

Na
sombra
do
quadro
Negro

Na Sombra do Quadrado Negro

**COLÉGIO DAS ARTES
UNIVERSIDADE DE COIMBRA**

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HOW FLAT IS DARKNESS?

ANTÓNIO OLAIO



Is Malevich's "Black Square" black? Is it really a square? Was it really meant to be a square?

If we think of it not as being black but, instead, as an attempt to represent the darkest shade of dark, maybe we can go somewhere else, our mind going forward and backwards at the same time. Forward, as we might feel we're in the process of finding a new meaning for it, at least to ourselves. Or backwards, if we feel we are in the process of finding out what it was meant to be, or even what it turned out to be, just after it was made and beyond that, having it reached somewhere in time a stable state, or having reached a transitory state before becoming something else.

If we believed in the alchemic virtues of our mind, we might even think we would be able to interfere in what that “Black Square” might become... Just by thinking about it. In a research that could be opened to an indefinite field of possibilities, we could be led to think we could actually change it into something else, or, at least, that we could add something to what it already is.

Or we could, wisely, not rely completely in our concept of time, or even if there is such a thing as time, something that had enough reliability as an existence, for us to try to conceive. If time didn't exist, what would be the purpose of trying to define it?

In his Suprematist exhibition in 1915, Malevich held his Black Square on the top corner of the exhibition room, the place where an icon should be, if there was an icon in the room. He could be probably stating with this action that, like icons, his “Black Square” was looking at us and not being looked at.

And this change on what or who is looked upon makes quite a huge difference. If the Black Square was the beholder and in fact looking at us, there would be no purpose in elaborating on the content, both material and immaterial, that we might perceive in it, since our viewing would have no significant place there. If we were allowed to problematize about the possibility of this inert painting being a beholder, what would really matter was what it might think of us. And even so, we could only wonder what both perception and thought meant to it, regarding that painting, or what kind of entity that painting was referring to.

But allowing ourselves to think it as being dark, the darkest shade of dark (being the black colour what the artist usually use in their attempt to represent that ultimate state of darkness) we might not even feel obliged to think of it as a square, we might see it as a sample of darkness, probably the most elementary one our rationality could get. In Malevich's Suprematist exhibition there were also other black shapes, but it was the square that was chosen and made to be in that upper corner, an elementary sample of darkness, the simplest shape, the closest thing to nothing, but just enough to exist.

And being so, we could even go beyond the idea of icon, not quite what could take the place of an icon, replacing an icon, literally iconoclastic, but going back to the substance icons could be made of.

Ultimately not being satisfied by reaching God but going further back, before Good and keep on going back...

But let us be satisfied by now by seeing that “Black Square” as dark, the darkest shade of dark.

If, when we stand before darkness, we decide to walk forth, we might bump our nose onto a hard wall, we might fall into

an abyss, or we might find ourselves walking forward, forever, in an endless path. Facing darkness through that square we might be facing pure possibility in its rawest state.

In 1858 (in the early years that, in Portugal, people stopped being allowed to bury their relatives in churches and cemeteries had to be built in open ground), my great-great-grandfather built a small cemetery for his own family. It's not that he believed his family should have had the privilege of a cemetery of its own. He just didn't agree with the place where the local cemetery was going to be built. For public health and disease control reasons (the justification why cemeteries had to be built in the first place) he believed (and time proved him to be right) that the land chosen back then by the municipality, for the cemetery, didn't offer the suitable conditions for bodies to be buried.

He was stubborn enough to build his own cemetery in the land he believed the local cemetery should be. He asked permission to do so, and he got it.

His wife was the first to be buried there (actually, she was buried in the cemetery ground while it was still about to be built, anticipating the cemetery as an idea before it was materialized). And, being the one who decided to built it, he chose to be buried in a place where anyone that would go there would have to step on, just having to walk along the small path that divided that cemetery in two halves (one for each of his two daughters and their descendants).

A stone cross stood at the end of that path, on the ground, reminding us the place where he was, just because we were told he was there. If we didn't know he was there, that cross would still accomplish the role it probably was also meant for, telling us we were in a cemetery, standing on holy ground. The cross on the top of the cemetery's iron gate already announced what kind of place this was. But that heavy stone cross, standing where it was, showed us how important that flat ground was in that space.

Having been buried there, my great-great-grandfather found a way of putting himself in the right place for the founder of the cemetery. The place all his descendants would step on, being aware of his presence, even of his physical presence. The relatives who had met him and, mostly, all the ones that came after, for whom he was completely unknown, would be able to be literally close to him,



people without his surname (not having had male children this was predictable to happen) but whose blood was in their veins.

And he is really there. He is someone his descendants, such as me, obviously relate to, but at the same time, feel that he has become a fictional character in a mysterious story, leaving us wondering if there wasn't much more to it than a simple choice of the proper land for a cemetery.

Quite a mysterious little cemetery, with shallow graves, flat ground, with no tombstones, no names to identify the people buried there. Condition followed by his descendants just because it was meant to be that way. I don't recall anyone ever telling why, just respecting his will, never questioning why, as far as I know...

I even wondered if there was any dark secret in this family that led to this strange cemetery. But why not instead believe and focus on how brilliant my ancestor was, before the possibility of building a cemetery, to have had the extraordinary idea of making this place that looked like it was celebrating oblivion more than it celebrated memory.

