Lazar Markovich Lisitsky / El Lissitzky
b. 23 November 1890, Polschinok, district of Smolensk, Imperial Russia. Brought up in Vitebsk.
d. 30 December 1941, Krachavy, near Moscow, Soviet Union
The film of El’s Life  1928

Birth
My generation was born a couple of dozen years before the Great October Revolution [of 1917].

Ancestors
Several centuries ago our ancestors had the good fortune to make great discoveries.

Ourselves
We, the descendants of Columbus, are creating the age of the most splendid inventions. They have made our globe quite small but have enlarged space and lengthened time.

Sensations
My life is accompanied by never-before experienced sensations. When barely five years old [1895] the rubber tubes from an Edison phonograph are stuck in my ears. Aged eight [1898], I am running after the first tramcar in Smolensk. All the farm horses bolt out of town to escape this work of the devil. A few years on and there in Germany are Zeppelin air-bladders flying above my head and aeroplanes turning somersaults as they loop the loop. The tempo of my movement hither and thither increases day by day. Even now, when, as the result of a motor breaking down, I go on foot, I can see that in a few years’ time the present speed of a mere few hundred miles an hour will seem to us like a snail’s pace.

Compression of matter
My cradle was rocked by the steam engine. Since then it has steamed off to join the ichthyosaurs. Machines have ceased to have fat bellies full of entrails. Now is the time of the crammed skull of the dynamo with its electronic brain. Matter and spirit are transmitted direct into crankshafts which provide immediate motive power. Gravity and inertia are being overcome.

My eyes
Lenses and eye-pieces, precision instruments and reflex cameras, cinematographs which magnify or hold split seconds, Roentgen and X, Y, Z rays have all combined to place in my forehead 20, 2,0000, 200,000 very sharp, polished searching eyes.

1918
In Moscow in 1918 there flashed before my eyes the short-circuit which split the world in two. This single blow pushed the time we call the present like a wedge between yesterday and tomorrow. My efforts are now directed to driving the wedge deeper. One must belong on this side or on that – there is no mid-way.

Art
Today and everyday between lunch and five o’clock tea, libraries and museums are infected by the arts of every century and every corner of the earth. To conteract these bacilli from the age of the ichthyosaurs we have set our vaccine from the age of radio. Then our art was designated by the stupid word “abstract”. Are radio waves then “abstract” or “naturalistic”? I have fought against art for art’s sake and now I find that art has become the private concern of the aesthetes, the critics and the dilittantes. Once again, damnation!

Proun
The painter’s canvas was too limited for me. The connoisseur’s range of colour harmonies was too restricted; and I created the Proun as an interchange station between painting and architecture. I have treated canvas and wooden board as a building site which placed the fewest restrictions on my constructional ideas. I have used black and white (with flashes of red) as material substance and subject matter. In this manner it is possible to create reality which is clear to all.
The New Reality

New inventions which will enable us to move about in space in new ways and at new speeds will bring about a new reality. The static architecture of the Egyptian pyramids has been superseded – our architecture revolves, swims, flies. We are approaching the state of floating in air and swinging like a pendulum. I want to help discover and mould the form of this reality.

El Lissitzky Life • Letter • Texts
by Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers

Lissitzky Speaks 1932

Birth

Our generation was born in the last decade of the nineteenth century and called to the colours of an era which marked a new beginning in the history of mankind.

Ancestors

Necessity forced our ancestors several centuries ago to discover new regions of the globe for colonies. Reaction against the Czarist regime drove my father, an official in the Smolensk government, to America and from there back to the approved settlement area.

Technical equipment

We were brought up in the age of inventions. When five years old [1895] I heard Edison’s phonograph. When eight [1898] the first tramcar. When ten [1900] the first cinema – then airship, aeroplane, radio. Our feelings are equipped with instruments which magnify or diminish. European and American technology strives to provide more advanced equipment for our generation.

At twenty-four [1914] I received the diploma of an architectural engineer.

