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Cringing About Culture: The City Looks at the Provinces

BY SHIFRA SHARLIN

Although it has long been established (since 1967) that you do not have to be Jewish to love Levy's rye bread, perhaps you do have to be a Jew from Iowa to look beyond the usual explanation for the relationship between Kazimir Malevich and Marc Chagall. For an Iowa Jew it is not enough to say that Malevich forced Chagall to leave the art school in the provincial Russian city of Vitebsk in 1920 because Malevich painted squares and Chagall painted Jews. For some, a Jew for instance, religion is the significant variable in this conflict; but for someone else, an Iowan for instance, location would be. And an Iowa Jew knows that prejudices based on geography, while not as serious as religious ones, are not utterly inconsequential. It takes a reluctant resident to know how consequential residence can be.

Marc Chagall was a native of Vitebsk, a city of about 100,000 in the Pale of Settlement in the western area of the Russian Empire where most Jews were required to live. Chagall left Vitebsk for Moscow in 1907 at the age of 20. He then left Moscow for Paris in 1910. By 1914, he had already exhibited twice in Paris and had a solo exhibition in Berlin, thanks in part to the advocacy of the Symbolist poet, Guillaume Apollinaire. What was to have been a brief return to Vitebsk to marry Bella (nee Berta) Rosenfeld in June 1914 was prolonged first by World War I

and then by the Russian Revolution. In September 1918, Marc Chagall as plenipotentiary for the arts of Vitebsk Province opened the Vitebsk Art College with the permission of Anatoly Lunacharsky, the Soviet Commissar of Enlightenment.

In October or November 1919, Kazimir Malevich left Moscow to join the faculty of the art college in Vitebsk.¹ He was the leader of the then-dominant artistic movement, Suprematism, which had its start at the 0.10 Exhibition Petrograd in December 1915 where Malevich had exhibited his first Suprematist painting, "Black Square." Malevich continued to develop the principles of Suprematism both in essays and as a pedagogic program, attracting a devoted group of students in Moscow.

On April 2, 1920 Chagall wrote a letter to an art collector in Moscow, Pavel Davidovich Ettinger, about the two, incompatible, "trends" at the art school: his own and that of Malevich. In June 1920, Marc Chagall left Vitebsk for Moscow to be a production designer at the Moscow State Jewish Theater. Malevich left Vitebsk at the end of 1922. Chagall returned to Paris in 1922. Understanding the feud between Malevich and Chagall depends on explaining exactly why the two artists and their trends were incompatible. It is on this point that an Iowa Jew looks beyond the usual explanation, albeit reluctantly.

Since this Iowa Jew has always found it easier to be a Jew than an Iowan, I have preferred, for much of my life, to pretend that geography does not matter. For better or worse, Jews always counted me as one of them; Iowans never did. Living in Iowa was not enough to make me Iowan: my fellow Iowans' skepticism was not based on length of residence. On my first day of school in Ames, Iowa my third-grade teacher, as puzzled by my name as my teachers at Manhattan's P.S. 187 had been, asked me a question that none of those teachers ever had. She wanted to know my nationality. In all the years of being asked this question by inquiring Iowans, I've had ample opportunity to test out acceptable responses. "I was born in New Jersey" was never one of them. Neither was the birthplace of my parents or grandparents. My teacher rephrased her question. In Iowa as in Russia, nationality was a synonym for religion, at least for the Jewish religion.²

It is true that not only Iowans questioned my claim to be counted as an Iowan. When Jack Kerouac wrote about how beautiful Iowa girls

are, he was not thinking of girls who looked like me. In contrast, Lenny Bruce's famous (to me) dictum that anything provincial could not be Jewish did not undermine my confidence that I counted as a Jew. My address did not carry the same weight with Iowans as it did with Lenny Bruce. Other things mattered more: appearance, diet, wax paper usage, house smells, tone of voice, gesticulatory habits, accent, number of magazine and newspaper subscriptions. The list was long and its logic obscure, but one thing was never included: any good deed. Whenever I did something an Iowan considered particularly admirable, then I counted as one of them. I was dubbed a "good Christian." The hollowness of the compliment — the speaker would have known I was Jewish — confirmed how much of an Iowan I was not. An Iowa Jew could draw only one conclusion: who I was had nothing to do with where I was. I thought geography did not matter.

I changed my mind thanks to two Madrid architects. Cristina Diaz Morena and Efen Garcia Grinda initially caught my attention, because they opted to pose on white sheets wearing white underwear for the readers of *El Croquis*, a bilingual journal for architects published in Madrid.³ Both the journal and its gallery promote innovation in Spanish architecture. Cristina Diaz Morena and Efen Garcia Grinda were the principals in an architecture group, Cero.9, that was one of three whose work was featured in a recent issue. Photographs of the architects accompanied their long explanatory statements in rather lush prose that supplemented the austere technical precision of building plans and models. I am neither an architect nor bilingual but I have a friend who is. In other words, I can pass as a credible enough skimmer of such a journal to form a judgment about those who flaunt their narrow flat abdomens in professional journals, write statements entitled "The Future is not Barbarella," and know the title of at least one Thomas Mann novel.

