Space Cadets: imaginary trajectories in Lissitzky’s *Pressa* installation

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This paper looks at “imagination” through an investigation of the nature of “imaginary” space in El Lissitzky’s 1925 text “A. and Pangeometry”. In this text Lissitzky draws from mathematics to distinguish “planimetric” and “perspective” constructions of space from “irrational” and ultimately “imaginary” spatial constructs. The latter, for Lissitzky, are central to suprematism, where the picture plane is exploded beyond the two-dimensional glassed surface and outwards into real space. The mathematical constraints of planimetric and perspective space become the liberating and emancipatory contradictions exploited in the construction of imaginary space. This collapse of the figure-ground—a primary symptom of the spatial explorations of the historical avant-garde—and the privileging of time (also characteristic of the period) is entwined in Lissitzky’s theory as the consumption of A. (art) by F. (form). To summarise his premise, F (form) will be achieved primarily through the abolition of A. (art) and especially through the eradication of A.’s dependence on monumentality and eternity at the expense of temporality.

Lissitzky’s thinking on imaginary space will be applied to his hybrid installation for the Soviet Pavilion at the International Press Exhibition [*Internationale Presse-Austellung Pressa*] in Cologne from 1928. In this installation and catalogue, the primary spatial theories of “A. and Pangeometry” are explored through a rigorous restructuring of space and medium. The fragmentation of space and the image that occurs in *Pressa* has both spatial and historical significance, foreshadowing the role of the “imaginary” in the broader context of the historical avant-garde and repositioning Lissitzky’s work in a broader theoretical spectrum of innovations in art, architecture and theories of space.
Space Cadets

Writing of Lissitzky’s design in the 1928 Soviet Pavilion at the International Press Exhibition in Cologne, George Baker writes:

There was a project—for it was no longer a “work”—that would occupy in every way the space of the between [...]. It was a form called into being by the claims of new audiences, offering new modes of reading, new forms of cultural distribution. [...] Lissitzky’s Pressa design was a form that had reached its telos, achieved its brief destiny.¹

The Pressa installation has been disproportionately positioned within the recent history of the avant-garde. Its idiosyncratic spatial and textual structure, and the hybridisation of media that contributed to its unique and unprecedented form have been singled out by scholars of the historical avant-garde as worthy not only of attention but historisation, marking the shifting of aesthetic paradigms and the emergence, however subtly of a new tactic of spatial representation. Baker, like Benjamin Buchloh², T. J. Demos³ and other American critics, position Pressa as a seminal moment, redefining the boundaries of avant-garde experimentation and innovation. It is within this context that a broader taxonomy of space can be unraveled.

Characteristic of the 1920s experimentations with suprematism in the Soviet Union was a detailed investigation of “space” which was characterised by the emphasis on composition, abstraction and tectonics that structured both the 2-dimensional and 3-dimensional production of the period. The theorisation of space in suprematism, led by the creative but misaligned juggernauts Lissitzky, Malevitch and Rodchenko⁴, privileged space as a critical and theoretical dilemma that was worthy not only of investigation, but scientific rationalisation and creative discipline.

Underpinning this was a united faith that architecture, if mobilized in the right direction, would underpin all aspects of revolutionary life, not only articulating an innovative new spatial and architectural language, but also a social and political structure upon which a society could be grafted. Referring to Tallin’s Monument to the Third International, Lissitzky described the work as “the efforts of the new architecture to loosen up volumes and to create spatial interpenetration between outside and inside”⁵ while at the same time dismantling established notions of architecture and the values that it adheres to.

One primary characteristic of these investigations into space is the open-ended categorisations through which space is continually subjected, either through medium (space is a painting; space is a book); taxonomy (rational space versus architectural space) or history (old versus new). This wayward wandering, where space is foreshadowed in almost all creative production of the period, has been problematic in more recent historical accounts of the 1920s which seek to align the creative streams of suprematism within the broader social and historical project of the avant-garde.

Peter Bürger’s Theory of the Avant Garde⁶ is an often cited example which tends to locate these strategies as part of a broader historical project to dismantle the art object and connect art with the processes of life. Bürger’s theory hinges on the relationship between art and life and, most famously, the role of autonomy in mediating the political and social pressures that underpin avant-garde art. While primarily concerned with Dada and Surrealism, Bürger’s Theory of the Avant-Garde drew on constructivism, and in particular the role that it played in privileging collage as a radical technique of the historical avant-garde. In a footnote to the second chapter, Bürger writes

a common feature of all these movements is that they do not reject individual artistic techniques and procedures of early art, but reject that art in its entirety, thus bringing about a radical break with tradition”.⁷

