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KAZIMIR MALEVICH AND RUSSIAN MODERNISM

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[1] I have intentionally omitted the figures from this dissertation due to copyright issues. My reader will be able to locate the vast majority by examining various exhibition catalogues.

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ABSTRACT

Kazimir Malevich and Russian Modernism

Daniel Kalman Phillips

Although Malevich's abstract Suprematist paintings are canonical images of modern art, standard avant-garde or modernist paradigms have little purchase on them. This dissertation proposes that Malevich's modernism was the product of an attempt to make sense of both Russian and Western art of the recent past. Such an approach shows that Malevich's art is both an idiosyncratic elaboration of Russia's own image-making traditions and a self-conscious attempt to participate in Western European modernism. To make this case, I sketch an alternative to the story of post-Enlightenment aesthetics that ground received histories of modernism. Emphasizing the weakness of a secularizing tradition in Russia, I look to texts by Russian religious and secular thinkers to understand Russian modernism in the visual arts as a departure from traditional ideas of modernist medium specificity. Malevich's autobiography demonstrates his sympathy with this alternative tradition. This is not to say that Malevich sought to create a purely national art; in fact, I begin by showing that Malevich's early career was defined by its "mimesis" of predominantly French painting. This practice of creative imitation dislocated styles from their original socio-historical contexts, thereby generating a "meta-modernist" practice. Suprematist painting too challenged notions of mimesis apropos abstract art. A critical reading of Malevich's Suprematist manifestos discloses their constitutive contradictions between virulent attacks on objects and the persistence of the tradition of painting. I conclude by demonstrating that Malevich's late works, rather than a form of artistic reaction, self-consciously put on view the local and international origins of the artist's practice.

INTRODUCTION

MALEVICH, ART, AND HISTORY

> In short, the only rule common to all interpretation games, the sole family resemblance between them, is that the canonical work, so endlessly discussed, must be assumed to have permanent value and, which is really the same thing, perpetual modernity.
>
> —Frank Kermode[1]

Anyone who knows anything about twentieth-century art has seen a picture by Kazimir Malevich. The *Black Square,* or the various rectangles of *Airplane Flying* (figs. 0.1 and 0.2) appear in survey texts from the most traditional to the most contemporary.[2] Malevich was the creator of an oeuvre spanning three decades that consisted of everything from impressionist landscapes to radical abstractions to crude architectural models to paintings of bright faceless peasants. Though a modernist and a member of the Russian avant-garde, he is hardly mentioned in the mainline of American modernist writing, that is, the texts of Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried. Neither does Malevich's work fit very well within the conceptual framework of the avant-garde as theorized by Peter Bürger, perhaps the most familiar overarching paradigm of art-historical investigation over the past fifty years.[3] In other words, Malevich is oddly estranged

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[1] Frank Kermode, *Forms of Attention* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), 62.

[2] Fred S. Kleiner, Christin J. Mamiya, and Richard G. Tansey, *Gardner's Art through the Ages*, 11th ed. (Orlando: Harcourt, 2001), 1046. *Gardner's* reproduces *Airplane Flying*. Yve-Alain Bois et al., *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, 2 vols. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2004), 130-34. *Art since 1900* is divided according to year; "1915" is entirely dedicated to Malevich, reproducing four artworks and the famous installation photograph of the *0.10* exhibition, but the section itself focuses mostly on his previous relationship to *Zaum* poetry and Russian formalism.

[3] See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). Bürger identifies in particular early twentieth-century movements a self-critical attack on the autonomous function of art in bourgeois society. He names this the "historical avant-garde." For this group, "[w]hat is negated is not an earlier form of art (a style) but art as an institution that is unassociated with the life praxis of men" (49). Yet the "sublation of art" into life intended by these artists did not occur (58). Instead, their strategies were appropriated by the neo-avant-garde and domesticated into the very art institutions the historical avant-garde attacked. A modified version of Bürger's thesis provides the ground for a great deal of contemporary scholarship on twentieth and twenty-first century art, especially for those scholars involved with the journal *October.* Although others work on questions of modernism,

from the categories most often used to describe his art. And this is particularly strange because Malevich inspired several generations of this avant-garde and is a crucial reference point for subsequent modernist and post-modernist art. Acknowledging his unique contemporary importance, critic Peter Schjeldahl writes, “Malevich feels freshly available, in ways that other past evangelists of abstraction don’t any longer.”[4]

This freshness means that Malevich’s art has often been included in discourses in which the artist did not participate. He is omnipresent in twentieth-century art, yet his name primarily serves, to borrow a metaphor from scholar Aleksandra Shatskikh, as a blank screen for art history, an empty signifier. So what, beyond its author’s extravagant claims for his inventions and the material histories of his objects, is Malevich’s art about? This dissertation aims to offer a coherent and compelling reading that gives an answer to this question while, at the same time, providing a means for keeping the interpretation game alive, allowing future work to enrich and expand our understanding of this art and that of the Russian avant-garde in general.

Malevich’s work was part of what Camilla Gray termed the “great experiment” in Russian art, part of histories of abstraction and revolution and even, some claim, part of the Soviet cults of Lenin and Stalin.[5] Furthermore, his work has been grouped with “the whole

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these scholars have been uniquely successful in creating something like a critical school. Perhaps most notably see the essays collected in Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000). A second generation of scholars including George Baker and Branden W. Joseph have productively expanded the *October* position. I want to suggest that the notions of totality many of the artists championed by these scholars struggled against might also be identified with the art-historical paradigm under which the scholars themselves labor, and that Malevich could serve as a way of troubling the paradigm’s dominance in scholarly writing about modernist art.

[4] Peter Schjeldahl, "Shapes of Things," *The New Yorker* 87, no. 4 (2011).

[5] Gray’s astoundingly comprehensive text was foundational for the study of Russian modernism in the visual arts. See Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art, 1863-1922* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1962). See also Richard Stites, *Revolutionary Dreams: Utopian Visions and Experimental Life in the Russian Revolution* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 120; Briony Fer, "Imagining a Point of Origin: Malevich and Suprematism," in *On Abstract Art* (New Haven: Yale, 1997); Mark Cheetham, *The Rhetoric of Purity: Essentialist Theory and the Advent of Abstract Painting* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Boris

enterprise of modernism, especially of abstract painting."[6] I suggest that, because so much of Malevich lies outside this "whole enterprise"—at least how it is usually constructed—he himself has suffered the violence of interpretative "abstraction." In other words, those elements of his practice lying outside standard formulations of modernist and abstract painting are cut off, either ignored or explained away in sometimes disconcertingly brief and schematic fashion. Malevich's late return to figurative painting, for example, is identified as "authoritarian alienation" and symptomatic of a broadly undifferentiated return to figuration in the West.[7]

In important ways Malevich does not belong fully within these histories. Neither does he fit well within our histories of Russia's own great avant-garde movement, Constructivism, whose critique of bourgeois art objects was never shared by Malevich, for whom painting was hardly bourgeois.[8] Yet the indisputable relevance of Malevich to those Constructivists artists (even if they ultimately rejected him) and the fecundity of his work for art of the later twentieth- and twenty-first centuries, in times when the rejection of modernist painting is practically the very condition of possibility for making advanced art, demands that a historically grounded place be found.

What has avoided scholarly attention is that a national and international commerce of styles, movements, and traditions marks Malevich's art. I posit that Malevich's ecumenical and

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Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992).

[6] Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 230.

[7] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting," *October* 16 (1981): 49.

[8] Malevich often appears as a peripheral figure in these examinations of artistic life in the 1920s. See Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); Maria Gough, The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005).

enthusiastic consumption of image-making practices, whether "Russian" or "Western," "traditional" or "avant-garde," shows itself, both visually and conceptually, in his own work, and that the result of this consumption is the reason why this work has proven continually relevant. For subsequent artists recognized in Malevich an alternative to a narrow-minded modernism. They recognized that although pieces of his art look very much like the paradigmatic image of modernist art, it was in fact not so. In order to sort out *why* this is the case this dissertation proposes a study of Malevich's art rooted in its nineteenth-century origins. Taking seriously Malevich's unlikely statement that "there was no mention of art" in his childhood, I seek to estrange, but not detach, him from received categories of modernist art. Establishing this relationship to modernist art further requires us to place Malevich within a historically and culturally specific space of making.

The artists and thinkers of the modernizing Russia insisted on its nontrivial cultural difference even as they engaged and exchanged ideas with the West. Art, both Western and Russian, and local traditions in crisis generated Malevich's modernism. The importance of Western schools of modernist art shows itself in the early, mimetic phase of Malevich's art, an imitative but nonetheless creative recasting of art of the recent past that traded on delay (chronologically) and dislocation (geographically, most of all from France to Russia) to attain a level of self-reflexivity that might be called "meta-modernist." This delay and dislocation evacuated original meanings of various artworks and allowed the entry of new ones. Malevich's early artworks are specific examples of this reinvestiture. Even Suprematism, Malevich's term for his brand of abstract art, continued the exploration of this commerce through its appearance as a kind of system whose methods were both crude (in terms of their actual facture) and suggestively modern (in the "mass-produced" multiplicity of works). Here, Malevich presented

in a troubling new way the antinomy between painting as a performance of real creativity—the ethical discipline of the artist-craftsman—and as the spiritual poverty of mass production. For Malevich, art practices from peasant craft to the religious icon to academic and modernist painting held equal value. Suprematism, in his view, was the modern holistic replacement for these arts of the past. At the same time, this ambition to supplant and surpass the art of the past had a necessarily contradictory character, owing to the impossibility of the complete destruction of the past as well as the inherent internal conflictedness of abstract modernist art. In attending to these contradictions my account seeks to narrate the dynamic life of artworks, rather than retell the biography of a "great" artist.

