

Na  
sombra  
do  
quadro  
Negro

# Na Sombra do Quadrado Negro

**COLÉGIO DAS ARTES  
UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA**

**•  
ARTE E PRÁTICA  
CONCEPTUAL**

13

**THE ADVENTURES  
OF THE  
BLACK SQUARE**

25

**ПРИКЛЮЧЕНИЯ  
«ЧЕРНОГО КВАДРАТА»**

IRINA KARASIK

---

39

**MALEVICH –  
THE SUN ON THE ROCKS**

PEDRO CABRAL SANTO

---

55

**MALEVICH,  
QUADRADO NEGRO**

LUÍS QUINTAIS

---

61

**QUADRADO  
ALONGADO-ECRÃ  
NEGRO  
Para uma profecia  
cinematográfica**

ANA RITO

---

77

HOW FLAT  
IS DARKNESS?

ANTÓNIO OLAIO

---

87

MALEVICH —  
“NO ESPESSO SUBSOLO  
DA CONSCIÊNCIA  
DO ESPAÇO”

CARLOS VIDAL

---

99

MALEVICH:  
COMO PINTAR  
A GOLPES  
DE MARTELO

PAULO PIRES DO VALE

---

111

KVADRAT

BERNARDO PINTO  
DE ALMEIDA

---

133

A BLACK SQUARE  
ON WHITE SNOW

PEDRO POUSADA

---

153

DURAÇÃO

DELFIN SARDÓ

---

169

UM CORPO NUNCA  
ESTÁ PERANTE  
UM QUADRADO NEGRO

LUÍS ANTÓNIO UMBELINO

---

175

WORLDVIEW  
AS A CONSTRUCTIVIST  
ACT

BRUNO GIL

---

# A BLACK SQUARE ON WHITE SNOW

PEDRO POUSADA

---

*“(The square is) as broad and as high as a man standing with outstretched arms, since the times of earliest writings and in the earliest stone engravings the square has stood for the idea of the enclosure, of the house, of the village. (...) According to an ancient Chinese saying, infinity is a square without corners. ☺”*

BRUNO MUNARI

*“I just think that part of his (Malevich’s) power, as master and practitioner was that he believed he had been granted the supreme experience of Nothing, and was good at convincing others that he had. ☺”*

T. J. CLARK

This essay will concern Kasimir Malevich’s “Black Square” (Черный квадрат/Tcherni Kvadrat) and its historical aftermath. I am fully aware of the increasing demography of scholars both in the western and in the russian spectrum. Like many others avant-gardists and paraphrasing Peter Osborne in a different context, Malevich “breeds commentary like vaccine in a lab. ☺”

That is why I want you to bear with me some personal recollections before we enter decisively into this endless phenomena.

In the 1977 movie “Annie Hall”, there is a scene where Woody Allen’s character stands with his girlfriend in a movie theatre line. Things are souring between the two lovers so W. Allen’s impatience is growing wild. And to put things worse his thinking is being

annoyingly distracted by someone behind him talking profusely about Fellini and Becket. W. Allen finally loses his temper as the “expert” enters the realm of Marshall McLuhan’s communication theory. Woody Allen turns to the audience in a technical inversion where we become subjects of his attention and are brought into the stage and so does the surprised academic asking for our empathy. As they exchange harsh opinions and the anonymous character ranks his academic status and claims being a teacher of McLuhan’s theory at Columbia University, W. Allen pulls a stunt. He brings, behind a movie poster, Mr. McLuhan himself, who, like a last minute witness, bulldozed the Columbia University expert. “Boy, if life was only like this...” W. Allen concludes.

I first recalled this episode back in 2002, while writing my Master thesis which focused on specific artworks of a living portuguese artist. I felt pressured by the risk one takes when writing about living persons and their artwork. They might do a sudden appearance and tell us how wrong and ill informed we are; and what might seem as a coherent assessment becomes a crumbling house of cards. This can be a source of anxiety and doubt. This awkwardness was confirmed, later on, while reading the published conversation between Benjamin Buchloh, the eminent scholar, and Constant Nieuwenhuis, the creator of the urban utopia, New Babylon, that occurred at the symposia “The activist drawing: retracing situationist architectures from New Babylon to beyond” (30th October 1999) ©. There is a moment when Constant grumbles in dissent as Buchloh makes a claim about Constant’s intentions and references. Another one of these misunderstandings, can be perceived in the conversation between Dan Graham and Sabine Breitwieser in the MoMA’s oral history transcripts as he upsets some of the assumptions about his generation, (Judd, Flavin, Lewitt, Bochner, Smithson, and al.) being forwarded by his interviewer.

I can now grasp why some of my art history teachers claimed that they could only adress events that distanced at least one hundred years from them. It is not just about evading the pressure of real time experiences unfolding from different and uncontrollable viewpoints. What is also implied is that this space-time of ghosts and “bigger than life” dead people is, in many ways, a comfort zone available for corrections and revisionism without the throwback of living artists or unexpected witnesses denying all that is being said and written.

