

Kazimir Malevich, *The Question of Imitative Art* (1920)

[...] After long centuries marking the destruction of the bearers of youth the day has come for the clash between youth and age. Today a desperate struggle is being carried on with the old man who is trying to stifle youth. Today we are witnessing one of the usual mistakes of the old, which does not comprehend the movements of new life, today the old men are striving to ensure that there may never be another spring: but there will be, for in it lies the birth of a new universal step. Today the avant-gardes of economics and politics are fighting to gain territory, in order to prepare a place for the foundations of the new world: all the young forces are collecting on it and will create a world in their new image. Today the man has awoken who shouts for all the world to hear and calls all humanity to unity. Our unity is essential for his being: not to obtain rights and liberty or to build an economic, utilitarian life, but in order that, by the safeguarding of our bodily needs, our being may advance to the single unity and wholeness on the path of universal movement, as our main and, indeed, only goal. The unit of all humanity is essential, for a new single man of action is needed. We wish to form ourselves according to a new pattern, plan and system; we wish to build in such a way that all the elements of nature will unite with man and create a single, all-powerful image. With this aim the economic principle leads us along its path and collects all the lives that have been scattered in the chaos of nature, separate and isolated, uniting them in his path: thus every personality, every individual, formerly isolated, is now incorporated in the system of united action.

This is why nowadays no individual personality is allowed to have the freedom of isolation or to live as it pleases, arranging a personal economic program for its own vegetable-garden, since it must be included in the system of sharing and of common freedom and rights, hence the individual has no rights, for the rights are common to all, and the individual personality itself is simply a fragment from a united being, all of whose fragments must be joined together in one, since they originated from one. Thus all the many lives in nature, with all their various advantages, have become incorporated in man and have brought him their entire will and wisdom; now only he—man—as a centre can turn nature into another new image, which will be nothing less than man himself. a completed step on the eternal path. Our new society should occupy itself in this way, but in order to begin building we need a plan of action and a system. We already know that every aspect of our life is based on the economics of subsistence and of movement in general, whence stem politics, rights and liberty. Of these the most important is economics, which is the measure of our contemporary life: this is how we measure it, and anything that does not come under this measure is not contemporary. We should, accordingly, apply this measure absolutely, to all forms of our expression, in order to be in accordance with the general plan for the contemporary development of an organism. Thanks to the economic system, every individual is subject to it, whilst it can no longer produce anything apart from the system of sharing. The communist town is not arising from the chaos of private buildings, but according to a general plan: the form of each building will stem from this plan and not from the whim of individual personalities.

Freedom of the individual can only be in accordance with the common freedom; hence no personality has any private property, for all its forms are a phenomenon of the general economic movement. Hence arises the collective—a group of personalities linked by the agreement of collective individualism on the basis of common economic action, and forming a unit of the general unite. The joining together of all the collectives is the unity towards which contemporary life is moving. [...] None of the forms of economic development and of human consciousness

that were found in the old world can exist any longer, for a new meaning has appeared. No form of the old can exist, for revolutionary perfection is ceaselessly bearing its being further and further by means of our consciousness, broadening and deepening space by energetic economic reasoning. If, on the other hand, we leave the old form, we are serving counter-revolutionary perfection. Each day, in economic and political life, brings purification from what is old—this is where perfection lies. But in art everything is the other way round: the older a work the more it is considered valuable, beautiful, artistic and skilful, just as in the wine trade old wine is the most prized. They always try to show the people that old art is valuable and beautiful, at the same time stifling, muffling and slandering everything modern. Today, when Revolutionary Perfection is bringing a new, youthful world of forms as the body of being, reactionary elements dig up and bring out into the street the remains of past perfection, showing them to the masses. It is not shown to aid understanding of the development of form, as an example of old life; no, they strive to prove and convince that the world of art they have dug up is beautiful, that its beauty is the greatest of all, and that it is lofty and difficult; they say that to repeat it one would have to possess talent, to be highly skilful and study a great deal, whilst modern art is very simple: any fool can draw a square, but no one can repeat Raphael or Rubens. But these reactionaries forget that perfection demands instantaneous action. Any boy can light a match and get fire in an instant. No one remembers the original primitive method of getting fire by rubbing wood together, and no one would advocate the old method. They are striving to inculcate the new meaning of revolutionary movement into old art. Life threw the icon out of people's houses, but now they are showing it dressed up in a new meaning.

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The movement of the new world is divided in two: on the one hand the fighting, destructive avant-garde with the banner of economics, politics, rights and freedom, and, on the other hand, the creative army which appears after it, creating form for the whole utilitarian and spiritual world of things. Creativity is the essence of man, as the highest being in nature and everyone should take up this activity. Creativity changes in the same way as the party's revolutionary attitude. People who were formerly considered revolutionaries have now turned out to be counter-revolutionaries: the same thing happens in art. In academism people saw creativity, painting and form, but with the arrival of new trends it turned out to contain neither creativity-nor painting nor form, Many people think that anything except communism is beneficial to the people; the same sort of people think that only academism can produce real art: both are cases of blindness to their own real perfection.

Just as up to now many people have been unable to conceive clearly the form of the commune, so many have failed to see form in new art; but those that have seen it have also seen a new world for their life. For no better reason than that they could see neither form nor art in new art, attacks and persecutions were carried out, just as they were in political affairs. Formerly art rested on artistic beauty, but now we must embark on the purely creative path of economic movement. This is the only road of development for all humanity and from it stem all the forms which are international: the car, airplane, telephone, machine, etc. The spreading of this conception amongst the people and its introduction to the channel of creative inventions will place it in world-wide unity. Economy in movement is the same for everyone, whilst, on the other hand, everyone has different aesthetic tastes, and therefore move towards not unity but division and separation; contemporary life leaves this by means of communism.

