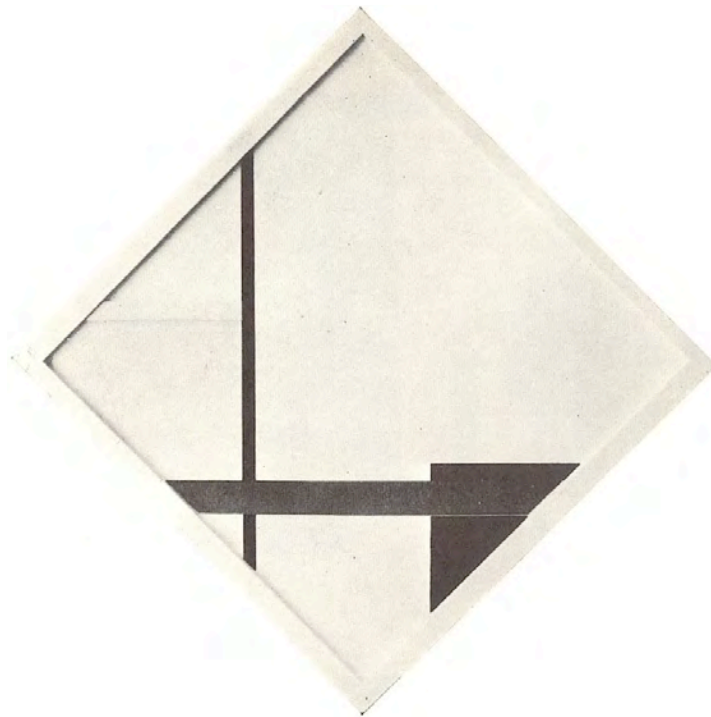


Figure 34. Jean Gorin, *Composition No. 28*, 1930 (as published in *Abstraction-Création*, no. 2 (1933), 19).

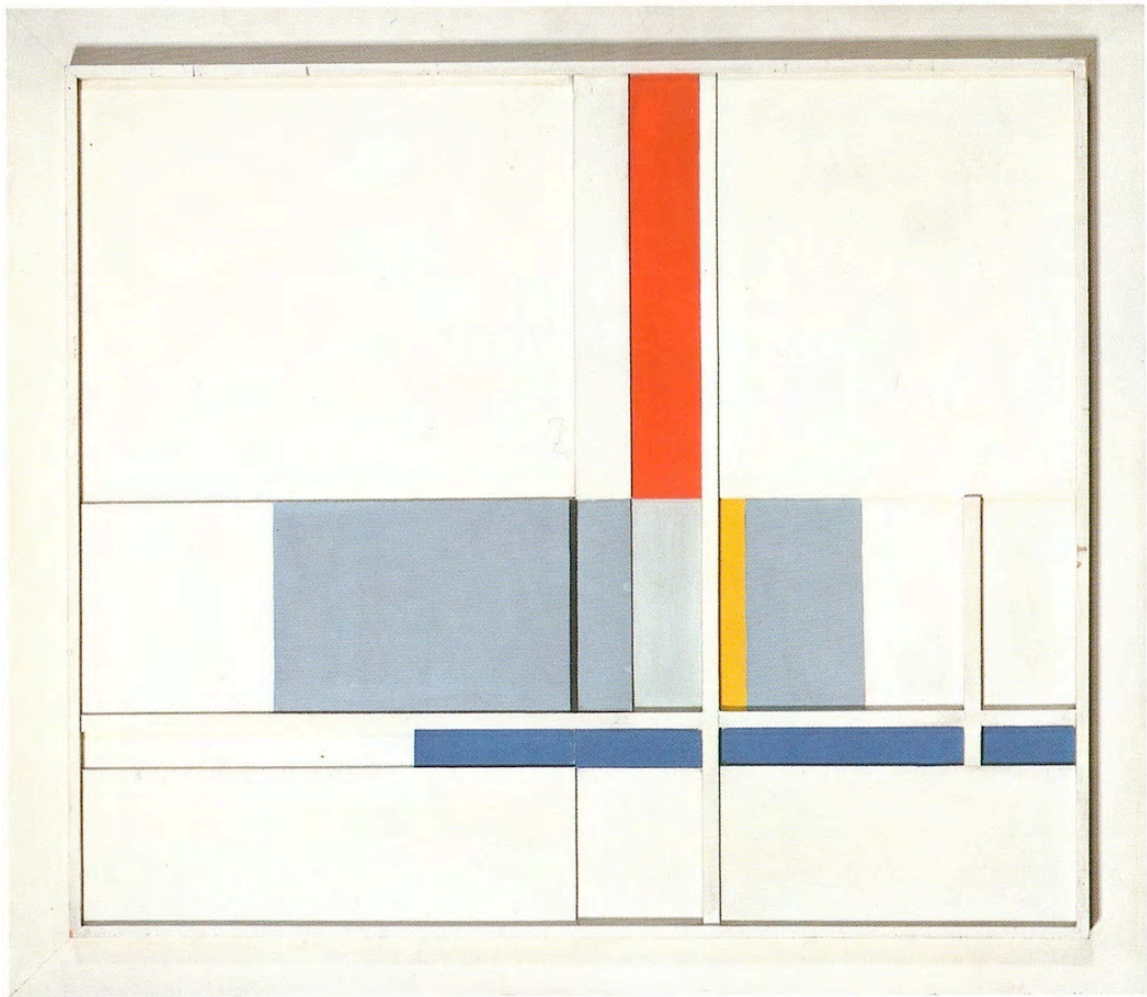


Figure 35. Jean Gorin, *Composition No. 8*, 1934. Oil on wood, 88 x 115 x 5 cm. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Liège.