Bürger’s critique of the “neo-avant-garde” flowing directly from his appraisal of the historical avant-garde, was that they employed the tactics of the original but in an emasculated and depoliticised form. This was especially typified in the works of American pop-artists such as Robert Rauschenberg and Jasper Johns, among others. The inherent categorisation of work and media (painting, sculpture, writing, collage) is inherent within this thesis, neglecting the theoretical/critical trajectories that were underpinning it or the social and political conditions that were supporting it. This has been partly argued by both Buchloh and Hal Foster who see these connections as overly historised and insufficiently contextualised. These strategies of decategorisation were later conigrated in the already heavily trammeled critical space between constructivism and deconstructivism, which has already been the subject of a vast and expanding literature in architectural theory.¹⁰

This paper will investigate the dematerialisation of space that occurs in two profound moments in Lissitzky’s creative life: firstly, through the positioning of an “imaginary” category in his taxonomy of space developed in “A. and Pangeometry”; and secondly through his design of the Soviet Pavilion at the International Press Exhibition (Pressa) exhibition which problematised the categorisations of space and radicalised its implementation. Distinguished from planimetric space, perspective space and irrational space, in Lissitzky’s description, “imaginary space” is characterized by its cinematic nature where concrete forms are transformed through motion and transience. It was through the Pressa installation and accompanying catalogue that Lissitzky was able to dematerialise space and form, rewriting, in the process, the spatial boundaries of the avant-garde and opening a complex web of theoretical ideas about space that have opened outwards ever since. Lissitzky’s work, like the broader suprornetist and constructivist projects in general, invites an investigation into space and imagination.

Imaginary Space (i)

In 1925 El Lissitzky penned a text for an almanac of European art being prepared by notorious avant-gardists Carl Einstein and Paul Westheim.¹¹ Titled “Art[A], and Pangeometry”, Lissitzky’s piece reads as an anthology of space, wading through “planimetric space”, “perspective space”, and “irrational space” before arriving at “imaginary space”. With an affectionate noder to Dada, Lissitzky recounts with fondness the dismantling of the status of the art object in the immediate post-war culture of Zurich, quoting both Grosz and Arp at their nihilistic extremes.¹² Lissitzky refers throughout his essay heavily to the categories of art and form, abbreviated, respectively to “A.” and “F.” Lissitzky’s language is scientific, as though searching throughout the text for a formula that can explain the connection between the two. Lissitzky writes

A. resembles a chemist’s graduated glass. Each age contributes its own quantity [...] thus A. is an invention of the mind ie. A complex, where rationality is fused with imagination, the physical with the mathematical , the v1 with the V-1 [...]. Parallels between A. and mathematics must be drawn very carefully, for any overlap is fatal for A.”¹³

82
That Lissitzky privileges architecture over painting is already well known. However this historicisation of a transferal from painting to architecture is significant, not only underpinning Lissitzky's theory of space in "A. and Pangeometry" but also the historical conditions through which it was investigated. Lissitzky reduces the planimetric and perspectival spaces to static and inflexible systems of organisation that had inadequately incorporated the technological evolutions of the 20th Century.

This is all prefigured in Lissitzky's discussion of "Irrational Space" which opens up questions of the broader context for suprematism, which he argues provides an avenue for mathematician beyond the controlling planes of perspective. If perspective space is governed by mathematical principles and order, then irrational space is premised on their collapse, embracing the mathematical contradictions that Lissitzky sees as endemic to complexity. In difference to perspective space, which is always anchored to the picture plane, Lissitzky writes, continuing the quasi-mathematical language

Suprematist [irrational] space can be formed in front of the surface as well as in depth. If one assigns the value 0 to the picture surface, then one may call the depth direction — (negative) and the frontal direction + (positive), or vice versa. Thus suprematism has swept away the illusion of three-dimensional space on a plane, replacing it by the ultimate illusion of irrational space with attributes of infinite extensibility in depth and foreground.

For Lissitzky, this transaction where the perspective plane is extended in both directions to infinity opens up a new spatial conundrum of the imaginary. The possibility of irreconcilable differences in mathematics is a source of considerable interest to Lissitzky, enabling space to move beyond the 3-dimensional limits of its rationalization into a realm of complexity and impossibility. Lissitzky concludes that "in mathematics has created a "new thing": imaginary (imaginary—not real, assumed) numbers" where, for instance "the square root of the negative of 1 is an imaginary thing called i/\sqrt{-1} = i."

