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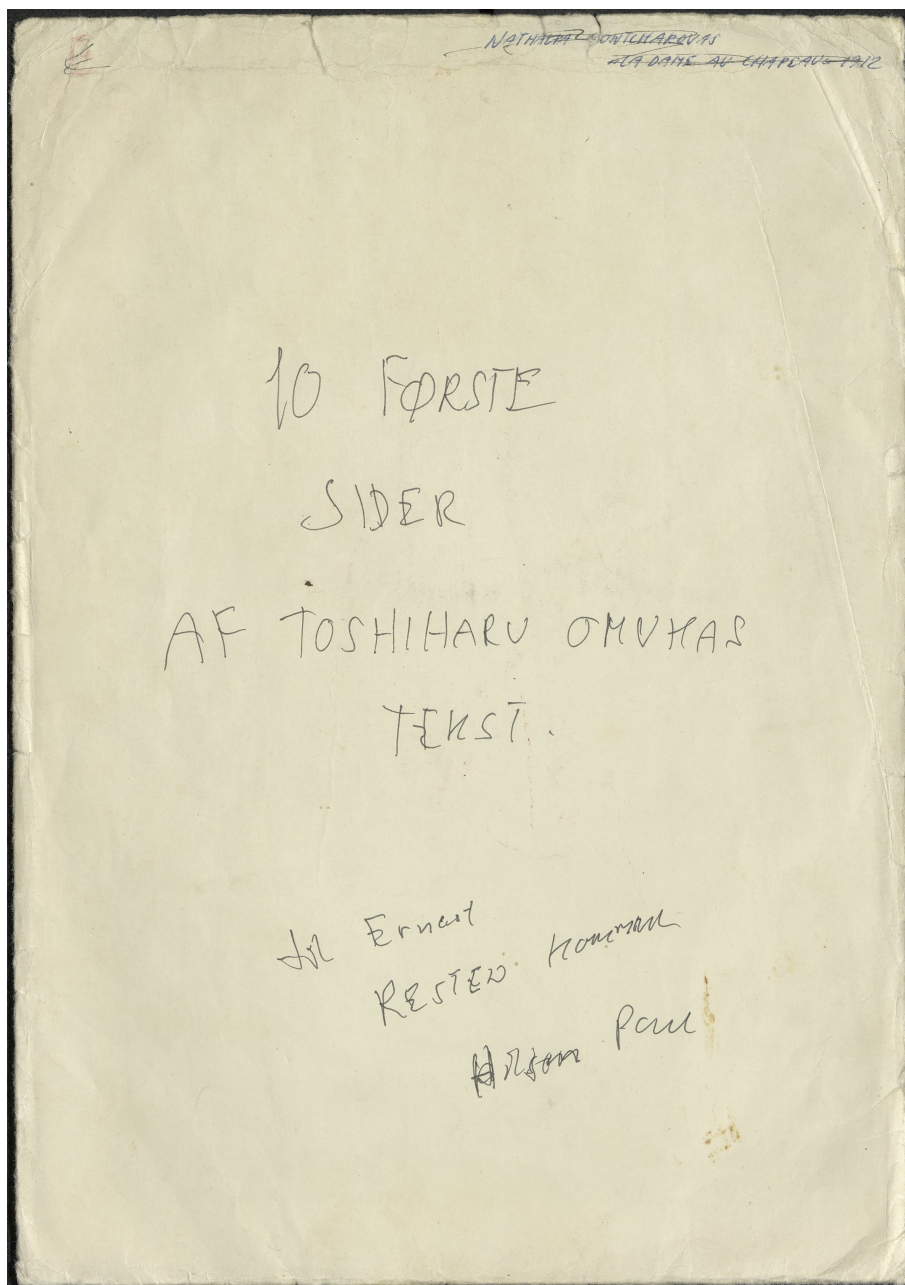
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The letter in the picture: An Aspect
of Malevich's Alogism
(draght)

Toshiharu Omuka

(1)

