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MIKHAIL MATIUShIN AND KAZIMIR MALEVICH

The friendship of Mikhail Matiushin and Kazimir Malevich is one of the most crucial relationships for the history of Russian art, perhaps one can even say in the history of Modernism, or even go so far as to declare in the history of Western art as a whole. It led to the first Cubo-Futurist performance piece—*Victory Over the Sun*—in 1913, and, in general, their correspondence during this period is the best, and really the only, record we have of the mysterious process that led to the appearance of the *Black Square* and Malevich’s revolutionary geometric Suprematism.

In spite of the fact that they were very different kinds of men, different in their personalities and stylistic approaches to art, their friendship continued for 22 years, until Matiushin’s death in 1934, and, as far as we know, in mutual respect, without major, or even minor, upsets.

For Malevich, Matiushin was a significant link with the Western art world; after all he had spent time in France, had even seen the Universal Exposition in Paris in 1900, and he and those around him kept up with progressive art events abroad, something extremely important for Malevich, who wished to see himself participating in contemporary art on a global scale, but who was not to go abroad until 1927.

The two artists first met late in 1912, when they became associated through a Moscow-Petersburg alliance of the Donkey’s Tail group, to which Malevich belonged, and the Union of Youth, which Matiushin had helped to organize. During the next three years they developed basic concepts about the nature and aims of art that would serve them the rest of their lives.

For Malevich and Matiushin, Cubo-Futurism became the art of the transcendent, expressing the highly developed consciousness of a future species of humanity that would possess radically new organs of sight, as well as a new and universal language. They both aspired to express a higher order of reality. Their view that a synthesis of psychic and organic evolution would lead to a heightened consciousness, became the conceptual basis for a large part of the Russian avant-garde esthetic.

The two artists’ exchanges of ideas about art were undoubtedly productive for both, but perhaps Malevich benefited most directly from the friendship; from Matiushin he probably learned about the theories of Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger, and about P. D. Uspensky and the notion of the fourth
dimension. Shortly after they met, Matiushin interspersed quotations from Uspensky’s books *The Fourth Dimension* and *Tertium Organum* with a translation of excerpts from Gleizes and Metzinger’s essay *Cubism*, drawing an analogy between the Cubist vision, with its implication of higher geometries, and the new art. The compilation of texts, with Matiushin’s commentary, was published in the *Union of Youth* journal in March of 1913. Matiushin had not previously been interested in Cubism as a style of painting, but now he and Malevich connected the fourth dimension with the aims of *zaum*—the notion of a transrational or beyonsense logic—that was developing as a principle of invention among the Russian literary and visual avant-garde. Matiushin wrote,

> Artists have always been knights, poets, and prophets of space, in all times; sacrificing to everyone, dying, they were opening eyes and teaching the crowd to see the great beauty of the world concealed from it. So also now, Cubism has raised the flag of the New World, of the new learning about the merging of time and space.”¹¹

Malevich’s letters to Matiushin from 1913 to 1916 detail step by step the course of Malevich’s thinking as he moved from a Cubist and Cubo-Futurist style to Suprematism. Thank goodness that Matiushin kept the letters—he must have recognized their importance. But Malevich was doing more than just using Matiushin as a sounding board to work out his own ideas; he wrote in anticipation of Matiushin’s responses to his thoughts, and if a response was not forthcoming, if the letter somehow did not arrive, Malevich wrote again, framing the same thoughts, waiting impatiently for Matiushin’s answer.

On the connection between Cubism and *zaum* Malevich wrote to Matiushin:

> We have come as far as the rejection of reason, but we rejected reason because another kind of reason has grown in us, which, in comparison to what we have rejected, can be called ‘beyond reason’ [*zaum*], which also has law, construction, and sense, and only by learning it shall we have work based on the law of the truly new ‘beyond reason’. This [new] reason has found Cubism as a means to express a thing.”¹²

Although Matiushin’s responses are not yet available—there must be many still unpublished letters of Matiushin as well as Malevich—we may judge something about what he may have written to Malevich about the idea of the fourth dimension from his notebooks. In May, 1915, for example, just at the

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¹² Manuscript Division of the Tretiakov Gallery, f. 25, no. 9, l. 7-8.