

Ilya Orlov

**The Very Last
Futurist Exhibition**

+

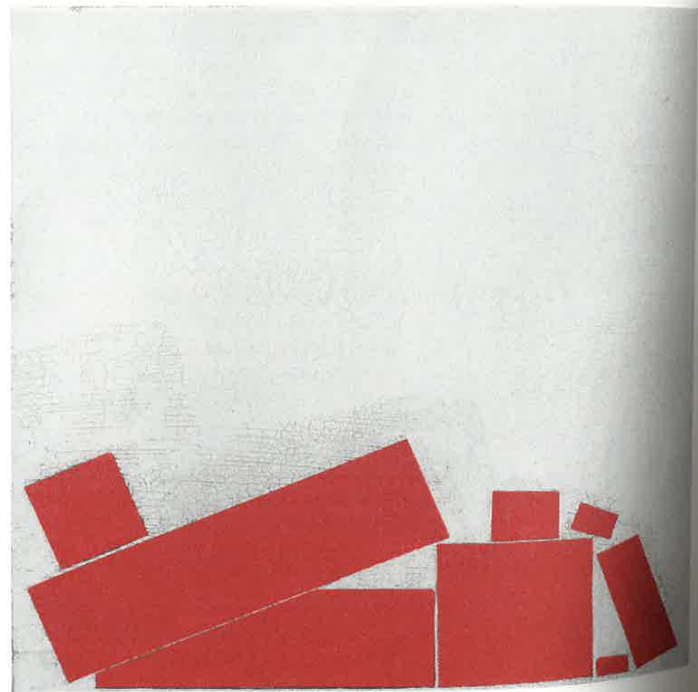
Gravity



318



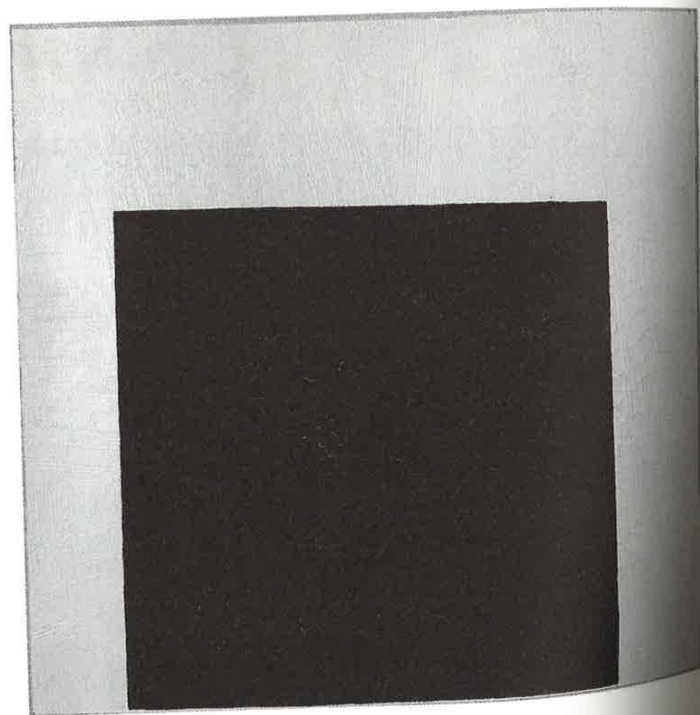
319



320



321



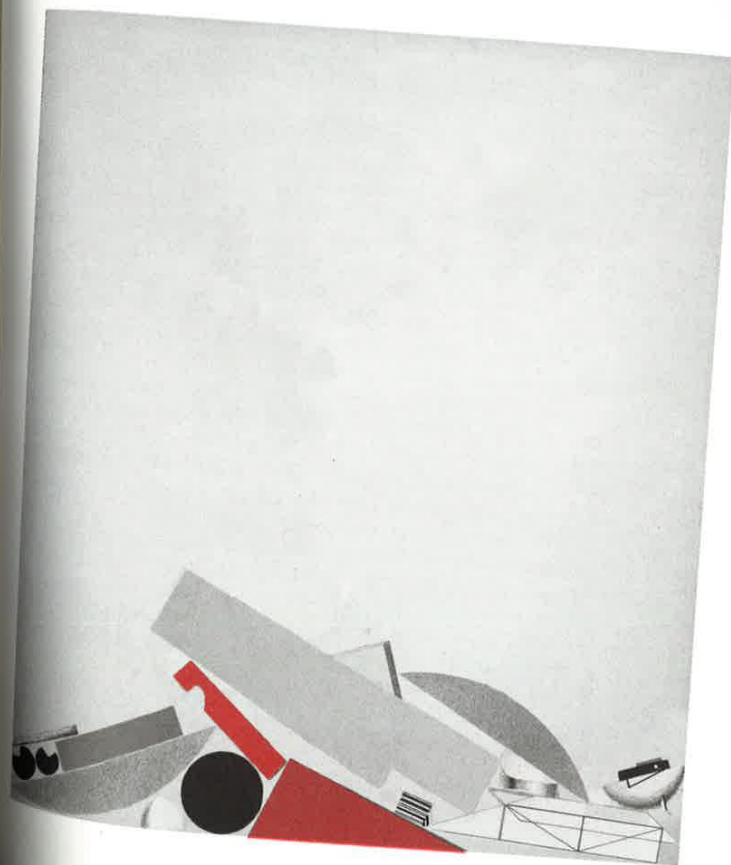
322



323



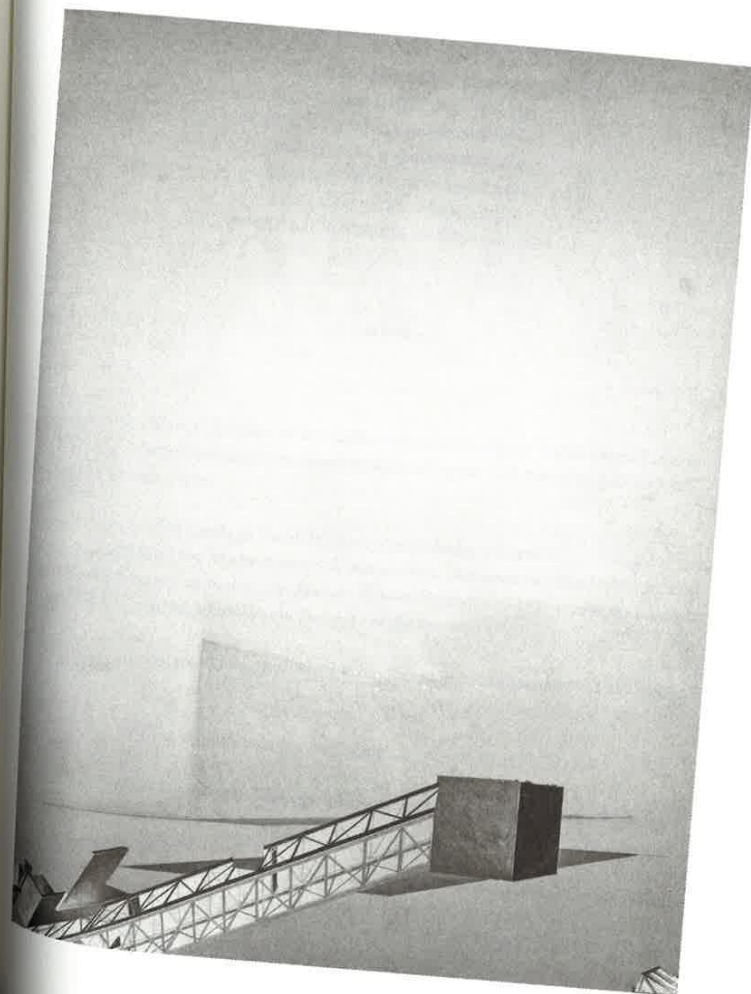
324



325



326



327

Gravity

A Play

THE CHARACTERS:

GRAY CUBE, a three-dimensional geometrical figure

THIN BLACK LINE, a thin black line

BLACK SQUARE, a geometrical figure

RED SQUARE, a geometrical figure

LENIN TRIBUNE, an image of sorts

LITTLE RED STAR, a little red star

WHITE BACKGROUND, a white background

GRAY CUBE: What is the point of this ludicrous monkey business? We have been hanging in the air—I mean, hanging on museum walls, minding our own business. And now this, for no apparent reason.

THIN BLACK LINE (*smiling*): You didn't hurt yourself badly, did you?

BLACK SQUARE: I see. Maybe this isn't all that pleasant. But remember that Malevich called for abandoning the art of the past. *The Last Futurist Exhibition* of 1915 meant the Futurists had made a break with Futurism in the name of the new art.

"Until you spit on your idols, your soul will be clothed in your grandmother's old bodice," he said.

A bit of iconoclasm wouldn't hurt the avant-garde.

THIN BLACK LINE (*smiling*): "They see blackness and alarm. A blow, and everything is scattered!"