---

① Bruno Munari, *Design as Art*. London: Penguin Books, pp.191-195.

---

② Timothy J. Clark, *Farewell to an idea-Episodes from the history of Modernism*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, (1999), 2001. Footnote 85, p.433.

---

③ Peter Osborne, *philosophizing beyond Philosophy: Walter Benjamin Reviewed*. *Radical Philosophy* 88, March-April 1998, pp.28-37. P. Osborne is in fact referring to Walter Benjamin omnipresence in every essay on art, cinema, photography and al. See also, Alex Coles, Introduction. In Alex Coles (Ed.) *the Optic of Walter Benjamin, de-,dis-, ex-*, Vol.3. London: Black Dog Publishing, 1999, p.8.

---

④ On this subject see Catherine de Zegher and Mark Wigley (Eds.). *The activist drawing: retracing situationist architectures from New Babylon to beyond*, New York: Drawing Center, 2001.

Still there is little danger of having Malevich demote my approach of his work unless he is brought back from the dead by the Monthly Python’s Flying Circus for a cycling tour around London’s highways...I think Malevich would enjoy the anarchic humour of this 1970’s TV circus considering his cooperation in 1918 with Mayakovsky on the making of the political and histrionic theater show *Mysteria-Buff* which was displayed in a circus tent before the delegates of the Third International (The Comintern).

So the armchair general’s platitude seems an unavoidable risk. This is a “modernist painting” © that has become a classic. This is a prototype that has, through posterity, become a paradigm. Its good fortune is overwhelming. From his contemporaries, allies and detractors, to contemporary scholars such as Andrei Nakov, who recently corrected Malevich birth date from 1878 to 1879, Selim Khan-Magomedov, Rosalind Krauss, Christina Lodder, T.J. Clark, Jean-Claude Marcadé...the list goes on and on. This abundance does give a sense of replay, of an anaphoric inability to approach in new and different terms Malevich’s “opus magnum”.

Any art school undergraduate knows (or at least should know) the basics about the “Black Square”; that it was originally created in 1913 and used as a decoration for a stage curtain of a modernist opera; that it would be displayed, two years later, as a pictorial surface in a pioneering exhibition of the russian avant-garde, the famous 0.10 group show in Petrograd. But that is the shortcut story, which is good for museum captions but I am more interested in the grey zone of its “pathos” and “ethos”.

In the debates organized by Jean-Claude Marcadé and that ensued the 1978 Georges Pompidou’s exhibition “Malevich 1878–1978” one of the participants, René Levy noted something uncanny about the first depiction of the square in the “Victory over the Sun” opera: “It was originally a man whose body had the form of a black square: this kind of reminds the humanisation of a pictorial form.” A liminal creature, half human, half abstraction is syntomatic of the Square’s potential as it evades categorisations and simplifications both in the poetic and in the aesthetic realm. It also runs against anthropomorphism by divesting itself of any recognizable features. This theatrical character mentioned by René Levy, was, like Kafka’s insect, a morphing process with unexpected consequences that come

---

⑤ I should note however that this “modernist painting” I am referring to is not the conscripted, “Elliotic Trotskyist” version of modernist painting given to us by Clement Greenberg, but the otherness of a more inclusive, heterodox, less normative, and less anglo-american embedded definition of modernism. Modernism before it turned into a narrative voiced and debated exclusively from a north atlantic perspective. From Alfred Barr visit to USSR and Moscow in particular between 1927-1928 henceforth this was the case. Barr was not interested in depicting soviet-avantgarde as a political and ideological agency where art practice was migrating to a social radical practice. He was looking for the epitome of artistic autonomy in the transition turmoil of NEP politics into the 1st Five Year Plan in Soviet Russia. On Barr’s visit see Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *From Faktura to Factography, October*, Vol. 30 (Autumn, 1984), pp. 82-119.

to light when one reads Malevich in his 1916 version of the Suprematist Manifesto: “I have transformed myself in the *zero of form* (...) ⊙.”

The modernist exploit of rebirth where Promethean change happens through a traumatic experience is not unseen if one reminds Marinetti’s description of his own metamorphic becoming as a futurist ⊙. Originality doesn’t come from Malevich positioning himself as a ground zero. Being interested in a new depleted start with a self imposed rejection of the past and a rejection of art, specifically painting, as a “mnemotechnic of the beautiful ⊕” is nothing unusual in any modernist’s call for arms. The big bang is placed elsewhere: in the history of canvas painting there is nothing that we can connect with that black square as well as with the suprematist room, nothing that we can find and juxtapose to Malevich’s self-referential painting experience. It is a painting that in the moment it was born had no past, it was deprived of traces of a previous history (later on this essay we will find some curiously awkward connections but none whatsoever in the field of western painting). Nothing in the world of artistic imagery could anticipate this flatness, this objectless planar materiality. No founding fathers, no pioneers, no ancestors to build a genealogy. Suprematism is Malevich’s Frankenstein but this new pictorial body does not unfold from the dead parts of the history of painting, it is the morphing of “pure feeling in creative art”, of transcendent nothingness into image.

