**SYNOPSIS**

In 1918, Russia’s fledgling revolutionary government appointed Marc Chagall Commissar of the Arts for the Province of Vitebsk. Having returned to his native town after four years in the heady cultural heart of Paris, Chagall founded the People’s Art School and invited distinguished colleagues to join his faculty. Among these was fellow visionary of the avant-garde, Kazimir Malevich, who soon established an artists’ collective known as the ‘Champions of the New Art’ – or Unovis.

Working with and for the young Soviet government, Malevich, alongside star pupils and colleagues such as El Lissitzky, injected new energy and creativity into Russian art’s current of modernity. Marking themselves with a black square pinned to their shirtsleeves, members of the collective set out to introduce Soviet society to the stripped, geometric designs and revolutionary ideals of Suprematism – ideals that would ultimately lead to rupture with Chagall. Against the backdrop of the Civil War, with shortages in everything imaginable, the school and collective managed to forge a new path for artistic education and collaboration, the influence of which was immediate and profoundly felt by art schools across the Soviet Union.

A hundred years on, this international conference returns to this vital, but little-known period that is often lost within the broader history of Russia’s avant-garde. It charts how distinguished artists, moving from major artistic centres to a small provincial town in present-day Belarus, created a revolutionary educational organisation and artistic movement with departments in cities throughout the Soviet Union. It will investigate how Soviet cultural policy was put into practice in a town far from the cultural hubs of Moscow and Petrograd, while exploring what exactly made this short-lived project so innovative and far-reaching. The fascinating, and at times fraught, interaction between three of the avant-garde’s most renowned artists – Chagall, Lissitzky and Malevich – is also at the heart of this discussion.

Organised by the Cambridge Courtauld Russian Art Centre (CCRAC) in collaboration with the Van Abbemuseum, Eindhoven, this conference aims to complement the major exhibition, *Chagall, Lissitzky, Malevich: Vitebsk 1918-1922,* which opens this spring in Paris’s Centre Pompidou (28 March – 23 July 2018). As the first exhibition to examine the artistic developments that took place in Vitebsk during the Russian Civil War, and with loans from over 25 museums and private collections in 12 countries, this is a truly landmark event. In dialogue with this important exhibition, an international line-up of avant-garde specialists from Russia, Belarus, Germany, France, Italy, the Netherlands, the UK and US will address vital new questions in five sessions at this one-and-a-half-day conference in Pembroke College, Cambridge.

**Supported by In Artibus Foundation and Pembroke College, Cambridge.**

**PANELS**

**Panel 1: *Bien étonnés de se trouver ensemble:* Chagall and Malevich in Vitebsk** It was Chagall who asked Lissitzky to invite Malevich to join the faculty of the People’s Art School. But soon after Malevich’s arrival, and having taken over the running of the school, it became clear that the two artists would never find common creative ground. Some say that Malevich chased Chagall out of his native town, while others maintain that Chagall was more interested in pursuing his individual artistic career than acting as a revolutionary Commissar of the Arts. This session explores a fascinating and complex clash of artistic personalities.

**Panel 2: Jewish cultural awakening and Soviet avant-garde universalism in Vitebsk** Although the People’s Art School was never conceived as a specifically Jewish educational institution, the majority of its pupils and a number of teachers were Jewish. After the revolution, Chagall – and Lissitzky especially – were involved in initiatives to give Jewish culture a new identity. The Suprematism preached by Malevich aimed at a universal cosmism and, therefore, did not engage with local cultures or folklore. Nevertheless, these contradictory currents were both present in the same institution, and even in one of its faculty members: El Lissitzky.

**Panel 3: The educational programme of the People’s Art School and Unovis** Chagall and Malevich differed greatly not only as artists, but also as educators. This session examines the organisation, curricula and budget of various departments in the People’s Art School and Unovis, considering both differences and similarities.

**Panel 4: The People’s Art School, Unovis and Narkompros cultural policy**One of Chagall’s first acts as Commissar was to establish the People’s Art School. Such schools were opened throughout the Soviet Union during the Civil War and offered the new revolutionary state a means of enlightening the people and spreading the ideals of a new society. This session looks at policy on art, propaganda and artistic education in 1919-1922, and its relation to artistic education in Vitebsk.

**Panel 5: The artistic revolution of Unovis**Upon his arrival in Vitebsk, Malevich established an art collective together with El Lissitzky and a number of pupils. This session addresses what made this collaboration so revolutionary, and why it garnered such a following in other cities.