Malevich made remarkable drawings just before the genesis of Suprematism, drawings in which letters/words dominated the entire space and forms were almost persecuted and negated as a pictorial element. While Suprematism was defined by the artist as "planar revelation" (ploskostnoe yavlyanie) (1) and in its system, he insisted, "forms must be given life and the right to individual existence," in those drawings it was forms as well as things that "have disappeared like smoke." (2)

Since Lamač published almost all of those important drawings in 1967 (3), few scholars have particular attention to them. This appears all the more strange if we take into account the "inflation" of the problem of the fourth dimension in the literature on Malevich (4), though it is only a facet of Suprematism. In this article this author will confine himself to another facet that was a necessary step toward the genesis of Suprematist painting.

In respect to the letters in his paintings Malevich admits his debt to French Cubists in his writings: "Cubism builds its pictures from the forms of lines and from a variety of painterly textures, and in this case, words and letters are introduced as a confrontation of various forms in the picture. Its graphic meaning is important. It is all for the sake of achieving dissonance." (5) He even enumerates the "Word" as one of three fundamental principles of Cubo-Futurism. (6) However, his view is quite his own in that letters/words in his transrational-realistic work are introduced to bring about dissonance/contrasts, seeing that the principal role of them in the paintings by Picasso and Braque might be epitomized by the latter's remark in an interview: "Toujours dans le désir de m'approcher le plus possible d'une réalité j'introduisis en 1911 des lettres dans mes tableaux." (7) Indeed, the words in the Cubist work, which are usually dispersed and given relatively independent existence, are themselves part of the reality to be represented and designate depicted objects to put them in proper context. But they stir up various associations as verbal element. "JOU", for instance, a part of the title of newspaper Le Journal which appears in so many works by Cubists, brings to mind such associations as jouer, jeu, joue, ... (8) The range of them is enlarged by the papier collé, especially by that of newspaper clippings. (9)

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Dissonance/contrast, the essential of Malevich's Alogism which he discovered in Cubism, differs from the implicit system of Cubist paintings based on the very existence of their own iconography; with this iconography or semantical basis Cubist letters/words are closely with things, which in their turn reinforce and complete fragmented words. Malevich's contrasts did not of course arise from this kind of complementary relations between forms and letters. His exploitations aim at such a conceptual transgression of the common knowledge as Magritte's famous "Ceci n'est pas une pipe" in which Word betrays Image and vice versa. A linguistic experiment that does not call for horizontal extension of implication through associations as in Cubist work - therefore jokes that Rosenblum demonstrated (10) ultimately remain extrinsic to the pictorial system of Cubism - but for vertical penetration into the subtle relationship between Word and Image.

Besides Cubists, Larionov and Goncharova exerted great influence on Malevich in the introduction of letters into the picture. Larionov's first experiment with letters seems to be made in his Soldier Series dated from 1910, and two distinctive features can be easily discerned as to the role of them. One is a sort of tautology: represented objects and words designating them are juxtaposed. For instance, "sablya"(saber) and "pivo"(beer) in Soldier. Second version(11). The other is a complementary reference to the depicted scene. To this category belong "srok sluzhb" (period of military service) in both Soldier. First version and Resting Soldiers and "durak"(stupid) in the above painting. These primitive descriptions reappeared in a more sophisticated fashion - that is, as a narration - in the Four Season cycle of 1912 (12), whereas in the same year Larionov made a provocative expression in Spring 1912 in which "vesna 1912" boldly rans across the surface as in a poster, violating the traditional consistency of image as well as perspective (13).

Larionov's investigation into the verbal element in the picture was accelerated by his fruitful collaboration with Futurist poets, especially with Kruchenykh, who advocated "autograph"(samopis'mo) instead of print and wrote together with Khlebnikov a manifesto "Letter as Such" (Bukva kak takovaya) of 1913. "Autograph" is one of Futurist endeavors to give a new life to letters which, according to the poets, have been

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trimmed and contemplated as poetic language and so there should be a new sign that is intelligible and perceptible even to the blind and that would replace the printing type (14). Just as Larionov vehemently denied the luxurious books by the World of Art group, their art nouveau synthetic unity of text and illustration, Kruchenykh reacted against the poetic language which had degenerated into a circuitous sign by Symbolists and sought for the "autograph" to implement it the directness, the purity and hence the universality.