The "i" in Lissitzky is significant, not only embodying the impossibility of mathematics and the collapse of logic, but constituting the fourth (and, in the 1920s, still evolving) categorization of space, which escapes the mathematical and formulaic confines altogether, integrating temporal and spatial dimensions into composition and the experience of space. The movement into an "imaginary" spatial environment is evidently conditioned by the 1920 technological environment where Lissitzky's theory was produced, mirroring the evolution of cinematic techniques that were being popularized and disseminated at the time.

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[the space of our physical and perceptual environment is three-dimensional. It is quite impossible for any one of us to meander up, down, right or left in time, our time is one dimensional.] However it is the interaction between the spatial and temporal "species" that enables the opening up of imaginary space and its necessity as a category beyond the "irrational". Lissitzky writes, in their vital quest for the enlargement of F. in A, a number of modern artists—including some of my friends—believe that they can build up multidimensional real spaces that may be entered without an umbrella, where space and time have been combined into a mutually interchangeable single whole. When describing the spatial characteristics of "Imaginary Space" Lissitzky's language moves away from the mathematical certainties of the previous categories into a speculative and a conceptual tone. While he defers to mathematics its originary explanation—"a recurring motion having a frequency of less than 1/sec, gives the impression of constant motion"—Lissitzky makes it clear that the boundaries of this new conception of space are both ill-defined and transitory. Lissitzky writes

[the infinitely variegated effects that may be achieved by the F. of imaginary space can already be sensed, to a limited extent, even today. The whole range of all of our visual capacities may thus be brought into play. To name a few: stereoscopic effects of motion by passage through coloured media; colour impressions produced by superimposition of chromatic clusters of light rays as the result of polarization, etc.; the transformation of acoustic phenomena into visual form. We can safely predict that every day life will borrow widely from these A. achievements.]

In this sense, the writing of Lissitzky begins to skirt the applied theory of Bürger, suggesting a role for the avant-garde (the "A.") in reformulating the conditions of everyday life. However, more fundamentally for Lissitzky, this results in the opportunity for the fragmentation, and potential dematerialisation, of form, "F." (rather than the proselytizing of "A."). Thinking clearly of the opportunities to dismantle the "shop-window" exhibition design strategies that were being radically revised across Europe by the various waves of avant-gardism, Lissitzky posits a spatial experience that transcends the "glass" of the cabinet and extends it infinitely into physical space. Lissitzky's conception of irrational space, where objects are arrayed three-dimensionally across an infinite interior turns the figure-ground nexus into a potential battlefield of complexity, where visual, spatial and tectonic elements are organized internally and under the enveloping label of F (form).

However the formulation of imaginary space reaches its height as a critique of the rational modes of planimetric and perspective space. Lissitzky clearly positions the future of space as a trajectory away from stability, towards transitory, dematerialized and hybridized models of spacial experience which are not only different to, but fundamentally opposed to, the existing categorizations of space. In an important passage, Lissitzky writes

the most important aspect of this development is the fact that this A.-F. will be accompanied by the destruction of the old A. notion of monumentality. Even today the opinion still prevails that A. must be something created for eternity: indestructible, heavy, massive, curved in granite, cast in bronze—the Cheops Pyramid [...] We are now producing work which in its overall effect is essentially intangible. Lissitzky describes this critical journey from the "planimetric/perspectival" to the "imaginary" collapse of space
as, paradoxically, a "nonmaterial materialism". The categorization itself suggests obliquely that the future of spatial experience will be driven by F., rather than A., but also by innovations in experience rather than geometry or substance. Already predicting the role that installation and exhibition design would have on his immediate creative life, Lissitzky's text locates, predictably, the most advanced evolution of imaginary space in the transitory space of the exhibition. He evokes the Eiffel Tower as an evocation of this, arguing that "the Eiffel Tower is not monumental, for it was not built for eternity but as an attraction for a world fair; no solid masses, but a pierced space needle".

In this sense, Lissitzky's taxonomy of space onds with the predicted disintegration of space, mobilized in the direction of the non-architectural mediums of cinema and exhibition and stripped entirely from the concrete and tectonic characteristics that defined the inventive language of suprematism. If the space of the "Imaginary" is defined by this intangible, temporal flux that Lissitzky foresees in "A. and Pangometry" as its immediate trajectory, it was through the design of exhibition spaces that this was ultimately explored. The series of exhibitions that Lissitzky undertook in the years immediately following the "A. and Pangometry" text were all successive departures from the concrete nature of space. Each witnessed the incremental departure of space from the concrete certainties of the plan, hounded into ever more divergent forms; from the interior, to the cabinet, to the catalogue, to the text. The Pressa exhibition, as the final mutation of space through which this "Imaginary" was chased, is significant, comprising at once the origin and the endgame of Lissitzky's efforts to unite "F." and "A." It is demonstrative both of the complexity and originality of Lissitzky's work, which relieves categorization at the same time as it promotes it. It also embodies a number of the most critical aspects of the "Imaginary space" that Lissitzky aspires to.

