Head-First Through the Hole in the Zero:

Malevich's Suprematism, Khlebnikov's Futurism, and the Development of a Deconstructive Aesthetic, 1908-1919

Abstract

Suprematism's attempt to move beyond representation in painting coincided with an attempt to move beyond Russian Futurist poetry and literature. I was an attempt to go 'beyond zero'. In making that move, however, Kasimir Malevich, creator of Suprematism, needed to develop from Russian Futurism—particularly that of Velimir Khlebnikov—working within the Russian avant-garde. Through his painterly reliance on the square, Malevich not only worked in concert with Futurists such as Khlebnikov, but ultimately elaborated on a literary theory bound by the constraints of language. In essence, Malevich's Suprematism could not get 'beyond zero' until Khlebnikov's Futurism got him there.

Inception

At birth, there is nothing: a mind devoid of representational imagery. But children grow. Imagery mounts. Kasimir Malevich's project throughout the majority of his artistic life was to re-find that original purity. 'I have transformed myself in the zero of form', wrote the artist in 1915, 'and through zero have reached creation, that is, suprematism, the new painterly realism—nonobjective creation'.[1] Malevich's transformation—his ideological development—depended on contact with the Russian avant-garde and, specifically, the Russian Futurist poets of the early twentieth century. That dependence demonstrated the benefit of interdisciplinary collusion. 'I think that first of all art is that not everyone can understand a thing in depths', wrote Malevich in 1913, 'this is left only to the black sheep of time'.[2] Through his consistent painterly reliance on

[1] Malevich, 1915, pp. 128–33.

[2] Malevich, 1913, p. 203.

the square, Malevich not only worked in concert with the Futurist poets, but ultimately elaborated on a literary theory bound by the constraints of language.

The Russian avant-garde community congealed into a recognizable entity between 1907 and 1908, and the distinct presence of Futurism emerged approximately two years later, including the poets Velimir Khlebnikov and Alexei Kruchenykh, as well as Vladimir Mayakovsky, Olga Rozanova, and the brothers David, Nikolai, and Vladimir Burliuk, among others.[3] Rozanova, a painter, enunciated a common theme of the Futurist aesthetic in 1913, declaring, 'The artist of the Past, riveted to Nature, forgot about the picture as an important phenomenon, and as a result, it became merely a pale reminder of what he saw'.[4] A general collaborative effort existed within the Russian avant-garde, with writers such as Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh co-publishing volumes with illustrations by painters such as Malevich and Rozanova, each publication replete with debates and discussions on the nature of art. As of 1913, Malevich maintained a close relationship with David Burliuk, Kruchenykh, and Khlebnikov. The poets insisted on the self-sufficiency of language, on the hindrance of the representational relationships of words.[5] Malevich and Khlebnikov in particular, along with the linguist Roman Jakobson, colluded in such a way as to make each artist's work dependent upon the other, driving a collective artistic conscience that had the same principles at base.[6]

Malevich was part of this communal atmosphere, but began to envision his project as distinct from the Russian artistic community by 1912.[7] Wassily Kandinsky originally initiated

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[3] Fauchereau, 1992, pp. 9–10, 14.

[4] Rozanova, 1913, p. 105.

[5] Crone and Moos, 1991, pp. 3, 7–8, 66, 72–73.

[6] Douglas, 1975, p. 358.

[7] Douglas, 1994, p. 15.

the push toward nonobjectivity in 1910, followed by Mikhail Larionov's Rayonism, both of which eventually led to the utilitarian Constructivism of Vladimir Tatlin and Suprematism of Malevich in 1915. But Malevich saw no formal relationship with earlier work. 'Suprematism originated neither from Cubism nor from Futurism', wrote Malevich, 'neither from the West nor from the East. For non-objectivity could not originate from something else; the single significant question is whether something is cognized or not'.[8] As concern with cognition led to total nonobjectivity, however, Malevich's advancement from the Futurist poetic aesthetic remained unacknowledged but vitally present.[9]

Community

Khlebnikov's Futurism developed largely away from the artistic community, in his study of physics, math, and linguistics.[10] 'A story is made of words', he wrote in 1922, the year of his death, 'the way a building is made of construction units. Equivalent words, like minute building blocks, serve as the construction units of a story'.[11] The Japanese defeat of the Russians in 1905 further piqued his interest in historicism and what he would later term 'the laws of time'.[12] Most of the Russian avant-garde community then followed Khlebnikov's lead. His works, and those of other Futurists and Cubo-Futurists, appeared in pamphlets of eclectic design, often illustrated by

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[8] Kovtun, 1991, p. 104.