It is necessary to consciously place creativity as the aim of life, as the perfection of oneself, and therefore current views on art must be changed: art is not a picture of pleasures, decoration, mood, experience or the conveyance of beautiful nature. This type of art no longer exists; nor do jesters, dancers and other miscellaneous theatrical grimacers (these monkeyish grimaces have also come to an end). There has appeared a silent, dynamic creation of new art's edifice in the red image of the world. [...]

[...] How we must study and what we must stand on is an important question, for your deed depends upon the stand you take. What is comprehended is also realized; this takes place in my consciousness and passing through experimental action is fixed in real existence; hence I appear to be divided into two parts: on the one hand, the experimental consciousness of a laboratory model fact, and, on the other, the real, utilitarian, living action. Studios should naturally be divided in this way. This is the chief basis from which the different topes of comprehension may stem. And so the new construction studios will pass from the artistic culture of aesthetic beauties to the action of natural investigation, losing all the quirks of imitative studios: a plan of unity is needed for all technical constructions. Every phenomenon of form is the result of our energetic movement, directed along the path of economy, which results in this or that form of a thing. Each artistic trend is a form of this type, a striving to convey by the briefest possible movement this or that state of a thing, as a question that has arisen externally. But all the trends, basing themselves on the aestheticism of art's beauty, have forgotten the important thing: the economy of movement. It was only in Cubism that this basis began to come more clearly to the fore, pouring itself out in the bright form of the Suprematist trend. New art is no longer organized under the flag of aesthetic taste, but is passing over to party organization. UNOVIS is now a party which has put economy as its basis. Thus art becomes closely linked with the communism of humanity's economic wellbeing. [...]

[...] Academism as art, as philosophical comprehension, and as a psychological phenomenon is already a definite form which has closed the ring of the horizon around imitative art. The new creation can no longer remain within this horizon, any more than the economic, political, civil life of rights and liberty can.

The form of academism as representation, as agitation, as a means for propaganda, is essentially temporary in the same way as grocers' shop signs are. Literacy will do away with the representation of objects on signs, whereas the expression of power sensations can only be made through the abstract forms of the red moving against the white. Just as one cannot convey the power movements of a machine by portraying a man, so, likewise, one cannot convey the actual force of red, by portraying a worker in a red apron. At the essence of the new arts lies not representation but creative construction: raising ourselves by means of constructions we achieve the highest natural development in all humanity. We are moving towards a world where everyone will create, rather than repeating and mechanizing a form that an inventor has rejected. We must set creativity's path in such a way that all the masses will take part in the development of every creative thought that appears, without turning it into mechanized production or cliché. [...] Humanity contains the idea of unity, and this is its being; but it is so blocked up that it can only be reached with great difficulty. Our contemporary communist principle leads to it, but thanks to the fact that the path is blocked by chaotic forms one cannot get through except by war, although great achievements are to be made by the creative building of life's forms. If the masses were freed from the limitations of national and every other kind of patriotism and property which have been wound around their being by false leaders, the whole people would be fused into one and would naturally be drawn into general fusion, a unity of all forces in one form. As it is, it is

destroyed by nationalism, and, preserving the latter, cannot be united as a result of which it produces a multitude of forms for its national, self-centered construction.

The contemporary being of modern man strives for a unity that will break up the boundaries between national vegetable gardens, summoning all the nations to a single pole, that in unity they might create the image of all humanity. There is only one path to this unification and unity—the economic path. This is the carrot that man chases in order to complete the form of pure action. This is the path of the economic and political avant-garde which is preparing territory for the pure action of creative work. Here lies the supremacy of contemporaneity. Imitative art has always been dependent on the various peculiarities of nationalism. It has developed in exact accordance with every phenomenon of economic, political, moral, religious, anecdotal, historical and everyday life; it has also had people waking up and shouting about the pure unity of pictorial action. But these people belonged not to imitative art but to creative construction, as a result of which many of them were banished by the state and ridiculed by society and the shameful critical press. They were subjected to cold and hunger, but their youthfulness kept them warm, and thanks to this they are still alive despite all these hardships. And thus we have lived to see a great revolution in imitative art. 1910 marked the conflagration, the clash between the revolutionary creative construction of Cubism and imitative art.

This civil war between new and old art is still going on. The academism of art's *arrière-garde* has been waging a desperate struggle with the innovators by means of the press and the censorship, but the October Revolution, having smashed the foundations of the old state, has partly recognized the innovators in art also. The innovators have been recognized and even given a place in the *arrière-garde*'s college, but this is not enough to satisfy us: imitative art must be destroyed like the imperialist army. We innovators protest against a constituent assembly in art, for agreement is ridiculous when it means uniting two opposing trends which form some third monster - this is what constituent imitative art means. Today, as yesterday, engaged in ceaseless struggle we are moving towards a new path for art's innovators, which we shall make the method and system for establishing the utilitarian world of things, as a tender to the moving being. We shall make for creative work which will be not merely personal but belong to the united masses. Our imitative art studios represent a constituent assembly, for they accommodate all the trends and even some individual personalities not belonging to any of the trends—the apolitical.

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A strip of the new world has today been formed on Russian territory and the entire old world has arisen against it. The leaders of the economic-political armies are engaged in a struggle for rights and liberty.

Just as in the old days the West, East and South oppressed us economically, so it was in art. Now we have an army, faithful towards a new principle in economic life, and the vanguard of art. The economic life of the new world has produced the commune. The creative construction of the new art has produced the Suprematism of the square. [...]