

Man: The Magic Square

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The symbolism of man by a square is not new idea: it is implicit even in the form of his body, for if a man stand with feet together and arms outspread, he will define the limits of a square, his height being equal to his reach; and if, thus standing, he swings his torso half-way around, he will have inscribed himself within an imaginary cube—for it is as Kepler says, “Artful nature has given to the most perfect animal the same six limits as the cube has, most perfectly marked. . . . Man himself is, as it were, a cube.”

—Claude Bragdon, *The New Image, “Man: the Magic Square”*¹

In 1913 the Russian-born Petr Uspensky (1878-1947) departed for Egypt and India in “search of the miraculous” after having read Claude Bragdon’s *Man the Square* (1912), a parable about the fourth dimension that through the analogy of the square’s two dimensions to the cube’s three-dimensions discusses the relationship between archetypal man’s indwelling personal consciousness to the higher-dimensional archetypal world’s divine consciousness. Although Bragdon does not specifically use the terminology, this parable is about achieving cosmic consciousness.

Uspensky was a journalist and occult writer who had inherited mathematical talents from his father. In 1908 he began extensively reading Theosophical and occult literature and he published his first book on the fourth dimension in 1910. Coincidentally, Claude Bragdon was also interested in Theosophy, so much so that he began and ended *Man the Square* with quotations by Theosophy’s founder, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), a Russian-born émigré to the United States.² After Uspensky’s return from the East, he corrected and supplemented his 1911 book *Tertium Organum* and republished this second Russian edition in 1915, which subsequently found its way into Bragdon’s hands in 1918. Together with Nicholas Bessaraboff, Bragdon translated *Tertium Organum* into English.³ In *Tertium Organum* Uspensky weaves together the mathematical logic of a space of four, or more, dimensions with notions of achieving “cosmic consciousness”⁴ and his mystical, occult and eastern philosophical sources of Taoism, Hinduism and Buddhism are readily apparent.

It has been well-documented that the ideas of Uspensky significantly influenced the Russian avant-garde, especially through his book *Tertium Organum*, which was read by both Cubists and Futurists⁵ and excerpts certainly would have been read by Kazimir Malevich.⁶ Malevich may have even attended one of Uspensky’s many public lectures.⁷ In *Tertium Organum* Uspensky challenges the artist to be clairvoyant: to see beyond the archetypal phenomenal world into the higher-dimensional world of

the noumenal. According to Uspensky, the *noumenon* is the hidden meaning and the hidden function of a thing that is reflected on earth as a *phenomenon*: a two-dimensional image of something three-dimensional. To Uspensky the “soul of the artist” has the ability to understand and *feel* the reflection of the noumenon in the phenomenon. To Uspensky, the artist “. . . must see that which others do not see: he must be a magician, must possess the power to make others see that which they do not themselves see, but which he does see.”⁸

In the 1914 edition of Uspensky’s *Fourth Dimension* he criticized Cubism and Futurism for misinterpreting his words by creating works that he believed to be the “falsification” of the ideas of the fourth dimension and he was outraged that these artists claimed to have attained a new vision of the world.⁹ The art to which Uspensky referred seems to be the motion-oriented works of late 1912 and the Cubo-Futurist paintings of 1913. It seems that the object-oriented paintings of simultaneous views or objects in motion interpreted too literally the notion of seeing that which others do not see, very much like the time and motion photographic studies of Muybridge and Marey captured what couldn’t been seen by the naked eye. Later in *Tertium Organum* Uspensky writes, “Art in its highest manifestations is a path to cosmic consciousness.”¹⁰ This type of art could only be successful to Uspensky, then, if it were the manifestation of a four-dimensional vision, which could not occur in nature but only as a mental operation of the mind’s eye.

