

ANDRÉI NAKOV

MALEVICH

painting the absolute



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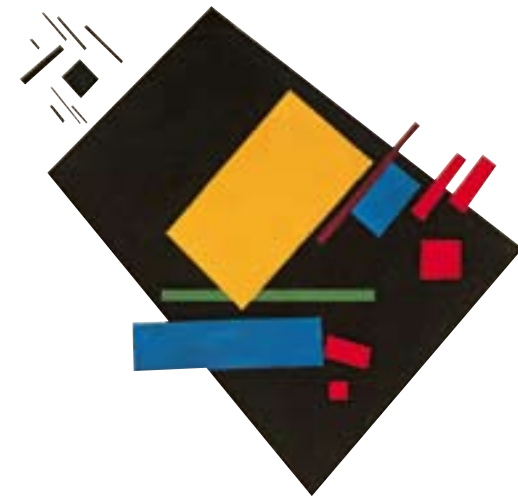


• Andrzej Nakov and Malevich's daughter, Anna-Maria Urman.

Andrzej Nakov is the leading world expert on the work of Kazimir Malevich and the Russian avant garde. He is the author of the Malevich catalogue raisonné (2002), an extensive critical anthology of the writings of Malevich (1975), and *L'Avant-garde Russe* (1984). *Kazimir Malevich: Le Peintre Absolu* (the French edition of the present book) was awarded a prize in 2007 by the Académie française des Beaux-Arts. Andrzej Nakov has organised numerous exhibitions on Dada, Constructivism and abstract art, including the Tate Gallery's *Malevich* exhibition in 1976.

In his introductions to the *Catalogue Raisonné* and the pocket monograph he published in French several years ago (*Malévitch, Aux avant-gardes de l'art moderne*, Paris: Gallimard "Découvertes," 2003), the author, Andrei Nakov, explained his decision to adopt the Polish spelling of the artist's name. His purpose was simply to return to the original form of his name in Polish, given that Malevich had attached a great deal of importance to its symbolic resonance. Of course, Kazimir Malevich, or **Малевич** as it was the (Russian), Cyrillic custom to write it, was a Russian painter. However, he was also an artist driven by an ambition to be universal, and moreover, as he himself always stated, he was born Polish.

In the present four volumes we use the Polish spelling "Malewicz" throughout the main text, but the more widely recognised spelling "Malevich" in the book's title and promotional text.



An iconic figure in the history of modern art, the Russian painter Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935) was the creator of Suprematism, best known for his emblematic *Black Square* (1915). Censored in Russia for many years, his revolutionary writings were only recognised at the end of the twentieth century, initially in Western Europe. Similarly, much of his work remained unknown until the fall of Communism; little studied, the life and work of this painter remain shrouded in an aura of mystery.

Andrzej Nakov's monumental study of this prophetic artist is founded on many decades of research in Russia, Western Europe and the US. The author has uncovered many previously unknown documents, and sheds a new light on Malevich's pivotal role in the development of modern art, offering a radically new interpretation of a fascinating artist.

'The Essential 4-volume Reference Guide to Malevich's Complete Oeuvre'

- The most detailed and comprehensive analysis of Malevich's complete œuvre available
- Based on over 30 years of research in Russia, Western Europe and the US
- Andrzej Nakov's scrupulous research corrects previous errors, myths and misinterpretations of Malevich's work
- Malevich's work is presented in the broader context of both the early Russian avant-garde and later repressive Stalinism, establishing him as one of the most important artists of the twentieth century
- This study sheds new light on the development of modern art, in which Malevich played a crucial role
- An essential reference companion to the Malevich catalogue raisonné: incorporates an addendum to the catalogue raisonné, a detailed Bibliography, complete listing of the artist's exhibitions and an illustrated chronology

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Foreword

Heroic Overture

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Impressionism and Symbolism are the starting points of the Polish-born Russian painter Kazimir Malevich’s avant-garde trajectory. The artist’s passion for Gauguin and Cézanne, and his subsequent involvement with Cubism and Futurism, enabled him to lay the foundations of a powerful oeuvre bolstered by an unrivaled sensitivity for color. Theory and practice, theatrical and literary experiences, paved the way for his uniquely original venture into “transrational” creation. By exploding the coherence of traditional “realist” representation, and thus the meaning of visual forms, Malevich pioneered a new approach to art. In the spring of 1915, moving courageously beyond the boundaries of traditional mimesis, he ventured into non-objective painting.

ANDRÉI NAKOV

Volume 1

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Volume 1

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- Emblem of Fëdor Rerberg’s art school, Moscow 1907–1910.
- [F-79] (page 64) *Self-Portrait*, 1907, tempera on cardboard
- [F-125] (page 67) *Anathema*, illustration based on the play of the same name by Leonid Andreev, 1910, watercolor

1 Viacheslav Ivanov, 1906.

2 Details supplied to the author by Victoria Zaitseva and confirmed by the existence of a volume of prints inspired by *Anathema*. My discovery of the latter in the summer of 1991 was subsequent to my conversation with the artist’s sister.

3 The exhibition opened on March 18 and ran until April 29, 1907, in the reception rooms of Pavel Kuznetsov’s residence. Participating artists included Fonvizin (von Wiesen), Kuznetsov, Nikolai and Vasilii Milioti, the aesthete Nikolai Ryabushinski, Nikolai Sapunov, Martiros Sarian, Sergey Sudeikin, Petr Utkin and the sculptors Aleksandr Matveev and P. Bromirski.

4 See Bibliog. KM 1924-d. We know of several versions of this text, which was almost certainly written to be delivered as a lecture. One of the versions is annotated “doklad” (public talk). The version referred to here is the most complete one (MS, private collection, St Petersburg).

5 For details and a description see my notes to F-152 in the *Catalogue raisonné*.

6 While the subject of the *Blue Portrait* is unquestionably linked with the artistic issues raised by the Blue Rose show, the style of this painting, executed two decades after the event to which it alludes, has more in common with the stylistic universe of Cézanne, whose influence was first felt in Malevich’s work some two years after 1907. This is only one of the numerous stylistic contradictions resulting from the artist’s retrospective and interpretational method of the late 1920s.

A work of art is only interesting because of the quantity of mystery that emanates from it.