I like them. I liked them even more when I realized that their proposed project, "Montana Magica de Ames," was in Ames, Iowa. There are cities so famous that, like some celebrities, they are referred to by one name only. Ames is not usually one of them. It was — to use another term of high praise popular in Ames — *nice* of Cero.9 to grant Ames that distinction. Nothing else they wrote about Ames, however, could be considered nice. Back in Ames, the opposite of nice is snobbish. Nice

people think everyone is equal; snobs do not. It was nice to give Ames the same one-name treatment as Madrid or Madonna; it was snobbish to call Ames "an anonymous city in the American Middle West." Cero.9 would not call Madrid or Madonna anonymous. At first, the snobbishness of this remark offended me and I liked them less for it. Even an Iowa Jew has some Iowa pride. That they probably would have exempted me, as an Iowa Jew, from this insult made me like them even less. And then I realized that they were right. Without committing to any judgments of better or worse (I am enough of an Iowan to fear the stigma of snobbishness), I would have to agree that Ames is different from Madrid. Trust people bold enough to bare their midsections to expose what could be the last unexamined prejudice: geography.

Malevich and Chagall were similarly bold and snobbish. Although neither artist ever called Vitebsk "anonymous," they also recognized that where you are affects who you can be. Both artists believed that Vitebsk affected them for the worse. Chagall called Vitebsk, "my town and my tomb;"⁴ to Malevich Vitebsk felt "like exile."⁵ Before incompatibility, whatever its reasons, drove them apart, living in Vitebsk or, more precisely, being forced to live in Vitebsk, had brought them together. Both artists would have stayed in their respective cities if the crisis of the civil war had not forced them to find refuge in Vitebsk. Their preferred term of contempt was provincial.

Cero.9 were bold and snobbish enough to call Ames anonymous, but they would not have dared to call it provincial and meant it as an insult. Cero.9 and *El Croquis* exemplify a trend new to Spanish architecture in the past twenty years: internationalism. This trend decentralizes culture by removing the city from the heart of cultural life and giving comparable importance to the provinces. Internationalism marks the decline of the city's cultural dominance. So writes William J.R. Curtis, in *El Croquis*. No longer is "the most vital architectural culture" confined to "major cities like Barcelona and Madrid" but can also be found in "remote corners" and "even in provincial towns." He cites international architecture competitions and the fact that a Cero.9 project is being constructed in Jyväskylä, Finland as evidence of this trend.⁶ Of course, it would not have made sense to cite the fact that a Cero.9 project will not be constructed in Ames; but the fact as well as its omission points to a flaw in the reasoning behind

internationalism. The provinces can count as international as long as they share city taste. Disgust with unmitigated provincial taste underlay Cero.9's snobbish remark about Ames.

Anonymous was not the most snobbish thing that Cero.9 had to say about Ames. They submitted their magic mountain design for a competition run by the Ames Landmark Commission to create a landmark for Ames by building a superstructure to enclose Ames's functioning municipal power station that would function as both tourist attraction and "branded image." Cero.9 speculate, snobbishly, about Ames's possible choices for such a landmark. Ames might "resort to cosmetic treatment, to the erosive power of images and the kitsch assembly of local materials."⁷ They were right (I flinch from adding an "of course." Call it Iowa pride or fear of Iowans). In June 2003 the Landmark Commission did not select Cero.9's rose bush cum bird sanctuary carapace, designed so that the power plant's ambient heat and waste water along with a system of solar panels would sustain both plant and animal life. They preferred a ring of light bulbs suspended around the top of the power station that, the award committee noted approvingly, would be visible from "outer space."

The Ames award committee was not trying to impress Cero.9. Their choice could be considered a revolt against what Australians call "cultural cringe," when the provinces fear making the city cringe at their cultural taste. Instead of doing their anxious best to please city taste, the provinces can defiantly choose to make the city cringe. Internationalism's flaw lies in its assumption that the provinces will share city taste. When the provinces make a cultural choice that the city deplors, internationalism is not invoked. Jyvaskyla is evidence of internationalism; Ames is not.

The flaw in internationalism resembles the flaw in niceness. Ames, Iowans calling me a good Christian did not make me one; they were simply asserting the superiority of their parochial moral standards. If it is good, it must be Christian. So also internationalism merely gives the city-dweller license to coopt provincial taste. To explain Jyvaskyla's choice of Cero.9's design as internationalism, that is, the recognition of the superiority of city taste, ignores Jyvaskyla's other possible motivations.

I was not necessarily trying to be a good Christian when I performed some good deed. I could have had another reason; however, I did not. The humiliating truth is that I really was trying to win that supreme Iowan accolade. This is my excuse: it was either that accolade or no accolade at all. Seemingly everything else about me counted only as a curiosity or did not count at all. The dominant majority has the power to set standards. Ames, Iowans should know what I mean. The ambition to transform their municipal power station into a landmark originated in the desire to be like a city. I quote from the competition guidelines:

Great cities often have a unique visual identity. When people think of them, they associate these cities with a visual symbol: Seattle has the Space Needle, St. Louis has the Gateway Arch, San Francisco has the Golden Gate Bridge, and Paris has the Eiffel Tower. These structures, in addition to being tourist attractions, usually become a branded image, used as a symbol to identify these communities. As the poet Gertrude Stein said, "There is no there there," for Ames, Iowa.

