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The Next Millennium

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“dream” in Steve Erickson’s explosive little formulation with “painting,” you have a sense of what art is in *Farewell to an Idea*—or what, as a disembodied force of its own, it means to be.

“There is a line of art stretching back to David and Shelley,” Clark writes, “that makes no sense—that would not have existed—without its practitioners believing that what they did was resist or exceed the normal understandings of the culture, and that those understandings were their enemy. This is the line of art we call modernist.” At its highest, in “a mood of euphoria and desperation,” the artist (or the painting speaking through the artist, the artist as medium for a spirit he cannot govern) bets everything on the black, calling for anarchism—or nihilism. In the blink of an eye, art rushes the stage of history and elbows the accepted heroes and villains aside: with modernism, Clark writes, “History is going to be overcome by painting. Human nature is going to be remade. Artists have invented a new alphabet.” “I have ripped through the blue lampshade of the constraints of color,” Malevich shouts. “I have come into the white. Follow me, comrade aviators. Swim into the abyss.”

This, Clark is saying, is a spirit that now seems to have gone out of the world—and how strange all this now sounds is proof of how complete the ending he is tracking really is.

Those waving us goodbye in *Farewell to an Idea* include Picasso, Cézanne, Pissarro, Rothko. Clark and I have talked about his book, and he might disagree, but I think his drama reaches a verge with one particularly strange and powerful version of that ending—the ending as beginning. It’s Russia in 1920, the civil war over the new Soviet Union is throwing up both barbarism and bare hints of a new civilization. In the town of Vitebsk—300 miles west of Moscow, near the front—a state-supported suprematist artists’ collective called UNOVIS is both working in the service of the official revolution and producing a revolution of its own. Malevich, the resident savant, or Merlin, has already invoked the black square as the UNOVIS flag; now El Lissitzky, inventor of the Proun (“Pro-UNOVIS, or Project for the Affirmation of New Forms in Art”), is ready to make the flag talk.

Join with us now as we return to a *really* wild West:

If communism which set human labor on the throne and suprematism which aloft [the black square] of creativity now march forward together then in the next stages of development it is communism which will have to remain in the rear because suprematism—which embraces the totality of life’s phenomena—will lure everyone away from the domination of work and the domination of the intoxicated senses. It will free all those engaged in creative activity and make the world into a true model of perfection.

But this was simply El Lissitzky as his own warm-up act. For his next trick:

It is not for us to see how the new world will be built. It will not be built with our knowledge and technology. It will be built with a direct and accurate force—a lunatic force, from which all will recoil in shame.

Now, whether you find this queerly

inspiring or simply insane may depend on whether you are more like me or George Will. It is bizarre, but perhaps less bizarre than the facts of life as UNOVIS found them. UNOVIS was part of War Communism, “the grossest struggle with the realm of necessity”—the collapse of the economy, a landscape of public massacre and public cannibalism, the desperation of hunger replacing all ideas and ideals. But UNOVIS was also part of an “attempt to imagine necessity otherwise”—and “imagining otherwise,” in this case making pictures of what had never been seen, was in this moment “actually instituted as part of the state apparatus.” To make this real, Clark focuses on a single work of El Lissitzky’s, which survives only in a black-and-white photograph: a large UNOVIS propaganda board put up on the street in front of a factory. Announcing a sort of luxurious austerity, a world of magic, conflict, and revealed truth, the picture is made of abstract shapes and words in a suprematist alphabet: in essence they say, “Produce.”

It’s the oddest-looking thing in the world: aggressive, blank, beckoning, impenetrable, mystically clear, and perhaps above all happy, speaking a new language with the confidence it will be understood. It’s the modernist fantasy, the modernist utopia, as imbedded in taciturn Pollock as in the raving Bolshevik: you take the most extreme art you can make, place it in the public square—and it will talk! It will communicate, on any level, to anyone! “A means of signification had to be devised,” Clark writes, “which would be comprehensively weird, for sure—the photograph exults in the sheer unlikelihood of the board’s showing up in its dismal surroundings, like a message beamed down from a passing satellite—but also effective and graspable in an instant.” A long instant, but, the point was, now: “The traditional book was torn into separate pages, enlarged by a hundredfold, colored for greater intensity, and brought into the street,” El Lissitzky wrote in 1926. “The American poster [was] created for people who will catch a momentary glimpse while speeding by in their automobiles, ours was meant for people who would stand quite close and read it over and make sense of it.” And that sense would not be official. In its surface language the picture would say, “Produce”; in its secret language it would say, “Speak.”