[9] Crone, 1978, p. 39.

[10] Khlebnikov's given name was Victor Vladimirovich, and he referred to himself as Velimir throughout the majority of his life. Khlebnikov, 1985, pp. 1, 4.

[11] Khlebnikov, 1989, p. 331.

[12] Khlebnikov, 1987, pp. 3, 6–7.

Malevich and other avant-garde artists.[13] *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*, produced in 1912 by Burliuk, Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov, and Mayakovsky, became the first Russian Futurist manifesto.[14] The Futurists often self-published through mimeograph, hectograph, lithograph, and handwriting.[15] Though the books were frail, their sheer volume and frequency made them integral to the continuing evolution of avant-garde art and theory. Through theoretical polemics and poetic elaborations on reigning linguistic ideas, Russian Futurist writers influenced all aspects of the avant-garde community.[16]

But that community did not exist in a vacuum. The Russians and French gained exposure to one another at the Paris 'Golden Fleece' exhibition in 1908.[17] Larionov and Goncharova actually traveled extensively in the West to witness the development of movements such as Fauvism and Cubism, eventually settling in Paris in 1914.[18] Malevich, too, incorporated the European advancements in painting between 1909 and 1912, but assimilated them differently from most. The poor state of his finances kept him in Russia, unable to attend European shows until later in life, so his knowledge developed from a more solitary interpretation of secondary sources.[19] The 1910 Russian 'Jack of Diamonds' exhibition, organized by Larionov and Goncharova, marked Malevich's first defined inclusion within the avant-garde. The 1912 'Donkey's Tail' exhibition was the first comprised solely of Russian avant-garde artists.

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[13] Compton, 1974, p. 190.

[14] Compton, 1978, pp. 16, 18.

[15] Kruchenykh, 2001, pp. 7, 13–14.

[16] Roman, 1980, pp. 102–4.

[17] Hornik, 1980, pp. 70–71, 73.

[18] Larionov and Goncharova, 1913, p. 88.

[19] Douglas, 1975, p. 267.

Throughout this period, the group, fed by their success, created work that grew steadily more abstract.[20]

Theoretical progression, however, bred division. The rivalry between Malevich and Tatlin began in earnest in 1914. Larionov and Goncharova abandoned the new abstraction the previous year. Larionov did not see any connection between his work and that of the later Futurists, adding to the back-and-forth drama that comprised the Russian artistic community.[21] In July 1913, 'The First All-Russian Congress of Poets of the Future (The Poet Futurists)' joined Kruchenych, Matiushin, and Malevich (the absence of Khlebnikov was due to his misplacement of his transportation money).[22] The report issued by the Congress declared the group's aim, 'To destroy the antiquated movement of thought according to the laws of causality, the toothless common sense, the "symmetrical logic" wandering about in the blue shadows of Symbolism'. Kruchenykch signed the document as 'Chairman', Malevich as 'Secretary'. In October 1913, Malevich attended the 'First Evening of the Creators of Language in Russia' with the Futurist poets and designed the advertising poster for the event.[23] The year witnessed Malevich illustrate five of Kruchenykh and Khlebnikov's books, including the cover design for *The Three*, a September Kruchenykh work that included 'The New Ways of the Word', which described *zaum*, or 'transrational', language.[24] His correspondence was also prolific in 1913. In a letter to the composer Matiushin, Malevich wrote, 'We rejected reason because we conceived of something else, which, to compare it to what we have rejected, can be called "beyond reason",

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[20] Barron, 1980, p. 14.

[21] Douglas, 1978, p. 113.

[22] Zhadova, 1982, p. 35.

[23] Compton, 1974, p. 190.