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Scholars of Malevich have recovered and continue to unearth elements of the "general intellectual history" that Erwin Panofsky in 1932 thought clarified the bounds of the possible "within the worldview of any specific period and any specific cultural circle."[9] Such historical practice allows us to see how Malevich's artworks are "redolent of a specific worldview in the process of historical change."[10] To articulate how artworks express a specific worldview is a common brief for art history. My own project builds on the work of Charlotte Douglas and others in its consideration of this expression. On the other hand, Malevich studies have operated with too much restraint in their selection of texts, including visual texts, it regards as evidence. The general intellectual history offered by scholarship vis-à-vis Malevich is most often written with particular kinds of texts: the history of science, for example, with an eye to the theories of Ernst

[9] Erwin Panofsky, "On the Problem of Describing and Interpreting Works of the Visual Arts," *Critical Inquiry* 38, no. 3 (2012): 480.

[10] Ibid.

Mach, Albert Einstein, and Nikolai Lobachevsky, or philosophy, with Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl, and Arthur Schopenhauer (all of whom were influential in Russia, though not necessarily known to Malevich). There is no real reason to limit ourselves to such names. Why not, for example, take seriously the ordinary exhibition review, no matter how ignorant its writer may have been to the supposed virtues of modernist art? Furthermore, I reach further back into the Russian intellectual tradition than many interpreters of Malevich, drawing on important nineteenth-century thought that helps elucidate the stakes and aims of Malevich's modernism.

Of course, the meaning of a text is not identical to the meaning of a work of art. We should acknowledge, as Panofsky did in 1932, that not only texts contemporary with works of art but our own sense experience of those works are sources for their interpretation.[11] This does not mean falling into subjectivism or presentism, because such experience is placed into a dialogue with what we know about the past. Indeed, such dialogues can be found instantiated in works of art themselves. Later artists, as the following section shows, found something vital in Malevich's work in multiple cultural and historical contexts. This vitality is part of the meaning of art, and so the meaning of art is not necessarily realized all at once, in a moment, but is the product of its past and future. Art historians are increasingly interested in studying these temporalities of art and artistic experience, even to the point of explicit anachronism.[12] In comparison to some of these scholarly approaches, my project is relatively modest. Here, the decision to consider Malevich's art in a more expansive context is an attempt to get at a specifically historical

[11] Ibid., 482.

[12] See, for example, Michael Ann Holly, *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996); Alexander Nagel and Christopher S. Wood, *Anachronic Renaissance* (New York: Zone Books, 2010); Amy Knight Powell, "Late Gothic Abstractions," *Gesta* 51, no. 1 (2012). For Powell, a turn to Malevich in a discussion of medieval art clarifies how "the utterly concrete, material thing that a painting is can begin to lose its substance," without at the same time "shedding their resolute insistence on their own (manu)facture" (81).

meaning, not an experiment in methodological radicalism (however rewarding such an experiment might be). It is the case that the historian is the actor responsible for the meaning of historical actors and things. On the level of praxis this allows us to say that Malevich didn't always get Malevich right, that the field in which any artist operates is clouded by the fog of life. It is in this assertion where this dissertation differs most forcefully with the present scholarship on Malevich. There are times I don't take Malevich at his word, there are hundreds of pages of his writings that I decline to address at all, and there are moments in which my interpretation of texts would probably be vigorously disputed by the artist himself. Such strategies, it seems to me, are commonplace in other branches of the humanities, and so, rather than present extensive arguments for these strategies' theoretical propriety, I hope their exercise in this dissertation discloses something new and rich.

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Shatskikh invoked the metaphor of the "screen" in 2001, in remarks made as an audience member on the Russian television program *Cultural Revolution,* which was hosted by the former Minister of Culture Mikhail Shvydkoi.[13] This particular episode debated the proposition that Malevich's *Black Square* was simply "a big fraud." In her remarks, Shatskikh universalized the *Square*, finding it a profoundly ambivalent object. Each of us, she said, has the right to make claims about it, for it contains, in its black and white form, everything and nothing. It's a screen (*ekran*—a loan word from French that also designates the screen of cinema) for our thoughts, neither rejecting their appearance nor internalizing them within itself. The *Square*'s own quasi-symmetry, its seeming lack of up or down, left or right, weight and measure, signal this

[13] "Kul'turnaia Revoliutsiia - "Chernyi kvadrat" Malevicha," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gEK9pY0iBD8. Shatskikh's remarks begin at 38:35.

"equality." Similarly, Yve-Alain Bois has called the *Square* a *tabula rasa*, full of potential but without its own signification.[14]

Artists have taken advantage of this picture's blankness. Here's one of many examples: two men stand on a roof (fig. 0.3). The one closer to us holds out his right hand. The face of the man behind him is washed out. His left hand is curled in a fist. We've seen these gangsters (detectives?) in films. Lights line the streets into the distance. There's a third figure in the frame, perhaps two more. First there's the implied interlocutor for these two men. But you can't see him, or her, because he, or she, lies under a white almost-square, tilted maybe fifteen degrees towards the right, a figure about four-fifths the height of the frame. It's pure white, whiter than the men's skin, whiter, it seems, than those lights in the distance. All its angles save the top right one touch the edges of the frame, and if its total lack of modeling didn't convince you that this was a totally flat thing pressed up against the surface of the picture plane, this touch of quadrilateral and frame does.

The square is a comic figure. The title of the picture also has its comedy: *Violent Space Series: Two Stares Making a Point but Blocked by a Plane (for Malevich)*. It's by John Baldessari, from 1976, about forty years and a world war after Malevich's death. We have the "violent space" of noir, developed in literature before the war in the work of authors such as James M. Cain and Dashiell Hammett then later in cinema, then the pun on "point." Putting them together is a farcical return in the wake of the historical trauma signaled here by the square.[15] These two sinister human figures are dislocated from their original places in noir not because

[14] Yve-Alain Bois, "Malevitch: le carré, le degré zéro," *Macula* 1 (1978): 35.

[15] There's humor in another postwar homage to Malevich, Blinky Palermo's *Composition with Eight Red Rectangles* (1964), after Malevich's *Eight Red Rectangles* (1915) (figs. 0.10 and 0.11). Palermo makes Malevich's extended and tilted forms look more like collage pieces than dynamic actors.

they themselves have moved, but because of the square's intrusion. The square both *is* modernist flatness and symbolizes it as modernist specter. And it's also a "screen." The film screen onto which this noir scene might be projected has entered into the narrative itself, a travesty of the claim that modernist artworks are self-reflexive. Baldessari projects Shatskikh's "screen" onto another one: the screen of noir. Baldessari's Malevich is just one of many given to us by the second half of the twentieth century, when the Russian artist's work returned to visibility. Artist and art historians alike have attempted to fix the projected image, leaving us with a multiple exposure.

In modernity, according to Thierry de Duve, the choice for artists becomes whether to abandon painting or purify it. Malevich (for de Duve) chose the latter option and created a "*Gegenstandlose Welt*, inhabited with forms and colors whose purposiveness is to make visible that, when [he] paint[ed], [he was] guided by the idea of painting as *pure visibility*."[16] But in Hegelian fashion this purity actually demonstrates the limitations of the visible and its necessary sublation into the invisible realm of the idea: "[t]he switch to abstract painting comprised the crucial step in a recognition of painting's demise as craft and its instant rebirth as idea."[17] The twofoldedness of de Duve's Malevich is his importance to both modernism ("pure visibility") and postmodernism ("rebirth as idea"). Here, the rhetoric of purity subtends both pure visibility and idea. Maybe de Duve is right; however, historically speaking his reading of Malevich doesn't hold. Malevich himself did not abjure involvement in the world, even seeking administrative and teaching roles in the new Soviet state. And the visible work of art always

[16] Thierry de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), 149.

[17] Ibid.

(according to Malevich) alluded to the essential nonobjectivity of reality itself.[18] Picking up on this contradictory element of the artist's legacy, historians and artists implicitly complicate de Duve's formulation. The following discussion begins to pull apart the complicated figure of Malevich in order to construct a rough and imperfect typology: Malevich as the pure artist, the maker of systems, the (cosmic) philosopher, the architect/designer, and finally the father of twentieth-century Russian art.

Malevich emerged from storage in Soviet museums and into the Guggenheim's spiral hallway for his first major retrospective in 1973. The minimalist artist Donald Judd wrote a review of this exhibition for *Art in America*:

> It's obvious now that the forms and colors in the paintings that Malevich began painting in 1915 are the first instances of form and color . . . before 1915 no form, color, surface, anything, existed as itself.[19]

Malevich, here a thoroughly deracinated artist, marks a transformation of the Western tradition. He's different from everyone who came before. Furthermore, in Judd's opinion, Malevich's compositional strategies were driven by intuition, not a priori conceits: "[h]e," writes Judd, "has no doctrine about geometry itself."[20] This is Judd's idea of purity: non-doctrinal, an unspiritual purity. In Judd's reading, Malevich moves beyond the received tradition of European painting by eliminating its corrupting compositional shibboleths. Yet at the same time, Malevich's purification of form and color in painting points beyond painting, to a new independence of objects in space. For Ad Reinhardt, on the other hand, the purity of *painting* was essential.

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[18] See Adrian Barr, "From *Vozbuzhdenie* to *Oshchushchenie*: Theoretical Shifts, Nova Generatsiia, and the Late Paintings," in *Rethinking Malevich* (London: Pindar Press, 2007).

[19] Donald Judd, "Malevich, Independent Form, Color, Surface," in *Writings 1959-1975* (New York and Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design and New York University Press, 2005), 211.