[Maurice Maeterlinck](#)

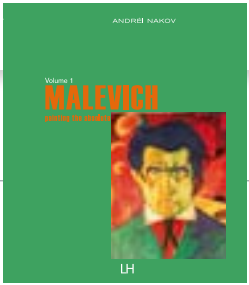
The years 1907–1909 are the least known in the artist’s life. All we know about them is that he attended Fëdor Rerberg’s private school, and acquired an ardent interest in psychological literature, Schopenhauer and Stanislavsky’s Art Theater where, not content to be a mere spectator, he applied for a job.² Due to its founder’s quasi magical reputation, Stanislavsky’s theater had a considerable attraction not only for the Muscovite avant-garde but more generally, thanks to its resolutely modern stance, for the European avant-garde. It takes no great imagination to grasp that, given Malewicz’s Symbolist leanings, the possibility of collaborating with the celebrated theater must have dazzled the young newcomer from the provinces then making his debut in the city’s exhibition halls. Malewicz’s efforts merely resulted in a portfolio of graphic images, executed during the winter of 1909–1910 following a production of the Symbolist writer Leonid Andreev’s play *Anathema*. The artist’s disappointment must have been particularly searing, for the task he was given, being limited to a lithographic transcription of stage sets and to portraits of actors, gave little scope for originality.

We can gauge the impact of the first public event organized by Russian Symbolist artists — the Blue Rose show —from faithful contemporary accounts. The exhibition, which took place in Moscow in March and April 1907,³ is described in detail in an essentially autobiographical text by Malewicz, a *Note on Architecture* written in 1924.⁴ The artist refers repeatedly and emphatically to the impression produced on him by the sophisticated atmosphere of the show, and the synaesthetic effect the organizers created by combining a refined setting with music and burning incense, thereby giving the impression of a “blue odor . . . the acme of aestheticism.” Clearly, the experience left a durable impression on him and evidently too he wished that he had not just been a mere visitor. The Russian Museum owns a female portrait of Malewicz’s from the late 1920s known as *Blue Portrait*, on the back of which the artist noted, “Refused by ‘The Blue Rose,’ 1907.”⁵ The fact that he was tempted in the late 1920s to reconstruct this rather anecdotal subject from memory⁶ shows that he attached a good deal of importance to his attempt to exhibit with the Blue Rose group. Retrospectively, he was acknowledging his desire to associate his name with the birth of Russian Symbolist painting.

His rejection by the organizers of the Blue Rose coincided moreover with his joining the Society of Moscow Painters (MTKh, or Moskovskoe Tovarishchestvo Khudozhnikov) under whose aegis he exhibited for the first time, in April 1907. Thereafter, Malewicz participated regularly in the shows organized by the society until January 1911, the date of his definite commitment to avant-gardism, then embodied by Mikhail Larionov’s Donkey’s Tail group.

In Moscow, the beginning of the year 1907 was marked by another important artistic event: the retrospective of Viktor Borisov-Musatov (1870–1905), a leading figure in the Association of Moscow Painters, who had recently died. This exhibition was organized by Sergei Diaghilev, another “Westernizing” aesthete whose undertakings were to leave a durable trace on Russia’s new, internationally ambitious artistic culture. Borisov-Musatov’s sudden demise combined with the dreamlike character of an oeuvre with a disturbing content and





• [F-285] *Peasant Women in Church/Peasant Procession I*, late 1911–early 1912, oil on canvas.

Whereas the stylistic idiom of the peasant faces in Goncharova’s work, simplified in a mystical attitude, is a rather special case, with its most striking instances dating from the winter of 1911–1912, by contrast Jawlensky’s Expressionist faces with almond-shaped eyes in the Byzantine manner quickly became a multi-purpose stylistic device. Those eyes became something like a signature thanks to which the work he produced between 1911 and 1914 can be identified on strictly stylistic grounds. If, in her *Dancing Peasants*, Goncharova’s decorative vein shows a kinship with the Matissian ideal (with the memory of *The Dance* in the background), Malewicz’s peasant figures refer — ideally — to Gauguin’s emphatic, but no less “ideaic” (as Aurier termed it), register. Our detour to Bobrov’s December 1911 statement fully justifies mentioning Gauguin at this point of Malewicz’s creative evolution, as well as that of Natalia Goncharova.⁵²

On the political use of the peasant subterfuge

On the one hand the development of the peasant-religious series of 1912 led rapidly to Malewicz’s first Cubist forms, and on the other it rested on a set of images whose themes (*The Orthodox*) posed the question of the artist’s relations with the tradition of Russian religious imagery, in other words the art of icons, especially monocephalous icons, in particular the image of Christ Pantocrator. If certain images produced toward the end of Malewicz’s life refer explicitly to this iconic stereotype and, in the face of the Socialist Realist



52 In fact, the winter of 1911–1912 was the only period when a true affinity with Gauguin’s mystic tonality manifested itself in Goncharova’s oeuvre. Recall her compositions *The Idol*, *The God of Fecundity* (oil on canvas, 70 x 56 cm, see M. Chabot, *Nathalie Gontcharova*, Paris, 1972, illus. p. 138 bottom left) and the canvas *Grape Harvest*, 1912, Museum of Fine Arts, Ufa, Russian Federation.



• [F-284] *Peasant Women in Church/Peasant Procession II*, late 1911–early 1912, drawing

• [F-288] *Peasant Women in Church/Peasant Procession*, 1912, oil on canvas (now lost, photograph from 1913)

onslaught of materialism, amounted to a direct summons to a spiritual tradition obvious to every Soviet viewer at the time, the artist’s work from 1912 was nourished by other issues: its spirituality was in no way national, the choice of the peasant theme was not immediately dictated by a sociocritical attitude, but was the expression of a philosophical perspective grounded in the pantheism dear to the Symbolists, which was distinctly more cosmic in scope than the folkloric interpretation found in a large body of recent critical writing.⁵³

We should remember that by the end of the 1920s, the roots of this programmatic interpretative deviation were to be found in the artist’s actual pictorial practice. Thus, following the violent “Marxist” attacks of 1926 when the Institute of Artistic Culture was shut down, and after Malewicz failed, in 1927, to take the opportunity offered by Anatolii Lunacharsky to emigrate with his oeuvre, the social pressures on him were increasingly crushing. Barred between 1926 and 1928 from one institution after another, he was given the chance of a social “rehabilitation” in 1929 when, to its credit, the Tretyakov Gallery presented the last retrospective of his oeuvre. But by then, the issue was no longer the rehabilitation of Suprematism, but more importantly, Malewicz’s very physical survival. The Tretyakov’s then director, Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov, endeavored to present Malewicz in the light of the sociological canons of the time, in other words, as the supposed eulogist of “peasant reality.”⁵⁴ It is probably due to the promotion of what was then thought to be the plausible and socially useful aspects of his oeuvre that Malewicz produced new versions of his Expressionist paintings of 1911–1912, which were then dubbed “peasant works.” (Significantly, he only reprised works from the “work in the fields” series; redoing pictures on a religious theme would have been viewed as provocative by the censorship, which was by then engaged in a campaign against “survivals” of the Orthodox Church.) Malewicz dropped these themes after the exhibition closed.