[24] Compton, 1976, p. 577.

which also has law, construction, and sense'.[25] This quest to somehow transcend the bounds of logic, combined with the continued interdisciplinary dependence of the Russian avant-garde, led to the group's principal project of 1913, the transrational opera *Victory Over the Sun*.[26]

Malevich, Kruchenykh, Khlebnikov, and Matiushin presented the production in December 1913 at Luna Park Theatre in St. Petersburg. Malevich designed the sets and costumes for the piece—heavily saturated with images of the square—while Kruchenykh wrote the libretto, Matiushin composed the score, and Khlebnikov contributed an introduction.[27] The opera only appeared for two performances, alternating nightly with Vladimir Mayakovsky's play, *Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy*.[28] In the first of two acts, a group of people attempts successfully to capture the sun in a concrete house, the sun representing traditional logical reality and past representation.[29] (In 1914, the following year, Matiushin would refer to "the sun of cheap appearances" that the opera essentially vanquished.) The second act follows the sun's victorious captors, depicting an otherworldly 'tenth country' as the group's new utopian residence. 'You become like a clean mirror or a fish reservoir', declared one of the sun's captors, 'where in a clear grotto carefree golden fish wag their tails like thankful turks'.[30] The final scene of the production featured a large black and white square backdropping the stage, and Malevich later claimed the opera to be the genesis of Suprematism.[31]

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[25] Henderson, 1978, p. 183.

[26] Douglas, 1974, pp. 45–47.

[27] Milner, 1996, p. 98.

[28] Terras, 1983, p. 57.

[29] Douglas, 1974, pp. 45, 47–48.

[30] Douglas, 1980, p. 63.

[31] Woroszylski, 1970, pp. 76–77.

But Suprematist paintings did not appear until December 1915 at '0.10, The Last Futurist Exhibition'. Malevich displayed thirty-nine canvases covering two perpendicular walls, including his 'royal infant', his 1915 masterpiece, *Black Square*, featuring a large black square set against an empty white field. 'Here is a device that creates havoc tirelessly', wrote Malevich the following year. 'Most important, NOTHING creates havoc'.[32] Malevich's belief in his arrival beyond zero—his creative 'nothing'—mirrored that of his nine fellow exhibitors at '0.10', hence the exhibition's name. The intent of the show was to mark the end of Futurist experimentation. Instead, it bred both Malevich's Suprematism and Tatlin's Constructivism.[33] This change to 'Suprematism'—the abandonment of the Futurist label—angered Malevich's fellow '0.10' contributors, but it was a planned change.[34] Malevich discussed his plan with Matiushin throughout the course of the year, illustrating his obsession with the idea of 'zero'. 'In view of the fact that we intend to set everything back to zero, we made up our minds to call [a potential publication] *Zero*, while we ourselves will go beyond zero'.[35] Khlebnikov too remained obsessed with zero, declaring in a 1913 fictional piece, 'The World In Reverse', 'I sacrificed myself. I jumped head-first through the hole in the zero'.[36]

The following year, 1916, the Tsarist government drafted both Khlebnikov and Malevich for military service, only Khlebnikov actually serving in combat. Khlebnikov's poetry upon his return was bleak.[37] Malevich's worldview, however, remained relatively optimistic, though he

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[32] Marcadé, 1980, p. 21.

[33] Marcadé, 1980, p. 22.

[34] Kovtun, 1991, pp. 105–6.

[35] Douglas, 1980, p. 34.

[36] Khlebnikov, 1985, p. 75.

[37] Khlebnikov, 1985, pp. 4–5.

only actually painted in the Suprematist style for five years.[38] The *White on White* series of paintings originally displayed in January 1919 essentially left Malevich at 'zero', the pure form of his desire, leaving philosophical writing (in the artist's mind) as the only non-representative method of theoretical demonstration. 'I have only the icon of our times (the canvas), bare and frameless (like a pocket), and the struggle with it is difficult', wrote Malevich in 1916.[39] Both Malevich and Khlebnikov experienced that difficulty, and both remained theoretically dependent upon one another.[40] In 1913, Malevich's painting, *Arithmetic—the Science of Numbers*, featuring a centered number 7, and Khlebnikov's 'Conversation between Two Persons', which asked, 'Is not "seven" (sem) the truncated word for "family" (semya)?' demonstrated that the collusion between the two artists was as overt in presentation as it was in theory.[41]

Influence

Malevich favored postimpressionism as early as 1909, as did most at the turn of the century, before moving briefly to Symbolism, soon derided by the artist and his contemporaries as a manipulation of consciousness.[42] He found a more lasting influence in the work of Cézanne, who distanced his primary characters from the rest of the painting by swift brushstrokes, a technique later adopted by the Cubists.[43] Describing the Cubists in 1924, Malevich wrote, 'They performed a more complicated surgical procedure on nature and reproduced the cubic content in

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[38] Fauchereau, 1992, p. 26.