[20] Ibid., 212.

Reinhardt's black paintings distill Malevich's abstract works even further. From Malevich's simple contrast of black and white in works such as *Black Cross*, Reinhardt uses barely differentiated shades of black in making his paintings, coming as close as possible in the process to eliminating not only the figure-ground distinction but the very presence of the artist's hand. For Reinhardt, this artist is a meditative figure, with a mind "free of all passion, ill-will and delusion."[21]

Reinhardt made Malevich's monochromes into a series of academic propositions. Malevich is thus the origin of compositional canons, meaning that Judd's assessment of Malevich's compositional strategies—as pragmatic and intuitive rather than non-dogmatic—was not universally shared. In fact, John Milner's *Malevich and the Art of Geometry* attempts to reveal an underlying geometrical system to Malevich's work.[22] What might appear to be to rational-istic element of Malevich's practice, with its simple geometric shapes, Milner holds to be in some way *truly* rational; that is, the making of paintings and objects is governed by certain formulas. Yve-Alain Bois has aggressively criticized this position for both its premises and its willful disavowal of those material facts that might compromise its thesis. Bois notes how Milner's text belongs to a practice of the "iconography of abstraction."[23] Negotiating these two positions, Briony Fer's skillful analysis demonstrates how Malevich's visual rhetoric conceals the lack of Suprematism's systematicity.[24]

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[21] Ad Reinhardt, *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt* (New York: Viking Press, 1975), 207.

[22] John Milner, *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996). A similar geometricizing account of Malevich can be found in Elena Ovsyannikova and Andrei Tukanov, "Suprematism: Bases of the Geometry of Plastics," in *The Russian avant-garde: personality and school.* Saint Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2003. ex. cat., 29-42.

[23] See Yve-Alain Bois, "Back to the Future: The New Malevich," *Bookforum* (2003), http://www.bookforum.com/archive/win_03/bois.html.

[24] Fer, "Imagining a Point of Origin: Malevich and Suprematism."

If not a compositional system, as Fer's analysis suggests, what then is the basis of Suprematism? Many artists and art historians have suggested instead a mystical or spiritual dimension of Malevich's work. This suggestion has also found critics, for example, the art historian Andrei Nakov, who argued that American critics had incorrectly held a "negative mysticism" to be at the center of Malevich's thought.[25] And some artists, such as Richard Serra, have explicitly distanced themselves from a threatening Malevichian spirituality.[26] But it is clear that emphasizing the mystic, spiritual, cosmic, or philosophical Malevich is not a purely American phenomenon: a European exhibition catalogue, co-edited by Russian scholar E.A. Petrova, presented a Malevich whose spiritual expression was profoundly national:

> For [Malevich's spiritualism] all that was needed was Russia, its popular mysticism and the aristocracy of the ancient mystic souls who made the time of the Word true in the real time of the world . . .[Malevich's] was an uncorrupted and positive spiritualism.[27]

Yves Klein one-upped Malevich's own rhetoric of infinity; he wrote that "[i]n effect, Malevich had infinity before him—me, I 'put myself' there inside of it. One does not represent infinity or produce it." For Klein insisted on his own impossible priority, reversing the hierarchy of influence in the form of a caricature (fig. 0.4). As Malevich transformed himself into the "zero of form," Klein declared himself to be "Yves le monochrome."[28]

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[25] Andrei B. Nakov, "The show must go on: Some remarks on the Malevich exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum," *Studio* 187, no. 963 (1974): 7.

[26] "Malevich's black square = spirituality; My black square = materiality." Quoted in Yve-Alain Bois, Magdalena Dabrowski, and Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh. *Malevich and the American Legacy.* New York, NY: Gagosian Gallery, 2011. ex. cat., 146.

[27] Giorgio Cortenova and E. A. Petrova, eds., *Kazimir Malevich e le sacre icone russe: avanguardia e tradizioni* (Milano and St Petersburg: Electa, 2000), 18 and passim. Only three of the twenty icons in this catalogue are dated to later than the sixteenth century, providing a misleading picture of a unified iconic aesthetic. As Chapter 2 will show, the actual state of the icon in Malevich's Russia was far more complicated. The belief that the icon is something determined once and for all by medieval canons of representation is one of the most problematic and enduring assumptions in the study of Russian art.

[28] Sidra Stich, *Yves Klein* (London and Stuttgart: Hayward Gallery and Cantz, 1994), 77.

Others grant Malevich's work and especially his writings the status of philosophy.[29] Yet emphasizing this writerly aspect of Malevich's practice runs the risk of neglecting his status as a maker of things. His hiatus from making art objects in favor of teaching and writing has been well noted, but equally significant was his *return* to painting. That Malevich's rhetoric has had a tendency to mask his status as an *artist* is apparent in T.J. Clark's anecdote about his friend and colleague Michael Fried. Clark relates how Fried exclaimed, before one of the Malevich works in the Museum of Modern Art, "I thought they were extremist gestures, and they are really *paintings*!"[30] Furthermore, understanding Malevich as a philosopher attributes a questionable kind of consistency to the goals and methods of his thought, a consistency clearly belied by the historical record: as an exhibition organizer, a pedagogue, and an advocate for his own art, Malevich played politics, obfuscated timelines, and played off contingency in a way hardly consonant with philosophical goals or methods.

It is this political, even revolutionary, Malevich that can be found in Larissa Zhadova's *Malevich,* first published in East Germany and later in English translation, which gives away its geopolitical origins through its bracketing of the religious and philosophical questions in Malevich's work.[31] For Zhadova, Malevich was a Soviet painter who worked for the Revolution.

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[29] See especially Emmanuel Martineau, *Malévitch et la philosophie: la question de la peinture abstraite* (Lausanne: Éditions L'Age d'homme, 1977). Malevich's translators, Jean-Claude Marcadé for French, Troels Andersen for English, are also committed to Malevich's philosophical legitimacy. See Marcadé's "Malevich, Painting, and Writing: On the Development of a Suprematist Philosophy," in Matthew Drutt. *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism.* New York: Guggenheim Museum, 2003. ex. cat., 32-43. Troels Andersen has attempted to identify parallels between Malevich's fragmentary essay "The World as Non-Objectivity" and Arthur Schopenhauer's *The World as Will and Representation*. See "Preface," in Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, 4 vols. (London and Chester Springs, Pa.: Rapp & Whiting; Dufour Editions, 1969), 3:7-10.

[30] Quoted in T. J. Clark, "God Is Not Cast Down," in *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2001), 268.

[31] Larissa Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 59.

Cutting through the polemics between Malevich and his contemporaries, Zhadova writes that "when Malevich and his pupils took Suprematism into the field of volume construction in architecture, design and decorative art they were in fact themselves engaged in Production Art."[32] "Production art" for Zhadova has a more ordinary meaning than it might have in the 1920s, a time of violent disputes over the nature of socialist culture; she rather integrates him into a history of design more generally. Continuing Zhadova's general line of inquiry, the architectural historian Selim Khan-Magomedov identifies Malevich's geometric abstraction as key for the development of a modern system of what he calls morphogenesis (*formoobrazovanie*).[33] I complicate Khan-Magomedov's design history by demonstrating how Malevich's art was always rooted in a particular Russian attitude towards making objects that included aspects of craft, a particularity often overlooked in the capitalist discourse of supposedly apolitical "design."[34]

Khan-Magomedov locates Malevich's importance for modern design, but "design" doesn't capture the extremism of the artist's projects (like Zhadova, Khan-Magomedov prefers to bracket Malevich's eccentric writings even as now, in the post-Soviet moment, he could have addressed them). The culture industry has well subsumed Malevich's formal language into its own palette. Yet there is a remainder of extremism in Malevich's work that alarms, if not embarrasses, a good deal of contemporary criticism and art history. In her painting *Malevich's*

[32] Ibid., 104.

[33] S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Kazimir Malevich*, Kumiry avangarda (Moscow: S.E. Gordeev, 2010); *Suprematizm i arkhitektura: (problemy formoobrazovaniia)* (Moscow: Arkhitektura-S, 2007). Like Zhadova, Khan-Magomedov uses the loan *dizain,* a word unknown to Malevich and his contemporaries.

[34] Hal Foster writes that the contemporary designer "is very different from the old: the Art Nouveau designer resisted the effects of industry, even as he also sought, in the words of Walter Benjamin, 'to win back [its] forms'—modern concrete, cast iron, and the like—for architecture and art. There is no such resistance in contemporary design." Hal Foster, "Design and Crime," in *Design and Crime* (London and New York: Verso, 2002), 17-18.

Tektonic, architect Zaha Hadid takes up this extreme aspect of the artist's imagination with an unwieldy but coloristically and geometrically exuberant vision for a project over the River Thames (fig. 0.5).