The Square’s conjunction of barbarism (the “European negative” as Manfredo Tafuri ⊙ described modernism; the avantgarde artist as the new Caliban, reinventing the anarchic nature of artistic autonomy through the enforcement of an anti-bourgeois and socially inhibited behaviour), spontaneity (imagination freed, decentered from the constraints of european cultural constructs) and “conscious construction”(what Asger Jorn ⊙⊙ would later in the XXth century convey as a feature of cubism and architectural functionalism, a quest for structure, an essentialism in art that recoils from christian platonism; in his explanantion of the GINKhUK’s ⊙⊙ working details, Malevich would focus how artistic research of form and expression was something similar to a biologist studying bacteria) breaks decisively the duality

---

③ Kasimir Malevich in Alex Danchev (Ed.), *100 Artist’s Manifestos From the Futurists to the Stuckists*, London: Penguin Books, 2011, p.106.

---

⑦ See Alex Danchev (Ed.), *Op.Cit.*, p.4.

---

③ Charles Baudelaire in “Le Salon de 1846”. Apud Hal Foster, *Design and Crime* (and other diatribes), London: Verso, 2002, p.67.

---

② Tafuri’s definition of Piranesi’s speculative spatial “montages”, his *Carceri*, *Cammini and Campo Marzio* engravings, as an “utopia of dissolved form” could be expanded to Malevich’s suprematism endeavor. One can perceive that enigmatic icon as a XXth century outcome of that utopia. On the “European Negative” see Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth-Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970’s*. Chapter 6. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1990, p.171.

---

①① Carmen Popescu, *L’art libérant l’architecture de la tyrannie de l’espace* ». *Autour de quelques textes d’Asger Jorn*, p.11, *In Situ* [En ligne], 32 | 2017, mis en ligne le 05 septembre 2017, consulté le 05 septembre 2017. URL: <http://insitu.revues.org/14733> ; DOI : 10.4000/insitu.14733.

---

content/container. The Square is a place where the philosopher, the poet and the polytechnician become one.

An interesting part of Anna C. Chave’s monographic study on Mark Rothko explores some philosophical and pictorial “kinship” between Malevich’s and Rothko’s square paintings. This is a “kinship”, Anna Chave warns us, that is problematic considering the difference of scales each of the painters worked with, and despite Rothko’s “neo romantic” materialism and “tragic worldview” and Malevich supposed mystic embedded utopia. Still she insists on this neighborhood by focusing on the fact that “(...) the square may be seen as a form so elemental and adaptable as to be capable of standing for a complement of non-specific meanings. The choice of a square or rectangle to represent spiritual feeling may have been based also, however, on the conceit (held by Mondrian as well) that the square is an oppositional form, representing a unity of opposites - of horizontal and vertical forces- and that, as a formal unity, it could stand in turn for spiritual unity. ⊕⊕”

The “Black Square” is a space where immanence and transcendence seem to dwell and confine each other. We can in fact claim that the painting’s meaning is only related to its pictorial and visual “ethos” (an enclosed process where origin and end become one: “pure feeling” or as said later on by Frank Stella “what you see is what you see”) but at the same time we can perceive that its meaning exists beyond the pictorial experience, that it is a semantic cosmos existing alone, detached from the square (which is in fact the affirmation of detachment), and this separateness from the material, compositional and symbolic qualities of the painting is possible exactly because this “formal unity” (the square, that has no original creator) is an exercise on austerity, a body that only offers an escape, a transcendental escape through its “soul” which is no longer placed inside the limits and presence of the square but in what we call interpetation, the semantic travel that frees the content from the container and puts this one before the latter.

Malevich’s redating and antedating some of his works, his effort to create the myth of a full blown pictorial breakthrough, has also turned the “archeology” of the “Black Square” into a site of exploit for many “treasure hunters”, (some more successful than others), to seek and explore its hidden facts, to deepen what it meant, how the material and conceptual conditions of its production evolved, how its reception unfolded, who saw it, when, who wrote about it, who despised it, who couldn’t understand it, who ignored it, etc. An apparently incomprehensible hot and cold square that became an

---

①① The GINKhUK was the Leningrad branch of the INKhUK (State Institute of Artistic Culture) and existed between 1923-1926.

---

---

①② Anna C. Chave, *Mark Rothko, Subjects in Abstraction*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989, p.191.

---

open source “software” playfully explored, enchanted, disenchanted as an hermeneutical device.

Vasily Rakitin describes Malevich as “a flying Munchhausen” cornered between a borderline emotional inspiration with strong doses of polemicism and a call for mystification. A strong example of this adulterating of the real timeline of his art practice, as Rakitin points, are his efforts to reinvent the birthplace of Suprematism moving it from its official and well documented event, the 0.10 exhibition in 1915, to an earlier date, 1913, closer to all the other stuff going on in European avant-garde, from futurist painting to late cubism, thus limelighting him as genius and a prophet anticipating and overcoming the academization of these two major pictorial movements.