[39] Lowestoft, 1977, pp. 5–6.

[40] Birringer, 1983, p. 137.

[41] Crone, 1978, p. 39.

[42] Birnholz, 1977, pp. 10–11.

[43] Betz, 1978, pp. 34–35.

painting in nature'.[44] The Russian avant-garde blended this Western modernist influence with a reversion to early iconography, leading to Neo-primitivism, which demonstrated a peasant influence and utilized lack of scale and simplicity of colour to emphasize the Slavic cultural past.[45] By mimicking the simplicity of primitive art, the avant-garde continued its reduction of images to geometric shapes.[46] Larionov and Goncharova emerged as the leading proponents of Neo-primitive art, and were also the first to move beyond it.[47]

'Rayonism', Larionov declared in 1911 (his work requiring a statement of theoretical purpose, as Malevich's work would continue to generate), 'deals with the spatial forms which may arise from the intersection of rays of light in various objects and which are selected at will by the artist'.[48] Suprematism, then, after its Cubist and Futurist predecessors, followed Rayonism as the next grand attempt to depict painterly space.[49] Of course, Cubism and Futurism made strange bedfellows. Cubism altered the form of objects to enhance the quality of paintings. Futurism attempted the destruction of all art forms as then known.[50] The avant-garde, however, was willing to combine techniques to reach its broader ends.[51]

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[44] Malevich, 1924, p. 204.

[45] Davies, 1973, p. 81.

[46] Markov, 1968, pp. 35–36.

[47] Bowlt, 1974, pp. 133–34, 138.

[48] Zhadova, 1982, pp. 29, 31–33.

[49] The Russian Futurists and Cubo-Futurists clearly rejected Italian Futurism, though both the Unanamists and the French Symbolist Rene Ghil provided further Western influence. Russian and Italian Futurists were entirely different entities. Khlebnikov even referred to the Russian artists as "Futurians," so as to distinguish them from Filippo Marinetti and the Italian Futurists. Crone and Moos, 1991, pp. 70, 77, 89–91.

[50] Kozloff, 1973, pp. 11–12.

[51] Betz, 1978, p. 32.

These influences were parallel to influences outside the artistic realm. Khlebnikov continuously experimented with mathematical equations as explanations of historical time—a perspectival aberration loosely based on Hegel's thesis and antithesis, but incorporating linguistics, algebra, and elementary psychology in an attempt to find global historical patterns.[52] Suprematism, too, added synthesis to the antithesis of world and man, object and mind. It mirrored (and perhaps borrowed from) Hegel's 'Philosophy of Fine Art'. Malevich maintained a Platonic skepticism concerning the representational ability of visual phenomena.[53] 'Everything which we call nature', he wrote in 1926, 'in the last analysis, is a figment of the imagination, having no relation whatever to reality'.[54] Appearance was an illusion. True being was non-figurative, so non-representative painting was necessary for the presentation of the truths hidden by common objectivity. 'Form is a condition', wrote Malevich. 'In Reality form does not exist'.[55]

Malevich believed that objects existed infinitely and that continued representation and re-representation of those objects was a self-sustaining and ultimately unhelpful exercise. As remedy, Malevich encouraged the development of an understood wisdom, intuition, or intuitive will in place of a painterly vision that sought the accurate depiction of objects.[56] 'The forms of suprematism are already proof of the construction of forms from nothing', wrote Malevich, 'discovered by Intuitive Reason'.[57] This was the intuition of Henri Bergson. In *The Creative*

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[52] Khlebnikov, 1985, pp. 5–6.

[53] Baljeu, 1965, pp. 106–7.

[54] Malevich, 1959, p. 20.

[55] Marcadé, 1978, pp. 226, 230, 234.

[56] Douglas, 1991, p. 58.

[57] Malevich, 1968, p. 33.