During the rise of socialism

After the first two years of severe illness – back in Moscow. I roll up my sleeves and start all kinds of useful work to meet the demands of “Today”. When household furnishings are necessary for daily life, then I teach in the faculty for furniture design and metalwork at Vkhutemas. [1925]

But if it is necessary to publicize at home and abroad the achievements of socialist culture and economy, I produce a new style of exhibition: in Moscow, Cologne, Stuttgart, Dresden and Leipzig. If it is necessary to provide recreational and cultural parks, then I become head of the planning office. If Meyerhold needs the stage settings for a new play, then I design the lay-out, transforming the whole interior architecture of the theatre with
its traditional picture-frame stage. (This was the basis for the new configuration of the Meyerhold Theatre). [See below, 1929]

Every piece of work I did was an invitation, not to make eyes at it but to take it as a spur to action, to urge our feelings to follow the general line of forming a classless society.

Continuation during the Second Five-year Plan

The October Revolution [of 1917] was the first youth of our generation’s creative activity. We know we can re-live that youth in the second Five-Year Plan. We are beginning to appreciate the new world of socialism as an accomplished fact. We believe that the elements in the chemical formula which expresses our activity – problem, invention and art – respond to the challenge of the age. It is possible that the element (art) is growing in size at the expense of problem and invention.

The molecular structure of the substance of socialism, whose first fifteen years of life in this new world has been experienced by every one of us, has been on the whole well strengthened. Our technical rearmament is recognized both in Europe and America.

Time will provide us with the energy to accomplish great works.

Information on the Work of the Book Artist  13 April 1941

1. Family name, Given name, Patronymic: Lissitzky, Lazar Markovich.
2. Date and Place of Birth: 10 (23 new style) November, 1890. Polschinok Station, Smolensk District.
3. Art Education. Which of your teachers or subsequent supervisors had particular influence on you in your work?
   I began to draw early on (in the lower forms of the Grammar School), and then I studied with friends. I can remember from age 15 onwards always being in a group of several people sharing the same artistic interests. We worked together and together forged our artistic worldview. My friendship with the late Malevich exerted a particularly deep influence on me. I graduated from an architecture institute abroad [Darmstadt]. I received my basic education in my wanderings through Europe – for example, I traversed Italy on foot in 1912 making sketches of it and studying it.
4. When did you do your first in book design? What acted as the real stimulus to your concentrating on book design? Do you work simultaneously in drawing, painting and engraving?
   I remember that the first book I did was in 1905 – it was a revolutionary almanach which I did on a typewriter in two copies. Drawings were my own. The text I did with a friend.
5. Which literary genre attracts you most from the point of view of artistic and polygraphical design?
   I have designed the most various things, but I'm more interested in the kind of comprehensive works which enable me to demonstrate my creativity at the editorial stage – when the material is being assembled.
6. Are there certain works which, from an artistic standpoint, lack a commission and publisher but which you would like to work on with particular interest?
   Our generation has set itself the aim of working precisely in accordance with commissions. But practice has shown that work of true artistic worth can be created only when the artist sets his own objective (the internal social commission). It would be a great pleasure for me to work on Mayakovsky, but where to find our palette, the modern, well-equipped printing house? Who will provide us with it?
7. Have you introduced any proposals for improvement or innovation in the art of polygraphy?
   Representatives of the modern printing industry and critics of the international press (Jan Tschichold), American, English and Dutch journals place me among the innovators of the art of modern book design.
1890 Born 23 November in Polschinok, district of Smolensk.

1909 Graduation from Smolensk Grammar School.

1909 Matriculation at the Polytechnic in Darmstadt. Education for graduated engineer (architect). Wandering through Europe, including Paris, I teach myself about the fine arts. I cover more than 1200 km in Italy on foot – making sketches and studying.

1912 My works are included for the first time in an exhibition of the St. Petersburg “Artists’ Union”.

1914 [August] Outbreak of World War 1; return to Russia.