The Pressa exhibition

Lissitzky was living in the Soviet Union when he was invited to become the chief designer for the Soviet Pavilion at the International Press Exhibition [Internationale Presse-Ausstellung Pressea] in 1928 in Cologne. Cologne, perhaps inadvertently was already heavily associated with avant-garde shock tactics, hosting, the early Dada forays of Max Ernst and Johannes Baargeld who had already accidently arrived and stayed there on their northward flight from Zurich. Lissitzky had a number of connections in Germany, and had lived there continuously from 1921 to 1925. In Germany, he had already completed his "Proun Room" for the Great Art Exhibition in Berlin (1923); his "Room for Constructivist Art" in Dresden in 1926 and his "Abstract Cabinet" in 1927.

The Pressa commission had come in the wake of Lissitzky's successful curating of the Union Polygraphic pavilion in Moscow as part of the All-Union Printing Trades Exhibition. Housed in an unpretentious timber pavilion in the Gorky Park of Rest and Culture the design, as can be witnessed in Gustav Klutsis 1927 photograph sits crudely in the ramshackle shell of the building, clearly differentiating itself from its ramshackle envelope and using sliding and shifting architectonic planes to create a kind of orthogonal labyrinth. Following the success of this exhibition—his wife Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers speculates that over 100 000 people attended the pavilion during its short life—Lissitzky was selected to prepare plans for the overall design of the Soviet Pavilion at Pressa. The commission coincided with the start of the first Five Year Plan (1928-1932) in the Soviet Union, which initiated a widespread programme of reform in the Soviet Union and dramatically reshaped industry and agriculture as well as, indirectly, culture and politics.

Lissitzky's ability to quickly, cheaply and effectively organize the All-Union Printing exhibition had a major role in his being selected as the architect for Pressa which also, inadvertently changed the course of his career. However the political and bureaucratic aspects that underpin the Pressa commission are insignificant when compared with the spatial tactics and architectural innovations that were first deployed there. For an artist/architect obsessed with the graphic and compositional characteristics of architecture, Pressa was a major evolution, where the lines originally inscribed on a page unfolded into 3-dimensional space and then backwards into the immutably produced catalogue that became the legacy of the exhibition and the iconic and often reproduced image. The pavilion comprised a large constructed space, organized in zones that required the visitor to circulate through the space three-dimensionally while focusing their visual attention centrally in concentrated areas. Lodder describes how the pavilion aimed to show various aspects of Soviet life and the tasks facing the press in educating the masses. This compilation of images was accompanied by a structure representing the rollers of printing machines to which were affixed the various types of images it produced. This already pointed towards a choice of descriptive photographs utilised without the addition of any elements other than typographical.

The exhibition was celebrated at the time for the "spatialisation" of montage, to such an extent that the architecture was effectively engaged in creating surfaces upon which images, generally collaged were applied. Positioning the work of Lissitzky in the broader context of Schwitters and Duchamp, T.J Demos describes the Pressa exhibition as the "spatialisation of collage" where, reinforcing the principles of "imaginary space" that Lissitzky outlined, the exhibitions aim to dismantle traditional models of spectatorship. Demos writes:

By encouraging mobile and varied physical interactions with their displays [...] these projects created zones of perceptual activation that challenged conventional modes of viewership. Rather than reproduce the conditions of passive spectatorship that were understood to typify the traditional museum experience, Lissitzky's designs promoted the revolution of perception along with the perception of revolutionary propaganda, both directed towards the political unification of its mass audience.

Central to this technique was the photofrize which Lissitzky compiled with Sergei Sinkin entitled, "The education of the masses is the main task of the Pressa in the transitional period from capitalism to communism". As Ulrich Pohlmann has illustrated, the technique of compiling such a large image was not unique to the Soviet pavilion, or this time period in general. It was a favourite technique since the 1900s. What was significant was the use of montage that Lissitzky employed which dismantled the popular panoramic perspective traditionally applied and deliberately fragmented the inherent realism of the printed image. Constructed from a variety of press images, including portraits and cropped images of crowds the frieze was reproduced by Lissitzky in the form of a fold out catalogue, that reproduced the rhythms of the architecture in folded in print. In both instances the nature of architectural space is problematised; blurred by the surfacing techniques that are used to disguise it and the folding process that reproduces and encloses it.
However, despite the rich strands of scholarship that remain unexplored in regards to the Pressa exhibition, it is to the context of Lissitzky’s “A. and Pangeometry” that the paper will now turn. When Lissitzky positioned, three years earlier, a scenario where *monumentality* in art would be consumed by form he was already conscious of the important role that the spectacle would play in shaping this new aesthetic experience. For Lissitzky, the *experience* of space would ultimately consume its physical or material properties and the temporal nature of programme would become fluid and dynamic. In Pressa the image itself replaces the architectural substance of the space, outlining it both visually and spatially. Lissitzky himself admitted that *artistically it remains an unsatisfying achievement, as the haste and lack of time violates the plans and necessary completion of the form, and then it ends up being stage scenery.*