Mind, Bergson stated, 'I call it intuition. It represents the attention that the mind gives to itself, over and above, while it is fixed upon matter, its object. This supplementary attention can be methodically cultivated and developed'.[58]

Khlebnikov, Malevich, and the other Russian avant-garde artists additionally took their cue from the new physics. The growth of popular science in the early twentieth century led to a generally understood holistic view of nature.[59] As conceptions of time and space became malleable, art became a link between man and his changing environment. Cultural historian James H. Billington termed this mindset, 'Promethianism: the belief that man—when fully aware of his true powers—is capable of totally transforming the world in which he lives'.[60] The artists blended a nineteenth-century notion of a 'fourth dimension' as spatial elevation, a higher geometrical plane, with the early twentieth-century notion, following Einstein's popular General Theory of Relativity, of space as the 'fourth dimension'.[61] Mystical philosopher P.D. Ouspensky popularized the convergence of the two seemingly disparate ideas amongst the avant-garde, positing the coming of a new era of four-dimensional human being and understanding.[62] Futurist and Suprematist ideals also borrowed from *New Principles of Geometry*, by Nikolai Lobachevsky, a late nineteenth-century work of abstract non-Euclidean geometry that argued against the traditional conception of a three-dimensional universe, stating, 'Lines straight or curved, planes and curved surfaces do not exist in nature; we encounter only bodies, so that all

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[58] Bergson, 1946, p. 92.

[59] Hornik, 1980, p. 71.

[60] Billington, 1966, p. 478.

[61] Henderson, 1978, pp. 172–74, 179, 185.

[62] Ouspensky, 1991. See also Ouspensky, 2002.

the rest, created by our imagination, exist only in theory'.[63] Malevich's declaration that, 'represented volumes, planes and lines exist only on the pictorial surface, but not in reality', clearly reveals Lobachevsky's influence.[64] But while Malevich read Lobachevsky and supported various 'fourth dimension' theories to a point, he later found them limiting to his approach.[65] Five of the thirty-nine original Suprematist works exhibited at '0.10' contained the phrase 'Fourth Dimension' in the title, but Malevich's interest in geometry, mathematics, and Futurism in 1913 and 1914 was part of a more supernatural interest in finding a way beyond the traditional three-dimensional world.[66]

Khlebnikov, like Malevich, originally associated with the Symbolists before moving to the Cubo-Futurist avant-garde and similarly emphasized the holism of nature. His poetry used common themes, swift pacing, and an emphasis on words as arbiters-of-sound-only, making much of it virtually nonsensical. He tried to destroy traditional syntax and vocabulary, relying instead on inferred sound and a series of linguistic and etymological chains to produce poetic meaning.[67] Neologisms allowed Khlebnikov to deform words—to 'free' them from objectivity. He used syncopation (transferred accent) effectively, while manipulating even the visual appearance and structural relationship of words.[68] He argued that as there is meaning behind the

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[63] Henderson, 1978, pp. 183–84. See also Lobachevsky, 1987.

[64] Crone, 1978, p. 46.

[65] Douglas, 1975, p. 358.

[66] Malevich's "Fourth Dimension" paintings at "0.10" included *Painterly Realism of a Football Player—Colour Masses in the Fourth Dimension*, *Automobile and Lady—Colour Masses in the Fourth Dimension*, *Movement of Painterly Masses in the Fourth Dimension*, etc. Milner, 1996, p. 114.

[67] Khlebnikov, 1985, pp. 1–2, 5.

[68] Markov, 1960, pp. 363.

words chosen in everyday life, so too is there meaning behind the sounds of those words. Khlebnikov inevitably termed these inventions 'discoveries'.[69]

He considered sound to be both definer and creator of verbal intent. Sounds were constituent aspects of a universal language, each linked by the attendant consonant's relationship with particular colours.[70] The preeminence of sound dominates Khlebnikov's writing, such as in these lines from a poem published in the Futurist book, *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste*, in December 1912: 'Bo-be-o-bee sang the mouth/Ve-e-o-mee sang the orbs/Pee-e-e-o sang the brows'.[71] Khlebnikov's words, like Malevich's canvases, eliminated reference to reality. Both poet and painter were obsessed with semiotic autonomy and transcendence of objective reality.[72] The Futurist conception of *zaum* would facilitate that transcendence and provide the theoretical base for Malevich's paintings.[73]

Zaum was an experimental language without literal meaning. It offered groups of letters more than clearly defined words, an attempt at deconstructive transcendence Malevich would adopt for Suprematism.[74] '*Zaum* language', wrote Alexei Kruchenykh in 1916, 'extends a hand to *zaum* painting'. The poetic theory of *zaum* hinged on the 'self-spun word', which related to its object through intuition rather than historical understanding or representative cognition. Sounds

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[69] Barooshian, 1968, p. 160.

[70] Birnholz, 1977, p. 102.

[71] Crone and Moos, 1991, pp. 83, 87, 89, 91, 124.