The writer supposes that Ames will be more visible, more appealing to tourists if it becomes more like a "great city." The writer does not suggest promoting any already-existing feature of Ames. The proof that there really was "no there there" for Ames, Iowa was that it was trying so hard to be somewhere else: the great city. Jyvaskyla might have made its architectural choice for the same reason. The readers of and contributors to *El Croquis* will never know if Jyvaskyla truly shared Madrid's taste. Those who cringe about their culture the most would most prefer to be seen as internationalists. Regardless of motive, however, the city and provinces are supposedly becoming more like each other: the provinces are not so distant or different from the city. Accordingly, provincial cannot be an insult.

Provincial was almost not an insult for Malevich and Chagall. A century before Cero.9, communication had already improved sufficiently for Malevich to be so infatuated with the railroad and telegraph that he imagined them uniting Russia into a single organism. Certainly communism had international ambitions. Maybe it takes time for the illusions of

improved communication to replace reality. Malevich and Chagall lived at the wrong end of the century to believe that the world really had gotten smaller. Or perhaps they lived at the wrong end of Russia. Their hatred of the provinces reminds us of something that our long experience with improved communication has made us forget: the city is far away from the provinces.

"Remote corners" (to quote Curtis) will always be remote, no matter how much space is internationalized. Curtis's use of the adjective betrays this awareness. We betray ours whenever we say "Far East," "Down Under" or even "Mid West." Maybe it takes an Iowa Jew, as skeptical of internationalism as she is of niceness, to be so stubborn about the persistence of distance and differences. It is not just that the putative sameness might not be benign; it might not be. I can never be a good Christian (op.cit. Kerouac); Ames will never be Paris or even St. Louis.

Vitebsk was doubly remote. It was both far away and foreign. The physical distance between Moscow and Vitebsk was enormous (especially before railroads improved traveling in the 1860s) but it was not as great as the cultural distance. The usually authoritative 1910 Encyclopedia Britannica was wrong about Vitebsk. It did not have a "dirty Jewish quarter." There were Jews everywhere. The writer for the Britannica had assumed, or hoped, that Vitebsk was like west European cities in restricting Jews to a ghetto. Vitebsk was a Jewish town in a Jewish region. According to the 1897 census, over 50% of the approximately 100,000 residents of Vitebsk were classified as Jews. Vitebsk was in the area of the Russian empire acquired from Poland in the 18th century by Catherine I. With the land, Russia acquired a large Jewish population which was, for the most part, compelled to stay there. The de facto arrangement became official imperial policy in 1835. Not everyone who lived in the Pale was Jewish but most Jews had to live in the Pale, unless they managed to get special permission. Under different tsars permission was more or less easy to get, but it was always necessary.

This double remoteness of Vitebsk gives credibility to the claim that nationality had something to do with the incompatibility between Chagall and Malevich. In this case nationality is also geography because Jewish nationality was, at least in part, defined geographically. Vitebsk was also a center for the Jewish cultural revival that used ethnographic,



Kazimir Malevich, *Self-Portrait*

1933. OIL ON CANVAS. 73 x 66 CM. THE RUSSIAN MUSEUM, ST. PETERSBURG, RUSSIA.

that is, "folk," sources in the hope of creating new, secular forms of Jewish culture. Chagall could be considered a member of this movement. S. Ansky, another Vitebsk native, and author of the classic Yiddish play, *The Dybbuk*, supervised an ethnographic expedition throughout the Pale of Settlement. Researchers collected literally thousands of documents: photographs, recordings of songs, transcriptions of folktales as well as actual objects between 1912 and 1914. In Vitebsk the Y.L. Peretz Society, named for the Yiddish writer, sponsored secular Jewish culture.⁸

When nationality is the significant variable, Malevich is the outsider and Chagall the insider in a Vitebsk so far away and foreign that its culture is presumed to be autonomous. Chagall's own ambivalence about Vitebsk and his moments of unambiguous hostility towards his co-religionists do not make him any less the insider. On the contrary, both ambivalence and hostility can betoken the familiarity of a true insider. For instance, the Yiddishists of Vitebsk's Y.L. Peretz Society are not on record as having an opinion about Malevich, but they did strenuously object to Chagall and his insistence on total control of all "outdoor decoration" for the anniversary of the October Revolution.⁹ At the Moscow State Jewish Theater, where Chagall decamped after Vitebsk, working with co-religionists made a bad situation worse. Chagall objected to surrendering artistic control to theatrical demands. He objected to props, to stagehands touching his sets, and to actors going on stage.¹⁰ Abram Efros, the cultural critic, reminisced:

He cried real, hot, childish tears when rows of chairs were placed in the hall with his frescoes. He exclaimed, "These heathen Jews will obstruct my art, they will rub their thick backs and 'greasy hair on it.'" To no avail did Granovsky and I, as friends, curse him as an idiot; he continued wailing and whining.¹¹

Chagall's idiocy shows that just because nationality is a significant variable does not mean it has to be a simple one. It does, however, simplify the relationship between Malevich and Chagall.

