

Laura Scala

**Malevič's *Victory Over the Sun*: the Dissolution of Reality**

## Abstract

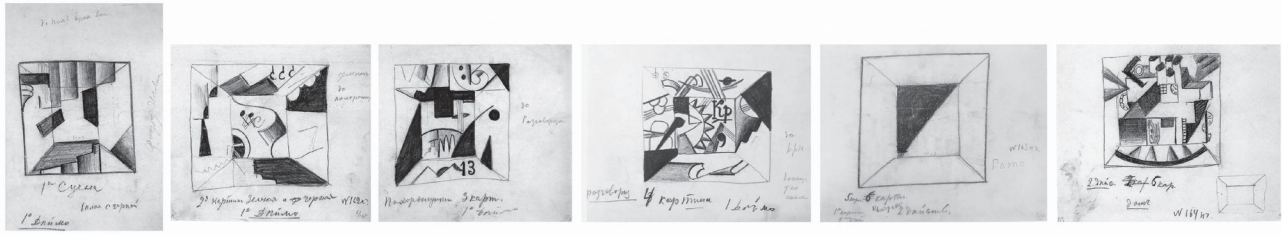
The scenography of *Victory Over the Sun* by Malevič (St. Petersburg, 1913) represents one of the best expressions of "total art", combining allusions to the multi-dimensional *Cubo-Futurist* theatre with the experimental music of Matjušin, and the *transmental* language of Kručěnych. The new idea of space in Malevič's drawings goes beyond ordinary human reason – symbolized by the Sun – and spreads to the world of dreams, fairy tales, rituals, and folk traditions. The theatre performance leads the spectators through a journey to a new world without the Sun, and so without order, directions, proportions and rules, where the most incredible objects float and dance together in space, as the free words of a *transrational* Kručěnych's composition.

## Keywords

Montage — Design — *Avant-garde* theatre — Collage

With the *Black Square's Suprematist* icon, painted in the summer of 1915, Malevič brings us to a new world beyond reason. This *transmental* journey, undertaken by the artist with the poet Kručěnych and the painter-violinist Matjušin, is expressed in the *zaum'* play *The Victory Over the Sun*, staged for the first time in St. Petersburg, in December 1913<sup>1</sup>. The protagonists of this first *Cubo-Futurist* show, the last step towards *Suprematism* (Marzaduri, Rizzi and Battafarano 1991), are *Supermen* who fight and kill the Sun, and reach the new world of the *Tenth Lands*. The *Heliomachy*, that is the victory over cosmic forces and the conquest of the stars, is the work's *leitmotif*: a symbol of revolt against any imposition of the past. The space that Malevič aims at representing in the six sketches of *Victory Over the Sun* (Fig. 1) is hard to draw on paper, since it goes beyond reason. It looks as though the artist is striving to capture a timeless place, which is made of the same substance as dreams and memories, and makes use of ancient and new languages taken from magic rites, Russian folklore, circus and cinema. This place, depicted in two dimensions, is so surreal, *a-logical* and boundless, that it would require a translation into a three-dimensional space in order to be understood. Therefore, starting from Malevič's drawings, we tried to create three-dimensional models of them.

*Victory Over the Sun* stems from the collaboration of Malevič, Kručěnych and Matjušin, who met at the first congress of the *Russian Bards of the Future*, in Uusikirkko, Finland, in the summer of 1913. The congress *manifesto*, published in the newspapers of St. Petersburg and Moscow, proclaims *The New Theatre "Budetljanin"*<sup>2</sup> and its aim:

**Fig. 1**

Kazimir Malevič, *Pobeda Na Solncem/ Victory Over the Sun*, six sketches, pencil on paper, St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music Art, 1913.

«the right to annihilate the outdated way of thinking of the laws of causality, of common sense, of symmetrical logic, and to give a personal and creative version of the real world of new men; to attack the artistic weakness, the Russian theatre, and to radically transform it. The Art Theatre, Korševskij, Aleksandrinskij, Bol’šoj and Malyj are all outdated».

