Art and Future

Art and Future:

Energy, Climate, Cultures

Edited by

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Peter Stupples

INTRODUCTION

PETER STUPPLES

From the vantage of the present, whatever present that might be, the future is totally unknown. We may extrapolate from the past and the current present the shape, both form and content, that our future may assume but we cannot know it until it is no longer "future." We may be apprehensive, probably wisely so, soberly prudential, so preparing ourselves for the eventualities our imaginations envisage. The past is familiar, through the histories we have composed for ourselves out of the facts, the myths, the prejudices of our specific cultures, but the future, it seems to many, is scarcely a "promised land," but full of dystopic political, social and environmental disasters, failures, nightmares that make for a heaviness, rather than a lightness of being. Steven Shapin, reviewing Yuval Harari's *Homo Deus: A Brief History of the Future*, summarised Harari's monstrous vision when, through what he calls a "technological upgrade," a few will morph into more machine-like, algorithmic information-processing systems with a de-coupling of intelligence from consciousness. They will rule the world. What will the superfluous mere humans (the lumpen residuum) do with themselves? "Will they discover the joys of art? Probably not: it's more likely that 'the useless masses' will find whatever satisfaction they can in shopping, drugs, computer games and the thrills of virtual reality, which will 'provide them with far more excitement and emotional engagement than the drab reality outside'."[1]

When a few of us in Dunedin began to conceive a symposium directed towards the idea of "future," each of us had a different agenda in mind. There was a desire to avoid both the rhetoric, on the one hand, of despair, and on the other, of wishful euphoria—the stuff of dystopian and utopian fiction. There was instead a determination to look the practicalities of our own near future firmly in the face—to face up to the realities of climate change, environmental despoliation and the growth-fixated juggernaut of neo-liberal capitalism. Yet we had to keep reminding ourselves that this was an art-based symposium. What was, would be, the role of art in the coming future? Had it anything to show us by way of warning, explanation, ideas for action or contemplation, an agency even? To engage

all these threads of motives for a symposium, to address our remarks and images to a specific set of agendas we agreed to add three words of explanation, limitation, directional pointers, to the title, which became Art and Future: Energy, Climate, Cultures. Within this set of parameters I am certain we still all entertained different visions, different communities of interests, retained our various agendas, but that is true for any title serving to bring some focus to a symposium bringing together people with something to say that has significance specific to them within the compass of a discourse set by others.

What we did succeed in doing was to keep that focus on art and artists. The cover for the catalogue for exhibition, that was held in association with the symposium, reproduced one of two large digital prints by Marzena Wasikowska showing a distant cityscape from the vantage of a viewer braving breaking billows in the middle of an ocean, as the crests surged towards a threatened coastal city. The title of the print neutrally announced *Earth's Self-Correcting Systems, Gold Coast*, suggesting that Nature, inevitably, inexorably, would "correct" in the future the errors human kind had committed in the past—and not necessarily to human advantage. Art was not so much warning and stating the fact, a fact that boded ill, but underscored an almost certain future. This was true of many images at the exhibition—the "taking of coal" by Marion Wassenaar, the consequences of rising sea levels in Bridie Lonie (and others') *Living Map* of the Dunedin city and harbour, the watercolours of Rebecca John showing the effects of environmental changes on the flora and fauna of Aotearoa New Zealand, Mark Bolland's and Nigel Brown's biting images of neo-liberalism's indifference to the fate of the planet. These images followed the dystopian despair that is so commonly the field art explores in our own present—showing the errors of our ways and our own indifference to them, indeed our political determination to turn away our minds and energies from action and redirect our gaze at "the promised land" of more goods and more waste accumulating in ever more polluted oceans and cities as well as within the fast contracting pockets of pastoral paradise. These images of desolation, despoliation, a sadly accepted despair, was also the theme of the paintings by Michael Shepherd, about whom Elizabeth Rankin writes her chapter, and documented from the work of a host of artists from many cultures by Evelyn Armstrong, demonstrating over and over that we haven't paid enough attention to the warnings, which have been placed before our eyes by two generations of painters, photographers and sculptors with, at best, the "theme of hope for a good outcome for the Planet Earth." Dramatically, in the exhibition, Pam McKinlay and Jesse-James Pickery displayed the effects of atmospheric

pollution on birds (*Sweeping up the Sparrows*) and human beings (*Foreseen. Forsaken*) denied a sight of the sun in North China. Yet our political masters still pay no heed. So has art, despite this frantic agonising, failed to exert agency?