The year 1932 witnessed another phase of the artist’s “interpretative self-criticism”⁵⁵: the drafting of the painter’s autobiographical sketch. This text, which we should always be careful to read through a corrective lens, contains a long passage relating to the peasant theme and to the art of icons, with a particularly

53 The texts of the 1980s and 90s, in particular those of V. Marcadé and D. Gorbachev (see Bibliog.), abound in instances of this naively folkloric attitude. They belonged to a wave of egregiously nationalistic interpretations. Far removed from the aesthetic perspective of the years 1900–1920, they are like a narrowly national and folkloric antidote to the many years of “proletarian internationalism” imposed by Communist ideology. Such were its limits and its dependency in relation to the model which it sought to oppose.

54 This was, moreover, a particularly perverse invention of Stalinist propaganda; in retrospect, the iconological strata in question seem to announce the tragic events that were to come.

55 The term “self-critical” is here used in the functional sense conferred by the collective psychodrama of totalitarian punishment instituted by the Communist regime at the beginning of the 1920s.

56 See Bibliog. KM 1932–1976, pp. 117–118.

Summary Volume 2

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- chapter 14** • *Suprematism 1*
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- chapter 23** • The barometer of incomprehension

Starting with Malevich’s revolutionary *Quadrilateral* (“*Black Square*”) of 1915, which his contemporaries experienced as a veritable earthquake, Suprematism developed vertiginously, attaining the maximal intensity of pure color barely three years later. In the summer of 1918 the so-called colorless phase of Suprematism culminated in *White Square*, which marked a major painterly and philosophical turning point in the handling of color as energy. The artist’s white-on-white compositions at the Non-Objective Creation and Suprematism exhibition in spring 1919 provoked the anger of his fellow non-objectivists. Motivated by philosophical considerations, his temporary abandonment of painting, which he declared “obsolete,” sounded the death knell of abstract art in Russia. Malevich’s impulse to move beyond painting remains little understood even today; at the time it meant the end of any hope of his pursuing a career and making a permanent place for Suprematism in Moscow.



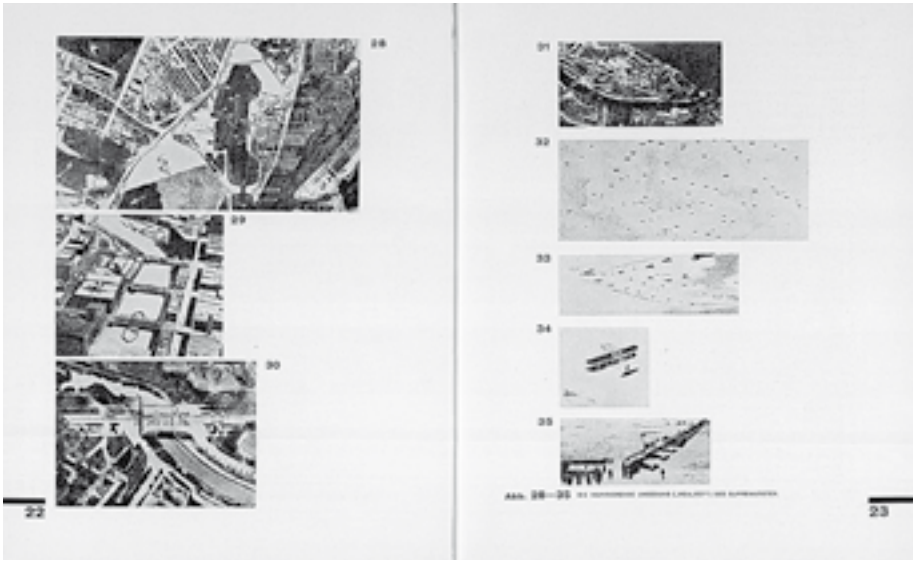
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The conservative critic complains that the small diagonal rod sloping toward the black circle on the left “has no good reason ... it introduces a totally new element ... which is not justified by any other area” in the composition. In short, the self-appointed censor of Suprematism observes that the non-objective elements in the artist’s paintings are not interdependent and run counter to the basic law of static stability embodied — and the term could not be more significant — in still lifes. In contrast to the logic of passive visual relationships, Malewicz put forward the principle of a dynamic existence of non-objective forms in an art whose “ability to create a construction ... does not derive from the interrelation of form and color ... but [is based on] weight, speed and direction of movement.”

“Forms must be given life and the right to individual existence,” he would proclaim in 1916.¹⁰⁰ The active concept of construction designed to help elaborate a “new reality” was thus affirmed as an alternative to the passive attitude of “composition” arising from an attachment to the extra-painterly reality underlying the passive status of painting tethered to the objects it claims to reflect. In the conventional aesthetic, composition refers to a pre-established spatial framework, and only in relation to this imposing, theoretically extra-painterly structure does the painter “arrange” a composition characterized by manifest stillness. From the very start of his Suprematist oeuvre, Malewicz vigorously asserted the notion of construction, a dynamic principle derived from his Cubist and Futurist experiences. We find the first statement of this principle as early as 1915 in the first printing of his pamphlet *From Cubism to Suprematism*.¹⁰¹ It is developed in the sentence cited above from the definitive version of this text, which the artist, summing up the conclusions of his first Suprematist phase, reworked in the wake of the 0,10 exhibition.