My writing and reasoning will, thus, link with authors that have studied and problematized this icon: how it came about, how it lived ever after by mutating into many other things and many other thoughts sometimes pretty far away from Malevich’s convictions; and how its radicalism is displayed as an historical artifact.

Even the term “icon”, as Troels Andersen ①③ noted, was seldom used by Malevich who preferred the word “obraz” that has a more expanded semantic scope meaning both the “orthodox icon and the image”. Jean-Claude Marcadé ①④ also recalls the lack of religious convictions of Malevich, originally of Catholic descent from his Polish parents, which didn’t mean he wasn’t interested in the esoteric and the mystic as providers of artistic experiences on totality.

Still, Malevich did use the term when answering back to Alexandr Benua, a pre-revolution art critic and a nemesis of the Russian avant-garde, that had levelled Malevich’s 0.10 participation and his Square in particular as an absolute “zero”. Benua saw blasphemy in the display of the Square in the “holy place”. He claimed that “without a doubt, this is the “icon” which the Futurists propose as a replacement for the Madonnas and shameless Venuses, it is that “dominion” of forms over nature. ①⑤” Jane Sharp observes how Malevich’s reply had more of a “*cri de foi*” than his manifesto, *From Cubism to Suprematism* published for the 0.10 exhibition:

“I have only a single bare and frameless icon of our times (like a pocket), and it is difficult to struggle. But my happiness in not being like you, will give me the strength to go further and further into the empty wilderness. For it is only there that transformation can take place. And I think you are mistaken in reproaching me that my

philosophy will blow away millions of lives. Are you not all like a fire blocking and preventing movement? ①⑥”

Definitely the “Black Square” was and is still, a roller-coaster of many and different interpretations: an excessively detrimental negative space forcing us whether to hesitate or agree even in dissent, as it is my case, whom for long, since my art student years, have loved this image without being in love with it. The irony or opportunity behind this aftermath is that a non-observed visual phenomena ①⑦, an empowered pictorial surface built against narration and illusion, has become through the historical process an intensely observed visual phenomena which is still collapsing catastrophically, like a supernova, against the derelict yet proven experience of art history. We can position it as a visual deception or a “sum of all possibilities” that happens through denial.

An echo of Oedipus’s brutal self-imposed blindness. Victor Stoichita calls this nullification “the zenith of the mimesis” killing “the mimesis ①⑧”. Malevich was no longer in dialogue with the Cezannes’s, Picasso’s and Matisse’s of the Chtchoukine and the Morozov Collections nor was he flirting his algorithm with the methodological cubism of Gleizes and Metzinger. Nature as a pictorial power and painting as its “conveyor belt” were gone.

The square could be also addressed as a mention to Plato’s cave allegory considering that neo-platonism (and neo-Kantian transcendentalism) was well embedded among Russian culture and experiencing a revival within artists and poets in the early XXth century as Jean Clair explains in his essay “Malevich, Ouspensky et l’espace néo-platonicien”: “the past and its art are assimilated to the image of a “cave”, of a “grotto”, a “tunnel”, a “catacomb”. ①⑨”

A blur travelling from entropy to the sublime, from irreversible eternity to biblical morning: the horrific promising darkness in Genesis where God has not yet prompted his big bang “*fiat lux!*” So, something of a fertile beginning. And a wiki reminder: in Russia the black soils, the “Chernozem”, are highly productive agricultural lands covering geographically the Euro-Asian region meaning that the black color has a productive organic face value that builded Malevich’s anthropological understanding of color, considering his youth, travelling through Ukrainian fields with his father, a sugar merchant.

---

①③ Malevich apud Jane A. Sharp, *Op.Cit.*, pp.116-117.

①⑦ In Malevich’s painting there is little to be perceived besides opposing monochromes, Hyppolite Taine, in 1865-1882, and later on Maurice Denis, in 1890, definitions of painting come to mind: in short, beyond the embedded subjects, a painting is basically “a surface covered with colors according to a specific order”.

---

①⑧ Victor Stoichita, *Short History of the Shadow*, London: Reaktion Books, 1999, p.189.

---

①⑨ Jean Clair, *Malévitch, Ouspensky et l’espace néo-platonicien*. In Pontus Hulthen, Jean-Claude Marcadé (Ed), *Op.Cit.*, p.15.

---

①③ Pontus Hulthen, Jean-Claude Marcadé (Ed.), *Malévitch 1878-1978, Actes du colloque international tenu au C.G.P.-MNAM, 4-5 Mai 1978, Paris*, p.114.

---

①④ Pontus Hulthen, Jean-Claude Marcadé (Ed), *Op. Cit.*, p.114.

---

①⑤ Alexandr Benua apud Jane A. Sharp, *The critical reception of the 0.10 exhibition: Malevich and Benua*. In Wim Beeren (Ed.), *The Great Utopia*, Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1992, p.116.



We further understand its semantic implications if we read Michel Pastoreau's, "Noir: histoire d'une couleur", particularly the point where he reminds us of the Aristotelian symbology of colors. We see that next to red that stands for fire, green for water, white for air, the black stands for earth. And this conceptualization is deeply locked in the mediterranean and middle east traditon. Was Malevich so detached from the understanding of black as humus?