Perhaps, it has heightened awareness, a change, at best, in attitude, rather than brought about action, and this through the agency of empathy, feeling with and for the planet, as acted out by Jan Hogan on the Derwent estuary in Tasmania, expressed by Margaret Feeney's notion of kindness, echoed in different language by others, or by Luke Munn, looking at "the entanglements of humans with wider ecologies," such as listening to the deep hum of the earth "generated by the accumulations of deep time" in the geologic strata beneath which we play at environmental predation.

Yet there were other responses, (Louisa Baillie's quizzical "Can art help to clarify?") modest in their way, yet, in the face of that neo-liberal juggernaut, perhaps that is the agency of art—to suggest small, practical steps that we can make towards a better future, even one where rising sea levels are a reality. The bravest and most quixotic artwork was Stuart Griffiths's concept drawing of the *South Dunedin Ark*, a steamer stranded on the mud of St Kilda in South Dunedin after its inundation by the sea, modified into a museum and archive of the place it once was, or the other side of Nigel Brown's visual and verbal rhetoric, the pleas for trust and conservation of the remaining environmental estate, and the positive artistic claim of Elizabeth Coats, in paint and in words, for seeing "Our Link with the Past in Continuous Re-formation." Similarly positive as a response both to visual thinking and to practical action is Margaret Feeney's Water Project in response to the climate change experienced on the Hokianga in the North Island of New Zealand. The boldest voice and proof of direct action came from Frances Whitehead, advocating the enmeshment of artists with city planners and developers to recreate sites abandoned though past pollution into positive sites of recreation in the future—indeed during the symposium itself it was her advocacy of positive action that raised its voice above the ever-present cries of the despairing.

Both Ashley Holmes and I offered a different reading of the present, and hence a more detached view of the future. That the cosmos has its "laws" is common sense in science. Indeed it is the task of scientists to seek them out in order to understand better the "real" present. This seems to imply a sane fatalism—we can do what we like, think what we like but we are in the hands of inexorable forces of nature that will, whether we wish it or no, do with us as these vital forces will. Hence the "energy" in the title of the symposium—the vital force of the universe, Bergson's *élan*

vital. We seek continuity through our rearrangement of the past, the histories we write and rewrite as we resift the evidence, but are buffeted by the discontinuities offered by our own actions and growing knowledge of the way the universe seems to work. These metaphysical notions are part of natural evolution. Our present is simply the way we work through that evolution, seeking both to understand it and find a means to direct it. The process of understanding seems clearer and clearer but the directing of it may be wishful. Perhaps there is no way in which human control of the macro-future makes any sense in "the scheme of things" (such a useful trope—assuming there is a scheme, because if there isn't—and most likely there isn't, then we are simply micro-objects flying through space without a future that we can in any way "direct.") Is what happens actually "created" or does it simply "happen"? Does art have any role in all this?

Some of the chapters in this book offer modest accounts of axiological preferences—better planning rather than floods and droughts, better ways of living with each other and the natural world (of which we are part? Or are we truly "unnatural"?)

Energy must be fuelled, so destroys in order to consume and act. For Malevich the chaos of the present is the destruction of the past to create a future. Human beings are energised by thoughts of the future—desire, will, creativity: artists are creative when they think beyond the present to create a cosmic future for themselves: artists are both thinkers and actors, making the present, visualising the direction of the future, exploring, sketching out axiologies of intrinsic value, fuelling the energy of being. Artists are the vital avant-garde. Not with images of the promised land, false prophets, but hand in hand with scientists and political activists, delivering an immanent future, based on argued-for values. If there is no chance of "directing" our future, we can, in the meantime, don the garb of Homo Deus and try for miracles.