To most, Malevich is indelibly written into the history of the heroic years of the Russian Revolution. Malevich had his most faithful students in Ilya Chashnik and especially Nikolai Suetin, his most important in El Lissitzky.[35] His contemporary Aleksandr Rodchenko took the monochrome pioneered by Malevich and made it, if anything, more absolute. For Rodchenko, monochromatic painting signified the end of painting altogether, a call to make *real* objects of utility to the new society rather than painting's, that is, *art's,* emancipation from the duties of representation.[36]

Boris Groys has gone further and argued that the power Malevich's claimed for his art was realized—by Stalin.[37] Groys develops this interpretation in part through an examination of how artists working in the postwar Soviet Union found themselves unable to continue the historical avant-garde's project. Nevertheless, they cited, made homage to, and parodied this art in their own work. Malevich's extremism proved an especially tempting target. Ilya Kabakov opens his album of drawings *Ten Characters* with a black page, a clear reference to Malevich. Yet the story onto which this blackness opens is, as Matthew Jesse Jackson notes, not one of

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[35] On the relationship of the three see *"Nas budet troe": Kazimir Malevich, Il'ia Chashnik, Nikolai Suetin: zhivopis' i grafika iz kollektsii Sepherot Foundation (Likhtenshtein).* Moscow: Gosudarstvennaia Tret'iakovskaia galerei, 2012. ex. cat. On Chashnik and Suetin in particular, see *Malevich, Suetin, Chashnik: Watercolors, Drawings, Porcelain, October 21-December 31, 1983.* New York: Leonard Hutton Galleries, 1983. ex. cat; Irina Lebedeva et al. *Nikolai Suetin, 1897-1954.* Bad Breisig and Moscow: Palace Editions, 2008. ex. cat; V. Rakitin, *Il'ia Chashnik: khudozhnik novogo vremeni* (Moscow: RA and Palace Editions, 2000); Stephan von Wiese and Il'ia Grigorevich Chashnik. *Ilja G. Tschaschnik (1902 Ljucite - 1929 Leningrad).* Düsseldorf: Kunstmuseum, 1978. ex. cat. On Malevich and Lissitzky see Clark, "God Is Not Cast Down."

[36] Aleksandr Rodchenko, "Working with Mayakowsky," in *From Painting to Design: Russian Constructivist Art of the Twenties* (Cologne: Galerie Gmurzynka, 1981), 191.

[37] Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*.

Malevichian "magniloquent exploits" but rather "family intrigue and the architecture of the petty bourgeois interior."[38] This kind of private Suprematism also surfaces in the delicate sensibility of Francisco Infante's photographs of colored papers arranged on snow, shapes about to blow away on the winter wind from their coldly plastic backgrounds threatened by the coming spring thaw (fig. 0.6). The ambivalent whiteness of snow evokes Malevich again in the photographs of the Collective Actions group (fig. 0.7). Dmitrii Prigov still finds Malevich a reference point for his art; witness his staircases to nowhere, or to everywhere, depending on what one takes the black squares at their summits to be (fig. 0.8).

In 1997, Aleksandr Brener travelled to Amsterdam and spray painted a green dollar sign onto a Malevich *Suprematism* of the 1920s (fig. 0.9). For Brener, Malevich's art could serve as the appropriate site for the critique of, and participation in, the global flow of capital in the post-Cold War order.[39] As the shape of the cross in this artwork expresses the totality of sacred narrative, the dollar sign expresses the secular totality of globalization. Brener's gesture writes the sign of value on a valuable artwork and inscribes a cynical "new" Russia into its old utopian strivings.

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With his responses to an *Artforum* interviewer, Mel Bochner provided a good apophatic approach to studying Malevich:

> He was not a reductive painter, nor was he an abstract painter. [. . .]

[38] Matthew Jesse Jackson, *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 144.

[39] Michelle Maydanchik has argued that "rather than attempting to destroy the artworld as they had been accused of doing, [Oleg] Kulik and Brener's actions were successful endeavors to assimilate into the artworld's market and media structures." She finds that Brener's vandalism of a market idol not only smashes but, dialectically, forges new meaning and potential value as an act of "creative destruction" consistent with the logic of the market. See Michelle Maydanchik, "Creative Disruption: Contemporary Russian Performance Art" (Ph.D., The University of Chicago, 2014), 219, 52.

> No, I don't think it's cubism. [. . .]
> I don't think that his forms are mystical nor that they come out of analytical notions. [. . .]
> [W]ith Malevich, what you do in order to understand him is to try and determine everything that he is not about.[40]

Bochner responds to the eager queries of the interviewer with negations, refusing to allow the standard epithets—"cubism," "conceptual art"—of art-historical discourse to stand for this art that seems to escape them. These negations show the necessity of a history that, in its course, will find more apposite means to discuss this art.

Artists and scholars have endlessly applied combinations and permutations of these categories, demonstrating the existence of Shatskikh's "screen." These Maleviches are inconsistent, contradictory; they don't mean the same thing. Some are spiritualists, others materialists. Some destroy the conventions of Western painting, some continue them. Some Maleviches are painters, others are architects or philosophers. The project of this dissertation is less to reconcile these personas, an impossible project, so much as it is to understand their origins and put forward a reading, however partial, of this plurality itself. This should be done because Malevich's work seizes the imagination of viewers, curators, and especially artists even in the time of "postmodernism," a term which if nothing else would mean: after the faith in the singular artwork has collapsed and the notion of the "artwork" as a knowable physical presence is continually reconfigured. The sheer breadth of Malevich's appropriation points to an expansiveness at the heart of the work. Its value to various postmodernisms makes us question the nature of its own modernism. And so we are asked to discover how Malevich was possible and how he created his art's "perpetual modernity."

[40] Mel Bochner, "Mel Bochner on Malevich, an Interview," *Artforum* 12 (1974): 59-63.

CHAPTER ONE

MODERNISMS BEFORE SUPREMATISM

> The French learned from the object, but most Russian painters . . . learned not from the object itself, but from French paintings of that object.
>
> —Varvara Stepanova[1]

Kazimir Malevich is a canonical artist because of some pictures mostly made between 1915 and 1918. He did a lot before then, and scholars tend to see these works as prefiguring his later interests. Prefiguration is the sort of trope belonging to the study of unities, identified by the historian's retrospective gaze. To secure the unity of the oeuvre, you need an endpoint, a dead artist. But works of art can be meaningful when they are made, at a time before the creation of those later works they supposedly prefigure and to which they are subordinated. Maybe we would get a better sense of Malevich's early work, its own character and not simply its function in the Suprematist tale, if we thought about this art as part of its own project, before 1915.

Malevich's first destination after leaving his home in Ukraine in 1896 was Kursk, about 3,000 kilometers from Paris, the center of modernist art. Kursk was provincial even by Russian standards (more than 500 kilometers from Moscow, more than 1,000 from Saint Petersburg). A ceremony held in Kursk to greet the tsar in 1902 reflected this provinciality: after receiving the traditional offering of bread and salt, Nicholas II met with "the people," meaning "[peasant] village and township officials gathered from provinces bordering the area." The meeting with the

[1] Varvara Stepanova, "On Non-objective Creativity in Painting," in A. N. Lavrent′ev, *Varvara Stepanova: The Complete Work*, trans. Wendy Salmond (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988); Varvara Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit' bez chuda: pis'ma, poeticheskie opyty, zapiski khudozhnitsy* (Moscow: Sfera, 1994), 52.

peasantry received "[p]articular emphasis."[2] So when Malevich began to paint impressionist pictures in Kursk a few years later, he was a provincial imitating an art movement of the metropolis. A bourgeois art of the French Second Republic had entered an environment of peasants and autocracy. [3] Malevich was one of many whom the art of this environment captivated. In entering this new environment, impressionism sloughed off its social referents and their meaning for beholders, for these referents had no local equivalent.[4] Malevich's art recognized and in some sense thematized the space opened up by this dislocation.

As Terry Smith has noted, artistic "models and prototypes arrive in the provinces devoid of their genetic contexts," meaning that they have lost their natural ties to a local, "metropolitan" tradition.[5] In these terms Malevich's early work is a case study in how artistic models are denaturalized by time and distance and take up new meaning when acquired and modified in a new cultural space.[6] Beginning with impressionism, Malevich made often playful inquiries into past modernist styles until the second half of 1915, when he developed his original Suprematist

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[2] Francis William Wcislo, *Reforming Rural Russia: State, Local Society, and National Politics, 1855-1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 145-46.

[3] Richard Pipes notes that "[i]n the early 1900s, Russia was overwhelmingly rural. The peasantry constituted four-fifths of her inhabitants by legal status and three-quarters by occupation: the same proportion as in France on the eve of her revolution. Agriculture was far and away the largest source of national wealth." Richard Pipes, *The Russian Revolution* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 91.

[4] As Stephen Mansbach writes of Eastern European modernisms, "[t]he expressionism, cubism, and abstraction of, for example, Budapest, Prague, or Vilnius may appear morphologically similar to those of Berlin, Paris, or Amsterdam, but these advanced styles were perceived differently by Eastern audiences and carried considerably dissimilar references for their apologists." Steven A. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890-1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 3.

[5] Terry Smith, "The Provincialism Problem," *Artforum* 13, no. 1 (1974): 55. Smith's article concerns the contemporary art metropolis of New York and his own provincial Australia, but many of its points are relevant to earlier modernisms as well.

[6] Cf. T.J. Demos's argument about Marcel Duchamp, whose work, "[b]y avoiding all forms of self-same identity, secure relation to place, and notions of ideal unity, which were culturally coded and exploited by the pressures of nationalism . . . functioned as an oppositional force, even while his definition of exile accrued highly differentiated meanings." Malevich was far less self-conscious in his early years than Duchamp about the politics inherent in troubling art's geographical relationships. T. J. Demos, *The Exiles of Marcel Duchamp* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007), 2.

abstractions. Even when Malevich's adoption of past modernist styles was mediated through domestic models, notable in the case of symbolism, a sense of play is apparent. These models were likewise, for Malevich, metropolitan and were themselves heavily and self-consciously involved with Western European art.[7]

Malevich's imitation of past modernist styles, though exceptionally broad, was not absolutely unique among the Russians of his time. It is because of the ultimate importance of his later art that scholars have uniquely sought to shape a coherent narrative from the early work.[8] This narrative distorts this work's true significance by turning our attention away from these issues of imitation, dislocation, and play. Instead, this narrative tells of an artist moving along the linear trajectory of modernism towards its goal of total abstraction. For example, Larissa Zhadova argues that, when Malevich arrived at his abstract Suprematist style, he had "already summed up in his own personal experience most of the history of modern art in the three stages of Impressionism (1904–08); Neo-Primitivism and the embodiment in it of different Post-Impressionist trends (1908–11/12); and Cubo-Futurism with its variants and accretions (1911–15)."[9] Similarly, Dmitri Sarabianov writes:

> In developing Suprematism, Malevich formulated a completely original conception of artistic expression, which took him more than fifteen years to implement fully. During this time, he assimilated literally every phase of artistic development from nineteenth-century Realism to Cubism and Futurism.[10]

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[7] For information on the "Silver Age's" internationalism see John E. Bowlt, *Moscow & St. Petersburg 1900-1920: Art, Life & Culture of the Russian Silver Age* (New York: Vendome Press, 2008), esp. 129-200.

