

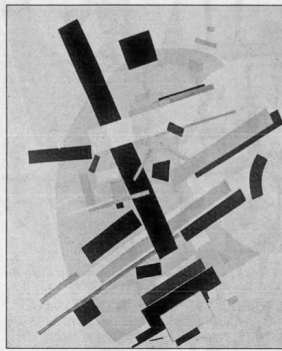
back to the Futurists

ther by the Barbican exhibition eloquently titled *New Art for a New Era*, with the sub-title Malevich's Vision of the Russian Avant-Garde. As Wolfgang Fischer said of his 1974 exhibition, *Tatlin's Dream* could as well have been Malevich's *Dream* — and now it is. It hardly matters who is the first among these equals, for the overriding impression is of artists working together, nourishing each other in the chaotic fervour of the moment from which Suprematist and Constructivist art emerged. It is now time for definitions.

Suprematism came first. Launched by Malevich in 1915 with a manifesto he defined it as art that rejected all reference to natural appearances, that expressed only non-objective sensation, served no purpose, was slave to no state or religion, had no emotional content and was restricted in form to elementary geometrical shapes of which the square was most pure and perfect — White Square on a White Ground was its sublime manifestation.

SOVIET Constructivism (which was distinct from pan-European Constructivism and must not, in spite of close parallels and common members, be confused with it) was an ideology that grew from Suprematism and of which the concept was clear some five years later: the term was in general use by 1921. It developed from Tatlin's beliefs, in which real materials were said to create their own space, depth and perspective, and from Leonid Brezhnev's doctrine of "the culture of materials" by which any suitable material could be exploited for its character and properties. This can hardly have been intelligible to the populace of Leningrad, yet the Constructivists were fanatical in their belief that art must contribute to the betterment of a socialist society and that their art was to be the art of Socialist reconstruction.

Vladimir Mayakovsky, Bolshevik poet and propagandist, put it neatly for them when he proclaimed: "We do not need a dead museum of art where dead works are worshipped, but a living factory of the human spirit — in the streets, in the tramways, workshops and workers' homes." "The distinction between artist and worker was to be destroyed and the artist was to turn his hand to practical matters, to the design of typography, furniture, clothing, ceramics, textiles and popular theatre. It was at this point that Russian artists who could not accept the thesis that art must be based on utilitarian principles began to leave the country. These definitions are broad, but the subtle distinctions between Suprematism and Constructivism, their overlaps, complexities,



Squaring the circle: Suprematism No 58 (1915-1916) by Kasimir Malevich

shifts of emphasis and sheer stupids over a very short period, require exegesis of book length — and a very boring book it would be. There is a general rule of art history that when theory precedes art the consequence is tedium, if not disaster; art can survive the posthumous application of theory — if none the better. Cubism is also none the worse for the work of art historians performing their post-mortems on the cold marble slab of scholarship

— but it is still-born when it is supposed to illustrate a manifesto. In art historical terms, only Suprematism and Constructivism, boring though they may be, were of serious interest in the Museum of Artistic Culture, and this is still so now — the rest of it was feeble derivative stuff, post-Cézanne, post-Picasso, sub-Cubist, Matisse at a misunderstanding removes. German Expressionism drained of its vigour and originality, and when it was none of

these it was hunted by Derain, Léger and Delaunay, by the Fauvists and Futurists, touched self-consciously by the false nativity of the Russian peasant, even hinting at the heroic idealism of the Soviet Realism that was soon to replace the avant-garde and become Stalin's propaganda.

In the Barbican's exhibition, which bravely attempts to reflect the layout of the lost Leningrad Museum and is wholly drawn from that collection, from this least-sublimely dip of the second-hand and second-rate, only the Suprematist and Constructivist works are worth retrieving, if for no other reason than to prove that so much western art of the second half of this century has Russian antecedents — stripe, hard edge, soft edge, colour field and even ideas that pre-empt the work of Rothko, Ryman and a host of others in America and Britain. Unfortunately, none of Tatlin's mature work was acquired by the abortive museum, and Constructivism is so poorly represented in the Barbican by lesser artists that it is impossible to comprehend its theoretical base.

Two fluent and fluid abstractions from his Munich period offer some insight into Kandinsky's achievement in releasing western European painting from its academic bonds, but are scarcely relevant in this context, and two fussy, over-worked and dense compositions of 1919 and 1920 demonstrate his hapless falling-off and intellectual failure. Sets of cups, saucers and plates by Stollin suggest that Malevich's Suprematism was most perfectly developed in decorative design — bright, jazzy, with a strong period sense of the roaring Twenties that could not roar in Leningrad, the intellectual's response to Clarice Cliff. The one picture that so disturbs, puzzles, provokes and satisfies the visitor that he knows he is in the

presence of a masterpiece is Pavel Filonov's *The German War*, of 1915. Filonov, born in 1883, five years younger than Malevich, two older than Tatlin, had in 1914 begun to develop his own theory of painting, anticipating theirs; he proposed a scholarly abstraction of form and colour, but that his new analytical principles activated everything that is to be seen and felt in the subject and its orbit, its emanations and interrelations, its own reality, "in short, life as a whole".

ALl this can be perceived in his large canvas, the forms splintered, multiplied and horribly rumpled in a powerful allegory that hints at ancient images of death and crucifixion, at active participants and passive onlookers, at events too terrible to be seen with a clear eye. Filonov had no experience of the Russian Front of the Great War, but in this he produced a picture seemingly as heartfelt as the war pictures of Otto Dix, and infinitely more disturbing than almost everything painted by the Official War Artists of Britain. It hangs too high and is stretched by 11" — it is worth standing on the nearby bench to make the perspective work and read the canvas of reflections.

The only reasonable conclusion to be drawn from this exhibition, *New Art for a New Era*, are that not much of it was new, that seven years hardly constitute an era, that the collection was small and feeble, and that its absorption into the State Russian Museum and oblivion was a perfectly sane response to its failure and the tiresomeness of its protagonists.

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