It has not been documented that Malevich responded directly to Uspensky’s challenge of clairvoyancy for the artist, however, in his book *The Non-Objective World* he seems to provide a direct rebuttal to Uspensky’s criticism. Malevich criticizes Cubism for standing “at the edge of the culture of Cézanne” and Futurism as “pointing toward abstract art” and bordering “on a new culture—*non-objective Suprematism*.”¹¹ In other words, both Cubism and Futurism were steps along the way, but neither art form had reached the “new culture” because neither were a “new reality” but were simply reflections of nature, or what can be seen by the eye. According to Malevich, “the artist who creates rather than imitates *expresses himself*”¹² through creating a new reality that is not based on what can be seen in nature, but is based on what the artist feels. To Malevich the distinguishing characteristic was *feeling*: “Feeling is the determining factor. . . and thus art arrives at non-objective representation—at Suprematism.”¹³ To Uspensky, it was because of

the artist's ability to *feel* that the artist could see the reflection of the noumenon and (re)present it as a phenomenon. Malevich equated feeling with the non-objective square.¹⁴

Why the square? Malevich's answer was, "The suprematist square and the forms proceeding out of it can be likened to the primitive marks (symbols) of aboriginal man which represented, in their combination, not ornament but a feeling of rhythm."¹⁵ To Malevich, rhythm was related to feeling. Malevich was also very familiar with Theosophy and may have come across *Man the Square* in a way similar to the way Uspensky did. If he was influenced by Bragdon, then in choosing the square he could equate the three: feeling, man and square.

Then why did Bragdon choose the square? For example, why not the pentagon? The human form has five appendages, head, arms and legs, and relates well to the star pentagram, which is a much more interesting shape. The human form also fits well within the circle. In *Man the Square* Bragdon begins by quoting previous sources: Kepler¹⁶ and H. P. Blavatsky,¹⁷ who corroborate the relationship between the square and the human form and legitimate Bragdon's reasoning behind his choice of the square. However, even prior to Kepler, the square has always represented the earthly. If one looks to the ancient Chinese *Lo Shu*, then the use of the square as the shape to best represent the iconology of the macrocosm of the universe in the microcosm of the body begins to make more sense.

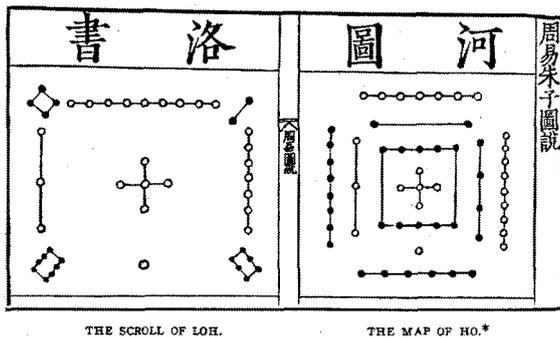
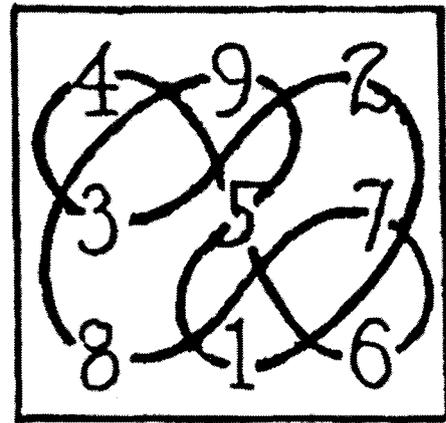


figure 1. Lo Shu and the Map of Ho

For example, in the second century BC when the *Lo Shu* (figure 1) was used as a means of divination it had been referred to as the "Nine Halls Calculation." In the sixth century AD, the Taoist Chên Luan explained this reference by the quotation, "2 and 4 make the shoulders, 6 and 8 make the feet; 3 is at the left, 7 is at the right; 9 is worn on the head and 1 is underfoot [literally: trodden by the shoes]; while 5 dwells at the center" (figure 2). This mnemonic means of ciphering the order of the numbers of the magic square of three referred to a person, and most likely to a man or god considered as a microcosm of the universe.¹⁸ The number five was important because it was located at the center, or navel of this cosmic man, which is also the location of the mythical *axis mundi*.



THE 3 X 3 SQUARE

figure 2. Claude Bragdon, Frozen Fountain, 1932

In his 1923 essay, "Contemporary Art," Malevich wrote that the cube symbolized the fuller "six-sided" perception of looking forward, backward, left, right, upward and down: "The new phenomenon or measure is a technological means for carrying out, not private trade, not three-dimensional, imitative art, but four-dimensional; not on three, but on six planes, not a half-cubic, but a cubic form, this will be the new realism of our time."¹⁹ According to Bragdon in *Man the Square*, the square is just the phenomenon of man's Higher Self the noumenon: "The cube is the true individual, of which the square is but a single illusory and inadequate image."²⁰ The true individual is one's higher, cubic self who is one with divine consciousness or in Malevich's terms has "six-sided" perception. The true individual is isometric (figure 3).