[8] I use the phrase "early work" to refer to the artist's output before the emergence of Suprematism in December 1915. The phrase should not indicate exceptional youth; Malevich's earliest extant work was created when he was in his late twenties.

[9] Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930*, 35.

[10] Sarab'ianov, Dmitrii, "Kazimir Malevich and His Art, 1900–1930," in *Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935.* Edited by Jeanne D'Andrea. Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center in association with the University of Washington Press, 1990. ex. cat., 164.

On the very first page of his essay, Sarabianov has already stipulated to Malevich's fundamental originality and that his "assimilation" of previous art was the assimilation of a progressive development towards this ultimate originality. Other versions of this argument use metaphors slightly more poetic than "development": Aleksandra Shatskikh writes that the *Black Square,* "was already gestating in 1913."[11] I want to bracket the premises of these historians' argument, which are roughly as follows: first, that abstract art is the culmination of a linear abstracting movement or drive; and second (and correlative), that the meaning of Malevich's use of previous styles is synonymous with their original meanings.

Regarding the first premise, nothing demands that our histories supply the faith in artistic progress that Malevich did not express before December 1915. Looking beyond Malevich's own pronouncements we find even more reason to put aside such a reductive approach to art history: for example, one of Malevich's contemporaries, the Minsk-based architect and sculptor Otton Krasnopolsky (1877–1971), thought that abstract art such as Suprematism was not the end of a linear progression but one apogee in the cycle of abstraction and naturalism.[12] Regarding the second premise, our understanding of Malevich's early works is not exhausted by ascribing to them epithets such as "impressionist" that would subsume them under existing, supposedly known, categories of artwork. This is just a morphological fallacy wherein the formal similarities between Malevich's work and his models, similarities echoed in the very terms used to described

[11] Shatskikh, Aleksandra, "Kazimir Malevich: Artist, Philosopher, Educator," in *Kazimir Malevich and the Russian Avant-Garde.* Edited by Geurt Imanse, et al. Cologne: Verlag der Buchh. Walther König, 2013. ex. cat., 217.

[12] Otton Krasnopol'skii, *Abstraktivizm v iskusstve novatorov (postimpresionizm i neoromantizm)* (Moscow: Obshchestvennaia Pol'za, 1917), 10. A clear precedent for Krasnopolsky's work was William Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy*, which was translated into Russian in 1910 or 1911. On Krasnopolsky see V. Chernatov, "Ot eklektiki do ar-deko (arkhitekturnoe nasledie Minska pervoi poloviny XX veka)," in *Avant-Garde and Cultures: Art, Design, Cultural Environments*, ed. Igor Dukhan (Minsk: GIUST BGU, 2007). On Worringer in Russian see John E. Bowlt, *Russian Art, 1875-1975: A Collection of Essays* (New York: MSS Information Corp., 1976), 117-18.

both sets of pictures, trick us into assuming their uncomplicated identity. The dislocation inherent in Malevich's versions of "impressionism" and other styles should make us reject this identity.

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Russian art has been seen as a form of Russian belatedness, part of the quest to "catch up" which is the motor (popular belief holds) of the country's artistic triumph and sociopolitical disaster. The notion of belatedness is not a Western projection (at least, it is not *only* that) but internal to modern Russian culture; it in fact saturates it from Petr Chaadaev's nineteenth-century *Philosophical Letters* through Joseph Stalin's *Short Course*.[13] This theme of belatedness is particularly relevant to modernist art-historical discourse that, as in Alfred Barr's famous diagram, sees the history of art as a sequence of events, each discarding and displacing the one prior.[14] Though Barr's own prejudices and oversights have been criticized, his sequential logic undergirds much contemporary scholarship. But observing such a sequence, taking it as a model, and imitating it does not produce the same meaning, even if the phenomenal results of such imitation are more or less the same. Anne Lounsbery points out that Nikolai Gogol drew attention to the non-identity of imitation and model in his *Dead Souls,* whose narrator notes that

[13] Chaadaev's first letter states: "And then when freed from the foreign yoke, had we not been separated from the common family, we might have profited from these ideas which had arisen during this period among our western brothers; however, we fell into an even more obdurate slavery . . ." Peter I.A. Chaadaev, *Philosophical Works of Peter Chaadaev* (Dordrecht and Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1991), 26. The Stalinist text begins: "Tsarist Russia entered the path of capitalist development later than other countries." TsK KPSS, ed. *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (Bolsheviks): Short Course* (New York: International Publishers, 1939), 3.

[14] Although to a large extent Russian art history has avoiding participating directly in the debates around this kind of modernist art history, it reveals its influences in statements such as "Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism, Symbolism, Futurism, Abstraction, each succeeding movement had its adherents; a process which should have taken generations to unfold was telescoped into the two decades between 1897 and 1917." Beverly Whitney Kean, *All the Empty Palaces: The Merchant Patrons of Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Russia* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1983), 65. Alla Lukanova similarly writes "This artistic ferment [of early twentieth century] can be accounted for by the need to catch up with the West European schools." Anna Kaphetse and Georgi Costakis. *Rosike protoporia 1910-1930, e sylloge G. Kostake : 6 Dekembrioy 1995-8 Aprilioy 1996.* Athens: Ministry of Culture, National Gallery and Alexandros Soutzos Museum, European Cultural Center of Delphi, 1995. ex. cat., 108.

even “successful” attempts at metropolitan fashion in the provinces “partake of [an] essential provincialism.”[15] In a discussion of twentieth-century art perhaps the most apposite evidence is this: if visual identity secured *semantic* identity, phenomena such as Duchamp’s readymades would be impossible. As Boris Groys argues, for contemporary art only the displacement of an object into the museum allows real difference to be staged and the work of art to appear as such, the difference between a bottle rack and the *Bottle Rack*.[16] Yet the museum is not simply a concept, it is a place. Seen as a place, one recognizes that musealization is a physical operation, and one potentially echoed by other sorts of displacement. The displacement of Western modernisms into modern Russia allowed the staging of the kind of difference that today belongs to the museum. In other words, Malevich saw that the dislocated styles of Western modernism were, in a sense, “readymades” when they were brought into a new space. He furthermore recognized that these styles contained tropes to be leveraged in the construction of new pictures; he saw, in other words, that imitation could be productive. The delay and dislocation inherently produced by bringing Western modernisms to Russia set in flux artistic meanings and allowed what I call Malevich’s meta-modernism.

“Meta-modernism” is an admittedly clunky formulation that nevertheless captures two crucial aspects of Malevich’s early work. First, Malevich was quite clearly invested in the set of tropes characteristic of what we know as modernism in the visual arts (though “modernism” itself was not a term familiar to Malevich and his contemporaries). These tropes include painting

[15] Anne Lounsbery, ""No, This Is Not the Provinces!" Provincialism, Authenticity, and Russianness in Gogol's Day," *Russian Review* 64, no. 2 (2005): 273-74. The Russian province is doubly cursed because it is the negation of a capital which itself is *not* metropolitan, that is, not European: “the Russian capital, always trying to catch up to and imitate Europe, might be seen as no less provincial than the provinces in its relationship to the real center, which was Europe” (266).

[16] Boris Groys, "On the New," in *Art Power* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2008), 30.

that refuses to do illusionistic work in favor of drawing attention to itself as painted mark, the evacuation of narrative content, and an interest in worrying or rejecting bourgeois norms in both the selection and treatment of themes. Participating in the modernist project, Malevich was nonetheless an outsider. He was a step removed, and therefore able to see modernist styles as options, not necessities. The project to define Russian culture relied at every moment on elements seized from European and Russian pasts and presents—elements many hoped could define Russia's own enigmatic substance. Similarly, modernism and modernist styles of painting came to Malevich from abroad, or, in the case of styles that had deeper Russian roots, came late. Taken out of their original contexts, they became available more or less all at once. This allowed Malevich to select, modify, and discard ways of picturing—styles—with remarkable speed and freedom.

"Style" here indicates what Russian scholars call *techeniia*, "currents," such as "impressionism," "symbolism" and so on. In essence, styles are aesthetic discourses, groups of objects whose morphological family resemblances, "a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing," allow them to be grasped under this or that name.[17] Styles are discourses of what Peter Bürger calls "means," or "creation . . . as a process of rational choice between various techniques, the choice being made with reference to the effect that is to be attained."[18] More broadly, styles are not only produced from these material means or tropes (seen from the perspective of the artist) but also from the statements of naming and recognition applied to artworks by critics and viewers. That not all commentators agreed or agree on these

[17] On family resemblances see Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2010), §66 and passim.

[18] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 17.

appellations does not detract from their necessity for the purpose of writing history. My use of "style" is taxonomic and connoisseurial.[19] That is not to say we shall be inattentive to the complexities of the connoisseurial terms themselves, as the example of impressionism in Russia will make clear. Whereas most theories of style deal with origins (Richard Wollheim's notion of individual, generative style for instance), this chapter is principally interested in mobility.[20] Rather than a piece of real estate tied to a particular place, style is a good that moves through time and space. This kind of good remains valuable in its final destination, where it may accrue new value, even as part of its appeal comes from knowledge of its distant source.