Abram Efros first proposed the explanation of the relationship between Malevich and Chagall that most scholars have since followed: "Malevich, after all, was just a dishonorable intrigant, whereas he, Cha-

gall, was born in Vitebsk, and knew well what kind of art Vitebsk and the Russian Revolution needed."¹² Although Efros cites location, he is actually invoking nationality as the basis of the incompatibility between Malevich's and Chagall's competing trends. Being "born in Vitebsk" is a reference to the fact of Chagall's Jewishness, since Vitebsk was in the former Pale of Settlement. Geography becomes a particularly rigid form of nationality when it names the place of birth. Defining Chagall by his birthplace suggests that Chagall, like Vitebsk, was first, foremost, simply, and only Jewish. Identifying Chagall by birthplace gives Malevich an equally simple identity: simply not born in Vitebsk. Nationality, defined by birthplace, makes the incompatibility between the two artists inevitable and irreconcilable.

When Efros pretends that Chagall is a Vitebsk native and nothing more, he leaves out what Chagall had in common with Malevich: their reluctance. In the same letter in which Chagall reports that he and Malevich lead two competing trends at the Vitebsk Art College, he writes:

I shall tell you one thing: though born in Russia (and in the "Pale of Settlement" at that), but educated abroad, I am especially sensitive to all that happens here in the domain of art (especially fine art). I remember too *painfully* the luster of the *original*... [Ellipses and italics 'Chagall's']¹³

The original whose luster Chagall remembers so painfully is "abroad," that is, Paris. Malevich has an equally painful memory of another city: Moscow. The city is the "original" in comparison to which the provinces, including Vitebsk, lack luster. Their reluctance is their unwillingness to forget the city's luster. Reluctance means that location does not matter, locations do. Reluctance is being in two places at once. It is being geographically hyphenated. When Chagall wants his correspondent to know that he *left* Vitebsk, not simply that he was born there, he is claiming a dual geographic allegiance. He is from both Paris and Vitebsk.

Maybe Lenny Bruce would have counted me as a real Jew after all. I wasn't an Iowa Jew. I was a New Jersey-Manhattan-Iowa Jew. Or maybe Lenny Bruce would have still considered my ethnicity compromised. Dual allegiances, whether ethnic or geographic, can frustrate the

singularly loyal. My family spent every summer in a different east coast city. Every summer my New Jersey relatives would want me to prefer Iowa or the east coast, here or there. I never could. How would they have chosen between being Jewish and New Jerseyan? Being geographically hyphenated, like its ethnic variant, can be considered an advantage or not. Was I always homesick or was I always at home? That was another thing I could never decide. In one respect my decision did not matter. Advantage or not, I was always in two places at once. I was always looking from here to there and back.

Not everyone who moves from place to place gets hyphenated. Most of the other artists and intellectuals who were forced to leave the city for Vitebsk resisted hyphenation. As much as possible, they maintained their city life transplanted to a provincial location. Bakhtin and his circle continued their philosophical conversations in one room rather than another. The orchestras and ballet companies performed on one stage rather than another, thus treating their time in Vitebsk as an extended provincial tour. For artistic and intellectual purposes, they remained in the city, neither changing nor being changed by their provincial surroundings.

Malevich and Chagall, in contrast, both believed that they could and should transform the cultural life of Vitebsk. They are their descendents. There is something of their idealism in Chagall's quest to find a "new arsenal of concepts...that are capable of harmonizing with new citizen dreams."¹⁴ Malevich and Chagall felt a responsibility to the dreams of the new soviet citizen. They never would have disagreed on *how* to change Vitebsk's artistic life, if they had not agreed *that* Vitebsk's artistic life should change. Encouraged by Lunacharsky's progressive educational policies,¹⁵ the Vitebsk Art College was to create "an exclusively revolutionary and truly artistic nest in the provinces."¹⁶ Their two trends were incompatible versions of the kind of "revolutionary and truly artistic nest" Vitebsk could be.

In August 1918 Chagall wrote a proposal for the Vitebsk Art College. The first section, "Goals and Rights of the College," lists three "main goals." Although the first goal proclaims the importance of "developing" the "innocent" taste of the "provincial masses," the second goal introduces a qualification important to Chagall. "In particular," Chagall writes as he specifies who exactly he has in mind when he thinks of the "provincial

masses." He wants to identify "any accidental and rare prominent talent of a beginner from the people." Chagall has twice as much to say about this goal than about the other two. It is the possibility of discovering and nurturing this potentially neglected talent that leads him to declare that the "revolutionary and truly artistic nest" will be created "especially for the needs of the poorest classes of the city and the whole Western Land."¹⁷ A few provincials would benefit from contact with artists from the capital cities (both Petrograd and Moscow) in Chagall's version of a revolutionary and artistic Vitebsk.