Malevich termed his icon an "embryo" @@ and in 1922 soviet artist and Unovis fellow traveler, El Lissitzky, positioned it as the zero in a continuous line of art experiences that through this event advanced from the negative (impressionism, cubism, futurism and al) into the future.

But contradiction is always on the look out and that's what makes this image so enticing and concise at the same time. So if one reads Aleksandra Shatskikh essay, "Malevich, Curator of Malevich" we realise that the version placed at the "red corner" in the suprematist room at the 0.10 exhibiiton was in fact pasted over a "coloured Suprematist composition"; its blue, red, yellow forms appear through the black screen with the craquelure @@, so the new born is a fake ex-nihilo, having a previous past in its surface dephts.

This early "turning out the lights" with all of Malevich's impulsiveness and vaulting ambitions is a genuinely creative move, a crossing of the red sea, migrating irreversibly (at least in Malevich's expectations) the act of painting, the act of producing pictorial images, from the millenarian focus of representation -what it means and how good painting, expressiveness, gesture hides its materiality in what it replaces, in what brings to form- into the extensive, endless, labyrinthic "cul-de-sac" of self-referentiality- how it means by only being its materiality, how structural order, essentialism, becomes poetical content.

The painting can be termed as a treaty on the boundaries of opacity and estrangement. A beginning and also an end; the demise of a state of grace since the painted surface, any painting with the ambitions of transcendence and being trans-historical, would no longer be designed to metaphorize historical and symbolic events or to replace or host ghosts (living or dead, static or kinetic). Something of a funeral is happening here: the recurrent demanding visibility of the symbolic body, whether the sovereign, the church, the state or the profane, have been put off screen. The rule of the image has become image's syntax itself. Malevich's challenge can be hailed as an embargo on both the hermeneutical and the metaphysical ambitions of figurative painting. It doesn't identify and it doesn't tell.

---

**20**

Apud Victor Stoichita, *Short History of the shadow*. London: Reaktion Books, 1999, p.188.

---

**21**

Aleksandr Shatskikh, *Malevich, Curator of Malevich*. In Evgenia Petrova (Ed.), *The Russian Avant-garde: Representation and Interpetation, Almanac*, Vol.n.3. Saint Petersburg: Palace Editions, State Russian Museum, 2001, p. 149.

A move that would be latter excelled and reproblem- atized by Ad Reinhardt's cruciform black paintings. In 1963, New York art critic, Harold Rosenberg remarked that "(Barnett)Newman shut the door, Rothko drew the shade and Reinhardt turned out the light." Well, long before them, Malevich was already trying to find the switchboard to turn off the sun... In this promethean effort he encapsulates the "ethos" of two of his contemporaries: Nicholas Tesla's pioneering inventiveness and Thomas Edison's political sense of opportunity and monopolistic ambitions. The first interested with prototypes and the second with popularization and ownership. Both qualities superimpose on Malevich.

And its monochromatic status validates other approach- es: its soft and swift blackness (now wrinkled by years of misuse) has in one of its versions @@, the 1929, according to expert evidence, a small phrase handwritten by Malevich. A caption relat- ed to Alphonse Allais's 1897 monochrome "combat de négres..." @@; this unexpected appearance downgraded for some, in our post-colonial (yet heavily neocolonial) era, the myth of grandeur and transcendence that the misterious materialistic Square unfolded: the future of art, some claim, had a bigot pole position.

Despite the evidence of a hidden message (somewhat "deleted" by the saturated black), and since black people were probably rare to be seen in Petrograd even in the post-revolutionary years it is too anachronistic and far-fetched to imagine that Malevich had developed any kind of prejudice against african people or against emigrants coming from Western Europe colonies. What one should bear in mind is that "the myth of originality" might well be in place here, considering that Malevich was full of himself and worried about protecting his pictorial breakthrough from curious copicat eyes. Produced in great secrecy as testified by Ivan Puny who failed to see what Malevich was doing for the Petrograd exhibition, the 1915 Square is an impulsive yet decisive "screenshot" of the 1913 theatrical curtain, one that was made by superimposing the new black and white composition on an original suprematist painting as explained earlier. Eventually, and here I speculate, Malevich became aware of Allais' XIXth century monochrome, a "blague", and recognized some deferred similarity with his own proposal. So the 1929 reenactment is a more deductive and judicious experiment that tries to answer back to this unexpected challenge to Malevich's strong belief of having produced an ex-nihilo onthological gesture. Both a quotation (how does one quote a black monochrome unless by using its title as a reference?) and a symbolic

---

**22**

The 1929, one of Tretyakov's two versions of the Square. There are four versions, two are, has stated, at Tretyakov's gallery, one at the Russian museum and a recent one was donated to the Hermitage museum.