- *Die inspirierende Umgebung (Realität) des Suprematisten* (The environment [“reality”] which stimulates the Suprematists), December 1927, layout by László Moholy-Nagy, double-page spread from *Die gegenstandslose Welt*
- [S-48] (page 94) *Airplane in Flight*, 1915, oil on canvas



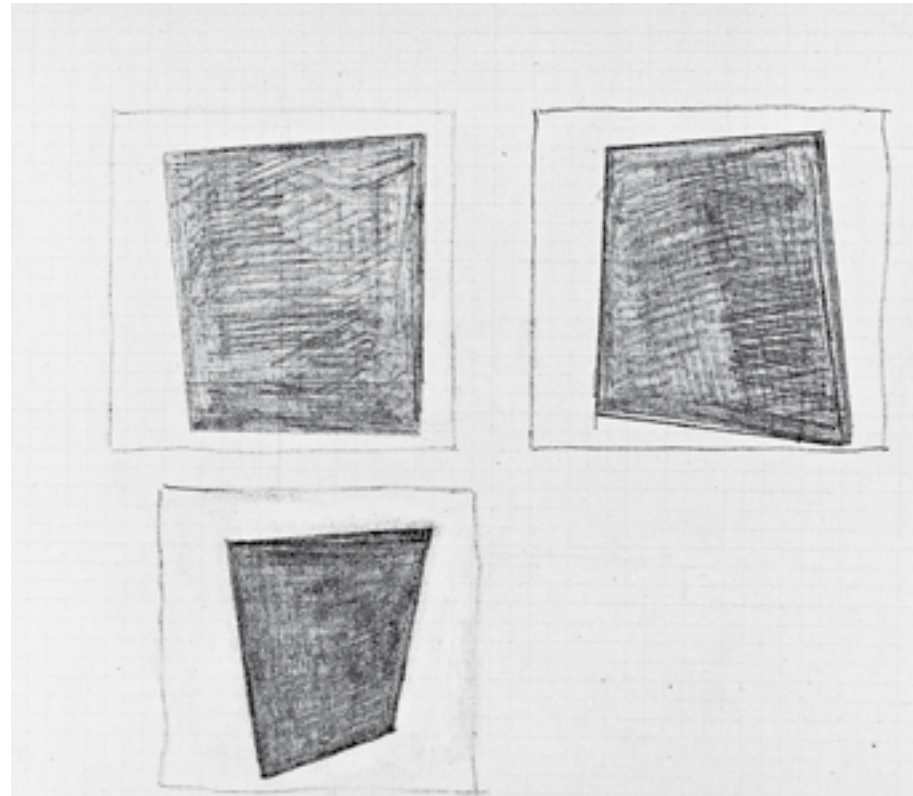
¹⁰⁰ Bibliog. KM 1916-b, pp. 9-10 (trans. Bowlit, op. cit., p. 123).
¹⁰¹ Bibliog. KM 1915-c: “As for the construction of the painting, it arose from the discovery of points on the surface where the position of real objects, as they break apart or come together, would have defined an interval of maximum velocity.”



- [S-161] *Planes in Projection*, three compositions on a single sheet, motifs of 1916–1917, 1920s version, drawing.

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- [S-162] *Planes in Projection* (three compositions), motif of 1915, version from 1916–1917, oil on canvas. The painted-over outline of a horizontally positioned “volumetric” element can be discerned toward the bottom of the quadrilateral.



When he adds a red circle, he places it higher up in the composition owing to its more dynamic nature; while a white circle will tend to impinge on the upper edge of the white field in which it occurs, as if impelled to escape its limits. Suggested by the energetic nature of the magnetic charges of Malewicz’s forms, this example gives us a notion of the logic of colors in the artist’s non-objective practice, a practice worked out on canvas and in theory by experimenting with single-figure compositions.

On page 3 of manuscript 1927-d a series of largely horizontal compositions illustrates what happens when “magnetic attractions” pull sideways. From relations of this type the artist produced a series of works in 1916 in which rounded organic shapes appear from time to time. These instances of what he called “Suprematist botany”⁷⁰ led him to transgress traditional stylistic barriers, as the new formal sequences were defined by certain “states” of matter and, as such, constituted a radical break with the old logic of formal imitation based on a mimetic sympathy. This new logic would lead in turn to sequences of “dissolving” forms, an outcome that was perfectly consistent with the process of “internally evolving” forms and a prelude to the artist’s great metaphysical leap into white immateriality.

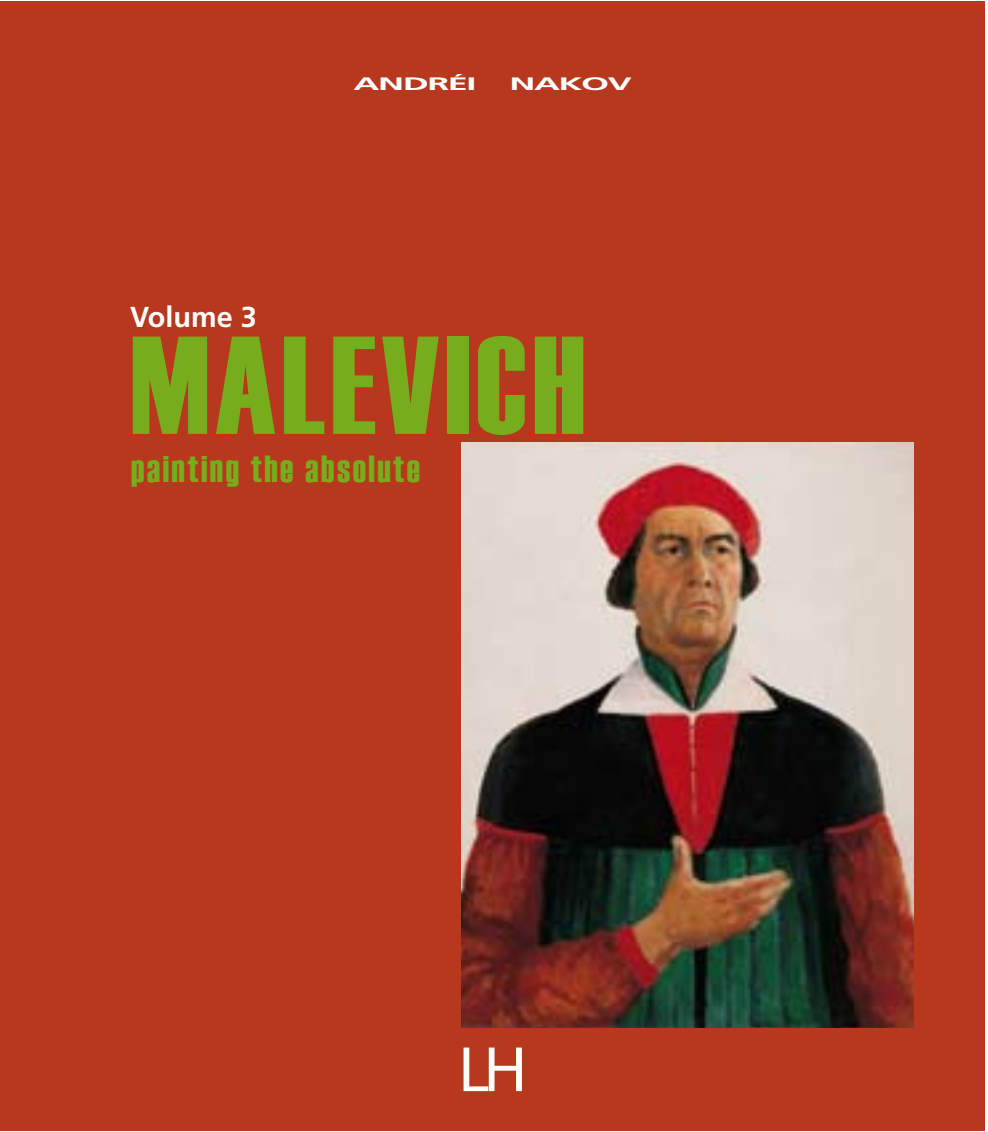
⁷⁰ Malewicz’s term in one of his “explanations” of the first *Red Square* (see his postcard to Matiushin, April 24, 1916, PD Collection, St Petersburg).