Building this provincial nest required recruiting new teachers. "Those old teachers who do not fit the contemporary requirements of art lose their warmed-up seats, and new teachers are appointed in their place." These teachers are to be brought from the city. Chagall addressed the artists of the capitals: "Give us people! Artists! Revolutionaries—painters! From the capitals to the provinces! To us! What will tempt you to come!"¹⁸ Chagall does not specify the alternative to the province's "innocent taste." His is, however, an elite taste. Speaking a few months later, in December, he asserted the superiority of his taste, promoting cultural cringe. His message was duly received by this local writer:

'The Minority in Art' or 'The Solitude of Chagall' — this is the theme of today's debate. But what can we answer the artist, we, coarse provincials, who have almost no idea about, true, great art. Every word of ours wounds the artist, because it is coarse, vulgar and worthless.¹⁹

Chagall's plan for improving provincial taste was restricted to educating the taste of the least "coarse provincials" he could find. The plan was revolutionary insofar as these promising provincials might be poor and Jewish. The majority of Vitebskans would be incapable of truly appreciating this minority taste. The benefit for Vitebsk as a whole would be limited to an improvement in the "artless signs, posters, monuments, etc." which he condemns for being "kitschy and impersonal." It is not necessary that most of Vitebsk appreciate the improvement; rather, it is sufficient if only the "rare prominent talent" of Vitebsk does. In subsequent statements about the art college, Chagall and his supporters emphasize

the good fortune for the provincial mass in having the opportunity to discover any hitherto unrecognized talented, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the honor for the untalented majority in having the superior minority in their midst.

Of course Chagall's plan for a Vitebskan artistic nest could be interpreted (and dismissed) on autobiographical grounds. He was that "rare prominent talent" from the poorest classes who would have benefited from the proposed art college. Without it, the development of Chagall's talent was dependent on various strokes of good luck. Poverty and his nationality were obstacles to his artistic career. Chagall's dedication to providing better opportunities for other talented provincials could be an indication that, rare and prominent though his talent certainly was, he himself believed that luck had played a disturbingly large part in his own artistic success.

But biography is not diagnostic of future cultural attitudes. Malevich no less than Chagall faced obstacles to becoming an artist arising from poverty and nationality. His father worked in a sugar factory. He was not Jewish, but he was not an ordinary Russian. He was Ukrainian, his first language was Polish, and he was also from the provinces, from the rural southern Ukraine. Malevich's artistic career also depended on strokes of luck and the friendship and patronage of more established artists. And yet, Malevich did not agree with Chagall that the provinces were a recruiting ground for an artistic elite.

In Chagall's view, the city could provide the provinces with the people — the artists and revolutionary painters — who would be able to identify and educate the rare provincial talent. Consequently, the biggest challenge he faced was "tempting" those people "from the city to the provinces." He complains: "But a half-starving official in the capital — why is it so hard to tempt him here [to Vitebsk] for cultural work?" Chagall admits "I do understand them..."²⁰ The three ellipses gesture towards a seemingly infinite list of reasons why no one, including Chagall, would want to live in his native town.

Malevich leaves nothing to ellipses. Although his diagnosis of provincial failings differs significantly from Chagall's, he is in agreement about the superiority of the city to the provinces. It was indeed difficult for Chagall to "tempt" Malevich to leave Moscow for Vitebsk. Being



Marc Chagall, 1971

Photograph by Carl Van Vechten

"half-starving" was not sufficient. It took Malevich's own partial paralysis, his wife's pregnancy in addition to a personal escort, El Lissitzky, to get Malevich to Vitebsk.

The journey itself exacerbated the distance between Moscow and Vitebsk. If the railroad shortened the vast Russian distances, the revolution lengthened them. A journey that had at one time taken less than a day took more than three. Malevich does not comment on the painful irony that he who had praised the railroad as the "contemporary genius" was compelled one year later to disembark at regular intervals in order to collect wood for the locomotive. He includes an overnight stay in Smolensk as one of the journey's hardships. It is no wonder that his first assessment of Vitebsk is "exile." Having heat, light and "every convenience" in his room is remarkable enough to warrant mention but not to stop him from complaining: "Everything here is smaller to the point of absurdity." He has to live and work in a single house. Vitebsk is not big enough for the long walks he habitually took in Moscow. Like exiles before and since, Malevich also believed that exile's material comforts were scant compensation for other deprivations.