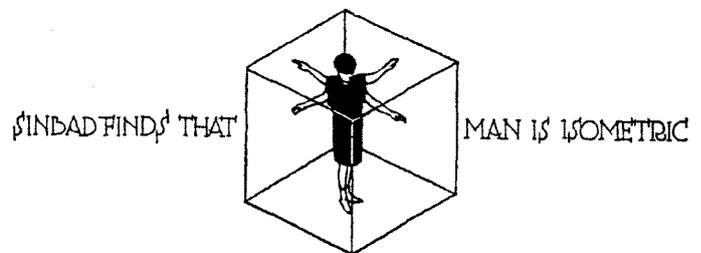


figure 3. Claude Bragdon, Frozen Fountain, 1932

In *Man the Square* Bragdon advises you to live "uprightly" and in "so doing you will make vertical and parallel the axes of your higher, or cube bodies."²¹ Coincidentally, Malevich's musician and painter friend Mikhail Matiushin (1861-1934) sensed that he "created a new direction" that went from him "ahead into infinity." According to Matiushin, this line had not yet appeared in the human consciousness "because a person's body up until now was the boundary for the lines of the third dimension, from front to back, just as the earth is the boundary for a line down from above. I abolish that boundary, and create a direction-line going through me to the back, through the earth and through my antipode toward a star."²² From these descriptions, it seems that Matiushin was referring to an *axis mundi* penetrating the navel and extending to infinity, and Bragdon was referring to an *axis mundi* running vertically through

the spine central to the isometric individual, both of which in relation to the cube have an embodied iconology found within yet another ancient Chinese device: the *ts'ung*, or Earth Symbol (figure 4).

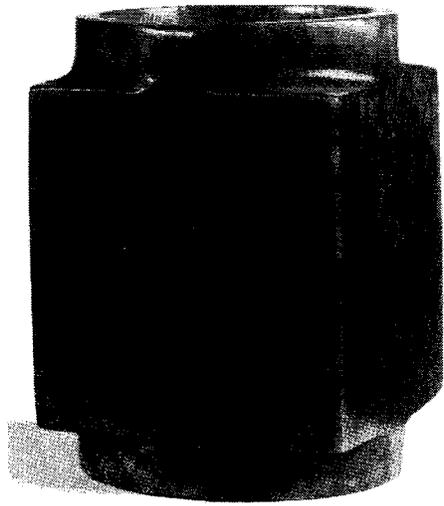


figure 4. jade Chinese *ts'ung*

The *ts'ung* is externally cubic and internally tubular, which makes it open from below upwards and from above downwards as a channel for the Way or the *tao*. The *ts'ung* is made from yellow jade (yellow the color for the element earth), which stands for immortality. The *ts'ung* is intended to receive a spiritual tree, or *axis mundi*. In funerary rites, the *ts'ung* is placed on the navel and the body is oriented to the compass points, so that the whole body is enclosed in what is called the "brilliant cube." The intention is to provide the deceased with a new and crystalline cosmic body of light. In Taoist tradition, in simulating death, the initiation rite gives birth to the "new man," called the "Diamond Body," who is a transformed being set free from the limitations of human individualization.²³ In other words, a person who has become one with the universal and has achieved cosmic consciousness.

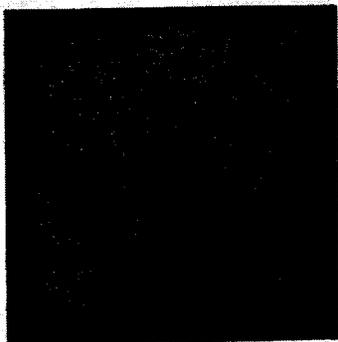


figure 5. Kazimir Malevich, *The Black Square*, 1915

In 1915 Malevich exhibited his painting *The Black Square* (figure 5) at the "0.10. Last Futurist Exhibition" held in Petrograd. In the brochure that accompanied the exhibition he declared, "I have transformed myself in the zero of form. . ."²⁴ In the eastern spiritual tradition of Tantra, the mathematical point of zero dimension is a representation of