[72] Simmons, 1978, p. 158.

[73] Barooshian, 1968, pp. 160, 163.

[74] Stapanian, 1985, pp. 19, 24.

gave the essence of objects more accurately than society's word.[75] Khlebnikov's 1916 short story 'Ka' stated, 'He taught that there are words for seeing—eye words—and words for making—hand words'.[76] A child, for example, playing make-believe and supposing the living room couch to be a castle, in Khlebnikov and Kruchenykh's linguistic paradigm, is correct in doing so, because in the child's contingent reference, the couch *is* a castle. In his essay 'New Ways of the Word', Kruchenykh declared, 'A new content is only revealed when new devices of expression are attained…once there is a new form there is consequently a new content…form causes content'.[77]

The *zaum* aesthetic, though abstract, wanted a new realism. 'The word is broader than its meaning', wrote Kruchenykh. 'Each letter, each sound has its relevance…Why not repudiate meaning and write with word-ideas that are freely created'?[78] It aided the Futurist idea that understanding occurred outside consciousness in a realm beyond the representative world.[79] Malevich often referred to his work during 1912 and 1913 as '*zaum* realism'.[80] In *zaum*, a verbal construction's syntax produced its meaning, creating a self-sufficient realism for words not based on any tangible object referent.[81] Suprematist painting offered the same self-sufficient meaning for line, form, and colour. In his essay 'On Poetry', Malevich wrote, 'The avalanche of formless,

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[75] Kruchenykh defined three word categories: *zaum*, emphasizing mysticism, texture, and harmony; rational words, with the illogical as categorical opposites; and alogical and accidental words and constructions. Cassedy, 1988, pp. 129–30.

[76] Khlebnikov, 1985, p. 86.

[77] Kruchenykh, 2001, p. 15.

[78] Stapanian, 1985, p. 18.

[79] Mayakovsky, 1975, p. 18.

[80] Simmons, 1981, p. 71.

[81] Simmons, 1978, p. 161.

coloured masses retrieves those forms which had awoken it'.[82] Russian Futurism and Suprematism, through lack of representation, served as unifiers by allowing everything into the system.

Development

Black Square, for example, is representative of nothing, making it, for Malevich, the 'zero', the beginning point of painting, demonstrating only that someone with paint has attended the canvas.[83] Khlebnikov referred to *Black Square* as 'the Face of Time'.[84] Suprematism was not formalistic, but within its scope Malevich clearly sought an establishment of universality. 'Space is bigger than heaven', he wrote in 1916.[85] A creation is only truly a creation when it borrows nothing from the outside world, and true creations, rather than representations, can best elicit true meaning and emotion.[86] 'One can speak of creation only where form does not imitate nature', wrote Malevich, 'but instead emanates from the pictorial masses, without repeating or modifying the primordial forms of natural objects'.[87] Of course, Malevich's Suprematism was not completely nonobjective. Its existence as form necessarily denoted a referent. That referent simply remained obscured, as with *zaum*—the conglomeration of letters presented itself as a word, so must have been a signifier for something.[88] He portrayed *Black Square* as sensation (the

[82] Malevich, 1968, p. 74.

[83] Lowestoft, 1977, p. 21.

[84] Hornik, 1980, p. 73.

[85] Malevich, 1915, p. 19.

[86] Donnell, 1964, p. 241.

[87] Malevich, 1915, p. 19.

[88] Dabrowski, 1980, p. 29.

black square) in infinity (the surrounding field of white).[89] 'Through zero I have reached creativity', Malevich declared in 1915, 'that is Suprematism, the new painterly realism—nonobjective creativity'.[90] The square was the base from which all new form could proceed, the painterly cycling to zero. 'I have transformed myself into the zero of form and dragged myself out of Academic Art's whirlpool of trash', wrote Malevich. *Black Square*, at its most fundamental, means nothing—'It simply exists'.[91]

Malevich interpreted the square as a manifestation of perfection, as did Plato, and a method of surpassing the limits posed by the written word. *White on White*, originally exhibited in 1919, was intended as an act of purification—the culmination of his explorations beyond zero. *White on White* presents a white square at roughly a forty-five degree angle at the upper-right of a white canvas, which measures 31.25 inches on each side with an inconsistently textured surface. Art historian Aaron Scharf referred to *White on White* as a 'final emancipation' and 'the ultimate statement of suprematist consciousness', and in its facilitation of open interpretation, the *White on White* square does serve as a metaphorical window.[92] 'The square = feeling, the white field = the void beyond this feeling', wrote Malevich in 1926.[93] By reducing the objective world to zero, in the Suprematist conception, the artist aided the viewer in achieving the blank slate necessary for understanding. Malevich acknowledged, however, Suprematism's dependence on individual creation, thereby limiting its ability to exist as some sort of absolute. It emphasized

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[89] Carney, 1991, p. 17.