---

**23**

One of this obscure french artist contributions to Jules Levy's *movement des arts incohérents*.

exorcism, a struggle to discharge his pictorial ideas from the toxic implications of a cartoonish outdated graphic monochrome. It bears witness to a “King Midas touch” (Malevich’s touch) where a mundane foolishness becomes a turning point on the history of painting. True art would not play the fool just for the sake of a laugh but instead would bring forward a critical consciousness capable of unbalancing and disturbing the tectonic plaques of pictorial imagery. This caption could be his “et in Arcadia ego”, a reminder of the mortal dangers of historicism and simpletons readings.

Another story disagreeing with Malevich’s hidden comment, is Vasily Rakitin’s. He tells us how while in Vitebsk, during the Russian civil war, Malevich used to give to his Unovis students an interesting and poetic explanation about the origins of the Black Square. He explained that his early inspiration could be found in one of the narratives of Russian XIXth and early XXth century painting, specifically the one involving Vasily Surikov’s 1887 painting “Lady Morozova”. Surikov found by accident the solution for the colour problems that his composition was facing, as he looked through a window, in a snowy morning, “and was surprised with the contrast between the fresh, blindingly white snow and the black satchel on the back of a student on his way to a grammar school. 1887” Malevich was impressed by this non canonical and non studio related intuition, and pinpointed the pictorial issues solved by the painter through a binary contrast: the heavy black suit of Morozova, as she is being escorted in shackles on a sledge to her imprisonment, gains a more powerful stand through the strong bright presence of the snow. And what was produced to create likelihood turns out to show that abstraction precedes and saves analogy from excess of visual elements or lack of an optical unity. The “black raven on white snow”, Surikov’s tale was thus hailed, by Malevich himself, as the primal source to accomplish his pictorial detachment from the fractured window of cubism...

But beyond the conundrum of racist/non racist interpretations of the blended “footnote”, the enhanced, saturated blackness of the “Square”, could also be associated with the Egyptian underworld. A subject of interest for Malevich if we remember how he infused his Aviator (1914) in its upper right side with the word “Ka”, the Egyptian definition of the soul. Let us speculate: the “Black Square” may appear as an image of hollowness; the emptied body of art, protected from the decaying past through the removal of all mimetic signifiers. The

---

**24**  
Surikov could be described as a Russian version of Alma Tadema, holding a realistic expertise in depicting dramatic historical episodes. Unlike the Belgian painter interested in the decadent features of the Roman Empire, he focused on the Russian XVIIth century; his major compositions are colorized to bring in a snowy, muddy atmosphere, where eternity and mortality play hide and seek.

---

**25**  
Vasily Rakitin, Artisan and Prophet, Tatlin and Malevich- Notes on two artists’ biographies. In Wim Beeren (Ed.), *The Great Utopia*, Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1992, p.104.

soul of art can now, freed from its organic metabolic condition, return safely back to the pictorial plane. I must admit that this reading is purely hypothetical and may lack clear cut proof and is clinched (as bizarre as it may look) to a catalyst that comes from a different conceptualization of abstract painting. In this reasoning I was under the influence (if that is the correct term) of Ad Reinhardt’s famous 1946 cartoon where an infant powerless generic “Art” is saved from being run down by the uncontrollable locomotive of “banality” and of other “forces of evil”, by a young heroic “Abstract Art” that jumps to the railway track and pulls “Art” away. In this hypothesis the black square appears as a redeemer, an epic action where the “presence/absence” dialectics gives way to an experience and a cognition of the absolute that is entailed through negation and depletion.

If Khlebnikov and Kamiensky were both fascinated with Asian and Persian cultures and Eisenstein would become interested in Japanese culture and language, why can’t we speculate about this remote Egyptian connection of the “Black Square”? Khlebnikov for instance, wrote in 1915 a prose poem titled “Ka”, “the soul’s shadow, its double.”

It also makes sense if we consider that Malevich’s grave, designed by one of his friends, Nikolai Suetin, was a cubic form heralded by this foundational “icon”. A protector and catalyst of the true value and significance of art in modernity (according to Malevich’s expectations) would become a protector of his resting place both as a Memento mori and a message to an unknown future where Suprematists shepherd (now I am deliriously pulling again Poussin’s painting “Et in Arcadia Ego” into the equation...) or “comrade aviators” would reflect upon the endless struggle of idealization, mortality, imagination and memory, i.e., the struggle between art and culture.

An interesting point to add: the “Black Square” original inception was in a theater curtain and this is a scenic ceremonial surface that prepares the beholder for an immersive experience: something is going to happen beyond that surface and as light goes down and the curtain unfolds, fiction imposes itself dramatically as reality. It is a vertical space holding duration as a potency. Through its opening and recoiling an haptic world based on the suspension of disbelief comes forward. But the sense of promise and expectation, of disclosure and artificial action, that

---

**26**  
Eisenstein described the small town of Vitebsk, where Malevich was based during the Russian Civil War, as a suprematist city transformed by the hands of Malevich and his Unovis students.

---

**27**  
Velimir Khlebnikov, *Ka*. In *Collected works of Velimir Khlebnikov- Prose, Plays and Supersagas*, vol 11, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1989, p.56.