Summary Volume 3

- chapter 24** • Conquering volume: “absolute architectonics, without any practical use . . .”
- chapter 25** • Surveying the world from the pinnacle of art
- chapter 26** • Return to darkness: European recognition and internal exile
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- chapter 28** • Silent painting
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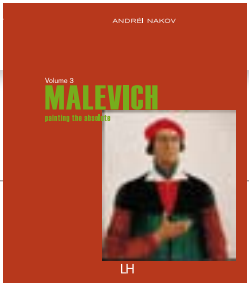
In the early 1920s Malevich created highly original architectonic works, while concurrently producing an important body of theoretical writings. An exhibition in Berlin in 1927 opened the doors of the Bauhaus and brought him to the attention of Western European and, not long after, North American viewers. However, the idealism of his art proved anathema to the totalitarian authorities in his homeland. On returning to Leningrad he was immediately jailed. In 1930 he was imprisoned again, as a result of which he concentrated on new figurative approaches, established as from the beginning of the 1920s. Endeavoring to produce images of the “new man,” he laid the foundations of post-Suprematist i.e. post-abstract figurative painting. Blacklisted, he suffered severe material deprivations and social ostracism, which soon made it impossible for him to continue painting. Aged barely 56, he died of cancer in 1935. In addition to a plastic œuvre of stunning intensity, he left behind an as yet partly unpublished and untranslated corpus of philosophical writings, the gist of which English-language readers will discover here.



Volume 3

MALEVICH

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• [S-697] *Gota 2-a-Type Architecton*, 1926, plaster

224 The former Malewicz archives contain copies of two letters from the artist concerning problems of architecture, both addressed to Lissitzky, respectively on October 1 and December 22, 1924 (private collection, St Petersburg). The correspondence between the two men was particularly lively judging from references to it in the letters Lissitzky wrote to his then future wife Sophie Küppers (see Bibliog. Lissitzky-Küppers 1967).

225 See Exhib. 1925-1926.

226 See the report on a meeting of GINKhUK's governing board on October 28, 1925 in the TsGALI archives, St Petersburg, f. 244, where the Institute's papers are preserved.

227 Several notes in the GINKhUK archives concern this change of the person in charge of the "studio of material culture." Suetin's appointment by the governing board (i.e. Malewicz, Matiushin and Punin) is dated December 19, 1925, and was ratified by the Glavnauka (Scientific Supervisory committee at Narkompros) in Moscow on January 30, 1926. Given the programs drafted in November 1925 (one of the first of them being dated November 5; see TsGALI, St Petersburg, f. 244-1-43) it seems likely that the studio's Suprematist activities started in December 1925.

228 A majority of Malewicz's architectonic models were produced in plaster; in a few cases the structure of certain architectonic elements was made in wood which was then covered in plaster. Notes relating to this period (TsGALI, St Petersburg, f. 244-1-48, pp. 42-44) mention the building of "12 architectonic models" and specify that 400 kg of plaster were used during the year 1926. An inventory of materials employed in the "studio of material culture" lists glass, plywood, glue and so forth. All of these supplies were needed for preparing the annual exhibition (for frames, stands, etc). The GINKhUK archives in St Petersburg contain a "Report on the work accomplished by the material culture section" (TsGALI, St Petersburg, f. 244-1-71-24), which indicates that "4 architectural models" of the "static Suprematist" type were built in November and December 1925 and four models of the "dynamic Suprematist" type in January and February 1926. In March a "model of the Suprematist aero type" *аэроупорядный*, or "visible from an airplane") was built and work was underway on coloring its plaster surfaces and giving them a finish (polishing?). In May, "2 color fragments" and a "model with worked [colored] surfaces" were produced. The month of June was devoted to "preparing the exhibition."

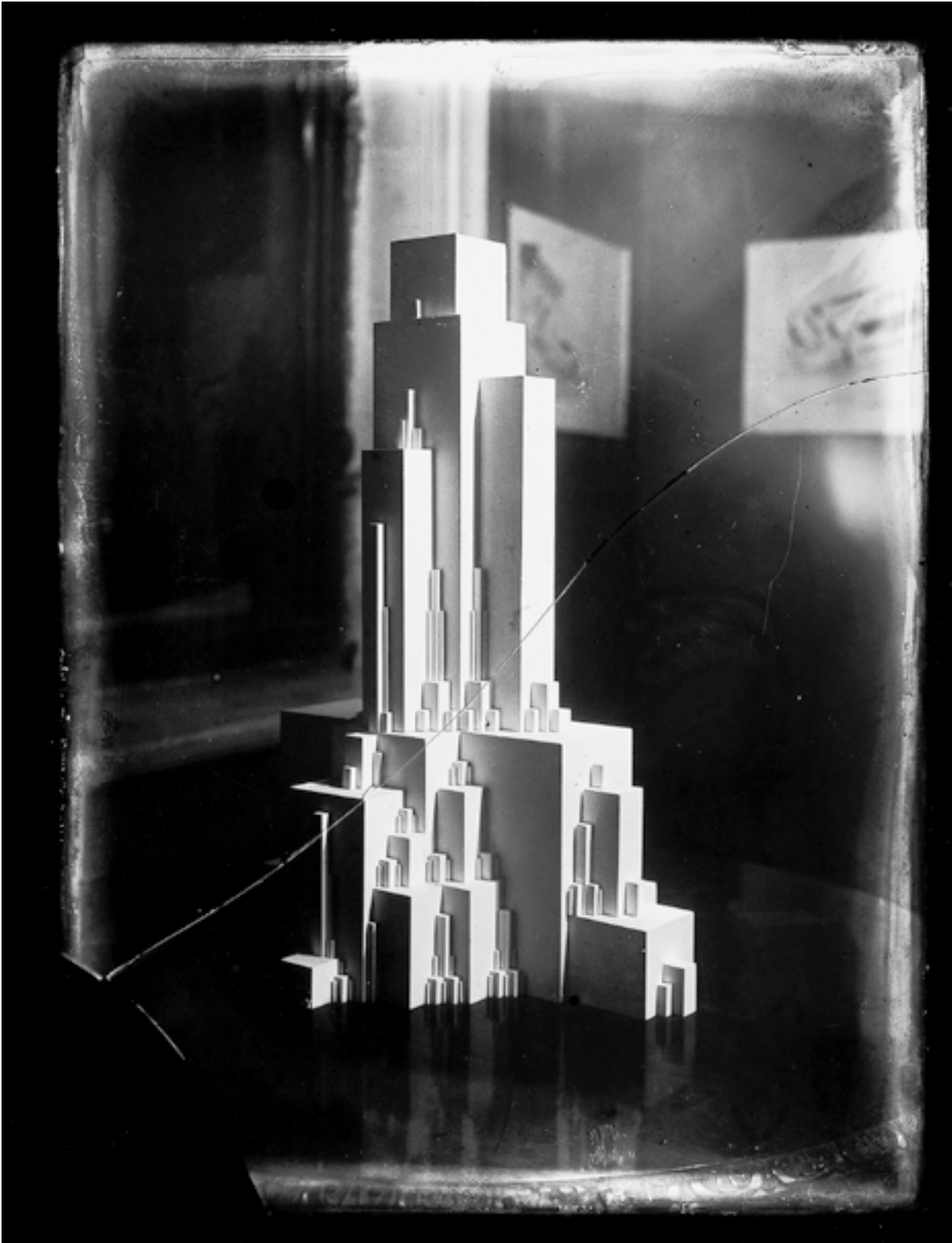
229 Suetin was given the title of assistant and was in charge of the "studio of material culture." B. Podzemski and V.T. Vorobëv (1884-1942), both students, became members of Malewicz's Leningrad circle. Vorobëv was moreover the artist's brother-in-law. Malewicz published an architecton bearing his name in the Ukrainian periodical *Nova generatsia*, no. 2, 1928.