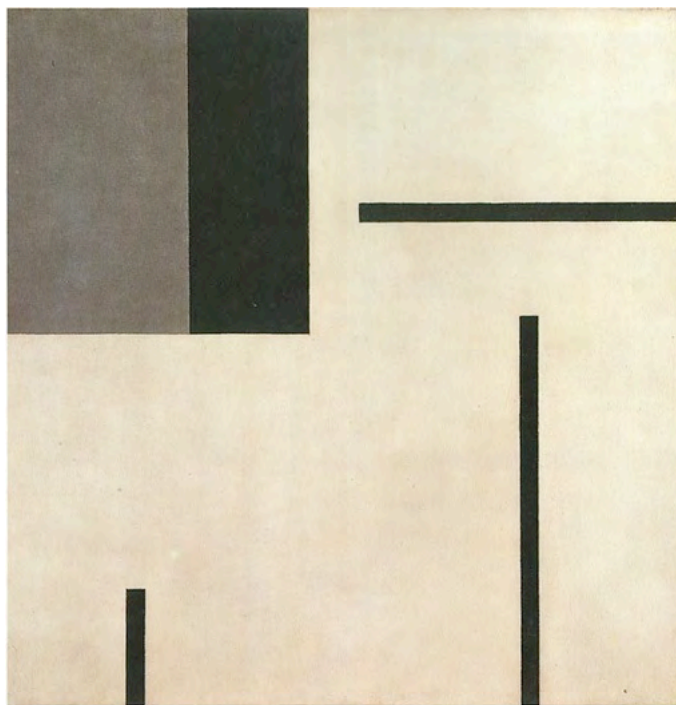


Figure 36. Jean Hélion, *Composition Ouverte*, 1930. Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm. Galerie Louis Carré, Paris.

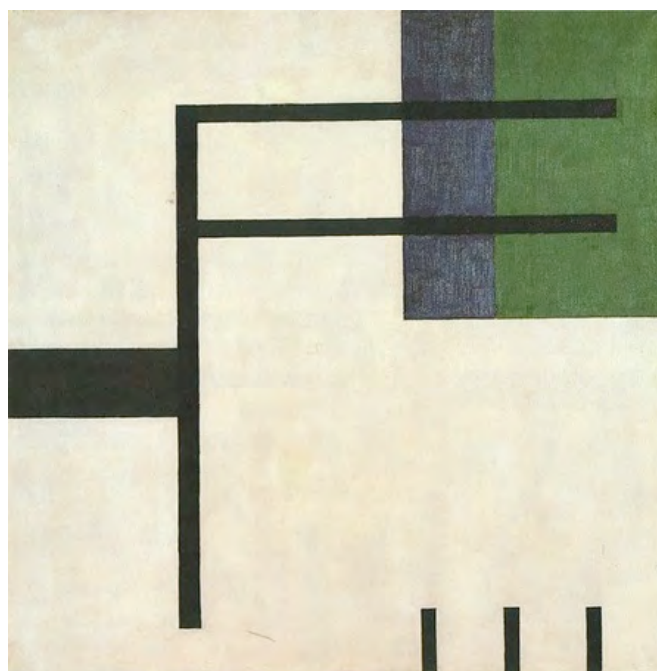


Figure 37. Jean Hélion, *Composition Ouverte*, 1930. Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm. Galerie Louis Carré, Paris.