On first arriving in Vitebsk, Malevich seems to have intended to be as unaffected as possible by his provincial surroundings. In his second letter, he writes with obvious satisfaction: "In my room you would think you were in Moscow. Absolutely nothing would remind you of the provincial backwoods." Outside his room, "when you go out in the street," this illusion is instantly shattered. By what? The problem with Vitebsk is Moscow. Malevich writes that "Everything [in Vitebsk] points to finding oneself far from the earth's axis. Everything visible inclines megaphone-shaped ears and aligns their bodies to the faintly heard voice of the center." This attentiveness, this recognition of the superiority of the center is exactly what Chagall recommends. Malevich does not. He both emphasizes the importance of the city — by calling it the "center" — and the absurdity of the provincials' attempt to adopt its culture. The center's voice is too faint for provincials to hear clearly. Even if they can hear it, they shouldn't listen. It is not meant for them. "[E]verything goes and flows like a stream into the vast sea so that it loses its individuality and mind...in the cauldron of the city's reason." The provincials risk losing what is uniquely theirs if they attempt to adopt city culture. City culture is reserved for city residents; provincials have to find something else.

From Malevich's point of view, Chagall, by bringing artists from the cities to the provinces, is merely pandering to a provincial weakness, their need to incline their megaphone-shaped ears (the image suggests that they should be actively speaking instead of listening). He makes it easier for them to hear a message that compromises their "individuality and mind." The provincial exile is entitled to city culture, the provincial native is not. Malevich's own plan was to use his time in Vitebsk to write, developing the ideas of Suprematism. In his first letter to Gershenzon from Vitebsk he expresses the hope that his essay "On New Systems in Art — Statics and Dynamics" will be published in Vitebsk. The provinces can at best provide the fodder for the center's culture. They have no cultural potential.

Russian borrowed the word provincial from French. Malevich and Chagall do not let "provincial" stand on its own. The French adjective often adds insult to the injury of the Russian noun. Chagall does not simply call Vitebsk a "hole" — it is a *provincial* hole. Malevich, like the unidentified art critic of the Vitebsk paper, does not simply call Vitebsk the "backwoods" — it is the *provincial* backwoods. The backwoods, Russian *glush*, can be a particularly disadvantageous location for cultural purposes.

Writing to Gershenzon, Malevich explains exactly what kind of provincial *glush* Vitebsk is: "a place where there is no echo, no sound, no rustle, no whisper." Malevich himself echoes the early nineteenth-century edition of the Dictionary of the Russian Academy. *Glush* is so remote that forests and fields are overgrown, and people are so isolated, "nothing is heard." Both the Russian Academy's dictionary and Malevich play on the etymological origin of *glush*, i.e., deafness. As agriculture or high culture, *glush* means an area inaccessible to human cultivation.²¹ The provinces, including Vitebsk, are out of earshot of the city's culture. If Malevich thought that the provinces were good for nothing more than publishing what he had to say, then how and why did he ever become involved enough in Vitebsk and its art school to challenge Chagall's program?

It was because Malevich thought that the provinces were good for nothing more than publishing what he had to say that he became involved enough in Vitebsk and its art school to challenge Chagall's trend. Malevich came to appreciate the cultural advantage of Vitebsk's supposed

silence. In the absence of its own echoes, sounds, and whispers, Vitebsk would have to listen to his voice. The megaphone-shaped ears that should not be straining to hear the faintly-heard voice of the center would have no trouble hearing him. All the contortionists angling to align themselves to the center could line up behind him. Vitebsk was a no place ideal for being transformed into the someplace of Malevich's essays. In January 1920, approximately two months after Malevich arrived in Vitebsk, Unovis (an acronym for Affirmers of The New Art) was founded. Vitebsk became the first of what was to have been many Suprematist utopias.

Unovis was the program that competed with Chagall's at the Vitebsk art college. The priorities of Unovis for the art college differed from Chagall's. Unovis had more to say about applied art than Chagall. Chagall listed applied art as the third of his three goals, important only for "workers and persons from the people." Rare prominent talents did not need to attend classes in sign painting. Unovis, in contrast, listed six types of applied art, and no other kind of art, on its "Working Schedule of the Council."²² The somewhat obscure relationship between Unovis theory and its application (how would the study of the "town and village as objects affecting the structure of an instant's velocity" or "[t]he square — its economical development," foster the ability to make "useful structures...textiles...furniture...books and other achievements in the field of printing")²³ should not obscure the fact that Unovis did apply theory to practical uses. Malevich himself designed textiles, tea cups, and women's clothing. In attempting to explain Suprematism and what he was trying to accomplish in Vitebsk, he boasted that he was creating a "utilitarian world." Chagall boasted about "prize-winning students."²⁴

The difference between the two directions lay in their contrasting perceptions of Vitebsk and its cultural potential. Chagall's cultural program would educate Vitebsk's "minority in art" to become citizens of a transnational cultural metropolis. Malevich's cultural program would transform Vitebsk itself into a utilitarian world. Efros and others praised Chagall for recognizing the talent of native Vitebskans, though only a few talented natives were worthy of his recognition. Malevich was indifferent to native Vitebskans whatever the quality of their talent, but he did hope to improve Vitebsk as a whole. Neither Chagall's metropolitan nor

Malevich's utilitarian Vitebsk was a Vitebsk the natives would recognize. Both city artists had fundamentally unflattering views of the provinces.