230 The hanging plan of the 1926 show differed considerably from Malewicz's instructions for his Venice presentation, indicating that it was by no means dogmatic but was guided by the artist's wish to clarify the principles underlying Suprematism.

Having brought a measure of social stability to the Leningrad GINKhUK, to which he had been appointed director in the fall of 1923, Malewicz had almost immediately envisaged developing his architectonic activities within the framework of that institution. This is clear from his writings of spring 1924 (notably the "Unovis" manifesto of May 1), as well as from the text of his exposé at the Association of Architects in December and from a number of his letters to Lissitzky apropos of getting an audience in Western Europe and especially Germany for his architectonic work and his aesthetic ideas relating to it.²²⁴

His activities at GINKhUK during the 1924-1925 academic year centered on administrative tasks and theoretical preoccupations. Indeed he devoted most of his energy to drafting theoretical texts and developing a critical view of the history of the new plastic trends in twentieth-century art. This work was presented in late 1925 at a conference organized by the Academy of Artistic Sciences in Moscow, the body on which the survival of the Leningrad GINKhUK depended.²²⁵ (The latter's future was already threatened by the anti-modernist criticism of pseudo-Marxist critics of every stripe.)

An opportunity for Malewicz to develop the production of his architectural models presented itself in 1925, thanks to Tatlin of all people. A full-time member of GINKhUK, though he had neglected his work in Leningrad since the beginning of 1925, having settled de facto in Kiev, Tatlin was summoned by the institute's governing board in October of that year to return to the "material culture" studio, which had by then been neglected for months.²²⁶ When Tatlin ignored this injunction he was considered to have withdrawn permanently and Malewicz's assistant Nikolai Suetin was then put in charge of the studio.²²⁷ Thanks to this chain of events, Malewicz henceforth had physical means at his disposal with which to build architectonic models. Even though this meant extremely modest resources, he was nevertheless able to call on his assistants to help him. Thus owing to a simple human — and aesthetic — refusal to comply, the premises and practical means which had initially been allocated to the standard-bearer of the Constructivist current fell into the hands of its ideological adversaries, the Suprematists. Thus by the end of 1925 it looked like the struggle between the Productivists and the Suprematists was about to end, at least in Leningrad, if only because the battlefield had been deserted. Armed with their aesthetic convictions, the Suprematists proceeded to construct a dozen models in plaster in the spring of 1926.²²⁸ The whole series, which had been realized by Suetin, Podzemski and Vorobëv under Malewicz's supervision, was presented that June in the GINKhUK's "retrospective of [its] annual activities."²²⁹ The two photographs of this exhibition that have come down to us allow one to identify twelve three-dimensional models, several ensembles of architectonic "details" and four graphic projects. An inscription on the stand under one of the pieces at the center of the display states "Suprematist order," while the three "basic Suprematist forms" — the black cross, circle and square — which Malewicz had shipped to the Venice Biennial two years earlier frame a particularly large two-dimensional version of *Form aF*.²³⁰ The presence of these emblematic images surrounding that huge architectonic composition like saints on an iconostasis, gave the exhibition something of the character of a festive demonstration. This "background melody" hymning the glory of Suprematism, informed the viewer that the composition was not an impersonal architectural



Summary Volume 4

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chapter 31 • Devices, style and realisation: professionalism in Malewicz's painting technique

chapter 32 • Bibliography

- Part one, The writings of Kazimir Malewicz
- Part two, Texts on Kazimir Malewicz