At least the writers assembled here are thinking about the state of things on the planet. Few are as wildly ambitious as Malevich, many are modestly suggesting different ways of creating energy—both social and political that suit a more positive set of values. All feel that art has a place, even a vital place, perhaps simply as critics of base human actions or heralds of the disasters that await our indifference. Here, at any rate, is fuel for thought, spurs to action focussed on the multivalent images of art that are so seldom simply one thing, are anything but reductive. Art, after all, may opens doors that its creators never had in mind, as creativity is indeed—whether some like it or not— part of our cosmic evolution.

28 July 2017

Notes

[1] Steven Shapin, "The Superhuman Upgrade," a review of Yuval Noah Harari's *Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow* (London: Vintage: 2016) in *The London Review of Books*, 39:14, 13 July 2017, 30.

CHAPTER ONE

UNOVIS AND THE FUTURE OF ART

PETER STUPPLES

Imagine the first lecture given by a newly appointed member of staff. The students are gathered in the body of the auditorium. The teachers form a semi-circle on the platform around the lectern at which the newcomer will display the gifts he brings. Loud talking becomes quieter chatter. At a mystical moment everyone closes their mouth, looks around the better to experience the collective silence. All eyes swivel to the front, to the door at the top of the stairs from which the semi-legendary newcomer—his reputation having swept before him into the town, into the building, into their very volatile consciousnesses—will emerge. The door at the top of the stairs is flung wide. The students fix their avid gaze. Suddenly, a thickset man, his hair flying to either side of his head, like angel's wings or devil's horns, comes at a run down to the rostrum, his arms cutting arcs in the air, like the propellers of a Sikorsky S-16. The newcomer, Kazimir Malevich, says nothing. He stands there, his arms revving for take off. He exuded energy. He gives a display of "Suprematist motion." His message is action, not words. Art would never be the same again—or so he hoped.[1]

This was Malevich's first appearance as a teacher, in early November 1919, at the Free State Artists' Studios in Vitebsk, near the front line in the civil war between the Imperialist Whites and the Bolshevik Reds in Russia. White and red were two of Malevich's colours—the white of space and the red of action. But it is a third colour with which his name is synonymous, the black of the *Black Quadrilateral*—the *Black Square*, the image that appeared in at least three versions at the unveiling of Suprematism at the Latest (or was it the Last?)[2] Futurist Exhibition of Pictures 0.10 in Petrograd, almost exactly three years before.

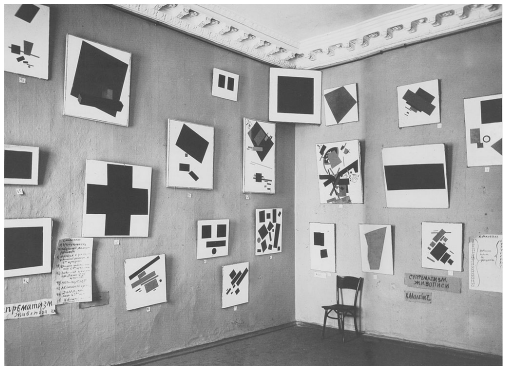

Fig. 1-1. Section of Suprematist works by Kazimir Malevich exhibited at the 0.10 Exhibition, Petrograd, 1915. This image is in the Public Domain.

For Malevich the *Black Square* was both a representation and not a representation. It was not a representation of a black square; it was a black square in actuality. Yet it was also a representation, a symbol for the foundation of the New Art. "To reproduce beloved objects and little corners of nature is just like a thief being enraptured by his legs in irons."[3] Black was not the colour of mourning. The end of the art of the past was nothing to weep over. Rather let's welcome "the first stage of pure creativity in art,"[4] the first icon of Suprematism, his most recent artistic and philosophical transformation.

Malevich had never stood still, either artistically or philosophically. He had been an Impressionist, a Symbolist, a Cubist, a Cubo-Futurist, an Alogist. But these were all way stations on the mainline of his autodidactic quest for something that only began to gel into Suprematism in 1915, a clearer comprehension of the world in which he found himself, the world of war and revolution. The Latest (or was it the Last?) Futurist Exhibition was followed twelve months later by the collapse of the Russian Empire and a few months after that by the Bolshevik revolution. It was as if Malevich's prophetic intuition was vindicated. The future was now and he was the Moses of the Promised Land with the tablets of Suprematism already written. And he was in Vitebsk swinging his arms, the champion of the art of the future, not related to a Futurism that was past.