The insistence on ignoring surface appearances passed for enlightened in the 60s, and not just in Iowa. In 1967 when not only Iowans thought that it was nicer to peer underneath than to look at what was staring them in the face, the creators of the Levy's bread ad thought otherwise. Levy's Jewish Rye Bread, a brand introduced in 1949, launched a series of ads that showed a head-shot of a crudely stereotyped ethnic minority: the native American sported braids and a feather in his hair; the Chinese man, a conical straw hat; the African-American boy, a white shirt, bow tie, and a suit several sizes too small. The conspicuously non-Jewish minority eats a piece of "Jewish" rye bread. The copy reads: "You don't have to be Jewish to love Levy's Jewish Rye Bread." The sentence is divided into two phrases to emphasize the differences between the two stereotypes. "You don't have to be Jewish" is printed across the top of the page where the hair-style and/or hat emphasizes the non-Jewish ethnicity. "to love Levy's Jewish Rye Bread" is printed right beneath the smiling mouth eating the rye bread. Our recognition of the incongruity between the stereotypes, whether as laughter or outrage, is an admission that we recognize them, that we are not always looking underneath when we look at each other. Sometimes, we are not nice enough to see stereotypes.

Seeing stereotypes is worse than being a snob. Stereotypes are the stuff of prejudice, of racism, of vaudeville humor. What could be worse than that? In my experience the one thing worse than stereotypes is no stereotypes. But why take it from an Iowa Jew? Take it from other Ames, Iowans. The contest to provide an architectural landmark was supposed to make Ames a tourist attraction by giving it a "unique visual identity," a "visual symbol," a "branded image." This apparent desperation to have a visible identity led Cero.9 to call Ames anonymous. They questioned whether an image could provide a genuine identity. ("Is architecture capable of carrying out such a change of identity through an image?"). But the kind of identity those Ames, Iowans wanted was an identity that others could see, a desire that people who pose in their underwear should be able to understand. Being the same underneath, though nice, is not always enough. Stereotypes are another form of visibility. Stereotypes make us visible to one another. Stereotypes, flattering or not, are one way of seeing ourselves as others see us.

The Levy's ad never made its way onto any buses in Ames or into the pages of the *Ames Daily Tribune*. Even if it had, my fellow Ames, Iowans would have been able to see only half of it. The ad supplied the image of the non-Jewish stereotype, not the Jewish one. Ames, Iowans could not supply the Jewish one. Neither could I. In a town of 40,000, there was one other Jewish child my age. But the Katz kid was no help: he lived across town, he was a boy, and he hated me. The feeling was mutual. I was hopeful about the statistical tables at the back of a book from Sunday school (the Katz kid, two other boys and I met in one another's homes). I studied those tables obsessively until I lost faith in their accuracy. How was I to know that, judging from the numbers, my extended family had taken on most of the burden of alcoholism and divorce for the entire Jewish people? The less than religiously-required number of Jews from the Ames Jewish Congregation who held services every Friday night in the lounge of the First Baptist Church (their portable Holy Ark was stored in the back of a Baptist coat closet for the rest of the week) also seemed an unreliable guide to the stereotypical. I was as invisible to myself as I was to Ames, Iowans. What kind of a Jew could a good Christian kind of Iowa Jew be? The creators of the Levy's ad campaign knew.

Even in 1967 when nice people everywhere were trying to focus on the underneath, surfaces were never really ignored. In order for the underneath to pass as the same, surfaces nation-wide had been modified. Age has replaced ethnicity as the aspect of the surface that is supposed to be the least reliable indicator of the person underneath. Back then skin color not elasticity, noses not chins, and hair texture not color were most subject to chemical and surgical tampering. The Levy's advertisement also showed how adaptable we could be, no anesthetic required. In the world of Levy's rye, stereotypes are the stuff of transformation. When those non-Jews ate a slice of Levy's rye bread, one stereotype consumed another and neither would ever be the same. No wonder they were grinning. So was I. I saw myself in that stereotype-munching American Indian. If he could love Levy's rye, so could a good Christian type of Iowa Jew.

Malevich and Chagall gave us two ways of seeing the provinces as the city sees them: two geographic stereotypes. Looking at the provinces Chagall saw the talented few who would be able to contribute to

and appreciate city culture; Malevich saw a cultural blank slate on which to write his version of the perfect world. Stereotypes like these are the stuff of cultural cringe. An Iowa Jew does cringe. But Malevich and Chagall know better. They know that locations matter. The provinces also have a luster that those in the city remember to their pain. Back in Moscow, Malevich would have memories of a place where his voice could be heard. A utilitarian world needs a place of its own and Vitebsk not Moscow could be that place. Chagall needed both Vitebsk and Moscow. When Chagall's artistic eclecticism came under attack, he defended himself to Lunacharsky: "You don't like the West, Anatoly Vasilyevich. I don't like it either. But I *love* those artists from whom I can learn, whom I can admire..." Said like a true metropolitan, pledging his allegiance to the "rare prominent talents" wherever they might be found.