consciousness that signifies the starting-point of the unfolding of consciousness, as well as the last point of its ultimate integration. This point is called *bindu*, is represented literally as a point, and is generally placed at the center of the *yantra*.²⁵ In tantric tradition the *yantra* is a visual tool used for meditation that serves as a representation of some personification or aspect of the divine, and is a pure geometric form without any iconographic representation.²⁶ What is striking about Malevich's *The Black Square* is that its image has qualities similar to the tantra illustration from the 17th century entitled *Pure Conscience* (figure 6), among others.

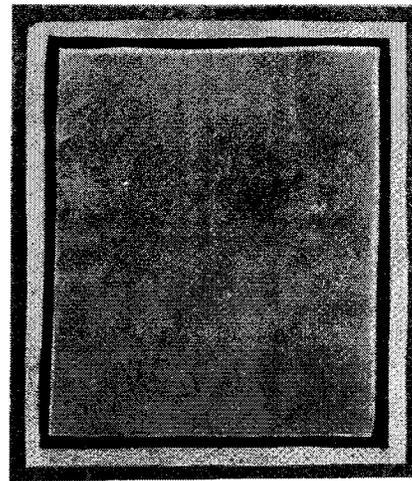


figure 6. *Tantra, Pure Conscience*, 17th century

What was curious about this exhibition was that *The Black Square* was hung near the ceiling diagonally across one corner of the exhibition space (figure 7). This position is the traditional place for the display of icons in the Russian home (figure 8), the *krasnyi ugol* (fair corner), often the back right corner of the reception or dining room.²⁷ The ultimate example of Russian iconic tradition was the *Spas nerukolovnyi*, which was the imprint of Jesus' face on white linen and the first icon to be hung in the corner. The *Spas nerukolovnyi* was considered to present a higher noumenal reality, or a representation of Christ's Higher Self. This coincides with Uspensky's definition of the phenomenal as being the image of the noumenal. Later in 1922 Malevich wrote, "There are however, no icons on which the saint is a zero. The essence of God, however, is the zero-salvation."²⁸ *The Black Square*, however, was exhibited as an icon that represented the essence of God as zero, *bindu*, or the beginning and end of the expansion of cosmic consciousness. Malevich later wrote that ". . . The corner symbolizes that there is no other path to perfection except for the path into the corner."²⁹

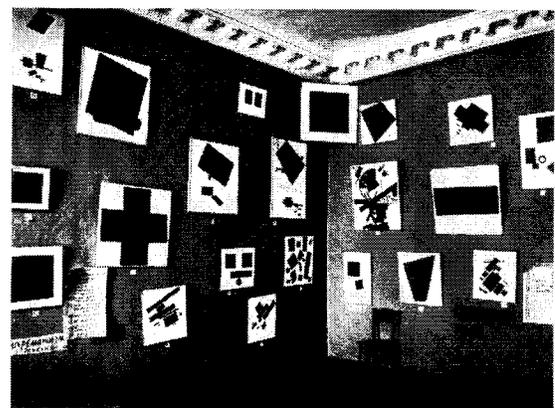


figure 7. Kazimir Malevich, 0.10. Last Futurist Exhibition, Petrograd, 1915

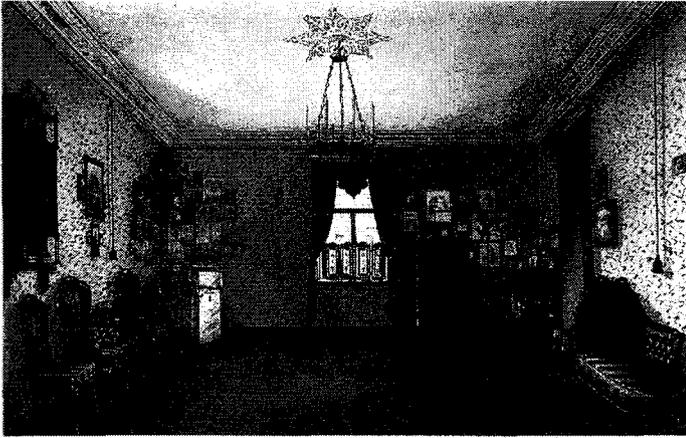


figure 8. Ivan Petrovich Vol'skii (1817-68), Russian Living Room with an Icon Corner