In any case Russian Futurism, *budetlianstvo*, was something altogether different from the Italian; it was a What-will-be-ism, rooted in the absurd, mocking all convention, making a travesty of established conceptions of logic and rational thinking, clearing a space for new ideas and acting in the present with the future as yet unconstrained by preconceptions.

The Latest and Last Futurist Exhibition of Pictures. Pictures indeed! As if we need pictures: "when the habit of our mind to see in pictures representations of nooks of nature, madonnas and shameless Venuses will disappear, only then will we catch sight of purely pictorial works (products)…of utilitarian reason."[5]

No more pictures. Turn to the present. Use your mind. Think about the way art can be useful for the actual future of a world in turmoil. It was with these credentials that Malevich left Moscow at the beginning of the winter of 1919-1920, the lowest point in the Russian Civil War, when there was no food or fuel, when the Whites were breaking through, supported by Western capitalism, when he joined the Free State Artists' Studios in Vitebsk.

Within a few weeks he had become a hero among the local students. At first his acolytes called themselves The Group of Young Cubists, then suddenly conscious of the archaic thinking entrenched in this title, they metamorphosed into Molposnovis [Молодые последователи нового искусства (Young Followers of the New Art)]. They were joined by older members of staff, so "Young" was erased from the acronym. Molposnovis became Posnovis [Последователи нового искусства (Followers of the New Art)]—the art of pure forms advocated under the banner of Suprematism. In less than three weeks "Followers" was thrown out as too submissive. They were not followers—they were practitioners of new art itself. They now called themselves UNOVIS [Утвердители нового искусства (Affirmers of the New Art)]. In Russian this has a positive ring. It was also an affirmation of Malevich's pedagogy—students and teachers are one: they are a collective, learning by working together. They constantly create and recreate their own curriculum. There is no canon. There is no history. There are no rules. Our art will change. It should change ahead of, in advance of circumstances, growing out of current social phenomena, changing them in the process. Art is action for change. The process is incomprehensible. It will make its own history, a history that has no value.

At the same instant as establishing a new group to create a new art, a new pedagogy, a new environment for making art, Malevich formed a political arm, also called UNOVIS, described as a Suprematist-Economist Party in Art.[6] No group of avant-garde artists in Europe had before advocated, let alone organised, a political wing. "Economy" has a special meaning for Malevich—it has to do with pure, direct, undecorated, the most fundamental, the swiftest, the easiest, the result of undiluted, undiverted energy—colour, lines, form without the enervating distraction of representation. But the Party is "in Art." It is not in the conflict of the political revolution and civil war taking place all around Vitebsk, or

having to do with the splits and counter-splits that fragmented the political parties vying for power. The Suprematist-Economist Party would have nothing to do with old scripts, old fights, old ideas, where there were always winners and losers. The Suprematist-Economist Party advocated not only the forms of the new but also the roles the new would play within any society that might emerge from the mess of the present. It would already be in place to lead and to serve. Malevich had no doubts.

To celebrate the Week of the Battle Front, on 6 February 1919, UNOVIS put on a performance of works to promulgate its ideas, reusing material Malevich had brought with him—the script of Europe's most avant-garde opera, *Victory over the Sun*, a tragi-comedy performed for the first time in the Luna Park in St Petersburg in December 1913, six years before. Within the seemingly incomprehensible action on stage, the sun, representing the past, the enemy of art, is torn down from the sky and locked in a concrete box. The habit we had of seeing the world through the overlordship of light is at an end, laid to rest by the Strong Men of the Future. The opera was followed by a Suprematist ballet, in which "dancers," carrying black squares and other Suprematist symbols, created ever-changing formations on the stage.[7]

The evening was described as a meeting-performance. The theatre was an interactive space: the performances a form of embodied social thought. The citizens of Vitebsk, soldiers, workers and peasants, were invited free of charge. Students and staff at the Free Studios, as well as members of the general public, were encouraged to take part as performers, stage hands, costume makers, musicians, dancers, and at the same time engage in sit-in discussions about these works as an example of the type of action/intervention epitomising the New Art.