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Malevich said that he made impressionist pictures; fifty-eight are extant according the to catalogue raisonné of his work.[21] Among these is *Church*, an image of countryside architecture (1905, fig. 1.1). We may pause briefly and question whether or not this picture fully accords with what we might think of as "impressionism" and why that might matter for our understanding of Malevich's impressionism. Like any artwork, there is tension between its specific effects and the

[19] Richard Neer reminds us that connoisseurship is foundational for art history and even archaeology, despite the latter's anxiety about preserving some standard of scientific empiricism. Neer writes that "the main categories of Classical archaeology are stylistic, root and branch. Without style there is no 'Geometric' and no 'Orientalizing' [. . .]. Because these acts of identification and denomination proceed largely from judgments about style, it follows that just about everything that counts as a fact in Classical archeology depends on style." Thus "[a]rchaeologists, no less than art historians, exercise aesthetic judgment to product facts." Richard T. Neer, *The Emergence of the Classical Style in Greek Sculpture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 10.

[20] So, for example, Meyer Schapiro writes that, in support of his view that any theoretically satisfactory account of style will find its basis in "the forms of social life," "[i]n many problems the importance of economic, political, and ideological conditions for the *creation* of a group style (or of a 'world view' that influences a style) is generally admitted [my emphasis -DKP]." Meyer Schapiro, "Style," in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 99. Furthermore, when styles become "means" a style itself ceases to become the primary object of investigation as Schapiro notes it typically is for art history.

[21] Andrei B. Nakov, *Kazimir Malewicz: catalogue raisonné* (Paris: Adam Biro, 2002), 63-73. It should be noted that only nineteen of these images can be dated to the early moment of Malevich's career. The remainder were made in the 1920–30s in an effort to fill perceived lacunae, it seems, in the oeuvre. Nakov believes these images to be actual recreations of earlier, lost works, though establishing this definitively is impossible given the absence of photographic records.

terms used to classify it. This sunlit scene has an unusual and unexpected solidity to it: the lightness of the palette generates no feeling of lightness. The winter light strikes the snow and sets it sparkling. In *Church* the sky is blue. The sun is shining. Yet the glow does not so much illuminate as melt the church, the birches, and the snow. At the top of the canvas the tree branches have lost their identities as such. No longer pieces of wood affected by gravity and rooted to the earth, they have become veins in the painting's surface, and so the trees lose their tenuous positions in illusionistic space. The deliberately heavy handling of paint overwhelms any sense of a momentary impression or ocular contingency. The picture is impressionist—how else would we classify it?—but at the same time somehow not *quite*.

Malevich did not align himself with the metaphorical potential of impressionist painting, perhaps because his experience of painting impressionist pictures *after* impressionism guaranteed a kind of failure, if indeed (as the neo-impressionist critic Félix Fénéon believed) "the impressionists had been compelled by the logic of their own painting—as an exercise in freedom and spontaneity—into being doomed by the threat of repetition."[22] That is, the heavy paint and obscurity of *Church* overwhelms any impressionist claim to spontaneity because the claim that certain techniques of paint application can effectively signal spontaneity is deadened by their repetition. In this picture, Malevich shows that you *can* repeat impressionist painting, but it will no longer mean "freedom and spontaneity." I would argue that it is the dislocation from France to Russia that affects certain material qualities of the paintings themselves, causing Malevich to foreground literal realities of paint and surface over a metaphorical relationship to the pictured world, a particular social space.

[22] Martha Ward, *Pissarro, Neo-impressionism, and the Spaces of the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 97.

In his late autobiography, Malevich wrote that there were “two stages of impressionism,” which were contemporaries of realism (here, as is almost always the case with Malevich, no specific historical examples are adduced).[23] Perhaps this second impressionist stage corresponds to what most historiography describes as post-impressionism, though it is unclear. Still, the formulation “two stages of impressionism” challenges the idea “post-,” which stands for the propulsive narrative of modern art. Rather, Malevich shifts a *narrative* about the drive toward abstraction, which for modernist historians belongs to art in general, into the register of wholly personal *discovery,* at whose core lies a different temporal logic:

> I understood that the essence of impressionism wasn't to draw phenomena or objects to a "T," but that the whole point lay in the pure texture of painting, purely in the relationship of all my energy to phenomena, and only to the painterly quality which they carry or contain.[24]

Malevich, in his own self-understanding, does not need to rehearse the entire narrative of modernism of which the sketchy, “abstracting” brushstrokes of impressionism are but the first stage on the road to “pure,” that is *abstract*, painting, painting reduced to its essence. *Church* gives plenty of attention to the picture plane, highly characteristic of modernist art. For Malevich this attention conveys all that needs to be said, as the essence of impressionism is that of painting in general. Pure painting exists even before the “pure painting” of abstract art. What makes this claim so striking is that Malevich is not speaking of artists such as J.M.W. Turner, whose late seascapes are only identifiable as such by their titles. Impressionism did away with many conventions of naturalistic painting but—and this is especially the case for Malevich’s models—

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[23] See Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, "Autobiography," in *A Legacy Regained: Nikolai Khardzhiev and the Russian Avant-Garde*, ed. Nikolai Khardzhiev, John E. Bowlt, and Mark Konecny (Saint Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2002), 171; "Posledniaia glava neokonchennoi avtobiografii Malevicha," *Russian Literature* 39 (1996): 318.

[24] "Chapters from an Artist's Autobiography," *October* 34 (1985): 42; "Detstvo i iunost' Kazimira Malevicha (Glavy iz avtobiografii khudozhnika)," in *K istorii russkogo avangarda*, ed. Nikolai Khardzhiev (Stockholm: Hylaea, 1976), 121-22.

it did not "purify" the canvas of representation, and indeed what it represented in its original context, the people and spaces of modern France, was far from incidental.

Church and other early works are not simple prolegomena to Suprematism even as issues they raise remain at issue for that nonobjective art.[25] This imitative period of Malevich's oeuvre should be considered with the idea of mimesis. Mimesis is an imitative yet nevertheless poetic, that is to say creative, act. The term reminds us that so-called influence is not passive.[26] In considering mimesis as a category for a history of Malevich's early work, I borrow and modify the governing metaphor of Russian formalist critic Boris Eikhenbaum's (1886–1959) famous study "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' Is Made." Malevich did not take European schools such as "impressionism," "symbolism" and the like off-the-rack; these were rather taken as fabrics from which cuts could be (re)made.[27] Malevich saw (to continue the metaphor) the latest fashions when he entered the home of the great collector Sergei Shchukin on its open Sundays, a space filled with everything from Claude Monet to the latest work of Pablo Picasso. Malevich saw

[25] Sometimes these works are given only a single sentence. "In the years before 1910 he produced Symbolist, impressionist and Art Nouveau paintings and drawings." E. A. Petrova, ed. *Malevich: Artist and Theoretician* (Paris: Flammarion, 1991), 7. An exception is Andrei Nakov's monumental account, whose entire first volume is about the pre-Suprematist work; however, I take a strong objection to Nakov's hagiographical account of the artist, which tends to find in all of the work (even in this imitative phase) the mark of a creative genius, the mythic artist-hero who stands apart from all his contemporaries. See Andrei B. Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, 4 vols. (Farnham and Burlington: Lund Humphries, 2010).

[26] Michael Baxandall notes that influence "is a curse of art criticism primarily because of its wrong-headed grammatical prejudice about who is the agent and who the patient: it seems to reverse the active/passive relation which the historical actor experiences and the inferential beholder will wish to take into account." Baxandall means that, besides the questionable and unreflective notion of causality at play in the formulation of "influence," the supposed "influencer" is as much the target of action as the artist he or she supposedly influences. See Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 58-62.

[27] See Boris Eikhenbaum, "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' Is Made," in *Gogol from the Twentieth Century: Eleven Essays*, ed. Robert A. Maguire (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974). Eikhenbaum aims to show that Gogol's story, and his art in general, operates as a combination of various storytelling tropes: jokes, puns, arbitrary euphony, mock seriousness, etc.

trends in modern Western art and they stimulated his own. His early work was fashionable, novelty without telos.

I

Malevich painted *Church* in imitation of an existing style, in a part of the world that did not originate that style and in a time after that style had become, in its original context, passé. In Russia, impressionism touched seemingly everyone with its brush, from future avant-gardists such as Malevich to academicians to realists.[28] Certainly impressionism had its critics, but the extent of its adoption made this new art mainstream. Ubiquitous yet ill-defined, impressionism was a subversive presence in Russian painting. Escaping material definition, the word *impressionizm* itself signaled an alien character (the Russian word for "impression" is *vpechatlenie*). Promulgated neither by the academy nor by avant-garde manifesto, impressionism for Russians was a new way of looking at the world, and a new set of painterly techniques; more than that, it was a new relationship to art making, without settling on what, in reality, this practice, look, and technique would be. Pictures that demonstrate formal similarities to French impressionism, painters who called themselves and their pictures, or those that critics called, "impressionist": all of this constitutes Russian *impressionizm*. Its practitioners, such as Konstantin Korovin (1861–1939) and Igor Grabar (1871–1960); sometimes Valentin Serov (1865–1911) and Ilya Repin (1844–1930) among many others, never formed a group of that name.[29]

[28] See Alison Hilton, "The Impressionist Vision in Russia and Eastern Europe," in *World Impressionism: The International Art Movement, 1860-1920*, ed. Norma Broude (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1990). Hilton's chapter is an excellent account of Russian exposure to impressionism and its effects on Russian artists. Whereas my investigation of Russian impressionism emphasizes its problematic nature as a category for artistic production, Hilton emphasizes the documentary record of movements, relationships, and opinions of Russians on the new art.