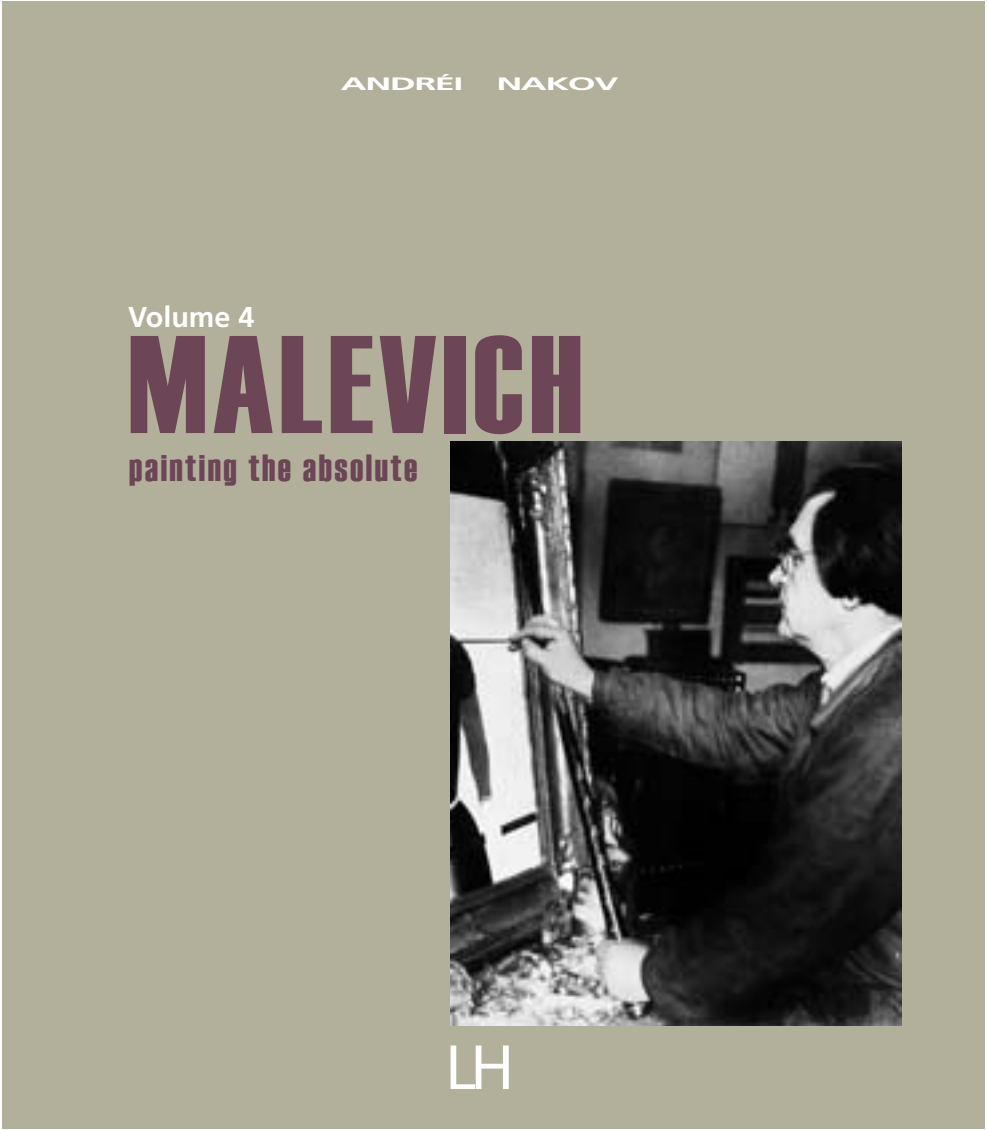
chapter 32 • List of exhibitions

- Part one, 1898-1935
- Part two, 1936-2009

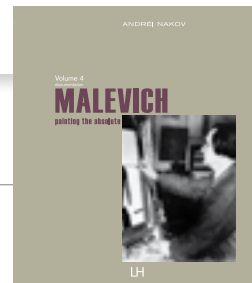
A prolific writer and fervent polemicist, Malevich wrote throughout his life and produced a vast body of texts. His Futurist and Suprematist manifestos, theoretical and polemical articles, aesthetic treatises and voluminous correspondence are duly listed in this volume, along with an exhaustive bibliography of publications devoted to his work.

In addition to a generously illustrated and detailed summary of Malevich's life, this volume includes a searching study of his visual techniques.

Further multi-lingual documentation is provided in an extensive List of Exhibitions. This new source material offers an exceptional tool for further understanding of the artist

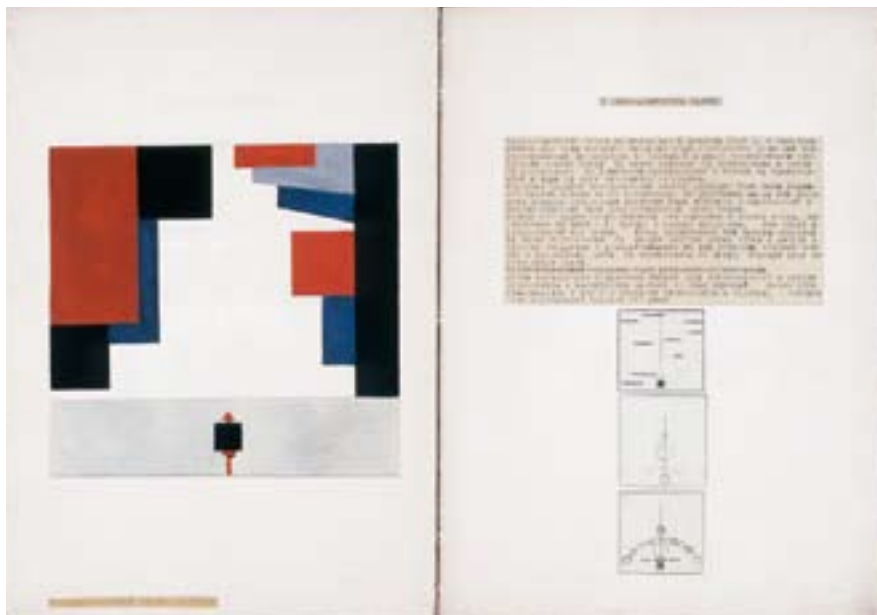


Volume 4
MALEVICH
painting the absolute



- A page from Lev Iudin's diary, 1921

- (right) N. Kogan, double-page spread from the anthology *Unovis No. 1*. Left, set design for a Suprematist ballet, gouache on paper, 19.2 x 20.2 cm. Right, text and three illustrations for a Suprematist ballet



Theory and teaching: beyond the “disheveled paintbrush”

In order to clarify his ideas and defend the new conceptual platform attained by Suprematism, the painter wrote his first didactic treatise during his summer sojourn in Nemchinovo (aka Nemchinovka): ¹²⁰ *On New Systems in Art*, dated July 15, was lithographed in November and reproduced in facsimile in the graphic studio of the School of Art in Vitebsk. As Malewicz later declared, summer 1919 marked an important milestone: he had abandoned his “disheveled paintbrush” in favor of the “sharper pen.”

The writing of this treatise of historiographic scope was also linked to his didactic practices, for the teaching at the Free Moscow Studios (Svomas), which he conducted during winter 1918–1919, was followed during the summer with lessons designed for art teachers.