(Matjušin, Kručěnych and Malevič, 1913, in Petrova e Di Pietrantonio 2015, p. 185 and following.)

Malevič, Kručěnych and Matjušin jointly sought new ways of understanding the world, going beyond the real world, the senses and reason, to reach another reality (Kručěnych 1913), experimenting new forms of art, literature and music. These three artists completely revolutionized the way of doing theatre through the *analytical de-construction* and the *synthetic re-construction* of the artistic substance. The Cubist pictorial compositional techniques go beyond the limits of art, moving from poetry to music and stage action. While the *Budetljane* painters dissected objects and parts of the body and sewed them together again with new meanings, the *zaum’* writers cut the syntactic-semantic connections of texts and split the words into minimal pieces – syllables or letters – enhancing them in their inner phonic values, and then recomposing them in unimaginable combinations of the so called *transmental* language.

In *Victory Over the Sun*, Kručěnych put together not only individual fragments of action and scraps of dialogue, but also meaningless phonemes. These operations of disassembly, assembly and *collage* came from the Cubist *sdvig*. The *sdvig* practice involves the displacement of pictorial levels, abrupt transitions of compositional techniques and unexpected and apparently incompatible dimensional-figural relations and it is translated into Kručěnych’s *zaum’* language as unmotivated fractures of verbal segments and random combinations of letters, syllables and units of meaning. The same feeling of *nonsense* had to be produced by illogical sound-connections from Matjušin’s music and by the graceless movements of the “actors-figurines” on the scene, designed by Malevič. Words and music follow the flow of painting, leaving the burdens of the past and freeing the creative act from unnecessary weights. Logic has always hindered new movements of the subconscious and, in order to free it from prejudices, the current of *a-logisim* has been promoted (Malevič, 1919). In his letter to Matjušin, June 1916, Malevič encourages his friend to free the letter from the line, and to give it the opportunity to move freely. These groups of letters will hover in space and will give us the opportunity to move further and further away from earth<sup>3</sup>.

Malevič sketched six three-dimensional scenic boxes (Fig. 1), which allude to a pyramid trunk – whose main base faces the spectators – or to a cube, seen in central perspective. All his sketches refer to the square and are drawn on a square. Moreover, the observer is ideally “closed” inside a

cube that is composed of five squares in depth and the sixth square is hypothetically placed behind the spectators. The backdrop is a construction of rooms, inside a room, a multiplication of mirrors, a kaleidoscope of worlds that open wide towards the eyes of the spectator: each face is a projection on the new world (Michelangeli 2000).

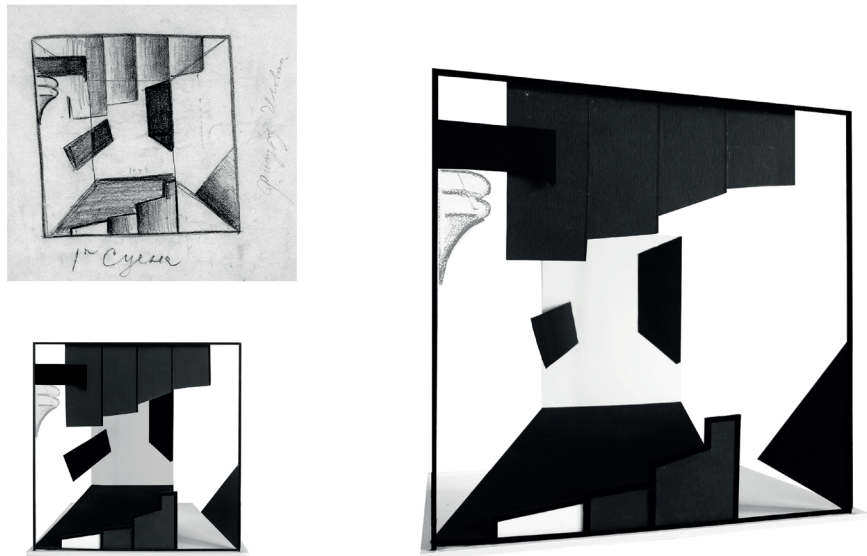
In all the six sketches, many dark shapes are contained in white spaces, in a *climax* that leads to the victory over the Sun and the arrival in the *Tenth Lands*: the static figure of the square contains the dynamic of the story. The objects – more or less filled with black colour – of incongruous dimensions, proportions, and semantic fields, torn from their own reality, invade the stage-box and confuse the spectator. The clash of these objects gives life to the new world beyond reason, some of them such as the hat, the spoon and the stairs, are figurative archetypes, that are also present in other Malevič's works (for example: *Englishman in Moscow*, Stedelijk Museum di Amsterdam, 1914). (Fig. 2)