[29] For a general overview of the names and diversity of Russian impressionism see Mikhail Guerman, *Russian Impressionists and Postimpressionists* (Bournemouth: Parkstone Press, 1998); *Russian Impressionism: Paintings*

Every invocation of *impressionizm* in the Russian context carried with it reference to French models but also to a new field of practice whose discursive limits were surprisingly unfixed. The adoption, modification, and redeployment of impressionist tropes, or simply the word *impressionizm* itself, made *impressionizm* something like the capsule version of Malevich's meta-modernism.

By "impressionism" most commentators mean Monet, Berthe Morisot, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Camille Pissarro, and others, members of a particular historical formation. Some include Édouard Manet, others Gustave Caillebotte. Impressionism's contemporary French critics saw in it a kind of art making specifically for the depiction of modern life by modern subjects: "what we need," wrote Edmond Duranty in 1876, "is the particular note of the modern individual, in his clothing, in the midst of his social habits, at home or in the street."[30] The poet Jules Laforgue stated that "[t]he Impressionist eye is . . . the most advanced eye in human evolution . . . see[ing] and render[ing] nature as it is—that is, wholly in the vibration of color."[31] This is common knowledge (the above citations are from a sourcebook for students) that nevertheless bears repeating. Impressionist painters rejected history painting and found ways to represent the "new," post-Hausmannian, Paris. The life of this Paris, filled with modern anxiety, was captured on its public ways, in its concert halls, and in its new suburban leisure spaces which emerged as the urban population grew and new rail lines were built.[32] The subjects that these spaces enclosed

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from the Collection of the Russian Museum, 1870s-1970s, ed. Vladimir Kruglov and Vladimir Leniashin (Saint Petersburg and New York: Palace Editions, Distributed by Harry N. Abrams, 2000).

[30] Compiled in Linda Nochlin, ed. *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, 1874-1904: Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1966), 5.

[31] Ibid., 17.

[32] See T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986); Robert L. Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988). The specificity of Paris to "pure" impressionism has been also pointed out by Dmitrii

were novel too. The impressionist painter examined contemporary life with the eye of a policeman and the gaze of the flâneur, a figure who sought to set himself apart from the bourgeois society that generated him. The experience the impressionists sought for their work was "at once objective and subjective, simultaneously physical, sensory, and emotional."[33] The original impressionist generation defined themselves through attention to certain subjects and themes—apparent *sine quibus non*; however, the absence of these subjects and themes Russian painting did not mean the absence of impressionism for Russian painters and critics.

The kinds of artists and pictures associated with Russian impressionism suggest Russian impressionists did not consider Russia as the French did France. And this makes sense, for how could they, given their many actual and perceived cultural differences? Strikingly, these differences, or at least their imaginary components, did not in the main provide material for Russian impressionists. Those painted signs of human civilization that might signify "Russia" (for example, its architectural idiosyncrasies, such as vernacular houses and "onion" church cupolas) were mostly absent in the art of Russian impressionists.[34] Many of these "Russian" signs had been deliberately reinvigorated for the visual arts in the mid-nineteenth-century turn to ethnography and continued to be used and generated through the Russian revivalism of the early twentieth.[35] They were popular in the art of the realists who aimed to create a national art, yet

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Sarab'ianov. See Dmitrii Vladimirovich Sarab'ianov, "K voprosu o spetsifike russkogo impressionizma," in *Russkaia zhivopis' XIX veka sredi evropeiskikh shkol* (Moscow: Sovetskii khudozhnik, 1980), 169.

[33] Richard Shiff, "The End of Impressionism," in *The New Painting, Impressionism, 1874-1886*, ed. Charles S. Moffett (San Francisco: The Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, 1986), 67.

[34] Only beginning in the 1910s did such scenes attract the attention of the avant-garde, though few significant avant-gardists had strong attractions to what might be called "Russian scenes" in the sense of recognizable stereotypes. A notable exception was Aristarkh Lentulov. a founder of the Jack of Diamonds group who travelled to Paris and whose work exhibits the strong influence of Robert Delaunay.

[35] On the formation of a "national style" in Russia see Cynthia H. Whittaker, ed. *Visualizing Russia: Fedor Solntsev and Crafting a National Past* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2010).

those same realists, trying their hand at impressionism, did not stress those signs. (The exception may be in landscape painting, but the durability of nature suggested by Russian landscape painting makes it resistant to impressionist concepts.) Even less overdetermined, but still recognizable, public spaces did not interest these artists. Russianist James Curtis writes:

> Despite the importance of railroads in Russia at the time, no Russian artist depicted people enjoying themselves in well-known public places. Despite the importance of Moscow industrialists as art patrons, we have no paintings of Russian factories from this period—no Russian equivalents of Pissarro's *Factory near Pontoise* (1873) for example. Moreover, no Russian artist depicted the new urban environment, as Monet did, for instance, in his series of paintings of Gare St. Lazare in Paris during the 1870s.[36]

Instead, works such as Korovin's *Paris Café* (1890s, fig. 1.2) strove for the "real" scene of impressionist modernity (Repin too painted a canvas with the same subject and title). Korovin in fact had the opportunity to travel to Europe and experience its art and society but Curtis states that the artist "never" painted any views of Moscow comparable to his rather generic paintings of Parisian streets.[37] Korovin's *Café* makes an implicit point of the "genetic context"—to use Smith's phrase—of impressionism to Paris. Here any genetic link is only in this adopted style and subject, not the father-artist himself. This is not a natural relation to theme. Such a picture, in other words, in its very forms describes a kind of cultural belonging yet, for its contemporary Russian viewer, also reveals that this belonging is something obtained, acquired somehow after the fact. Indeed, as Alison Hilton notes, Russian critics were concerned that Russian artists' interest in impressionism came at the expense of national character.[38] These critics' anxieties

[36] James M. Curtis, "A Place for Us: *Embourgeoisement* and the Art of Konstantin Korovin," in *Between Tsar and People: Educated Society and the Quest for Public Identity in Late Imperial Russia*, ed. Edith W. Clowes, Samuel D. Kassow, and James L. West (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 330.

[37] Ibid., 333.

[38] Hilton, "The Impressionist Vision in Russia and Eastern Europe," 388.

about Russian uses of impressionism remind us of the social character of artistic form; these critics understood that the world that impressionism arose to depict was somehow not their own. If the forms of impressionism were mobile and international, this did not mean that they were neutral.

The response that Russian impressionism provoked from domestic critics reminds us that even pictures lacking clear signs of national identity come into existence in a specific location via a specific hand, and that this specificity is meaningful. In *The Children Sasha and Yura Serov* (1899, fig. 1.3), Serov has caught one of his children gazing at the sea and the other with his head towards the viewer. Brushstrokes undulate horizontally and go in all directions to convey the movement of the ocean and texture of sand respectively. A boy throws his suspicious glance at the viewer, and the steeply-pitched platform on which both children stand is cramped and uninviting. The sea is of indeterminate nationality; one would need to research the painter's biography to determine whether the scene takes place in France, Russia, or elsewhere.[39] The impressionist style, which points towards France or at least a sort of internationalism, make it ambiguous. The use of the dislocated impressionist style raises the question of the painting's "Russianness," at issue for contemporary viewers. Any such national character is invisible, present only in our knowledge of the relationship between the painter and his young subjects.

Serov continued the investigation of impressionism in the Russian context with his portrait of Nicholas II, which was commissioned by the tsarina as a gift, and a copy of which was shown to the public at the World of Art (*Mir iskusstva*) group's exhibition in 1901 (1900, fig.

[39] Hilton says that the picture shows the Gulf of Finland, though she does not share her reasoning. See ibid., 400.

1.4).[40] The broken marks of "impressionist" brushwork run all over the tsar's figure, which is placed in an indeterminate space. These marks play across the surface of the canvas and the emperor's body. Compare these marks to those in, for example, Serov's first major work, *Girl with Peaches* (1887, fig. 1.5). In that earlier picture, the play of the paint stands convincingly for that of the light entering through the window, the movement of a young girl anticipating the fruit she holds in her hand. The way the canvas is painted seems in accord with impressionist metaphor. Similar marks signify nothing in the tsar's portrait. His folded hands indicate his body's stillness. Nothing seems to motivate Serov's broad and energetic brush—not light, not movement—; the painting looks like a sketch despite the fact that the portrait was the product of prolonged sitting by the tsar (an exceptional occurrence).[41] The supposed familiarity such contact should generate is here overwhelmed by the equivocating brushstrokes, troubling the intimate familiarity of the spousal gift or the image of autocratic paternity before its subjects, two foundational relationships whose stability one would think to be essential. The attempt to use impressionism in this portrait estranges these two "natural relations." Rather than address the difference occasioned by impressionism's dislocation, Serov simply takes its devices and deploys them for Russian subject matter. The lack of motivation between painted mark and subject matter calls into question the viewer's relationship to the emperor in the picture and is the source, I think, of the image's failure. Here we find an "inappropriate" use of impressionism, not because anything should have prohibited Russians from painting impressionist pictures, but

[40] Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, *Valentin Serov: Portraits of Russia's Silver Age* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 127-28.

[41] Ibid., 128.

because Russian artists did not use impressionism to make the claims, about contingency and modernity, that impressionism seemed born to make.