Work in the international office of the visual arts section (IZO) of the Commissariat (Ministry) of Education appeared to have stalled: the anthology *The Internationale of the Arts*, the last project he was in charge of in Moscow and for which he enlisted the help not only of Khlebnikov and Tatlin but also of theoreticians from other fields (the Symbolist Bely and the Productivist Toporkov), did not get beyond the planning stage. His application to join the staff of the new Moscow School of Art and Technical Engineering (Vkhutemas) met with some resistance. Little by little a strong anti-Suprematist (anti-idealist) barrage was being erected against him in the city, bastion of an ideologically officialized avant-garde — the Materialists-Productivists who openly declared their allegiance to Marxist ideology. Their social and economic usefulness



was recognized very early on by the new authorities, which a few perceptive observers would later describe as “State capitalists.”

Excluded from official institutions, Malewicz found himself in a difficult material situation. In order to circumvent these problems — he was still living outside of Moscow and suffered from a lack of heating and malnutrition (famine was beginning to take hold in the city) — in the fall of the same year he accepted, without much enthusiasm, an invitation from the School of Art in Vitebsk to teach in the “free studios” there. He intended to stay for a few months only, or so he hoped. Leaving his pregnant wife in Moscow, he went to Vitebsk in the hope of sending his family food parcels. At first this was possible, but there too the situation changed rapidly. He looked on his departure from the capital as a temporary exile and would constantly ask David Sterenberg, the head of the visual arts department (IZO), to “reintegrate” him into Moscow life.¹²¹ His return to Moscow remained a dream: the political changes taking place in the capital were faithfully reflected in the nation’s artistic orientations, and at this point the Bolshevik authorities merely tolerated artists willing to follow the one-party line unquestioningly. Confident of its absolute power, the Party imposed its aesthetic will for a realistic, and above all “politically correct,” “return to order.” Thus, in the field of visual arts, it was faithful to the mediocrity of the petit-bourgeois ideals of nineteenth-century illusionist aesthetics.

During the dramatic winter of 1919–1920, Malewicz’s first personal retrospective opened in Moscow. Presented as the sixteenth State Exhibition, a name which put the official stamp on what appeared to be an



- El Lissitzky, double-page spread from the anthology *Unovis No. 1*, containing the beginning of his text “The Suprematism of Creation and the Communism of Work,” India ink and collage on paper

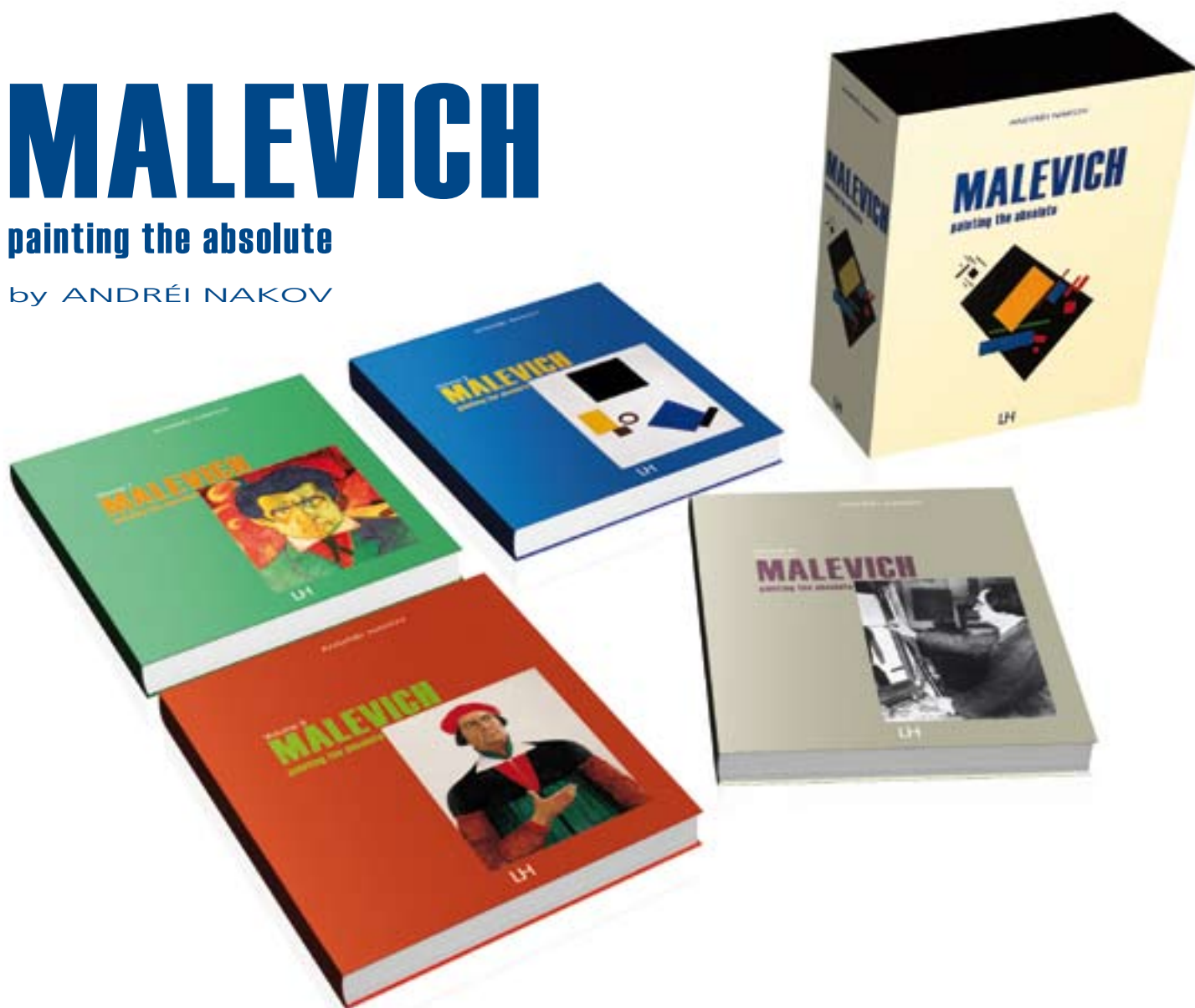
- (left) El Lissitzky, cover design for the Suprematist children’s story *Tale of Two Squares*, watercolor on paper, Vitebsk, 1920. Private collection

¹²⁰ Malewicz went frequently to this village, located about 30 km from the center of Moscow. The house belonged to the family of his wife, Sofia Rafalovich. A true force of nature, he handled the farm work himself. He can be seen in photographs of the time in various Tolstoyan attitudes, walking barefoot and wearing a peasant’s shirt. After his death, his ashes were scattered in the fields of Nemchinovka, near the little river a short distance from the family house.

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by ANDRÉI NAKOV



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