Lissitzky posits the “imaginary space” in his text as a cathartic moment in the history of space where space itself is no longer chained to geometry but freed to engage notions of movement, temporality and cinema. What Lissitzky didn’t predict was the sheer monumentality of the image which, tied to the dissolution of physical space, could be reproduced and distributed with extraordinary speed and precision. Architecture, in this setting, had become transient, reduced to the status of the event, while the art object, reviled by the avant-garde, had become replicated and adulterated through reproduction. The history of architecture, at this moment, becomes bound to the history of the image and “F.” in the currency of Lissitzky has become “A.” in an albeit emaciated form. The kind of complexities and impossibilities that had originally inspired Lissitzky in his conception of “imaginary space” were, in the space of three years, turned to the fragmented reality of the 2-dimensional image. The “imaginary” nature of experience was reduced to a visual and static “F.” plastered to a heroically monumental “A.”

The distillation of Lissitzky’s theory, brilliantly executed (both technically and aesthetically) in the seductive visual saturation of Pressa articulates a deeper crisis or undercurrent that underpins the historical avant-garde and the more recent theoretical trajectories that have positioned it. Nowhere is this more relevant than in the recent dialogues regarding the historical avant-garde which go to lengths to depict its authenticity when juxtaposed with the 1960s neo-avant-garde of American capitalism. The critical urge to proselytize the historical avant-garde against the wallpaper aesthetic of pop art neglects that, on numerous occasions, the trajectory of the historic avant-garde was proudly and deliberately in that direction. These trajectories were never complicit in a broader historical programme, but uniquely and dramatically independent: specific strategies tailored to unique and individual cultural and political circumstances. It is only through this repositioning of these strategies within a broader avant-garde history (and theorization) of space that the aesthetic significance of Pressa can be appended. Rather than constituting, as Baker posits, a “revolutionary telos and brief destiny”26, the Pressa exhibition was the cathartic battlefield between “A.” and “F.”—art and form—where rather than signifying resolution or closure, it signified the expanded role that architecture would adopt in the ongoing avant-garde synthesis of geometry and form.

Endnotes

4 While outside the context of this paper, for a detailed description of the experiences with space that Rodchenko undertook see: Alexander Rodchenko, Spatial Constructions (Cologne: Hatje Cantz, 2002); see also Maria Gough, “In the Laboratory of Constructivism: Karl loganson’s Cold Structures” October, 84 (Spring, 1990): 90-117.
7 Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, p. 106, n. 4.
13 Lissitzky quotes (without reference) Arp —art is “magic crap”— and Grosz—“we made one single mistake which is to take art seriously in the first place”— as well as Malevich—art has been removed from its holy pedestal “while spitting on its altar”. El Lissitzky, “A. and Pangeometry”, p. 142. The references to Dada may also be out of respect for Einstein’s strong affiliations with the movement.
15 El Lissitzky, Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution, p.29.
16 Having shown a series of books and photos to Alfred Barr on his visit to Russia in the 1920s, Barr looking for paintings, was told Lissitzky “only painted when he had nothing else to do... and that was never, never.” Quoted in Benjamin Buchloh, “From Faktura to Faktography”, October 30 (Autumn, 1984): 84.
26 For the 1920 exhibition held in Cologne in the Winter Brewery, entitled “Dada Early Spring” see; Georges Hugnet, “The Dada Spirit in Painting” in Motherwell ed., The Dada Painters and Poets, p. 161.
27 The title of Klutsis photograph is “View of the All-Union Printing Trades Exhibition, Moscow 1927”. In the foreground is El Lissitzky’s Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge. For a reproduction of the print see: Margarita Tupitsyn, El Lissitzky: Beyond the Abstract Cabinet (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), p. 27.
33 As Lodder writes:
the image juxtaposed elements of reality, according to their significance for subject without regard for their natural proportions, and traditional perspectival relationships...making it possible to incorporate different viewpoints, themes and subjects within the scope of one composite image, almost as a type of motionless moving picture