In a few years this would not only be unbelievable; it would, like people in Argentina or Chile in our own day, be disappeared. In Clark’s telling, this story becomes a modernist novel, and even though you know the ending, with Stalin waiting in the wings, the suspense rises. Clark slowly takes you through the labyrinth of the work, folding blazing illustrations into the story rather than letting them turn a story into a caption: shape by shape, word by word, shade by shade, the world begins to seem unmade, which is to say ready to be made again from the beginning. A peculiar, doubled aura settles over the tale. The scene is impossibly far away, foreign, meaningless—but the lost board and the world that it meant to form around itself have a sulphurous, magical cast that the great pages on Pollock in *Farewell to an*

Idea, haunted as they are, cannot touch.

That contrast—between what casts a spell, and what doesn’t—made me think of the scandals in Kenneth Anger’s *Hollywood Babylon* that take place in the silent era. They seem suffused with a glow of the forbidden—just as the same sort of stories from the talkie era Anger tells, right up to our own time, cannot hold glamor. “Of course not,” Anger said peremptorily when I asked him about this years ago. There’s something about what’s out of reach that rebukes us, that tells us what we missed, that suggests that our own time is a mistake, a cheap imitation of something that never quite got made. There’s a way in which El Lissitzky’s public picture says exactly what Mary Pickford once said: “It would have

been more logical if silent pictures had grown out of the talkie than the other way around.” That is the modernist impulse in a sentence, that urge toward a silence that can say anything. With Clark in Vitebsk, it is a modernist detective story: Who murdered the twentieth century—in its cradle? “All utterances,” he writes, “anticipate answers,” and point “themselves towards an imagined future in which something is said and done in reply.” It sounds so mild—but what is being described is a future that never arrived to attend to the utterances, to the pictures, and thus what is left behind is no future at all, just a memory of it. But after this year we won’t have to think about it; isn’t that what the millennium is for, to march bravely into a new era, and forget?□

The Next Millennium

1

The flight attendants of the next millennium came to me and said:
You can still get a seat on the third millennium before lift-off.
Come with us, dead or alive, we’ll take you along. We have no malice
and no defenses but we’re strong and mobile as constellations,
our eyes are closed but we can see.
We are women who glide easily between life and death.
You with your seat-belts and gear-belts and buckles that click shut,
you, sir, you with the noise of a door closing,
we with our voices of glide and whisper.
Our belts are not for safety or for holding up our clothes,
they’re snakes, they’re just decoration. Gliding the loops,
we’re acrobats looping the loops of wish and would.
You with your steamy worries and emotions
heavy as cow dung in the field,
you with the sweat of your death like an afterlife perfume.

2

We are the flight attendants of the next millennium, buoyant brides,
no excess baggage of bridegrooms,
while you are weighed down by the stripes and checks on your clothing.
You with the flicking colors of traffic lights, Permitted and Forbidden;
for us color changes are fluid. You with you strict demarcations
between sacred and profane, outerwear and underwear; for us
everything is like water within water. You with your little excitements
and attachments, your oaths and your vows,
your buttons and snaps, your comb and your qualms,
hairbrush and despairs, you with your loneliness
and the compassion of wombs, of testicles and stiff members.
For us, everything is smooth and transparent—flexible glass.
You with your conjunctions and prepositions,
you with your spirit, your respiration and resuscitation,
your distance and intimacy. We are the world to come,
come with us, we’ll preserve you like a potsherd, like a symbol,
like a lion of stone, and in the year 2024
we’ll celebrate your hundredth birthday.

—Yehuda Amichai

(translated from the Hebrew by Chana Bloch and Chana Kronfeld)