1915 Diploma in architecture. I work with various architects as assistant.

1916-1917 Represented at art shows “World of Art” and “Knave of Diamonds”.

1917 Since the beginning of the Revolution member of the art commission. Creation of the first Soviet flag.

1917-1920 Jewish books.


1920 Plan for a tribune of the students’ collective (1924 renamed as Lenin tribune).

1921 Called to Moscow as head of the faculty of Architecture of the school “Vkhutemas”, the Russian “Bauhaus”. First constructivist exhibition “Obmokhu”. [Society of Young Artists, in May.]

1922 During a temporary stay in Berlin I publish together with the writer Ilya Ehrenburg the journal “Veshch”.

Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge
Vitebsk, 191

Reproduced in El Lissitzky and Hans Arp
Lenin Tribune, 1920.
The Isms of Art, 1924
1922-1923 I participate in the organization and creation of the First Soviet Art Exhibition in Berlin and Amsterdam.

During Majakovsky’s stay in Berlin I was asked to design his book “Dlia golosa” (For the Voice). It was recognized as the starting-point of a new kind of typography. I was appointed a member of the Gutenberg society. Temporary stay in Hanover. Here the first Kestner-Proun Portfolio and the portfolio “Victory Over the Sun” came into being. Late autumn serious illness, which required immediate treatment in Switzerland. Tuberculosis.

1924 In Brione near Locarno. Pneumothorax. In Brione were created: 1. “ABC”, essays on construction together with Mart Stam, Hans Schmidt, Emil Roth et al. 2. Issue of the Merz-Journal called “Nasci” together with Kurt Schwitters. 3. Layouts for “Pelikan” publicity, which are regarded as a guarantee for the granting of the cure. 4. The “Kunstismen” together with Hans Arp. 5. The essay “A and Pangeometry”. 6. The photographic self-portrait.
1925 With the technical help of Emil Roth the “Wolkenbügel” / Cloud Stirrup project is executed: a skyscraper on three posts planned for Moscow (illustrated for the first time on the front cover of Adolf Behne’s book “De moderne Zweckbau” (Practical Modern Construction). Order to leave Switzerland. In June back to Russia via Petrograd. Moscow: Professor for interior decoration and furniture at the Faculty of Woodwork and Metalwork at “Vhkuemas”.

On 20 June, Lissitzky writes to Sophie Küppers, in Hanover, saying, “Judging by a series of newspaper articles, I see that my Wolkenbügel is the answer to a whole set of problems which are of current importance in Moscow. When I exhibit it, it will make a great impression. I must now make a model whatever happens.” (In Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, El Lissitzky, p. 63.) The Wolkenbügel was never built.
1926 My most important work as an artist begins: the creation of exhibitions. In this year I was asked by the committee of the International Art Exhibition in Dresden to create the room of non-objective art and was sent there by “Voks” (the intermediary with countries abroad). After an educational trip, the new architecture in Holland being the subject, I returned to Moscow in the autumn.

From a letter to Ilya Chasnik, 6 November 1926:

“This summer in Dresden I did a hall for the International Exhibition. The press referred to it as the only Bolshevist work of art at the Exhibition. Herewith I enclose a photograph but there are some things in it which need explaining because the piece lives and moves. On paper you see it only as static. The result of all this was that I received a second commission to design a project according to the same principles for the modern art section at the Hanover museum. The museum is being built at the moment. I am waiting for photographs.” [In Galerie Gmurzynska, El Lissitzky, Cologne, 1976, p. 75]

1927 Polygraphical exhibition in Moscow. Layout for “Abstract Cabinet” in the Landes-Museum in Hanover on the request of Dr. [Alexander] Dorner [the Director].