One of the attractions for Malevich of working in Vitebsk was the existence of a lithographic stone and press on a site that was not yet under the eye of any civic or military authority. It could be used to produce and distribute a series of broadsheets to propagate the ideas of the New Art, the thinking that developed within both the art and political wings of UNOVIS.

UNOVIS also adopted a seal, a badge, sometimes a red square, sometimes black, worn on the lapel, the sleeve, lithographed on publications. "Wear the Black Square as a Sign of the Economy of the World."[8] These ritualistic insignia distinguished the radical artists, the struggle of the new "in art" to materialise out of the old. The development of UNOVIS would run parallel to the political struggle, interact with it, become its philosophical vanguard, its conceptual antennae feeling its way into the unknown.

"Wear the Black Square as a Sign of the Economy of the World." What does Malevich mean by "economy?" Malevich wrote essay after essay in Vitebsk. In "The Question of Imitative Art" (Smolensk, 1920) Malevich stressed that "Every form is the result of the movement of energy on a trajectory from an economic foundation." By economic Malevich means what works best naturally, with the least possible friction, with no waste of energy and time. It is also the essence, as he understands it, of the fifth dimension—length, breadth, depth, time/space and then the fundamental energy driving the Universe and its creative, functioning principles.[9] This fundamental principle of economy he also applies to images. For example those that "convey in a single plane the force of the static or of evident dynamic repose,"[10] or "introduce the 5th dimension in art" are regarded as the most economic.[11] But Malevich went further, beyond art, to apply this principle of economy to society as a whole, including rights and politics. Our rights are preserved by the utilisation of the best means to regulate society, a society that works well—needs and wants satisfied equally, a communist state, that is not so much Bolshevik, Menshevik, of partisan factions, but "of the commune," the community as a whole working collectively. "A person receiving rights and freedom cannot act independently…The economic principle leads us along its trajectory and collects all the lives that have been scattered in the chaos of nature, separate and isolated, uniting them in its path; thus every person, every individual, formerly isolated, is now incorporated in the system of united action."[12]

Thus for Malevich action—energy in motion, based upon economy of means, achieves social goals through collective endeavour. Art participates in this endeavour through experimentation, through creative construction, through political commitment to social equality and collective rights and freedoms. "New art is no longer organised under the flag of aesthetic taste, but is moving into party organisation; 'Unovis' is now a party based on the notion of economy. Thus art aims towards unity with the communism of the economic wellbeing of mankind."[13]

Malevich clearly advocated a utopian collectivism, the collective ownership of property, the collective freedom he practiced in the studios in Vitebsk, where the students and staff were equal—certainly equally impoverished and malnourished, but also equally inspired by the new social realities.

Fig. 1-2. Posed photo of Malevich with students and their "cosmic" work in Vitebsk, 1920. This image is in the Public Domain.

How did idealism translate to practice? The art students, as we have seen, gave performances. They decorated the streets of the city with banners, painting the sidewalks, designed Suprematist decorations for tramcars, speakers' platforms, signage, posters, ration cards, books, textiles, theatre curtains, gave talks in schools: propaganda was art-work, as all the left artists working in Russia agreed. But UNOVIS was also passionate about designing cities of the future, working within the creative language of architectonic, even cosmic Suprematism. From the very first Malevich had seen Suprematism as a form of theoretical philosophy and cosmology—exploring conceptually the way objects move in space and through time, including Outer Space.[14] He was interested in flight, in aerial photography, in seeing the earth from space, in space travel. His students at Vitebsk designed rockets, cosmic habitats. One of them, Gavriil Iudin, aged only 14 in 1920, wrote about interplanetary travel and corresponded with Konstantin Tsiolkovsky, the father of Russian rocket science.[15] In *Suprematism: 34 Drawings* Malevich speculated about the building of a space satellite (which he called a "sputnik") that would move in its own orbit between the earth and the moon: "movement on a straight line towards any planet cannot be achieved other than by the circular