The first product of their collaboration was the publication of Old-fashioned Love (Starinnaya liubov') of 1912, a book that was printed by hand on humble paper and that eliminated the complicated but circuitous relations between text and illustration; both stood for themselves and thus accused the World of Art book of the complicity of Word and Image.

Larionov's provocative tautology made its way in Russian Futurism. In Goncharova's famous painting Cyclist we find the image of a hat and the fragmented parts, "shl" and "ya", of the word "shlyapa" (hat) juxtaposed (15). Popova made the same attempt in Traveling Woman of 1915, slightly changing the fragmentation of word: "shlyap"(a) (16). Shevchenko's Fruits of 1913 is in the same vein: the title "Frukty" (Fruits), a depicted object "vino" (wine), the signature "Aleksandr Shevchenko" and the date "13g" are all inscribed on the surface (17).

With the decisive experience of the collaboration Larionov went further into the destruction of formal conventions and contexts. A revealing example is an illustration entitled Street Noises that he drew in pre-rayonist linear style for Kruchenykh's The World Backwards (Mirskontsa) of 1912. In this lithography he exploited for the first time potentialities of the fragmentation of word: "Mee" and "meh" painted on the ban. It is quite difficult to sense the original words though the latter may bring up such remote associations as mebelnyi magazin (furniture shop), mebel' (furniture) and the like. In addition to this fragmentation of word, musical notes and a bar of music are also worthy of note. Compton has argued that they should be the call of coach man or the sounds transmitted by the telephone wire (18), but it is more convincing to interpret them as the signs or symbols denoting "Street Noises" as a whole, not some specific sound. In Soldiers. Second version Larionov transformed

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the song that a soldier is singing with accordion into letters/words as in the scrolls in the religious painting from the Middle Ages, and in Street Noises he tried to shift the code from the purely verbal (the words of song) to the quasi-verbal (musical notes and a bar of music). While the sings that Street Noises includes are utterly alienated from the proper function to convey precise message, they are still caught by Cubist and Futurist tenets in that they retain a complementary relation or reference to the depicted image, though in a lesser extent than in Soldiers. Second version. In that work, the van with an ad and the telephone wire as well as musical signs and a bar of music are all components of urban scene and in this sense, as Apollinaire pointed out in praise of Picasso and Braque, verbal and musical signs indicate the "great artistic role" that played billboards and printed matters overflowing in the modern city (19). There are many examples which Russian artists made under a direct influence of Cubism. Popova, who studied under Le Fauconier and Metzinger in Paris at the Academy "La Palette", was well acquainted with Cubist iconography, or vocabulary as far as this article is concerned (20): the collage of newspaper "rna", which is no doubt a part of that French paper "Le Journal", in Tray, Vase, Fruit of 1915 (21); "conce"(ert) and "prog"(ramme), both typical musical terms in Cubist terminology in Violin of 1914 (22); "II kl" (the second class) and "zhurnaly" (journals) relevant to the understanding of the depicted scene of the railway station in Traveller of 1914 (23); after French Cubists who most often derived their vocabulary from the life of café (24), Udal'tsova, who went to Paris together with Popova to study at the academy, also painted At the Piano inscribing the names of great composers: "Bach" and "A. Skr"(yabin) (25).

But these are again wholly embraced by pictorial tenets of Cubism and hence with no potentialities to go over Parisian investigation, which Cubists carried out mostly on a firm basis of the reality, or more exactly in conviction of the parallelism between the word and the object denoted by it, and so the jokes that French painters concealed into their work could be appropriately conveyed and understood, one cannot of course notice them if they are entirely out of context. Here lies a still uncharted realm which Russians cultivated relentlessly in accordance with Futurist

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poets. Already in Larionov's Spring from the Four Seasons cycle appeared some words and syllables that do not make sense (25). Goncharova also placed an elaborate trap for the common sense in Cyclist: fragments of words, "shelk" and "nit" can be interpreted at least in two ways: one is "shchelnit" that means something snaps - is it some noise that parts of bicycle raises? - and the other is "shelkovaya nit'," silk. Thus, diametrically different images and associations were brought forth to collide in the same semantical level. In this painting the vibration of image parallels that of connotation of word.