A contemporary of Malevich's was the priest, Fr. Pavel Florensky (1882-1943) who wrote at about the same time as Malevich that the "essence of a human being is the image of God."³⁰ This concurs with both Bragdon's notion in *Man the Square* that man is the two-dimensional reflection, or image, of his higher cubic self and Uspensky's definition of the phenomenon as the two-dimensional image of the three-dimensional noumenon. According to Florensky, the icon was the outline of a "heavenly vision" that "because its outline coincides with a spiritual vision, is that vision within our consciousness."³¹ The icon, then, is an outline of the vision and not an imitative representation of it. If the icon is "more than itself in becoming for us an image of a heavenly vision or less than itself in failing to open our consciousness to the world beyond our senses—then it is merely a board with some paint on it."³² To Florensky, the icon should be a tool that could be used to expand one's consciousness to encompass the divine. Although he doesn't specifically state it, his words could be interpreted to mean that an icon could be similar to a *yantra*. What Florensky doesn't talk about is the viewer's participation with the icon in the expansion of consciousness.

Malevich reduces the Russian icon to *The Black Square* on a white field, which represented the void.³³ This void represented the celestial void of the "blue lampshade of the firmament," the sky comprised of all colors in the spectrum of the rainbow in unity, or the white light of the divine.³⁴ My acquaintance with icon painting convinced me that the point is not in the study of anatomy and perspective, not in depicting the truth of nature, but in sensing art and artistic reality through the emotions. In other words, I saw that reality or subject matter is something to be transformed into an ideal form arising from the depths of aesthetics.³⁵

The Black Square = feeling. It was an icon, an ideal form that was the absence of all color, or a zero. Tantra regards vibration as a primary cosmogenic element which gives rise to all structures: as movement increases, form is condensed into a whole, which is represented as a mathematical point of zero dimension. In tantric tradition the *yantra* is used as a machine to stimulate inner visualization. When the *bindu* begins to evolve, the primary geometric shape is set into motion and form becomes more differentiated while multiple spaces interpenetrate, overlap, collide and generate energy in this process of inner spatial visualization. The diagrams of tantra could be described as ideal forms that represent the immobilization of the primordial vibrations of the expansion and contraction of forces in the ongoing process of creation.³⁶ Like the *yantra*, Malevich's icon was dependent on the viewer's powers of visualization, or architectural imagination.

ENDNOTES

¹Claude Bragdon. *The New Image* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), 162.

²There is no documentation as to how Uspensky obtained a copy of *Man the Square*. It is very likely that *Man the Square* was distributed along with other Theosophical books. It seems probable that since he was interested in Theosophy and was avidly reading Theosophical works that he obtained the book through Theosophical sources. We do know that he had a copy of the book because in the author's preface to the second English edition of *Tertium Organum* (1921) he writes, "Also, it is especially pleasant for me to remember that a number of years ago Mr. Bragdon's *Man the Square* reached me in Petrograd, and that I, not knowing Mr. Bragdon's other works at all, selected this little book from a whole series received from abroad, as one which carried the message of a common thought, a common understanding." We know he read it before travelling to India because in a letter to Bragdon he writes, "The fact is that I know this small book very well and like it immensely. I had it in Petersburg before my travelling to India" (10 April 1921 [Bragdon Family Papers, University of Rochester archives]).

³Claude Bragdon, "Introduction to the English Translation," in P. D. Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, translated by Nicholas Bessaraboff and Claude Bragdon (Rochester, NY: Manas Press, 1920), vii.

⁴In *Tertium Organum* Uspensky quotes extensively from the Canadian psychiatrist and mystic Richard M. Bucke's book *Cosmic Consciousness* (Philadelphia: Innes, 1901), which first appeared in Russia in 1915.