[In January 1927, Sophie Küppers goes to Moscow where she and Lissitzky marry on 27 January.]
International Press Exhibition in Cologne. The foreign press praised the creation as a big achievement of Soviet culture. [See below, Press Reviews] For this pavilion I had designed a photomontage frieze which was 24 meters long and 3.5 meters wide. It became the model for all those gigantic montages and also the symbol for future exhibitions. For this work I received great congratulations from the state. Another part of my work at that time was the artistic and polygraphic creation of albums, journals etc.

PRESS REVIEWS

DIE WELT AM ABEND, Berlin, 25 May 1928
A visit of the individual exhibits and of the pavilion as a whole will give the viewer an idea of the tremendous results achieved during ten years of Soviet activity.

FREIHEIT, Dusseldorf, 26 May 1928
The Soviet pavilion at the “Pressa” is a peak achievement, unique in its imaginative content, and unique in the power of illustrative presentation.

ZEITUNGS-VERLAG, Berlin, 26 May 1928
The main topic of the exhibition concerns the contents of the press, its working methods and forms of expression, giving a highly interesting picture of the governmental and economic reorganisation in Russia in which the press plays a special part. This is followed by a group entitled “social life in the U.S.S.R.”. The activation of the masses by means of the press, self-administration, trade unions, auxiliary organisations, etc., and the participation of the press in elections, are shown as important factors. Interesting special features of the Soviet press are evident in a unique form of cooperation between the paper and its readers, as demonstrated by the appointment of press correspondents among labourers, farmers and army members, as well as in the arrangement of readers’ conferences, by editors’ visits to factories and villages, by the arrangement of opinion polls and inquiries, etc. These activities of the press are shown in special groups by means of examples.

GENERAL-ANZEIGER, Bonn, 26 May 1928
There can be no doubt that one of the most interesting sections is that of the Soviet Union, both as regards form and content. It deserves special and detailed study.

DER SONTAG, Cologne, 27 May 1928
No matter how much one may refute the ideological or economic implications, it must be acknowledged that the U.S.S.R. exhibition is one of the best items of Pressa.

DRESDNER NEUESTE NACHRICHTEN, Dresden, 1 June 1928
The department of the Soviet Republics, which was opened only a few days ago, is something of a sensation, a sensation because the means employed here are very clearly different from all others.
DER MITTAG, Dusseldorf, 2 June 1928

It is in the very nature of things that the revelation – from the exhibition point of view – of the new Soviet Union is of particular significance. The political aspects which are decisive in determining Russia's participation, as well as the efforts of the Soviet government, which cover a span of only ten years, have determined the fact that Russia is exhibiting items which go far beyond the framework of its press, throwing a characteristic spotlight on its internal governmental structure and on successful individual achievements. The problems of Russian life and form of government, the unsolved state of many problems, recede before the social achievements and facts on which the main attention has been focused in this exhibition.

In El Lissitzky, Galerie Gmurzynska Cologne, 1976

1929 Construction of the Soviet stand at the “Film und Foto” exhibition in Stuttgart. Theatre project. Reconstruction of the stage for [Sergei] Tretiakov's play, “I Want a Child”; the director was Meyerhold. [Plans finalised in 1932, but the theatre was not built.]

CONVERSATION BETWEEN V. MEYERHOLD AND THE ARCHITECT LISSITZKY

Moscow, 11 January 1930

Present: The theatre expert, V. Meyerhold, the architect Lissitzky, and the regisseur/experimenter P. Tsetnerovich.

The basic requirements which we should stipulate for a new theatre building must derive from the objective conditions of our time.

The word “art” should be thrown out of circulation. If Lenin were alive he would organise a “commissariat of everyday life”. Any action on stage is the demonstration of an organised idea, the demonstration of the “organisation of everyday life” or of its “negative aspect”, of how not to.

In previous times a play was performed and “beautiful” ballets were shown which showed beautiful steps, etc. (Fragonard and Watteau used the stage area as if it were a place for exhibiting big paintings.)