Malevič acts as a director of a dream or of a child's memory and puts together the chimneys, the stairs, the sickle, the wheel of the factory world, with the violins, the musical notes, the organ pipes, the trumpet, which allude to Matjušin's cacophony. A classic capital, numbers, letters, circles, black triangles, planetary systems and the first *Suprematist* elements are bundled up inside the six white squares, as free *a-logic* words in a Kručėnych text; finally, images that materialize or dissolve in the white space. In these sketches, the space, or emptiness or «white», declares itself through the objects that it contains, which are the full «black» shapes. These elements, topologically placed towards the observer, float dancing *within* and *beyond* the three-dimensional boundaries, traced by Malevič, recalling the «*literal and phenomenal transparency*» of Rowe and Sluzky (Rowe and Sluzky 1963, 45-54). The observer is brought into a universe where he has the simultaneous perception of different levels, figures, times and worlds. The white background expands among the objects and goes beyond the limits of reason. The white, that is the absolute and the perfection to which we aspire, is in contrast with the black, that is the concreteness of those everyday objects that break into the *Cubo-Futurist* scene, until the *Black Square* in the *Fifth Scene* takes over, destroying the white and the traditional Enlightenment values of reason. «At the end of Scene V, the dark square descends into the square of the stage, first it's like a curtain that lowers on the diagonal, then an eyelid that closes.» (Semerani 2012, 28, personal translation). Malevič seems to understand the whole universe, he is aware that the opposites interpenetrate each other until they finally find themselves into another order.



**Fig. 2**  
Kazimir Malevič, *Englishman in Moscow*, painting, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1914.

We reach the *Tenth Lands* through the six Scenes designed by Malevič. The new *Cubo-Futurist* space is perceived through an investigation by figural isolations, identifying full and empty spaces, through the reconstruction of three-dimensional models that reproduce the stage-box, our field of action. In each sketch, which is built as a cube seen in perspective, we can analyse the shape, the size and the topology of the dark elements inside the square, which direct the gaze of the observer, between compressions and extensions of perceptions, according to laws of attraction and repulsion between the shapes. The sketches' compositional analysis through the model thus becomes a tool to explore the elements and the relationships that exist between them within the field of action. This reconstruction takes the signs and the expressive forms to the extreme and translates them into



**Fig. 3**

Kazimir Malevič *Pobeda Nad Solncem/ Victory Over the Sun, First Scene, Act One*, sketch, pencil on paper, St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music Art, 1913.

Laura Scala, three-dimensional reconstruction of the set, 2017.

spatial terms: how could these sets have been built three-dimensionally in the small Luna Park Theatre in St. Petersburg<sup>47</sup>

In the *First Scene* of the *First Act* (Fig. 3) two *Futuristic Strongmen* tear the curtain and the victory over the Sun is described in a fragmentary way. The dynamic of the stage-action is enforced by the two black objects, stuck inside the cube, like two splinters, compositionally counterbalanced by a black triangle in the lower right corner, and by a black rectangle in the upper left corner. On the top left side, a classical column refers to the past to defeat. The wings are represented by four black curtains and a sort of three-level scaffolding is drawn on the floor.