BLACK SQUARE: You are quoting Lissitzky, who made a similar gesture. He covered the Earth with the Red Square, and sent me packing.

RED SQUARE: Ahem!

GRAY CUBE: Plainly, gravity has been switched on, that's all. Where is the artistic gesture? This is no more clever—than you know what. But I bet you have a theory at the ready.

THIN BLACK LINE: As far as I can see, nobody has come up with a theory yet. Nothing but references to the nihilistic spirit of the early avant-garde.

LENIN TRIBUNE: I would rephrase this from the standpoint of Marxist dialectics, if no one's minds. In his book *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought*, published in 1924, soon after Lenin's death, Georg Lukács wrote that if we wanted to advance communism, we should treat Lenin the same way Lenin approached Marx, and Marx approached Hegel. Meaning we should not dogmatize, but criticize and dialectically rework, and do this by means of a "concrete analysis of the concrete situation." This is what Lukács called the "theory of practice." I think this is completely applicable to our topic. In other words, if you wish to be faithful to the avant-garde and its horizons, you should treat it the same way it treated pre-avant-garde art.

LITTLE RED STAR: I'd like to ask why this has happened now. If you are such macho Marxists, you should be aware that everything has an economic, political, and social basis. The superstructure follows from the basis, does it not? But what do we have here? Does it mean that post-Soviet "stability" collapsed again in 2014 and continues to be lopsided? But this "stability" had nothing to do with leftist politics or with the problem of the avant-garde. At best, it has an indirect bearing, if you consider perestroika a revolution. So it isn't clearly why this artistic gesture has come to a head now.

THIN BLACK LINE (*smiling*): You have forgotten the mention the failure of the 2011–2012 protests and the Occupy movement.

LITTLE RED STAR: Seriously, the reaction in Russia is a response, of course, to the Ukrainian revolution and a direct consequence of Bolotnaya Square's failure.

RED SQUARE: I think a bit of social lubricant wouldn't hurt us right now. (*Pulls a bottle from its pocket.*)

BLACK SQUARE (*crossing itself*): Lord—

They fill glasses and have a drink. There is a pause.

GRAY CUBE: Thanks. But I still don't see the point in crashing us to the ground.

BLACK SQUARE (*pensively*): You know what? I feel more stable now, I'd even say, more natural, as if I fit myself. In a certain sense, my gravity has become clearer to me.

RED SQUARE: Of course, you finally got your materiality back, the materiality the idealist Malevich fought tooth and nail, like the utilitarianism of the constructivists.

WHITE BACKGROUND (*irritably*): Honestly, our conversation is absurd.

BLACK SQUARE, RED SQUARE, GRAY CUBE, THIN BLACK LINE, and LITTLE RED STAR: Why is that?!

WHITE BACKGROUND: Malevich, Lissitzky, and the other avant-garde artists avoided psychologism, characterism, and personification. There are no heroes and characters in their theoretical and artistic works. Because what mattered to them were universally valid, philosophical subjects. So it is hard to imagine anything more alien to the avant-garde than these expressionist personifications and this dialogical mode of writing.

RED SQUARE: Hey, what about Lissitzky's *Tale of Two Squares*?

BLACK SQUARE: Ha!

WHITE BACKGROUND: It is true that in Lissitzky's book, the squares function as personae or actors. But they are definitely not characters. They are abstractions and function as transcendental objects, as symbols of phenomena, ideas, and forces. Yes, Lissitzky does construct a myth, but he constructs it with abstractions. And, at the end of the day, it was a children's book.

LITTLE RED STAR: There are some earlier examples. Russian Futurism and Suprematism first appeared on the scene in the form of theatrical characters. Let us recall Malevich, Matyushin and Kruchonykh's opera *Victory over the Sun*, which features characters albeit quite abstract ones. This trend was continued in Lissitzky's *Figurines*, produced in Vitebsk in 1921 for a new version of *Victory over the Sun*. Basically, *Figurines* were the personified versions of his Prouns. He even planned to animate them, to make a mechanical marionette theatre.

WHITE BACKGROUND: *Victory over the Sun* is a more persuasive example. However, the characters are also total cardboard cutouts even in it. They are nothing more than personified forces and ideas.

We heard a faint humming and crackling sound.

LITTLE RED STAR: What is that?

WHITE BACKGROUND: What do you mean?

LITTLE RED STAR: That sound.

WHITE BACKGROUND: I don't hear anything. You wanted to say something, Line?

THIN BLACK LINE: Yes. There were plenty of characters in 1970s conceptualism, which was then regarded as the avant-garde's mostly likely successor.

