

# Willem Jan Renders /// Malevich in Vitebsk

## Theory and Practise of Revolutionary Artistic Education

### Introduction

Almost a year after the Revolution, in September 1918, Marc Chagall was appointed Commissar of the Arts for the Province of Vitebsk by his old friend Anatoly Lunacharsky, head of The People's Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros). Chagall immediately started the cultural renewal of his native city, the provincial capital Vitebsk, presently in Northern Belarus. After organizing the elaborate decoration of the city for the occasion of the grand celebration of the first anniversary of the Revolution, Chagall's main goal became to create a professional art school and a museum there: the People's Art School and the Vitebsk Museum of Contemporary Art. The school came first. The former residence of a local banker was provided for this purpose and Mstislav Dobuzhinsky, a former teacher of Chagall and a well known artist at the time, was appointed director. After some delays the People's Art School opened on 28 January 1919. The event was postponed because of the commemorations in Vitebsk of the victims of the peaceful demonstration in Petersburg on 9 January 1905 and because of the recent murders of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa von Luxemburg in Germany on 15 January 1919. The official opening of the school was important to Chagall because he wanted it to be recognized by the revolutionary authorities as an official institution for higher learning. And the requirements on a national level for art education were high. At the opening of the State Free Workshops in the former Petrograd Academy in 1918 Lunacharsky had stated: "Despite our impoverishment, despite the impoverishment of Russia, we are on the way to a flowering of the arts, whether we want it or not. (...) A need has arisen to change the aspects of towns as quickly as possible, to express the new experiences in works of art, to get rid of a mass of sentiment obnoxious to people, to create new forms of public buildings and monuments. And this need is enormous." On top of these national ambitions came the fact that Chagall and so many of his Jewish fellow citizens were not allowed to study at the official art academies in Russia before the Revolution. This will have heightened the level of the ambitions for the People's Art School. Chagall's ardent opening speech was paraphrased in the local paper 'Vitebsk Izvestia':

"Comrade Chagall (...) spoke of the enormous importance of artistic development for the proletariat, and on the necessity of giving new art wide scope for development. Comrade Chagall spoke of the fundamental difference between the way the artistic development of the masses was carried out under the old regime and how it is now, under the dictatorship of the proletariat." Now the workers of Vitebsk would finally have access to the art education that was denied to them for years. The art school thus was one of the revolutionary means to educate the masses and this education could start at young age. At first, there was no age limit for pupils: children as young as ten were enrolled. Everyone had to choose a discipline: drawing, graphic arts, decorative arts, sculpture or painting. In the school each discipline had its own studio that was led by one of the teachers. For the painting department Chagall had Kasimir Malevich in mind, who was teaching in Moscow at the First and Second Free Workshops

(SVOBMAS) at the time. In the course of 1919 Malevich was invited to teach in the People's Art School in Vitebsk. By the end of the year he accepted the invitation and he stayed in Vitebsk from the end of 1919 until the summer of 1922. For a few years the art school of Vitebsk would be the spot where far reaching developments in the visual arts would take place. This article briefly explores the period in which Malevich taught in this art school and focuses on his ideas and practises as an art educator. Chagall did not invite Malevich only because he was advised to do so by one of the other teachers of the Vitebsk Art School, the leader of the Studios of Graphic Arts, Printing and Architecture: El Lissitzky. He also knew the work of Malevich himself. In 1919 Malevich was already quite famous as an artist. Already in 1913 he had painted his famous 'Black Square' and in 1915 he had laid down the foundations of his art in the manifesto 'From Cubism to Suprematism'. A year later he participated in exhibitions of the 'Jack of Diamonds group' in Moscow. After the Revolution, Malevich became a member of the Collegium on the Arts of Narkompros. His first one-man show, one of the state exhibitions organized by Narkompros, was being prepared at the end of 1919. It would open on 25 March 1920 in a large salon in Moscow and is known as: 'Kazimir Malevich: his Path from Impressionism to Suprematism.' Considering his acquired fame as an artist in the centre of revolutionary power and his determination to add to that fame, it seems a bit strange that Malevich accepted the invitation to teach in the provincial town of Vitebsk. Why did he not stay in Moscow? On 5 October 1920, about ten months after his arrival, Malevich explained the reasons of his stay in Vitebsk in a letter to David Shterenberg, the head of the Narkompros Fine Arts Department: "I'm living in Vitebsk not for the sake of food but for the work that needs to be done in the provinces. This is an area in which Moscow's bigwigs are not much inclined to give answers to a demanding generation." When he was invited to come to Vitebsk, Malevich was directing the Free State Artists' Studios (GSKhM) in Moscow. Although he states that food is not the reason to come to Vitebsk, a warm house and food certainly must have been very welcome; in the winter of 1919 there was a continuous food shortage in Moscow and Malevich and his wife were suffering from the cold. The fact that his wife was pregnant will certainly have made the decision easier. A farewell message to the Council of the Studios in Moscow dated 29 October 1919 gives us an insight in Malevich's living conditions at the time: "In spite of my desire to continue working here I have been compelled, in the absence of an apartment (I'm living in a cold dacha), firewood, or electricity, to accept the offer made by the Vitebsk studios, which will provide me with the necessary working and living conditions, and to leave Moscow." But as we have seen, a year later Malevich had already almost forgotten the hunger and cold in his former dacha. And he certainly saw other advantages of his stay in Vitebsk. The city seems to have functioned as a kind of governmental testing area for economic, political and ideological measures to be spread throughout Bolshevik Russia. Vitebsk was for instance one of the first cities where radical revolutionary expropriation took place. Moreover, the distance from Moscow and Petrograd allowed Malevich to elaborate his ideas on artistic education more freely in a kind of try out lectures. And he could with the help of Lissitzky publish them afterwards. In the People's Art School he had gathered a group of young and devoted pupils around him. Under his leadership and that of El Lissitzky they had even formed a fanatic artistic production group that executed projects all over the city. And, as Malevich had experienced in the course of 1920, the city was certainly close enough to influence thoughts on artistic education in Moscow, the centre of power. All in all it seems that the first year of his stay in Vitebsk, at a safe distance of some seventy

kilometers away from the front of the Civil War and with train connections to Moscow and Petrograd, was not so bad after all. Early in 1921 Malevich writes to Shterenberg: “I left Moscow for the city of Vitebsk in order to offer up all my knowledge and experience. The Vitebsk studios are not simply standing still, like in most provincial cities; they have taken a progressive stance, in spite of difficult conditions (...) everyone is cooperating in the overcoming of obstacles and progressing farther and farther along the road toward the new science of painting. I'm working around the clock, which the apprentices – there are about a hundred of them – are here to confirm.” From this citation it is clear that Malevich had found fertile grounds in Vitebsk for his educational activities. Three aspects of his work there will be discussed in this article: his teaching, his publications and the activities he directed.