In the *Second Scene* (First Act, Fig. 4) white and black objects remind us of a struggle: on the left of the background there is a half a white wheel turning; next to two notes and a bass clef, there is a wrapped dark blanket, anticipating the victory of black over white; on the floor, another three-level scaffolding is drawn like a stair; from the ceiling, next to the three hanging hooks, a black figure with seven sides looms like a dark bird, while, on the lateral faces, the scene is framed on the left by two curtains and on the right by a black curtain that looks like a bat.

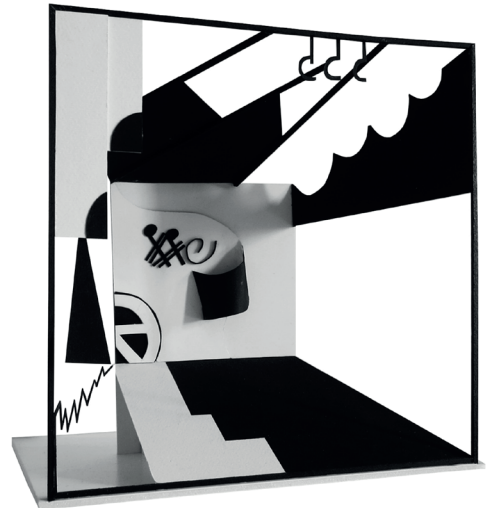
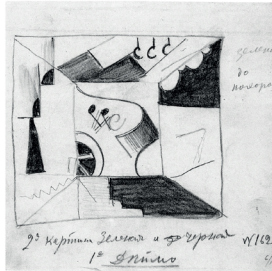
In the *Third Scene* (First Act, Fig. 5) the *Gravediggers* sing for the Sun's death; the sketch is a bundle of black and white points, lines and surfaces on different levels, which prefigure a new world. Six black figures dominate the set: in the background, a segment of a black circle stretches towards another small black circle, invading the right face; a bulky dark cross falls from the ceiling, hinting at the death of the Sun; on the lateral faces there is a black trapeze on the left, and two black triangles on the right, one of which is hanging (from the right corner above). On the floor, a black quaver seems to move next to the number 13. Two white curtains drop from the ceiling.

In the *Fourth Scene* (First Act, Fig. 6) "Those who bring the Sun prisoner" reach the *Tenth Lands* and sing his death. In the background, on the left side, there is a large Sun in the middle, two underlined letters *Kp* and a black comma; on the left there is an airplane, facing the Sun. Triangles, quadrangular figures and a black planet animate the space: a sort of closed fist, like a cannon facing the Sun, rises from a black quadrilateral, at the bottom left side; a black triangle is hanging from the upper right corner and

**Fig. 4**

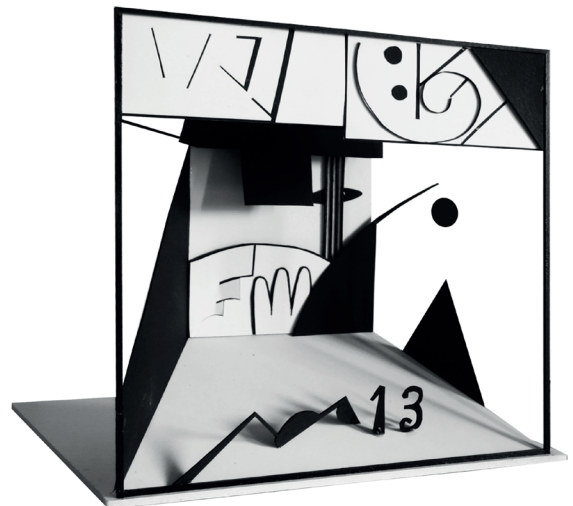
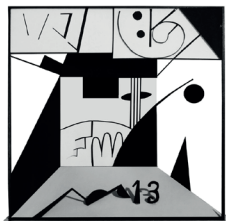
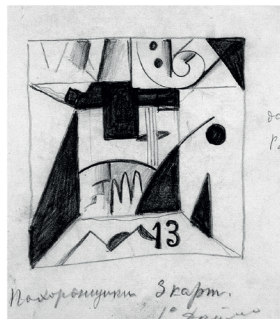
Kazimir Malevič, *Pobeda Nad Solncem/ Victory Over the Sun, Second Scene, Act One*, sketch, pencil on paper, St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music Art, 1913.