Letters disappeared in Rayonist paintings and when they reappeared in his works from the same period, for instance, the designs for the self-painting published in his manifesto "Why We Paint Ourselves" (Pochemu my raskrashivaemysya) (27), then they underwent a complete transformation: there remained only signs that were bare, isolated and totally out of context. Similar signs were placed in Goncharova's paintings, The Wall of the Street, for example (28). Larionov and Goncharova thus ran through an entire process from the most primitive form, which were apparently under the influence of icon painting, to the most abstract, sophisticated in the use of the letter in painting. However, like Rayonism itself, this process is not a consistent, logical experiment to decompose the subject matter, a minute semantical system which penetrates into every component and the whole surface of a painting. Absolutely his linguistic tactics remained ex-pictorial, arbitrary and fortuitous and this may be the reason why his Rayonism did not attain the drastic destruction of that pictorial system only to take over Impressionist ideas, without such a cosmic vision as Delaunay's. Larionov's works from his Futurist period were always colored by a sheer provocative action-gesture, which more often than not left far behind other aesthetic inclinations. He explained, for instance, the name of his group "Vubnovyi Valet"(Jack of Diamond) just because he found very stimulating and provoking "combinations of the two words and their letters." (29) The provocation is ahead of an epitomization of the principles of the group, or it seems even the sole principle in his artistic creation. To the artist of impetuous disposition, the serious linguistic problematic which Futurist poets-colleagues pursued were essentially alien. Larionov, who was still caught by the retinal limitations of representation in his

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advocacy of Rayonism, failed to jump over the provocation for provocation's sake onto a fundamentally new conceptual dimension of the painting.

* * *

Malevich in his philosophical inclination stands the opposite of Larionov, who is an agitator by nature. Malevich's conceptual aspiration reveals itself in his changing descriptions of the Square. He mentioned "the Suprematist quadrilateral" in his letter to an art critic Ettinger of 3 April 1920, correcting himself as "more exactly, the square." (30) As a matter of fact, all known versions of Square are slightly deformed and so should be called as quadrangle if we should be geometrically precise. The title of the so-called "Black Square" was listed as Quadrangle (chetyreugolinik) in the catalog when the painting was first shown in the "0,10" exhibition in December 1915 (31), while the painter had already related the "square" (kvadrat) in his letter to Matiushin of May 1915, more than six months before the opening of exhibition (32). We should fail to understand his creation, at least, his later innovation and devotion to the writings, unless we should take his conceptual bent into account.

Malevich largely indebted in his introduction of letters into the picture to French Cubists and Russian colleagues. His first play with the essentially ex-pictorial element, though it must be admitted that a long tradition of the close relationship between the letter and the image in terms of a visual communication, was done in his provocative gesture most likely after Larionov; a gouache of 1911 with his signature and the inscription in left center "etiud krest'yanina" (study of peasant). (33) Andersen suggests that this work in the ex-collection of the late Nina Kandinsky might have been exhibited in the second "Blue Rider" exhibition in Munich in 1912 - and it appears to have remained with Kandinsky after the exhibition was over. (34). There is another evidence that shows Malevich's particular attention to letters. It is a curious drawing of the same peasant subject, head of peasant, with a printed word "zdes' " (here) (35). These two drawings do not of course testify to a serial, consistent exploration into the linguistic. Rather they are isolated preliminaries that, it seems, the painter carries out by inflected consciousness toward the letter. And here lies his inner basis to receive keen stimuli

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from contemporary artists.