WHITE BACKGROUND: I wouldn't say that. Characters are typical of Moscow conceptualism only, whose continuity with the avant-garde is dubious and problematic. But even if we perceive such continuity, it should be mentioned that, say, Kabakov's or Makarevich and Elagina's characters are hardly expressive. Rather, they are distanced, abstract constructions: cold, ironic, and definitely not expressionist. And generally, they were following the postmodern tendency, not the avant-garde one.

THIN BLACK LINE: Exactly. Irony, doubts, and ambiguity were alien to the avant-garde. The avant-garde was serious, determined, and full of first-order negation. But the tone is quite another matter.

GRAY CUBE: We are not going to get very far this way. We have barely started talking, and it already turns out that the one is inappropriate, and the very notion of talking is has been called into question. Let's begin, then, with the fact that painting squares and cubes is as corny today as telling tasteless jokes.

LENIN TRIBUNE: Don't be so dramatic. We do have things to talk about. It is another matter how we talk about them, in what terms. Basically, the avant-garde is a hackneyed topic, at very least in terms of whether the avant-garde is alive and what it means to us today, as explored by everyone from Peter Bürger to Hal Foster and John Roberts. (*The Black Square and Red Line cross themselves, quickly and imperceptibly.*) Despite the differences between the stances, the takeaway of these debates is that the avant-garde today is yet another new realism, with the stress on socially engaged practices and the politicization of art through alternative economic strategies, forms of production, and so on. In a certain sense, the debates on the avant-garde are over, at least for the time being. But now I have a question: What do our circumstances have to do with this conventional conclusion?

LITTLE RED STAR: Everything is clear, although debatable. But if it's not too much trouble, could you rephrase the question?

LENIN TRIBUNE: Look, in our situation, a simple, utterly formal gesture has been involved. In Malevich's Suprematist paintings, Chasnik's drawings, and Lissitzky's Proun prints, gravity has been turned on, so to speak. The elements in these avant-garde compositions have fallen to the ground, forming piles of red and black squares, gray cubes, thin black lines, little red stars, etc. Piles or barricades, as you wish. What does this situation have to do with the conventional theoretical conclusion I mentioned, namely, with the argument that today's avant-garde is socially engaged art? In my opinion, what we have here is the totally opposite approach, the formalist approach.

GRAY CUBE: Why not? Harry Lehmann writes that the overcoming of postmodernism in "reflexive" modernism takes us back to the traditional forms of easel painting: poems, concerts, etc.

THIN BLACK LINE: Provided the artist is aware of where and when she is working. If she is aware, then yes, dialectically speaking, this is a negation of the negation of the negation.

GRAY CUBE: Okay. That's what I meant.

LITTLE RED STAR: Lehmann?

RED SQUARE: He is a German art theorist. Speaking of Russian contemporary art, I read his essay "Avant-Garde Today" in the Moscow underground art journal *Baza* about ten years ago. I think they published it to bolster the idea that 1990s Moscow radical actionism was now part of art history, and it was to time to engage again in object art.

GRAY CUBE: That's right. I read it in Russian.

LITTLE RED STAR: Maybe you could read out the quotation?

GRAY CUBE: "The first answer to our central question of the avant-garde today is thus: at the present historical moment, avant-garde is a work-centered art that reverts to the old media—if this is recognized, interpreted and communicated in the art system as a step into reflexive modernism, and does not lead art directly into a pre-modern self-understanding."

We hear a faint rattling and humming.

LITTLE RED STAR: There it was again.

GRAY CUBE: What?

LITTLE RED STAR: The sound.

LENIN TRIBUNE (*coldly*): I would like to go back to what I was saying but wasn't able to finish. Perhaps we underestimate the problem of the term avant-garde. In 1966, the Marxist aesthetician Galvano Della Volpe wrote that the term avant-garde is inappropriate for progressive leftist art and has more to do with bourgeois and bohemian culture. Accordingly, he writes, "We Marxists should abandon it." It is fair to say, however, that when Volpe discussed the avant-garde, he was talking about Picasso and Pollock, not Duchamp and Lissitzky. In all fairness, he was a theorist of socialist realism, and he was mostly interested in literature. However, there is something to his argument, even though it is obviously mistaken, a kind of apophatic testimony to the fact that the avant-garde program of the 1910s and 1920s failed so badly that in the 1960s a so-called philosopher would identify Picasso and Pollock as the avant-garde. We should also keep in mind that avant-garde is a retrospective term. The leftist artists of the 1910s and 1920s never identified themselves as avant-gardists. Rather, they invented tons of competing -isms. By the way, in Russia, it was the reactionary art critic Alexander Benois who first applied the term avant-garde to Russian Futurists and Suprematists. Of course, he meant it sarcastically.