Laura Scala, three-dimensional reconstruction of the set, 2017.

**Fig. 5**

Kazimir Malevič, *Pobeda Nad Solncem/ Victory Over the Sun, Third Scene, Act One*, sketch, pencil on paper, St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music Art, 1913.

Laura Scala, three-dimensional reconstruction of the set, 2017.





**Fig. 6**

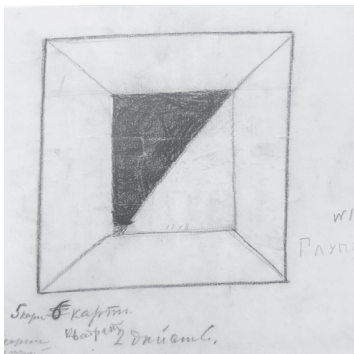
Kazimir Malevič, *Pobeda Nad Solncem/ Victory Over the Sun, Fourth Scene, Act One*, sketch, pencil on paper, St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music Art, 1913.

Laura Scala, three-dimensional reconstruction of the set, 2017.

another quadrilateral is placed in the upper left edge of the backdrop (this is probably an airplane's wing); on the ceiling, a planet oscillates between oblique lines, curves, drapes and hooks with wings. The eye of the observer stumbles over a curved depression on the floor; through the lateral walls, the viewer glimpses planetary systems as gashes in new worlds and dimensions.

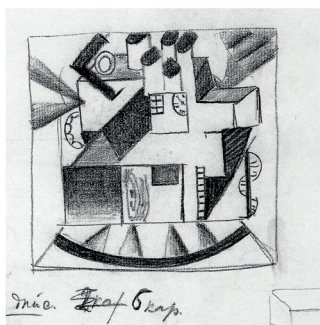
The *Fifth Scene* of the *Second Act* (Fig. 7) anticipates the famous *Black Square* of 1915: there is a square in the background, cut into two triangles, where the overlying one is black, representing a partial and then total eclipse of the Sun, the victory over light and reason. The *News* characters explain to the *Cowards* that they have shot the past and the *Disclaimer* rejoices in the present. The *Black Square*, empty of objects and full of sensations, opens a window towards the whole universe; there is no reason to doubt that the *Suprematist Black Square* has its origin in this painting, since this unique image includes all the meanings.

Finally, we reach the *Tenth Lands* (Fig. 8). The *Sixth Scene*'s cubic stage-box is contradicted by a perspective and axonometric drawing at the same time, which represents, through a *collage* of fragments, a large *Cubo-Futurist building-house-city*: five cylindrical chimneys or organ pipes stand out from the roof; a clock is glimpsed from a window; a spiral staircase and a ladder allow us to reach unknown destinations. This *city-dresser*, embedded in the set, goes beyond earthly logic and cannot be placed in known time and space. In the *world upside-down* (a *topos* of *Russian Futurism*) of the *Tenth Lands*, the man is freed from any physical and psychological burden: laws, social conventions, hierarchies are abolished; spatial and temporal coordinates are disrupted; logical-causal connections and grammatical rules are no longer applied. Time goes back, the cause precedes the effect, there are no more proportions and directions, everything is the opposite of everything else; common sense, logic and reason show their limits in this upside-down reality. The *Sixth Scene* is, among all, the most difficult to understand in spatial terms, since there are a lot of incongruences; the *city-dresser* is designed as a body, around which the artist's eye moves through time and space: Malevič constantly changes the point of view, he juxtaposes partial views, sections, and distorted perspectives, disorientating the viewer. The *Tenth Lands* remind us of an intangible world, space