movement of intermediate Suprematist satellites which create a straight line of circles from one satellite to another."[16] These sputniks, like all Suprematist forms, would have nothing in common with the technologies of the earth, "but will be equipped with their own sense of reason and will operate [live] according to their own rules." The UNOVIS collective elaborated a complete range of collage-reliefs depicting cosmic architecture, such as the work by Lazar Khidekel'.[17] Malevich abandoned painting for drawing and writing, creating and thinking, making prototypes, discarding them, developing new ideas and strategies, the endless tasks of collective artistic imagining.

Of course he and his young acolytes were mad, living in a city between warring armies, short of fuel and food. Giving up painting was no effort when there was no paint. Printing was possible only on the single lithographic stone. Yet a few photos show studios filled with drawings, students eagerly busy on their projects. Life was a buzz. Excitement filled every hungry body and mind. Feet on the ground but heads in the air—the cold and wet air of Vitebsk, but also the air of outer space, of rockets and satellites, but not just any rocket or satellite. Malevich did not imagine them propelled, as he put it, "by means of engines, nor the conquest of space by clumsy petrol-powered machines of wholly catastrophic construction, but by the smooth harnessing of form into a purely natural functioning, by magnetic interrelationships within a single form, made up from all the elements of naturally interrelated forces, and therefore with no need for engines, wings, wheels, petrol…'The Suprematist apparatus'… will be a single unit, whole, without any joins."[18] Malevich might have used the word "sustainable" to characterise his bio-organic[19] satellite if that current concept had been available to him.

Art, even creative construction, is always embedded in its own historical present, or as John Searle would put it, in contingent practice based upon contingent capacities, social, cultural and material.[20] The energy sources available to the workshops in Vitebsk were wood and coal for the stoves and oil for the lamps. Large-scale public utilities were things of the future for Russian provincial cities. Climate change was not on anyone's mind as the Russian Civil War raged across vast territories and engaged all minds and bodies with the bitter fight to the death between capital and labour. The political leaders, and UNOVIS too, were intolerant of what we might call the foundation stones of "cultures"—traditions and customs, class, gender, ethnicity, language, religious faith and practice. In the realities of Vitebsk the Polish-speaking, Ukrainian-born, Russian thinking and writing Malevich was a total stranger surrounded by Yiddish-speaking Jewish students. UNOVIS and the Bolsheviks were engaged in

an international revolution to uproot all "old ways of thinking," ways of life that were culture-bound. It was a rootless time and Malevich a rootless cosmopolitan. But rootlessness makes it a lot simpler to be uprooted from contingent practices. To change the metaphor, the Future was an open book of blank pages. Writing on it would only bring about division—arguments about what words meant, who owned the ideas, who owned the press. In a collective enterprise the Future must always be a white canvas. It was the task of art to keep it that way.

Yet. And yet. From our perspective, from our contingent economic and social practice, Suprematism was supremely naïve, simply the latest, but not the last, manifesto in the competitive practice of the historical avant-garde. The UNOVIS project was at best a heroic failure, with nothing to offer the proletariat of Vitebsk. From the point of view of Lenin's Bolsheviks it was simply foolish posturing, when what was needed was Western industrialisation, electricity in the countryside, tractors and the latest technology, with no regard for the future of the planet. From the point of view of science cosmic Suprematism was a joke. From our point of view Suprematism simply could not see the future of a resource-depleted world, an ever-increasing population with ever-increasing aspirations for goods, for power, for entertainment. Of course not. It was not in the contingent cultural, scientific or economic capacities of anyone only a hundred years ago to do so. Art had no idea that it might be called upon to respond to such a planetary crisis as our own. How does art respond? I was struck by the earnestness of the European consortium for the study of energy use and the art project conducted through the Royal College of Art in London that was part of this study in 2015.[21] Members of the public at various exhibition sites were asked to draw energy, to explore their perceptions of that as-it-were invisible subject. The resulting drawings were whimsical, colourful, entertaining to look at. Yet they were totally lacking in any contingent capacities to think about energy use. There was no sense of action for change, no context of social revolution. Suprematism is still ahead of the game. The tasks we set for art are more mundane than Malevich set his students in Vitebsk. The propaganda is no more effective despite the much-vaulted means at our disposal to create it. Perhaps we still need to set our minds to the creative construction of naturally fuelled spirals of satellites to take us to the moon and beyond, to make a new life in space whilst we set the planet Earth to rights. We have made no advance in terms of getting ourselves to think and work collectively, on the basis of the equality of all men and women. The creative construction of a world for mutual wellbeing has always seemed alien to our combative, violent, tribal natures, with or without the