[90] Malevich, 1915, p. 19.

[91] Crone and Moos, 1991, p. 5.

[92] Birnholz, 1977, pp. 9–10, 12–14.

[93] Malevich, 1959, p. 76.

brushstrokes, texture, and the painting and painter themselves.[94] There wasn't anything else there. It made the painting itself the reason for painting.

After his *White on White* series in 1919, Malevich virtually abandoned painting in favor of pedagogy and theory, eventually teaching in the Belarusian city of Vitebsk, along with Kiev and Petrograd, changing cities and assignments as the Soviet government continued to waver in its acceptance of the modern principals of abstraction.[95] In pieces such as 'On New Systems in Art', written in the early 1920s, Malevich described the necessity of contingent signifiers to facilitate a linear evolution of proper cognition,[96] but his principal text, *The Non-Objective World*, written between 1923 and 1926, offered a broader interpretation of the Suprematist aesthetic, responding to, and modeling itself after, Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. Malevich's book posited a unified, constant state of being unburdened by a mind-body duality, which he considered a human creation. It offered unconscious intuition as a means of achieving the objectless world, as Schopenhauer offered will as a means of achieving enhanced perception.[97]

Culmination

Khlebnikov died of a blood infection in 1922 at the age of thirty-six, and Russian Futurism, as a recognizable entity, ended eight years later in 1930.[98] Khlebnikov's later work

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[94] Douglas, 1975, pp. 271, 277, 280.

[95] Bowlt, 1978, p. 257.

[96] Malevich 1968, pp. 83–117.

[97] *The Non-Objective World* also translates as *The World as Ojectlessness* or *The World as Non-Objectivity*, further demonstrating the text's close relationship to Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. Malevich, 1959, pp. 11–12, 14, 62–65, 67–68, 84, 88, 98, 100. See also Schopenhauer, 1966.

[98] Barooshian, 1968, pp. 157, 166.

became surprisingly optimistic compared to his younger, healthier output, but his 1920s linguistic experimentation fell largely on deaf ears due to the growing influence of Socialist Realism. The epitaph on his tombstone read, 'President of the Terrestrial Sphere'.[99] Malevich died on 15 May 1935 and received the state funeral that Khlebnikov did not.[100] 'I saw myself in space', he wrote in 1917, strikingly similar to statements made by his poetic counterpart, 'hidden in dots and bands of colour; there among them I sank into the abyss. This summer I declared myself the chairman of space'. A car with a black square between its headlamps carried his body to the train station.[101]

El Lissitzky asserted that *White on White* was the culmination of the painterly experience, thus leaving architecture as the next logical step, the next thing that needed to be cycled down.[102] Indeed, Malevich's elaboration on and separation from Russian Futurist ideals demonstrated the square to be the fundamental arbiter of nonobjectivity. It demonstrated representation to be a hindrance to full cognition. He certainly agreed with Olga Rozanova, who wrote in 1913, 'There is nothing more awful in the World than repetition, uniformity. Uniformity is the apotheosis of banality'.[103] Malevich harnessed the theoretical tools of Russian Futurism throughout the second decade of the twentieth century to combat that banality of uniformity. In 1914, five years prior to *White on White*, Vasily Gnedov presented his 'Poem of the End', the pinnacle of Futurist poetic openness, consisting of the title followed by a blank page. When performed, the poem featured

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[99] Markov, 1960, p. 351.

[100] Douglas, 1989, p. 176.

[101] Karasik, 1991, pp. 192–94.

[102] Lowestoft, 1977, p. 27.

[103] Rozanova, 1913, p. 109.

Gnedov moving his hand back and forth, standing otherwise perfectly still.[104] As Suprematism developed, Malevich, too, moved his hand back and forth across canvasses he believed to be windows, arriving *zaum*-like at *White on White* and the 'purity' he had desired all along.

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[104] Compton, 1976, p. 585.

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