**Fig. 7**

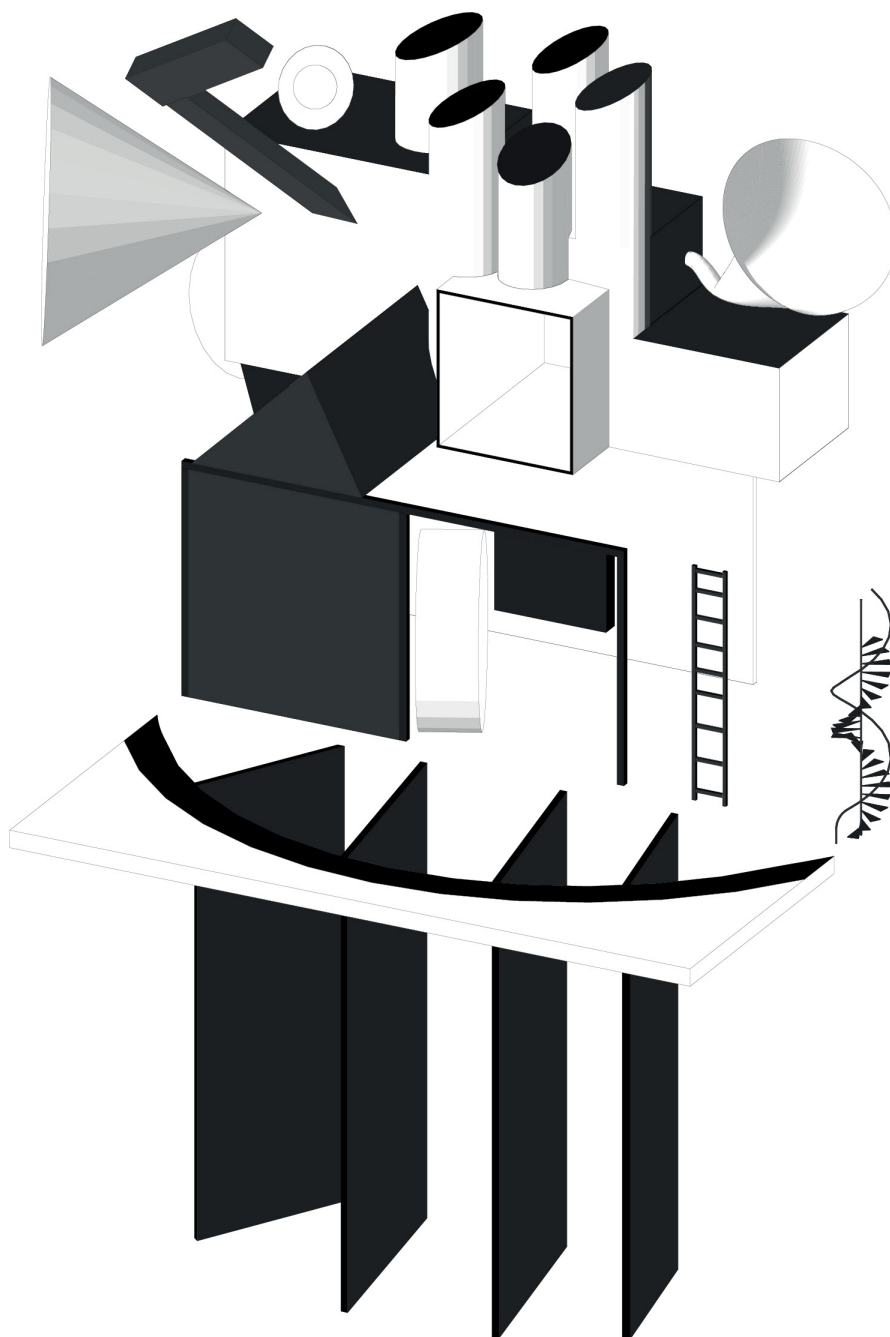
Kazimir Malevič, *Pobeda Nad Solncem/ Victory Over the Sun, First Scene, Act Two*, sketch, pencil on paper, St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music Art, 1913.