THIN BLACK LINE: There is an interesting parallel with today. John Roberts has wittily appropriated the conservative art historian Donald Kuspit's term 'post-art'. Kuspit introduced the term as a purely negative and even pejorative definition of various forms of contemporary art, especially conceptual art, which, in his view, exemplified art's loss of artistry and spirituality in the twentieth century. Roberts, on the contrary, has used the term in an entirely positive sense to define the contemporary avant-garde as a true Hegelian 'art after the end of art' or 'art after art in the expanded field'.

LITTLE RED STAR: Okay, now it's much clearer. But what is the connection to Hegel's end of art?

THIN BLACK LINE: "In defining the end of art's traditional mimetic function as 'the end of art,' Hegel opens out a space in which the possibilities and limits of art can be articulated and defended as a necessary task of modernity. As such, the recurring etiolated humanist histories of art [...] do violence to the post-classical, post-traditional and ultimately 'post-art' [*sic*] condition of art, rendering incomprehensible its extended conceptualization."

LITTLE RED STAR: Now I see, thank you.

LENIN TRIBUNE: Let's stick to the point.

THIN BLACK LINE: Sorry, it just came out.

WHITE BACKGROUND: If I may, I would point out another conclusion in the aforementioned debates, a more generally valid conclusion, and one that was also quite common among the people involved in the debates. John Roberts expressed it clearly: "The avant-garde is a historically open-ended research program." Accordingly, the conclusion that the avant-garde today is another ultra-realism, rooted in socially engaged practices and alternative economies, is definitely relevant to the present day. But it is a tactical conclusion, not a strategic one. There is no clear horizon beyond this. Yes, it is resistance to the system, but more in the sense of nipping at it or undermining it, than an alternative or a program. I agree that the term avant-garde is problematic. But since we have no alternative yet, we can only fall back on self-definitions—first of all, Futurism, Suprematism, and constructivism. It is clear that current socially engaged tactics have broken with Futurism. So this is truly *The Very Last Futurist Exhibition*.

LENIN TRIBUNE: Speaking of horizons, the key problem the avant-garde really engaged with was violence: the master/slave relationship and the whole complex of relations among things, the state, exploitation, production, consumption, etc., no matter how many times it has been said that capitalism implemented the constructivist program of merging art, mass production, and everyday life.

LITTLE RED STAR: Malevich wrote about violence that human beings were the "most dangerous phenomenon in nature." He meant the ongoing cycle of oppression, the

suppression of thought, and revolts against the former, the liberation of (and from) labor, and the liberation of nations. All these issues are still on the political agenda. We saw them exemplified by Ukraine, Georgia, and Moldova in 2014–2016. Perhaps, socially engaged, thrash economy, underground art practices (grassroots or theory-based and internationally funded) will cope with this? Alright, we are producing alternative models. But doesn't this collapse of abstract Suprematist figures and Prouns speak no less concretely of this?

THIN BLACK LINE (*smiling*): Finally, we are speaking of something concrete. Will there be anything to haggle over here?

GRAY CUBE (*sighing*): There always was and there always will be something to haggle over. Even in our state of collapse.

WHITE BACKGROUND: We attempted to resist and avoid this.

They pause. We hear a rattling and crackling sound.

BLACK SQUARE: U—el—

LENIN TRIBUNE: Sorry, what?

BLACK SQUARE: —u—el—el—te—ka—

LENIN TRIBUNE: What's an "elteka"?

The crackling sound grows louder.

LITTLE RED STAR (*anxiously*): Hey, what's going on?

THIN BLACK LINE (*nervously*): Look, it has a crack.

LITTLE RED STAR (*laughing*): Who? The Lenin Tribune?

THIN BLACK LINE: No, no, the Black Square.

WHITE BACKGROUND (*smiling*): Oh, come on, it's just more of his trademark craquelure.

The rattling and humming grow louder. The Thin Black Line looks around, listening intently. Then it gets up, goes to the far corner of the room, and switches off an air conditioner. The sound stops. The characters pause.

BLACK SQUARE: I'm going.

There is another pause.

LITTLE RED STAR (*hurriedly*): I'm sorry. I have to go.

LENIN TRIBUNE: Yes, it's time for me to go, too. I have a flight to Berlin in an hour.

WHITE BACKGROUND: Well, friends, we should wrap it up. Thank you for today's session, and see you soon.

Radical a
on De
Ab
Interview wit