At the same time, those graves wouldn't be anonymous if each of your ancestors told his descendants where the former bodies were buried. A memory passed from one generation to the next, in a personal way, a real connection only to be ended if those family ties were broken. Probably he hoped it would never happen...

Nevertheless, there aren't people anymore who know where all the bodies are buried and, if it were allowed to continue to bury people there, some chaotic mixture of bodies would occur. But probably no one would mind, because they all belonged to the same family... Ultimately something the founder of that cemetery had already predicted it might occur...

My father was the last one to be buried there in the early 1980's. I remember it wasn't meant to be allowed to happen, but it was. There couldn't be people buried in such places as private cemeteries, places that weren't even meant to exist.

Probably no one will have permission to have more burials there, but we may find a way.

People's ashes can be put anywhere, so, why not there?

I imagine the possibility of, with a simple small gardening shovel, to mix the ashes with the earth, starting to do it in a corner of that cemetery, putting everyone's ashes there, mixing them with the earth and with the ashes of everyone whose ashes were put there before...

And so, in that cemetery, we could find an interesting way of following its founder's will, adapting to new circumstances, finding a way to do it, doing it without raising any legal issues.

Everyone's remains being together in an abstract shapeless matter, the flat surface of that cemetery growing on density, as much in memory as in oblivion.

All squares are rectangles but not all rectangles are squares.

About 7x8 meters, we might see that cemetery not exactly as a square, but as though it could be tending to be a square, maybe tending to be some kind of version of Malevich's Black Square, maybe for everything's else but the fact it is almost a square, for we may end up to realize that to be a square wouldn't be Malevich's Black Square's most relevant ambition...

You might wonder what could this story have to do with Malevich's Black Square? To that question we might add another one: What does Malevich's Black Square have to do with a black square, if we consider the possibility of it having a much broader ambition beyond being a black square, to which that square black shape would only be a medium to?

Believing in the fact Malevich had written something like "black people working in a coal mine" before covering that sentence with black paint and making the first version of the Black Square, we can be led to believe that, adding to the ambition of an important place in Suprematism and its conceptual consequences, Malevich didn't even neglected the possibility of such a crude approach to blackness, even risking making something that can be easily taken for a racist joke, but dealing with no matter what conceptual shades of black this painting might lead to... Leading to everything art is concerned with or anywhere else beyond art. Dealing with all the range of possibilities it might raise.

Wondering what the story of this cemetery has to do with art, it might lead you to raise an even more interesting question that could be: What art has to do with art?

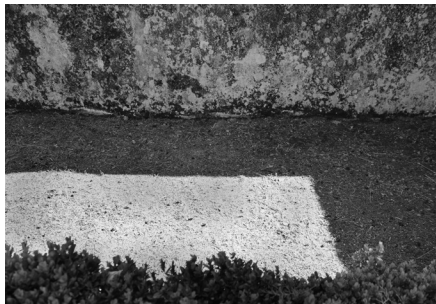
When Duchamp raised the question: "Is it possible to make works that are not of art?" he probably was more interested in the question itself than in a possible answer. By raising that question, he put us before the inevitability of having to define art, if we really wanted to put ourselves in the process of answering it. He never tried to do it himself, maybe because he was too clever to make such an attempt.

It was good enough for him to enjoy the possibilities raised by questions like that, aesthetic experiences disguised as what we recognize as sentences or as questions...

I could try to inscribe the question "How flat is darkness?" in the same category I find Duchamp's sentences and questions might belong to... A question not meant to be answered. But it might be interesting enough trying to answer it anyway. An attempt

to answer it, even if in a shamelessly superficial way... But probably experiencing multiple ways of being superficial...

Darkness might be the flattest thing you can get, like a wall beyond which you're blind (in fact, experiencing blindness just by facing it), a door to everything else if only you could go through. Not being able to see beyond, flatness might be the closest thing to anywhere else, to imagine everything compressed into a surface, just a surface and zero thickness. Nothing to see, but yet perceivable as being close to be anything, anything else...



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António Olaio (1963). Doutorado pelo Departamento de Arquitetura da Faculdade de Ciências e Tecnologia da Universidade de Coimbra em 2000 com a tese "O campo da Arte, segundo Marcel Duchamp". Professor no Curso de Arquitetura e Diretor do Colégio das Artes da Universidade de Coimbra. Investigador do Centro de Estudos Sociais. As utilização de vários meios na sua prática artística (pintura, desenho, vídeo, música) decorre duma forte relação com a performance, numa intensa atividade desde 1984 (<http://antonioolaio.com>). Os livros e artigos que publicou revelam a centralidade da sua condição de artista, e da da arte enquanto espaço especulativo na sua produção teórica, explorando dinâmicas de relação entre a reflexão e a experiência estética.

António Olaio (1963). Doctor in Architecture by the Department of Architecture of the Faculty of Sciences and Technology of the University of Coimbra in 2000 with the thesis "The field of art, according to Marcel Duchamp". Assistant Professor in the Architecture Course and Director of the College of Arts of the University of Coimbra. Researcher at the Center for Social Studies. The use of various media in his artistic

practice (painting, drawing, video, music) stems from a strong relationship with performance in an intense activity since 1984 (<http://antonioolaio.com>). His published articles reveal the centrality of his status as an artist, and of art as a speculative space in his theoretical production, exploring the dynamics of the relationship between reflection and aesthetic experience.