As far as we're concerned, our theatrical art wishes to be utilitarian – to show “what is needed and what is not”. So as not to caress the eye, we show an absence of decor. Hence arose the need for the installation – the construction. That is very pleasing because we live at a time of great technology. It is pleasing to watch the machine, the car, the thermo-generator, the hustle and bustle of the factory, etc.

But now to the main point:

If anyone were to ask me what the stage area should be I would reply: a floor, just like the deck of a ship (convenient for gymnastics). Wherever there is a machine,
cleanliness – “deckness” – must also be there. Sometimes we need slopes (in the floor). This requirement should be met but we should be able to get automatic slopes by the push of a button.

Secondly, we need extensive width on the sides.

Thirdly, the following point: the profile of the auditorium should be like an amphitheatre.

It is difficult for the actor to perform to different levels. He plays to the gallery and the parterre gets annoyed, and vice versa. The stage area should be arranged so that run-ons could be from any side – north, east, south, or west. There would be a major entrance from the auditorium, precisely, an entrance and not just an exit for the public. In that way, the audience will also be included in the action when the masses “surge” on to the stage.

We go one step more. The stage is arranged so that it is on the same level as the street. In this way we would be able to let cars, trams, cannons, horses, regiments, and demonstrations pass through. The stage would be constructed so soundly that even if a tank were to pass over it it would not collapse. The question of the revolving stage `- that’s nonsense, that’s for pavilions.

The revolving stage is rubbish and a good deal more than imperfect. The inside is taken up with the revolving apparatus. The underneath is packed out with machinery. But we need the underneath not for storing decor. We need it for transferring things from below through the traps, etc. We must gain depth under the auditorium, and height.

All the above has been formulated through practical work. This is not some H. G. Wells Time Machine but a yearning, a great yearning, for a theatre where we might work and achieve those objectives which we set ourselves.

In El Lissitzky, Galerie Gmurzynska Cologne, 1976

1930 I was appointed chief artist of the Soviet pavilion by the Ministry of Health for the International Health Exhibition in Dresden. At the same time I set up the Soviet section at the International Fur Exhibition “Ipa” in Leipzig on the request of Narkorn-Meschtorg (Ministry of the Fur Trade). Thus I became a pioneer of the artistic construction of our exhibitions abroad with their new political responsibility. In the following years I was asked continually to participate in our important exhibitions.

Cover of catalogue of Soviet Pavilion International Hygiene Exhibition Dresden, 1930

Cover of catalogue of International Fur Trade Exhibition (IPA) Leipzig, 1930
As of 1931
I was chief artist-architect at the permanent architectural exhibition in the park of culture “Gorki”. But with the years, with my failing health, less and less strength is left for the realisation of big exhibitions and similar works.


1934 I was appointed chief artist for the agricultural exhibition of the Soviet Union. I fought against the mistakes of my predecessors and resigned. Then, while I was still in the sanatorium I undertook the creation of the main pavilion. The construction of the main hall still bears my imprint until today. I succeeded in working out a project for the museum exhibition of the “Narkomat: for social security. “Soviet Subtropics”. Editor M. Kolzov (Ogonjok Publishers).


1936 Album and large portfolio for the Food Industry (Za Industrialisazia Publishers).


1941 The last exhibition work was for Vnesh-torga (Department of Foreign Trade): the Soviet pavilion at Beograd. Although ready to be shipped the exhibition had to be left in Moscow. War. The Germans were in Beograd [June 22].
As from 1932

I was permanent collaborator as book-artist for the journal “USSR in Construction”. Layout for particularly complicated issues such as “Dneprostroi”, Tcheluskin, “Red Army”. A special volume consisted of four issues, which were dedicated to the Constitution. The editorial office received approving letters from among others: Lion Feuchtwanger, Heinrich Mann, Martin Andersen-Nexö. I designed posters some of which are illustrated in journals at home and abroad. I wrote about questions on Art and Architecture and also some books. Many newspapers all over the world reported on my works. Presently, while I am ignoring my serious illness, I still hope to be able to create something for the 25th Anniversary of the October Revolution.