Well-known is the capital importance of his collaboration with the poet Kruchenykh and the composer Matiushin for the production of the Futurist opera Victory Over the Sun which took place in December 1913. The first fruit of their collaboration was the publication of the famous miscellany The Three (Troie) with a preface-manifesto by Matiushin, Kruchenykh's important criticism "The New Ways of the Word" and illustrations by Malevich; this book was published in September 1913, but before it appeared, in June, Kruchenykh's collection of poems Let's Grumble (Vozroshchem) came out with illustrations by Malevich and Rozanova. A lithography entitled Arithmetic (Arifmetika), which Malevich contributed to the latter book, contains various signs that respond somehow to the unusual subject despite their seeming diversity: ciphers "7" and "4", parentheses, signs of equal and unequal, a letter "a", letter/word "i" - this last means "and", that is, a sign of addition - and commas and colon (36). Numbers in French Cubist paintings can be sometimes rightly guessed from the context as, for instance, price of drink at the café or the opening time of a concert (37), whereas Malevich's ciphers seem to refer to nothing else.

In the literature on Malevich few have paid serious attention to this drawing. Crone has argued it in some detail in his long article on the relations between Malevich's paintings and Khlebnikov's writings (38). He suggests that the number "7" inscribed on the drawing might correspond to an idea that the poet disclosed in his article contributed to the journal Union of Youth: "the seven stages of the moon rising above the earth remind us of seven heavens and of many things with seven. And in the names of numbers we recognize the old face of mankind. Is the number seven [sem'] not the abbreviated word for family [sem'ya]?" (39) Also the letter "a" might be explained by the poet's reflections on this alphabet; in 1912 he came to uphold an idea that "a" had meant a continent, considering its common place in the names of Asian, African, American, and Australian continents (41). Nakov too pointed out the close relations between Khlebnikov's curious metaphysics on numbers and Malevich's use of them in his work, but he carefully restricted himself from entering into dangerous details (41). Crone's discussion may be open to

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criticism for his partial, arbitrary citations from Khlebnikov's texts; he just keeps silent about other signs which should be relevant to his further discussion: the number "4" and the letter/word "i" that he misreads for "e" (42).

Arithmetic can be interpreted in the light of the Futurist opera and of the four - dimensional notion manifested in the play. In the fourth scene of the first act the character "Many" declares triumphantly: "We pulled the sun by its fresh roots / These fat ones became permeated with arithmetic." (43) Like the sun to be conquered by Futurists as a dreary symbol of Old World, the arithmetic was one of those disciplines which were completely subordinate to the outmoded cultural establishment in which the traditional notion of space-time and linear forms of knowledge still dominated and repressed the true creation. Hence Matiushin's insistence in his preface to The Three: "The days are not far when the conquered phantoms of three-dimensional space, of the illusory, drop-shaped time, and of the cowardly causality... will reveal before everybody what they really have been all the time - the annoying bars of cage in which the human spirit is imprisoned." (44) This negation of arithmetic as a methodological limit of human thoughts was a possible conclusion drawn from Futurists' and especially Matiushin's involvement in the problematic of the four-dimensional geometry advocated by Hinton and Ouspensky (45). Hinton made various attempts to represent - imagine, more exactly - an invisible, four-dimensional hypersolid "Tesseract" by geometrical analogies (46). The Russian thinker Ouspensky properly evaluated Hinton's Metageometry(47) as an actual method, a new form of thought to reconstruct the worldview, but with certain reservations: at the same time he pointed out the circuitous naiveté of analogy based on geometrical perception, asserting that dimensions are not mathematical magnitudes; one should take a "direct path" to examine possibilities of the four-dimensional properties which he bears with himself in his psyche. The fourth dimension was thus not a mathematical problem but a far-reaching, psychological, and even ontological problematic to (re-)establish co-ordinates of Man and World (49). Seen from this point of view, it is no wonder that Futurists considered arithmetic, which supported that "cowardly causality", as a lower-dimensional discipline that lacked a metaphysical depth into the

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the human existence and was still caught by mere numeral relations. In brief, it was a relic of Old World or a typical mode of the three-dimensional, indirect logic that suppressed the elan of the human imagination.