Cero.9 were Malevich-type utilitarians. When they looked from Madrid to Ames, they saw only a location for their magic mountain. Cero.9 are justly famous for their integration of nature with technology, but my favorite thing about their magic mountain was their choice of rose hybrid. Without a hybrid hardy enough to withstand an Iowa winter la Montana Magica de Ames would have been impossible. Griffith Buck, a horticulturist at Iowa State, the local university, had developed such a hybrid. Professor Buck did not warrant Cero.9's attention. The place not the people in it matters for utilitarians.

I am more metropolitan than utilitarian. I studied the austere technical precision of Cero.9's building plans for the magic mountain and the lush prose that supplemented it, looking for any additional mention of Professor Buck not Ames. I wanted to believe that the hybrid, Buck's Roses, had given Cero.9 the idea for their magic mountain. Professor Buck's younger daughter, Susan was one of the nicest third-graders at Abby Sawyer Elementary School: she welcomed the new gift from Manhattan, New York. Eleven years later her father employed me in his greenhouses which were as bright and tranquil as her home. Reluctance runs both ways.

Notes

¹Alexandra Shatskikh calculates late October or early November as the date of Malevich's arrival in Vitebsk: see Alexandra Shatskikh, "Chagall and Malevich in Vitebsk," in *Marc Chagall: The Russian Years 1906-1922*, ed. Christoph Vitale (Frankfurt: Schirn Kunsthalle Frankfurt, 1991), 64. Irina Vakar puts Malevich's arrival in October, Frederic Valabregue in November: see Irina Vakar, "Note," in *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism*, ed. Matthew Drutt (New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2003), 240; and Frederic Valabregue, *Kazimir Severinovitch Malevitch* (Marseille: Images En Manoeuvres Editions, 1994), 155.

²In Russia, as elsewhere, nationality is a contested and complicated term. The markers of nationality shift. In the 1897 All-Russian Census, nationality was defined as native language and religion. Location, however, becomes an increasingly important official marker for nationality under the Bolsheviks. In 1935, Stalin wrote that Jews are not a nation, because they share neither language nor location: see Francine Hirsch, *Empire of Nations: Ethnographic Knowledge and the Making of the Soviet Union* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2005), 43, 10.

³Cristina Díaz Moreno and Efrén García Grinda, "El Futuro ya no es Barbarella! The Future is not Barbarella," *El Croquis* 118 (2004), 115.

⁴Letter, Marc Chagall to Nadezhda Dobychina (March 3, 1918) in Benjamin and Barbara Harshav, *Marc Chagall and His Times: a Documentary Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 239.

⁵All letters from Kazimir Malevich to Mikhail Osipovich Gershenzon in T. N. Mikhienko and I.A. Vakar, *Malevich o sebe, Sovremenniki o Maleviche: pis'ma, dokumenty, vospominaniia, kritika, avtory-sostaviteli* (Moska: RA, 2004).

⁶William J. R. Curtis, "Territories of Investigation," *El Croquis* 118 (2004), 7.

⁷Cristina Díaz Moreno and Efrén García Grinda, *Ibid.*, 174.

⁸Grigori Kasovsky, "Chagall and the Jewish Art Programme," in Christopher Vitali, *Ibid.*, 55-57. John E. Bowlit, "From the Pale of Settlement to the Reconstruction of the Word," in Ruth Apter-Gabriel, ed. *Tradition and Revolution: The Jewish Renaissance in Russian Avant-Garde Art, 1912-1928* (Jerusalem: Israel Museum, 1987), 44-45, *Ibid.* Seth Wolitz, "The Jewish National Art Renaissance in Russia," in Apter-Gabriel, *Ibid.*, 25.

⁹Seth Wolitz, *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁰Abram Efros, "The Artists of Granovsky's Theater," qtd. in Harshav and Harshav, *Ibid.*, 288-289.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 289.

¹²*Ibid.*, 287.

¹³Marc Chagall to Pavel Davidovich Ettinger (April 2, 1920) in Harshav and Harshav, *Ibid.*, 274.

¹⁴Moreno and Grinda, *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁵Harshav and Harshav, *Ibid.*, 242.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 247.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 260.

¹⁹G. Grillin, "The Right to Solitude," *Vitebsky Listok*, December 1918, No. 1959, quoted in Harshav and Harshav, *Ibid.*, 258.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 261.

²¹McDonald, D. "Razmyshleniia o 'glushi': Provintsii, dvorianstvo i gosudarstvo v XVIII-m veke," ["Reflections on the 'sticks': provinciality, power and noble identity in eighteenth century"], *Russkii Sbornik*, vol. V, 2008, forthcoming.

²²K. Malevich, L. Lissitsky, V. Ermolaeva, I. Kogan, "Working Schedule of the Council," *UNOVIS Almanac No. 1*, Private collection, Moscow, and State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, Manuscript Section, Fond 76, Item 9, quoted in Larissa Zhadova, *Ibid.*, 317.

²³"For the Programme," *Ibid.*, 316.

²⁴Letter of Chagall to Ettinger (April 2, 1920), quoted in Harshav and Harshav, *Ibid.*, 274.