**Fig. 8**

Kazimir Malevič, *Pobeda Nad Solncem/ Victory Over the Sun, Sixth Scene, Act Two*, sketch, pencil on paper, St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music Art, 1913.

Laura Scala, three-dimensional reconstruction of the set, 2017.





**Fig. 9**  
Kazimir Malevič, *Instrumental Lamp o Musical Instruments*, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, 1913.

and time, that cannot be trapped by the two-dimensional sketch.

In the work *Instrumental Lump* by Malevič (Fig. 9) it is possible to find the same elements and compositional laws that we see in the *Sixth Scene*. The construction is made up of actions of dismemberment, perforation, the addition and subtraction of bodies, the decomposition and re-composition of pieces.

*Cubo-Futurism* and *Suprematism* subverted the use of words, sounds, colours and signs, and revolutionized the ordinary idea of space. The *Cubist* visual distortion and the alienation of the object, through the technique of *sdvig*, *collage*, disassembly and re-assembly, bring our attention back to the object itself, its characteristic shapes and materials, regardless of its functions. This attention to the object as such, both in the art and theatre, is analogous to the inner value of the word and the sound as such in Russian *Cubo-Futurist* literature: phrases that are to compose new languages, fragments that are to create new worlds to which you could aspire. Language is the meaning frozen in the word, just as the energy is frozen in the shapes. Malevič's *upside-down world* is a space in which we can get lost as in *Alice in Wonderland*, where the irrational breaks into everyday life and where the industrial world of technology, speed and machines merges with the dreamlike, circus, unpredictable universe of childhood and myths, to lead us to that limbo, «an indefinite place where art is born» (Semerani, e-mail of 2017, personal translation), perceivable only through another type of knowledge: a space-time break widely open towards a new world.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> After the first performance on December 3, 1913 at the small Luna Park Theatre on Oficerskaja Street in St. Petersburg, another performance took place on December 5 of the same year. The show, divided into two *Acts* of four and two *Scenes*, was introduced by the prologue by Chlebnikov. Today it only remains Malevič's set designs and stage costumes, Kručënych's *libretto* written in *zaum*, and only twenty-three bars of Matjušin's experimental music.

<sup>2</sup> *Budetljanin* (plural *Budetljane*) is a neologism that Chlebnikov invented in order to use it instead of "futurists". *Budetljane* means "the men of the future" or "the men that will be", from the Russian verb "*budet*" (he/she will be).

<sup>3</sup> Letters and notes about the friendship between Malevič and Matjušin are translated in MALEVIČ K. (2000) – *Suprematismo*. edited by DI MILIA G., Abscondita, Milano.

<sup>4</sup> At the end, – for lack of organization and money – the original sketches by Malevič become the sets themselves, placed on the backdrop of the scene. Every three-dimensional intention of Malevič's sketches is only achieved through the use of stage lighting design. [LIVŠIC B. K. (1933) – *Polutoraglazyj strelec*. Leningrad.].

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Laura Scala (Treviso, 1986) is a Phd architect based in Venice. She achieved the title of Doctor of Philosophy in Architectural Composition at Luav University of Venice with praise and dignity of publication in 2017. Her work was shown at the *Close Reading* exhibition by L. Degli Espositi at the Tulpemanie Gallery in Milan in April 2017. During her academic formation, she participated in an internship with the Venetian Studio Semerani e Tamaro Architetti Associati and in 2012 she graduated with honors at the Faculty of Architecture of Venice. She has worked as teaching assistant of Professor A. Gallo at Luav's courses and laboratories since 2014, and at W.A.Ve – Luav summer Architecture Workshops – since 2016. Starting from 2014 she is curating Design and Architecture exhibitions, most of which are related to Luav University of Venice. She is author and co-author of W.A.Ve's critical texts and of published projects together with Professor A. Gallo.