assistance of art. The problems facing us are different from those in Vitebsk in 1920, but our background capacities, as Searle would call them, are no more advanced. Perhaps art, a New Art, of a Suprematist ambition, can help us if nothing else can.

Notes

The notes are based upon Troels Andersen's edited translation *K.S. Malevich: Essays on Art*, vol. 1 (Rapp and Whiting: Copenhagen, 1968), but my translations are based upon the Russian texts in Aleksandra Shatskikh (ed.), *Kazimir Malevich: Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Gileia, 1995).

[1] Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007) 67-8.
[2] The Russian word *poslednii* can mean both "last" and "latest."
[3] Kazimir Malevich, "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting," (Moscow, 1916) in *K.S. Malevich, Essays on Art 1915-1933*, Troels Andersen (ed.) (Rapp and Whiting: Copenhagen, 1968) 1:19.
[4] Ibid., 38.
[5] Ibid., 19.
[6] The Party was first "affirmed" by Malevich in a letter to Matiushin dated 20 January 1920. The party would share the name of UNOVIS. See Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007) 93. This book was originally published in Russian in 2001.
[7] Ibid., 94-107.
[8] Ibid., 111. In her note to this slogan Shatskikh comments, somewhat brusquely and uninformatively— "'Economy' in this context does not refer to economics in the narrow sense but to the concept of efficient order." Ibid., 338 n.10.
[9] Whilst for many this is often seen as a "mysterious" aspect of Suprematism, if not completely crazy, Malevich held that we simply do not know what these principles are, yet there is a sense in which there can only be creative freedom in conformity with natural laws, not the social laws and history that are the dominants in human affairs.
[10] Near the opening of Malevich's essay *Suprematism. 34 Drawings* (Vitebsk, 1920) (Andersen: 1968) 123
[11] The relationship of artistic creativity with the fifth dimension is laid out in Malevich's *Resolution "A" in Art* (a postscript, dated Vitebsk 15 November 1919, to his earlier, and first major philosophical essay, *On New Systems in Art*, dated Nemchinovka 15 July 1919). Andersen: 1998, 117-18. Nemchinovka was a village, now a suburb, lying to the west of Moscow, where Malevich lived at various times in his life.
[12] In Malevich's essay "The Question of Imitative Art" (Smolensk, 1920) Andersen: 1968, 167
[13] Ibid., 173

[14] This is expounded in no uncertain terms in the essay *Suprematism; 34 Drawings* (Vitebsk, 1920). Andersen: 1968, 123-8.
[15] Shatskikh: 2007, 195.
[16] Andersen: 1968, 124.
[17] Illustrated in Shatskikh: 2007, 209, fig.173.
[18] Andersen: 1968, 123-4.
[19] See Shatskikh: 2007, 204 and Aleksandr Romm's review of the 1922 Unovis exhibition, where he talks of the "bio-natural foundation" of Suprematist cosmic architecture. Shatskikh: 2007, 207-08.
[20] John Searle*, The Rediscovery of the Mind* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1992) 185.
[21] Flora Bowden, Dan Lockton, Rama Gheerawo and Clare Brass, *Drawing Energy: Exploring Perceptions of the Visible* (London: The Royal College of Art, 2015).