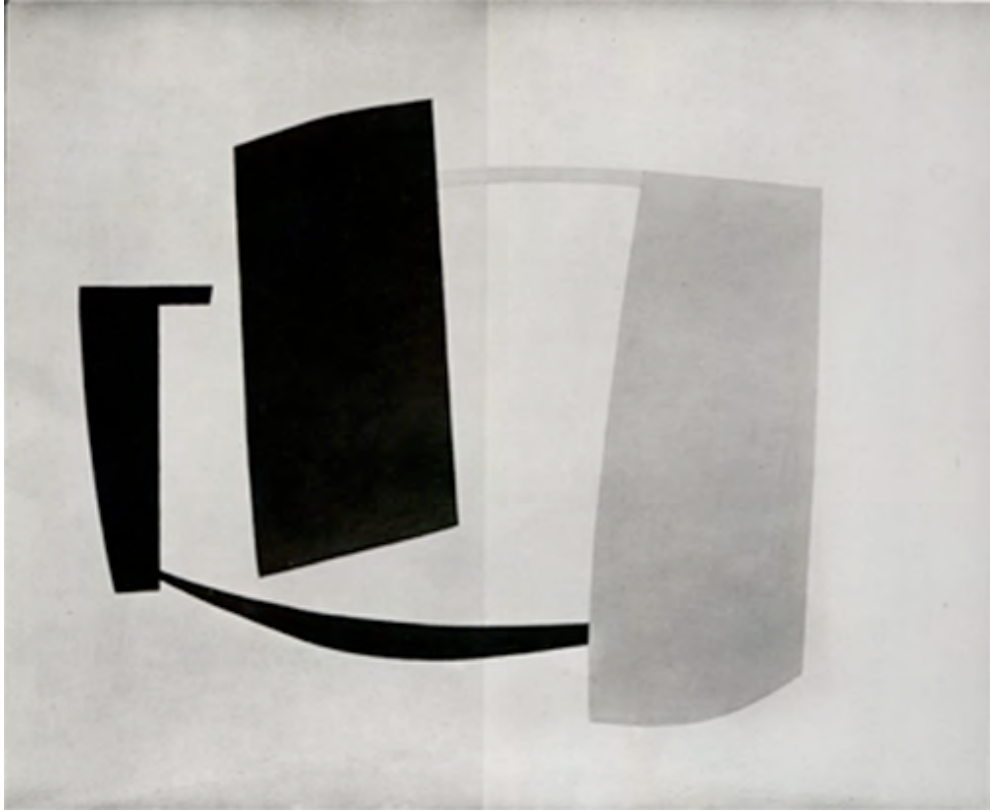


Figure 38. Jean Hélion, *Équilibre*, 1933. Oil on canvas, 65 x 81 cm. Private collection.



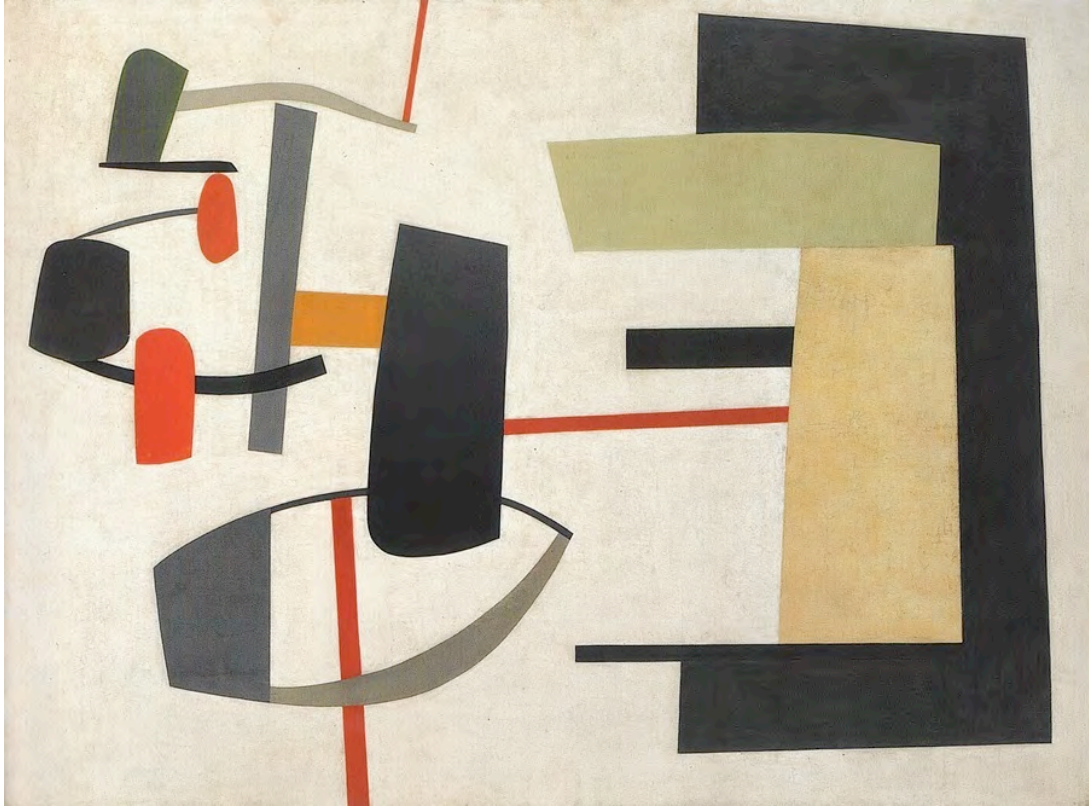


Figure 40. Jean Hélion, *Équilibre*, 1933-34. Oil on canvas, 97.4 x 131.2 cm. Peggy Guggenheim Collection, Venice.



Figure 41. Jean Hélion, *Figure bleue*, 1935-36. Oil on canvas, 145 x 99 cm. Musée de l'art moderne de la ville de Paris.



Figure 42. Fernand Léger, *Three Women (Le Grand Déjeuner)*, 1921. Oil on canvas, 183.5 x 251.5 cm. Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Figure 43. Jean Hélion, *Figure tombée*, 1939. Oil on canvas, 126.2 x 164.3 cm. Centre Pompidou, Musée national d'art moderne, Paris.

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