⁵See Patricia Railing, *From Science to Systems of Art* (East Sussex, England: Artists Bookworks, 1989), Linda Dalrymple Henderson, "Transcending the Present: The Fourth Dimension in the Philosophy of Ouspensky and in Russian Futurism and Suprematism," *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 238-299, Charlotte Douglas, "Beyond Reason: Malevich, Matiushin, and Their Circles," and Edward Kasinec and Boris Kerdimun, "Occult Literature in Russia," in *The Spiritual in Art: Abstract Painting 1890-1985*, edited by Edward Weisberger (New York: Abbeville Press, 1986), 185-199 and 361-365, and Irina Gutkin, "The Magic of Words," in *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, edited by Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 234-235.

⁶Malevich would have known about the work as early as 1913 when his friend Matiushin published long sections interspersed with his review of Gleizes and Metzinger's *DU CUBISME IN UNION OF YOUTH* 3 March 1913.

⁷In Petersburg during February and March of 1915 Uspensky gave public lectures on his travels in India, and repeated those lectures in Moscow after Easter. P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1949), 6.

⁸Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, 156.

⁹Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*, 278-288.

¹⁰Ouspensky, *Tertium Organum*, 339.

¹¹Kasimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World* (Chicago: Paul Theobald and Company, 1959), 61 (written 1922-1925).

¹²Malevich, 30.

¹³Malevich, 67.

¹⁴"The square = feeling" in Malevich, 76.

¹⁵Malevich, 76.

¹⁶Kepler: "Artful nature has given to the most perfect animal the same six limits as the cube has, most perfectly marked. . . . Man himself is, as it were, a cube." *Mysterium Cosmographicum*.

¹⁷Blavatsky: "The phenomenal world receives its culmination and reflex of all in MAN. Therefore he is the mystic square—in his metaphysical aspect—the Tetraktys; and becomes the cube on the creative plane." *The Secret Doctrine*. Vol. II, p. 39, third edition.

- ¹⁸Schuyler Cammann. "The Magic Square of Three in Old Chinese Philosophy and Religion," *History of Religions* volume 1 (Summer 1961): 42-43.
- ¹⁹Quoted in Henderson, 293-294.
- ²⁰Claude Bragdon, *Man the Square in A Primer of Higher Space: The Fourth Dimension* (New York: The Manas Press, 1913), 76
- ²¹Bragdon, *Man the Square*, 77.
- ²²Mikhail Matiushin, "An Artist's Experience of the New Space," (1926) in Henderson, 292-293.
- ²³Ananda Coomaraswamy, "Svayamatryna: Janua Coeli," *The Door in the Sky* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 15-17.
- ²⁴Malevich, "From Cubism," 1916, in Troels Andersen, ed., *K. S. Malevich, Essays on Art, 1915-1928* (Copenhagen, 1971, 2d ed.), vol. 1, 19.
- ²⁵Ajit Mookerjee and Madhu Khanna, *The Tantric Way* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1977), 54-55.
- ²⁶Mookerjee and Khanna, *The Tantric Way*, 50.
- ²⁷In W. Sherwin Simmons, "Kasimir Malevich's "Black Square": The Transformed Self Part Three: The Icon Unmasked," *Arts Magazine* 53/4 (December 1978): 129. For the use and display of icons in Russia see Nikodim Pavlovich Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, trans. Ellis H. Mimms (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1927), 34.
- ²⁸Kasimir Malewitsch, *Suprematismus-Die gegenstandlose Welt*, trans. by Hans von Riesen (Cologne: DuMont, 1962), 57.
- ²⁹K. S. Malevich, *The World as Non-Objectivity, Unpublished Writings 1922-1925*, ed. By Troels Anderson, trans. by Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Edmund T. Little (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1976), 354.
- ³⁰Pavel Florensky, *Iconostasis* (1922), trans. Donald Sheehan and Olga Andrejev (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Press, 1996) 55.
- ³¹Florensky, 64.
- ³²Florensky, 65.
- ³³"The square = feeling, the white field = the void beyond this feeling." Malevich, *The Non-Objective World*, 76
- ³⁴El Lissitzky, *Russia: An Architecture for World Revolution* (originally published as *The Reconstruction of Architecture in the Soviet Union in 1930*), trans. Eric Dluhosch (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1970), 145.
- ³⁵Kazimir Malevich, "Fragments from 'Chapters From an Artist's Autobiography,' 1933," translated by Allan Upchurch in catalogue, 174.
- ³⁶Mookerjee and Khanna, *The Tantric Way*, 50-51.