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CHAPTER TWO

ECOLOGICAL IMPERIALISM: MICHAEL SHEPHERD'S IMAGES OF A CHANGING NEW ZEALAND LANDSCAPE

ELIZABETH RANKIN

Like many New Zealand artists, Michael Shepherd was drawn to landscape as a genre, but felt puzzled and somewhat alienated by the way it was depicted in so many twentieth-century artworks. The most admired New Zealand landscape paintings, by such artists as Rita Angus, Colin McCahon or Don Binney, invariably show pristine panoramas. Their deep colours and strong contours bring horizons into sharp focus, and have sparked endless art historical discussions about the influence of New Zealand's clear hard light. It is a pervasive trope and the concept has been perpetuated at a popular level in tourist campaigns for 100% Pure New Zealand, even though nay-sayers have questioned the truth of the claim. But, growing up in Ngaruawahia in the Waikato, Michael Shepherd was aware of different vistas, the tangled presence of bush and the dampness of marshy wetlands. Some of his earliest landscape paintings from around 1985, such as *Portland Road Swamp*, capture the watery lushness of such swampy terrain. Relatively formless shape-shifters, offering a close-up, almost myopic vision, these images deny the clarity and purity of customary New Zealand landscapes.

It may have been because of the dominance of the harsh-light theory of New Zealand landscape paintings that Shepherd initially avoided landscape as a subject, although his tiny, much admired early still life paintings could be read as miniature landscapes, with their long shadows and low horizons. But a series of larger-scale works made in 1987, after the death of his father, introduced natural material into still life, and added a very personal note. Coming to terms with his loss, Shepherd revisited the Waikato where he spent his boyhood, involuntarily plucking weeds from the verges of road and river. Invariably imports that arrived accidentally

but spread rapidly, the weeds that came to overrun the native biota signify the altered ecology of post-settler New Zealand, concomitant with the spread of Europeans themselves. Unexpectedly displayed in formal white vases in these paintings, the pathos of the insignificant weeds seems a kind of "memento mori," not only for his father, but also for the changing New Zealand environment.

These studies were to form part of an ambitious six-metre work, *Time is a River without Banks, Time is a Dark Still Life at Ngaruawahia,* painted in 1988, where the weeds are depicted amongst other familiar still life objects representing Pākeha settler culture, and offset against objects representing the indigenous culture of the Tainui people. Starving and in dire straits after World War I and the Spanish flu that followed, the Tainui of Mangatawhiri had been led by Princess Te Puea to settle at Ngaruawahia in 1921, where they built the important marae called Turangawaewae—meaning a place to stand. The two extended still lifes in Shepherd's painting flank a central panel of the Waikato River. While the juxtaposed artefacts of Pākeha and Tainui in the work sets up a bicultural binary, suggesting the cohabitation yet disjunction of the two cultures of New Zealand, it also reveals their mutual dependence on the river around which their stories are intertwined—a shared history in a shared land.

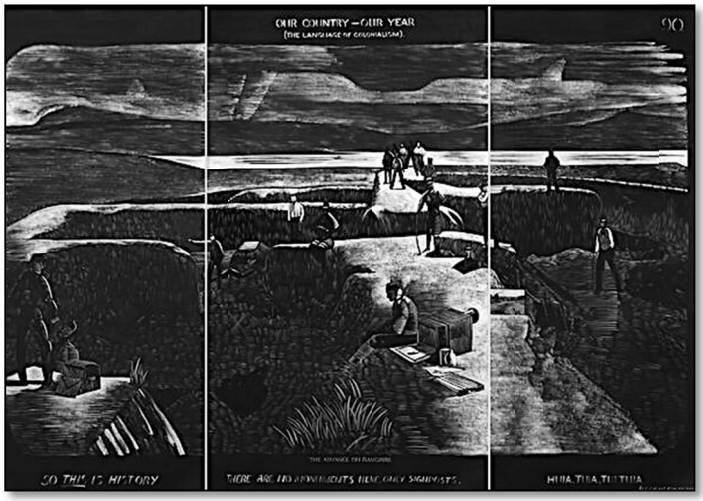

Fig. 2-1. Michael Shepherd, *The Advance on Rangiriri*, 1990, triptych, oil on hardboard, installed size: 210 x 304 x 3. Private Collection. Courtesy of Milford Galleries Dunedin. Photo: Glenn Frei.