---

**28**  
“I have breached the blue lampshade of color limitations and have passed into the white beyond: follow me, comrade aviators, sail into the depths-I have established semaphores of suprematism. I have conquered the lining of the colored sky...Sail on! The white free depths, eternity is before you.” – Kasimir Malevich, *Suprematism*. In John E. Bowlt (Ed.), *Russian Art of the Avant-garde: Theory and criticism, 1902-1934* New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988, p.145.

relates to the separateness that curtains provide is an important part of the experience of painting particularly when its access was based on a private sphere of mediation (in many cases the experience of seeing a painting involved unveiling and revealing it, since it was a social experience not always available to all and in many cases it was privately done); but a curtain was also a device to explore, within the figurative composition, a sense of intimacy, of hermetism, of double meanings, and hidden agendas.

The myth of Parrhasius's curtain misleading Zeuxis is strongly attached to this dialectic. Visual nullification (the curtain) and the expectation of intense realistic visuality (the *trompe l'oeil*) converge. And this is the point I want to reach: Malevich was not painting a curtain to envelop and disclose reality but to envelop and close all connection to the reality of previous paintings. The gesture of superimposing the Black Square in a previous suprematist painting has something of this function of veiling.

I must address also a spatial and historical point: my endurance, both speculative and attentive to historiographical findings and difficulties, is, particularly, motivated by an old black and white photograph that depicts the exhibition room where this exceptional, egotistical, creative artist "curated" his exclusive and imposing artistic and philosophical proposal: Suprematism. Though I am a cultural construct of a technicolor world I empathize with the amateurish appearance of this black and white "cliché". There is a domestic atmosphere strangely preserved in the binary colouring. A sense of oldness and loss. Today, when googling "suprematist room" one finds this picture dangerously close to decorative experiences in ultra modern living rooms but the value of the room depiction doesn't relate to the "clean drawn (...) good design" of a contemporary style deprived of human presence. Malevich's room though strongly attached to a yet non-existent world has the rhetorical and performative qualities of an individual shouting out loud. And despite the grey scale imaginary that the surviving photograph produced, Malevich's installation was far from being a chromophobic atmosphere. Entering the room might have felt like immersing into a field of forces that happened to be translated into colours, geometry and also into the affirmative action of his propagandistic "logos" scattered in a flyer and some slogans and pinned in the wall in between the paintings. No doubt, as stated earlier, this was a unique experience: the exhibition walls had become an ideological device, words filling the gaps, playing the part of the verbal mediator and codifier of those unexpected, unusual and silent compositions. We are clearly looking into one of the first endeavors of conceptual art. And all this is even more bizarre as it is displayed in a

residential apartment turned into an Art Bureau by Ivan Puny and his wife Ksenia Boguslavsakaya. The chair, the skirting board and the ceiling decorations that can be seen in the photograph lend a sense of homeliness to the exhibition space. One almost imagines these paintings replacing family photographs of the dead and the living, scattered between engravings, oil landscapes and portraits. All the "now" of bourgeois intimacy, (a "now" that is gone forever, of a past that was alive and lost its momentum in tradition and memorabilia), becomes an environment where the tragic (the funeral of painting, namely, painting as an imposing correction of the rawness of nature) and the gratifying (the birth or rebirth of art as a supernatural reality where humans face the post-human) come together.

Malevich brought to the show 39 paintings. From these, only 21 are available in the surviving depiction. It was a major contribution which downsized the visual and theoretical offer of the remaining participants. Tatlin's corner counter-reliefs included. The surviving photographs of Tatlin's sculptural constructs, though major breakthroughs of the realm of artistic creativeness into the real of technical and social modernization (nonmimetic sculpture bringing to the forefront the "tropos" of modern material culture: kinetic tension, transparency, suspension and anti-gravity, the extreme testing of glass, wood and metal properties) don't have the same ideological and agonistic strength. In fact, Tatlin disliked the all over the walls suprematists paintings and was adamant in his critic of Malevich's participation on the 0.10 show. His assessment was that it was amateur painting and nothing more, and this made Tatlin post at the entrance of his own room the words "Exhibition of Professional Painters" @.@. So the suprematist room, with its "stylistic unity" was not only perceived by its contemporaries as a pioneering shock and awe pictorial attitude. It was also fingered as a "maladroit" painting manner lacking seriousness and method. The Russian avant-garde was divided. The photograph with all its mystery and auratic strength has also to be contextualized as the portfolio of a radical positioning within a radical group. A radical monologue between Malevich and himself.