The lithography Arithmetic provides the viewer with, so to speak, a 'short circuit' interpretation of its subject by a superficial parallelism between the title and different signs, and yet it was a transrational trap. Malevich furiously charged against the ambiguity of such a positivistic understanding and reversed it into a cognition of the internal limit of arithmetic as a direct tool of analysis to measure the depth of the world. In this sense it was indeed a contemporary work with 3 Standard Stoppages by Marcel Duchamp who also was seriously involved in the problematic of the fourth dimension and cast profound doubts on established measurements. In one of the four lithographies that Malevich contributed to The Three, he made a radical step toward the deconstruction of the seeming linear consistency of signification that functions in Arithmetic. It is an untitled work that contains letters scattered at random all over the composition, numbers, musical signs, commas, wheels of airplane(?), etc. and these diverse signs do not form any definite context which enables the viewer to scoop up a coherent system from their disparity, though there certainly exists a rather implicit reference to the Futurist opera: musical signs, commas(to be discussed below), and wheels of airplane. This disperse of context, however, was in no way such effective an strategy that Kruchenykh insisted on the poetry in comparison with the Futurist painting: deliberate, eccentric combinations of words (50). It was but a random, naive enumeration and at the same time a mere suggestive gesture of different signs. Letters therefore fell into just a pictorial and even decorative element and failed to attain the transrational(zaumnyi) in formal terms in The Three, the very book in which the term was perhaps for the first time uttered by Kruchenykh (51). Presumably Malevich himself noticed keenly his straightforward, simplistic and formalistic approach to that dangerous realm; it was by no means a 'direct' path but rather a detour through a wilderness or blind alley. As a matter of fact, thereafter the random placement of letters never came to the fore in his transrational-ologist exploration.

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It is commonly admitted that various motives which often appeared in Malevich's work in 1913-14 stemmed from the opera Victory Over the Sun. The most famous, salient, among them, is the inscription "partial eclipse" (chastichnoe zatmenie) in Composition with Mona Lisa and Eng-lishman in Moscow. In the play the conquest is indicated by the fall of darkness and so this world of the total "eclipse" is the New World that Futurists aspires, foresees and literally captures; the renewal of the centuries old metaphor of 'light - dark', as Nakov has rightfully pointed out, is reflected in the well-known drawing which brought Malevich an intuition of the Black Square (52).

Inspired by the opera, Malevich intensively engaged himself in two directions of exploration as to letters/words: one may be characterized as a distorted quotation and the other as a fragmentation or "partial eclipse" of the word.

Malevich made several vain attempts to publish his drawings for the opera, though Zheverzheev, who financed the production, presumably possessed almost all of them (53). One of the few exceptions is a drawing evidently made after the production and it was published without any indication of particulars by Futurist poet Livshits in the early 30s (54). Nakov argues this remarkable work in some detail in formal and thematic terms and relates it to the second act of the play. But his 'iconological' approach are not necessarily unchallenged when we read the inscriptions that show subtle but significant differences in comparison with the original text by Kruchenykh. In the very scope of this article they must be called into question.

Though not all inscriptions are decipherable, we can read the followings in the drawing: gaz sobran (gaz is gathered), gaz sinii (blue gaz), neptun vzyat (Neptune was defeated), ot solntsa (from the sun), cleva (from right), utro (morning), saturn (Saturn), baza (base), gemi (semi), let (flight), 5,000 vr v sekundu (5,000 verstas per second), razlozhenie efira (decomposition of ether/destruction of Zephyros) (55), nad zemlei (toward the earth), 1,000g (the year 1000), and letters "p", "s", "v", and numbers 0, 0,12, 09 $\frac{0}{6}$, 9,0, 8, 18,95, 4,00 ($\frac{0}{6}$), etc.. Firstly "flight", "5,000 verstas per second", "from the sun", "toward the earth" and to a lesser extent "the year 1000" are more or less dis-