

Chapter 3

“Smooth Space” for Avatars: A Proun in the Metaverse

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ABSTRACT

During the years of Suprematism, between 1919 and 1923 in Russia, one of the movement’s most significant contributors, architect, artist and designer El Lissitzky developed a series of works which he entitled “Prouns,” a name the exact meaning of which El Lissitzky never fully revealed, although he later described the purpose of his creations as interchange stations from painting to architecture, i.e., from two dimensional to three dimensional visuality. The author has re-created El Lissitzky’s “Proun #5A” from 1919 in the metaverse, as an architecture for avatars. The process in which the translation from analogue drawing to three dimensional digital artifact was undertaken, the challenges encountered during its re-building; framed within a literature review that examines both El Lissitzky’s influence on contemporary cyber-architecture, as well as the significance of his spatial investigations and his sources of inspiration during the early decades of the twentieth century will form the contents of this text.

INTRODUCTION: SUPREMATISM AND EL LISSITZKY

The project discussed in this text is based upon the concept of ‘The Proun’ which artist/designer/architect Lazar Markovich Lissitzky (widely known as El Lissitzky) developed during his association with the Suprematist art movement, instigated by Kazimir Malevich during and following the years of World War 1 in Russia. Although Suprematism was established as an art movement in as early as 1913, El Lissitzky’s involvement with it did not come about until 1919 when he was brought into close contact with Kazimir Malevich at an art school founded and directed by Marc Chagall in Vitebsk, near Moscow. Prior to his involvement with the Suprematist movement El Lissitzky had whole-heartedly embraced the tenets of Constructivism, and would return to them after 1924 when the Suprematist movement came to an end under Stalin’s new regime.

What is of note in his 5 year-long affiliation to Suprematism is that the movement is fundamentally opposed to the post-revolutionary positions of Constructivism with its cult of the object, and its strategies

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of adapting art to the principles of functional organization. Under Constructivism, the traditional artist is transformed into the artist-as-engineer in charge of organizing life in all of its aspects.

Suprematism, in sharp contrast to Constructivism, embodies a profoundly anti-materialist, anti-utilitarian philosophy. Malevich writes:

Art no longer cares to serve the state and religion, it no longer wishes to illustrate the history of manners, it wants to have nothing further to do with the object, as such, and believes that it can exist, in and for itself, without “things,” that is, the “time-tested well-spring of life;” further explicating that “under Suprematism I understand the primacy of pure feeling in creative art. To the Suprematist, the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth. (Malevich, 1927- reprint 2003, p. 67)

According to Lissitzky, the decisive transformations in art were analogous to the new concept of number – that is, art became totally divorced from material phenomena and free of the physical object. This change occurred, in Lissitzky’s view, with Malevich’s Suprematist Black Square of 1913. Prior to Suprematism, artists depicted objects from nature, and all new movements including avant-garde movements such as Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism were nothing more than attempts to endow the object with a new life. The Suprematist canvas, on the other hand, existed independently of anything outside it. In terms of the analogy with mathematics, “Suprematism transposed painting from the condition of the ancient objective and concrete number to that of the modern number abstracted from the object. This number occupies its own, independent place in nature alongside all objects.” (El Lissitzky quoted in Levinger, 1989. p. 228)

Moreover, Lissitzky claimed that geometric forms were pure inventions of the mind that were comparable to the abstract terms of functional equations which imply a universally valid system of relationships. In the same way, the artist had to find a system of relationships that would be valid for all artists. This, Lissitzky argued, happened in Suprematism:

The moment the square and the circle are dissected and distributed over the flat surface a relationship is formed between the individual parts. The result is not a personal affair concerning one individual artist, but a system of universal validity. (El Lissitzky quoted in Levinger, 1989. p. 228)

Although El Lissitzky whole-heartedly embraced the creed of Suprematism, it cannot be said that the Constructivists, as a whole, shared his enthusiasm: The First Working Group of Constructivists devoted one of its early sessions to a discussion of two paintings by Malevich, one Cubist and the other Suprematist. Their consensus was that Malevich’s Suprematist canvas followed the laws of composition. According to Rodchenko “Malevich makes no color resolutions. His form is strong, but if you were to paint it a different color with the same intensity, nothing in the work would be changed” (Rodchenko quoted in Levinger, 1989. p. 229) The Group’s verdict against Malevich stood in blatant contradiction to Lissitzky, who argued that the term ‘construction’ applied as much to Suprematism as it did to Constructivism.

The difference between El Lissitzky and the Constructivists was more than a disagreement over terminology. For Lissitzky, a Suprematist painting was, by definition, constructive art. Thus he repudiated the final decision taken by the First Working Group of Constructivists – namely, that a utilitarian element had to be immediately present in the idea of construction. El Lissitzky distinguished between the

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