This monologue reminds me that there isn't a contemporary lyrical response to the pictorial blindness of the monochrome,



**Kasimir Malevich's Suprematist Room in the 0.10 Exhibition, Petrograd, 1915.**

---

⊗⊗  
Linda S. Boersma, 0.10-The last futurist Exhibition of Painting. Rotterdam: 0.10 Publishers, p. 41-45.

nor a prayer or a wacry inspired by this icon. All the modern Virgils brewing in Moscow and Petrograd, Khlebnikov, Mandelstam, Mayakovsky, Iessienin, and many others, deeply active in changing the construction of poetic meaning, dismantling the semantic mimicry of experience (real and fictionalized) could have brought this “mute poem”, this futuristic nostalgia, into the realm of words and sounds. But they didn’t. Too bad Khlebnikov, particularly him, with his time travel sincretic imagination, didn’t attend the show. His “Zaum” transrational poetics, his talent to deal with “eyewords” (“words that you can see with”, scopic words) and “handwords” (“words you can do with”, building words) would surely bring out the semaphoric harmonies, colour dissonances and geometrical dynamism of the installation. A transrational “ekphrasis” would be the right written emulation of the barbarism, the kinetics, the conflicting flow of primary colors and the opened “pandora box” of secularized symbols, as Rosalind Krauss once observed ☹☹, that lived in that supreme room.

Though R. Krauss is refering in her 1979 essay to the cruciform structure embedded in so many modernist abstractions, the Black Square can be included in this reasoning. Like Pandora’s box, the Square unfolds a sequence of enduring “chain reactions”. An ante-diluvian landscape, a sense of wanted doom, precedes it: the cubist visual and optical revolution created a new and irreversible momentum in figurative painting; cubism’s explosive emulsion of form into an endless intersection of the object with itself, is a coming of age for modern western painting as much as perspective and spatial illusionism had become in high renaissance; futurists, as they travelled in 1910 to Paris to find new solutions for their “et pictura poiesis”, would explore and enhance the technical lesson of Picasso and Braque’s pictorial decomposition of the figure/ground relationship and turn it into a fragmented depiction of bodies and machines dissolving into surfaces of movement: visual poetry would be found not in the inbetween space of opposed objects but in the transmutation of the solid, dense world of form into the flowing and unperceived world of duration; modernist painting had found a way (not necessarily the exclusive one) to turn the experience of image making and object visualization into a time process. But all these events were about solving the problem of representation in the century of techno kinetics and social-political kinetics. Cinema and social revolution were clearly two cognitive and aesthetical paths where fixed representation had become insufficient if not almost obsolete. But Malevich’s painting goes beyond that conundrum. It closes a door but a revolving one, meaning it opens new perspectives

☹☹

Rosalind Krauss, *Grids, October, Vol.9 (summer 1979)*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, p.52.

in the development of the pictorial device where there is no longer a monologue between the object and its embodiement as a multiple nor a revisitation of nature’s presence.

It is, instead, about an eternal present whose unfulfilled past of relapsing memories, still has the power of a high tide bringing us delay and indeterminacy: we look at a square but our gaze does not see nor contents itself with the evidence of a square enclosed by its limits. There must be something else, probably something that is only in our heads as it was originally and secretly in Malevich’s head but something that like a deluge kills any common sense, any affection for the picturesque, and revokes all vapid and obedient reading of what art is all about. Devoured by hesitation, exasperated as one may be, (after all the square is, visually speaking, a very poor image, a depleted escape from pictorial expertise, an aesthetical deprivation), one can still find, as in the chinese saying, infinity collapsing the limits of our beliefs. Discomfort is the middle name of this square.

There is in Khlebnikov’s prose poem, “Ka” (1915) which I mentioned earlier, a moment where he accidentally steps into the realm of the Black Square: He is talking about gaming, specifically gaming with the universal will and his words seem adequate for a provisional conclusion: “(...) you could even take a damp sponge and wipe the constellations from the sky, like yesterday’s lesson from a blackboard in school. ☹☹”

☹☹

Velimir Khlebnikov, *Op.Cit.*, p.60.

**Pedro Pousada**

DARQ-FCTUC, COLÉGIO DAS ARTES, CES.  
UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA

**Pedro Pousada (Lisboa, 1970), é artista visual e Professor Auxiliar da Universidade de Coimbra desempenhando funções docentes no Departamento de Arquitetura da FCTUC e no Colégio das Artes de que é subdiretor e onde desenvolve funções de coordenação do Doutoramento em Arte Contemporânea desde 2012. A sua atividade científica tem estado sobretudo ligada às relações entre modernidade artística e cultura arquitetónica no séc. XX tendo publicado a sua investigação em diversas revistas académicas. Foi membro da direção do CAPC (2012-2015) e é colaborador da mesma instituição cultural na área da produção ensaística sobre Arte Contemporânea. Mail: pedro-pousada@netcabo.pt**

**Pedro Pousada (Lisbon, 1970) is a visual artist and also an Assistant Professor at the University of Coimbra. He teaches in the Architecture Department of the FCTUC and at the Colégio das Artes (College of the Arts) where he is deputy director and one of the coordinators since 2012 of the Contemporary Art PHD. He is a researcher at CES (Centre for Social Studies) and his scientific activity has been mainly focused in the relations between artistic modernity and architectural culture in the xxth century. He has published in several scientific journals. He was a member of CAPC (2012–2015) and collaborates with the same art institution as a writer of Contemporary Art subjects. Email adress: pedro-pousada@netcabo.pt**