June 1941

Postscript:

During the months before the 30th December 1941, the day Lissitzky died, a large poster “For Peace” (the original is lost) was being designed and also the poster “Give us more tanks” (which was printed). Even the night before his death, Lissitzky had left a plan on his little notepad, but I have not been able to decipher it.

Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers

Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers & El Lissitzky,
Pressa, Cologne, 1928

Compiled by Patricia Railing
Elena Semenova, “From My Reminiscences of Lissitzky”
An Interview with Symon Bojko, Moscow, January 1976

Elena Semenova studied at the
Moscow Vkhutemas and then was a member of LEF.
She went on to design a number of exhibitions and interiors.

Lissitzky did the design for the Soviet Pavilion at the Cologne exhibition, Pressa. He was in charge of all the preparations and the on-spot assembling. There were many, many artists involved in the realisation of the design. After Lissitzky had told us what he had in mind for each section of the exhibition, he gave each of us individual tasks. It was my job to do the press section.

We set to work in the building of what is now Gum. This had originally been built as a wholesale goods market and as a place for exhibiting examples of wares. There were huge passage-ways and great heights in the building so we were able to assemble and set up the stands there.

We learnt a great deal from Lissitzky. His artistic direction was also ours, i.e., the Soviet avant-gardes. We were able to work with a supervisor who understood us – and we understood him, too. It was thanks to Lissitzky that we had the chance of seeing and working with real, imported materials. This was the first time that we laid hands on plexiglass or that we used good quality coloured paper, good quality paints which didn’t alter their colours, and grey factory-dyed pasteboard which could take oil, tempera or whatever. This was the first time that we were able to concentrate on objects (for the exhibition) which would revolve and move: to involve ourselves not with a dead spectacle but with dynamics. For example, we had moving surfaces, montages, newspapers and revolving panels which showed one thing on one side, something else on the other. Alexander Naumov [1899-1928, also a Vkhutemas student.] designed such a stand with revolving semi-cylinders and with the picture of a Red Army soldier. Because of the general conditions of those days we were unable to complete the mechanical aspect of the exhibition and Lissitzky did it in Cologne. Even with a simple thing like ball bearings it was an awful problem for us. Besides, we didn’t have any experts in mobile advertising.

Lissitzky was the kind of artist who poses very pointed questions in art. He always puts things in sharp relief and was rather outspoken. He possessed an intractable character and as for bosses and petty tyrants who demanded that he do this or that their way he was very hard to get on with. He was not easy to work with because he never made concessions and never allowed compromises. In Moscow he did not maintain close contact either with artists or with architects. He was not even a member of the Union of Architects. His circle of friends was small but it included the [Sergei] Tretiakov family and Dziga Vertov [the filmmaker]. This can also be explained by his illness. He contracted tuberculosis very early in life and the disease gradually worsened. Strictly speaking, he was a sick man all his life.

This was the Lissitzky I came into contact with during the last years of his life when we were organising the exhibition commemorating the tenth anniversary [1940] of Mayakovsky’s death [in 1930]. Alexander Vesnin was appointed artist-in-charge. Lissitzky was invited as a consultant and one of the sections was entrusted to me, [Anton] Lavinsky and [Grigori] Miller. In connection with this we used to visit Lissitzky at home because, as a result of his illness, he was no longer able to move about physically. At that time, Lissitzky lived on the outskirts of Moscow in the village of Krachavy near the Preobrazhenskaya Gate with his wife and little boy. They had a small wooden house. It was well designed and the inside was faced with wood. This is where Sofia Christianovna ruled. She had established a very strict regime. When we arrived we were informed that we would be allowed to talk to the sick man for an hour and then, after a break, to continue for another half hour. Lissitzky was then already seriously ill and it was thanks only to the extraordinary atmosphere created in that house that he was able to go on working until his very last days.

In Galerie Gmurzynska, El Lissitzky, Cologne, 1976.
SOURCES