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Malevich's *Landscape with a Yellow House (Winter Landscape)* and another *Landscape* are roughly impressionist pictures both of which emphasize exploration of the painted mark over illusionism (ca. 1906, figures 1.6 and 1.7).[42] These works are the furthest moves into purely abstract art before Suprematism. *Landscape with a Yellow House*'s title does a lot of work as the house's presence is tenuous, really only nominal, struggling for recognition against the allover painting that thwarts the emergence of a stable place for the beholder to rest his or her gaze. The paint in this picture is thick physically and it is also thick in its figurative opacity: the beholder is still given a kind of "window," but it is a window with bars on it. These "bars" are the striations all over the canvas, creating a grid that maps the surface of the painting rather than the illusionistic space it contains. The birch trees themselves seem to be the origin of this particular grid.[43] The very nature that is the subject of representation, having lost much of its identity as anything but paint, now works to occlude representation itself.

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[42] Irina Vakar writes that these two canvases were exhibited in 1908 as *Studies.* See *Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum.* Edited by E. A. Petrova. St. Petersburg: Palace editions, 2000. ex. cat., 318. The attention to painterly facture here belies Ekaterina Bobrinskaia's claim that "Malevich was not carried away with the facture of the picture surface" (*Malevich nikogda ne uvlekalsia fakturoi kartinnoi poverkhnosti*). This claim results from her focus on textual rather than visual source materials. E. A. Bobrinskaia, *Rannii russkii avangard v kontekste filosofskoi i khudozhestvennoi kul'tury rubezha vekov* (Moscow: Gosudarstvennyi institut iskusstvoznaniia, 1999), 203.The history of the term *faktura* has been outlined by Maria Gough, "Faktura: The Making of the Russian Avant-Garde," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, no. 36 (1999).

[43] This grid, fashioned from nature, presents an intriguing contrast with that described by Rosalind Krauss in her well-known essay. She writes that "[the grid] is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature. [. . .] Insofar as [the grid's] order is that of pure relationship, the grid is a way of abrogating the claims of natural objects to have an order particular to themselves." Rosalind E. Krauss, "Grids," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 9.

The other picture is from the same year. Malevich works with a pointillist technique and a similar palette, with more prominent blues and reds, and placed paint from this palette in small daubs on a uniform yellow ground. The flatness of *Landscape with a Yellow House* resulted from the grid-like structure of paint blocking what seems to be the world on view behind it. In this other *Landscape* the flatness is already there, the flatness of the cardboard surface itself, covered in an even yellow. Malevich left the bottom-right corner of the work mostly exposed, yet this relief from the daubs of paint throughout the picture does not allow an obscured representation of any space to come out on display; rather there is an admission that *nothing* is actually represented there. The visibility of the thing represented is contingent on how much iconic value the beholder is willing to ascribe to the paint spots that rest on the surface. This ascription may not be fully justifiable by anything we might point to in the picture.

The application of paint in these works insistently emphasizes the materiality of paint over its potential for metaphorical or illusionistic work. Malevich manipulates paint for the substance it is, intent on exploring the possibilities generated in the encounter of artist and substance, rather than for the purpose of signification. This attention to facture comes at the expense of recognizable subject matter and the metaphorical potential of impressionism to signify spontaneity, or really any subjectivity at all. He escapes Serov's problem of the relationship of style to representation because these pictures do not raise representation, in the sense of picturing a recognizable world, as an issue. The absence of metaphor and representation is likewise signaled by the absence of human beings. This picture imitates French (neo-) impressionism on the one hand while on the other it rejects, through human absence, the kinds of socially engaged realism that still constituted a sort of shadow academy in Russia. Thus while art historians have observed that Malevich takes aspects of "the French original, from . . . the color-

light effects to the pointillism of the neo-impressionists Georges Seurat and Paul Signac," it is important to note that his pictures do not entirely resemble these originals nor do they mean the same thing.[44] In these pictures, the thematization of dislocation, an argument for the incommensurability of impressionist technique with its new context, generates modernist abstraction.

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Malevich made his impressionist pictures only after the term impressionism had come under considerable strain. "By the mid-1890s," Hilton observes, "the definition of Impressionism had become too fluid to be understood in the same way by everyone."[45] Richard Shiff's reading of impressionism stresses the sorts of ambiguities present even, by the last decade of the nineteenth century, in its original French context. Still, Shiff states, "if the term 'impressionist' is to be defined with some precision, it must be understood with regard to specific technical devices applied to a very general problem of both discovery and expression."[46] In Shiff's view, it is only this confluence of technique and ends that satisfactorily defines French impressionism. With this definition in mind, he is able to demonstrate how French *symbolism* of the 1890s was not indeed antithetical to impressionist ends. In contrast, Russian artists and critics found impressionism's main attraction and defining aspect to be its technical means. Although they recognized that these means had certain goals in mind, they found it difficult to establish whether or not impressionist means—or means that *looked* impressionist—were sufficient or necessary conditions for impressionist art. Thus in Russia the relationship between painterly technique and

[44] Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh, *Kazimir Malevich* (Moscow: Slovo, 1996), 12.

[45] Hilton, "The Impressionist Vision in Russia and Eastern Europe," 388.

[46] Richard Shiff, *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism: A Study of the Theory, Technique, and Critical Evaluation of Modern Art* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1984), 17.

the very *category* of impressionist painting—a name itself—was the crux of the problem. Russian critics identified impressionism in relation to a kind of materiality, but could not successfully define impressionism itself in terms of material operations.

Commentary on impressionism came from all quarters. Vladimir Gringmut attempted in his 1893 *Enemies of Painting* (Vragi zhivopisi) to establish the difference between impressionist and old master painting in terms of their approach to form.[47] Gringmut, future leader of the black-hundredist Russian Monarchist Party, was not sympathetic to the new art.

> [W]hen I ask *how* a Madonna or a Flemish scene is depicted, I have in mind not the external technical form of these pictures, but the external expressivity of those depicted, which [that is, external expressivity] gives me the possibility to penetrate into their hidden spiritual world.[48]

Gringmut denigrates the "external technical form" of impressionist pictures, generated by means of "external, half-craft technical devices" (*vneshnikh, poluremeslennykh tekhnicheskikh priemov*).[49] Clearly all paintings, good and bad, are material objects whose creation demands work with brush and paint. Gringmut points to a problem in the facture of impressionist works on a figurative, not literal, level. They are related to craft inasmuch as they are created with a set of devices that are *visible* in a way they should not be for good art. This aesthetics recognizes, and rejects, the formalism of Viktor Shklovsky that emerged more than a decade later. For Shklovsky,

> The purpose of art . . . is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By "estranging" objects and complicating form, the

[47] On Gringmut see George Gilbert, *The Radical Right in Late Imperial Russia: Dreams of a True Fatherland?*, ed. Richard Sakwa, BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 21 and passim.

[48] Vladimir Gringmut, *Vragi zhivopisi* (Moscow: Universitetskaia tipografiia, 1893), 26. "[K]ogda ia sprashivaiu, *kak* izobrazhena Madonna ili flamandskaia stsena, ia imeiu v vidu ne vneshniuiu tekhnicheskuiu formu etikh kartin, a vneshniuiu vyrazitel'nost' izobrazhennykh lits, daiushchuiu mne vozmozhnost' proniknut' v ikh sokrovennyi dukhovnyi mir."

[49] Ibid., 27.

> device of art makes perception long and "laborious." The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest. *Art is a means of experiencing the way something is made, but what is made in art is unimportant* [Iskusstvo est' sposob perezhit' delan'e veshchi, a sdelannoe v iskusstve ne vazhno].[50]

For Gringmut the "what is made" (*sdelannoe*) *is* important, for it is the thing that may be penetrated. Nothing is going to be able to "penetrate" or be penetrated by Shklovsky's grammatically neuter and sterile sounding "what is made." Gringmut never identifies impressionism's devices, but merely relates them to photography, another non-art "craft."[51] The invocation of photography makes clear that the "external" character of impressionism has little to do with abstraction. As it turns out, we cannot identify an impressionist picture because of its commitment to abstraction, or to this or that painterly device.

The problem of impressionism outlasted Malevich's own commitment to the style. Despite the many developments in the Russian and international art worlds at the beginning of the twentieth century, impressionism was still relevant in March 1911, when an article entitled "Impressionism" appeared in the journal *Women's Affairs*.[52] Its author, Vera Erisman, considered impressionism a vital trend in contemporary art despite the fact that by this time several of the original impressionist generation (Morisot, Pissarro, Alfred Sisley) were dead. Erisman is less

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[50] Viktor Shklovskii, *Theory of Prose*, ed. Benjamin Sher (Normal: Dalkey Archive Press, 1991), 6; *O teorii prozy* (Moscow and Leningrad: Krug, 1925), 12. I have modified the translation of the italicized section, which reads, in the printed translation, "*Art is a means of experiencing the process of creativity*. *The artifact itself is quite unimportant*." But "creativity" hints at a notion beyond mere making, to the Russian "tvorchestvo" which often indicates an inspired mode of artistic creation; Shklovksy quite deliberately prefers a phrase without this resonance: "*delan'e veshchi,*" the making of the thing.

[51] For Gringmut, photography is a craft, not an art (". . . *ne iskusstvom, a remeslom*"), and impressionism aspires to the "objectivity" of the photograph. See Gringmut, *Vragi zhivopisi*, 12, 31-32.

[52] *Women's Business* emerged in 1910, calling itself a "socio-political and scholarly-literary journal." As a writer for the *Capitol Rumor* (Stolichnaia Molva) newspaper noted critically, it actually employed more than twice as many men as women. N. Serbov, "Zhenkoe Delo," *Stolichnaia Molva*, January 11 1910. Its reporting was far reaching and, one imagines, tendentious in the Russian context in its coverage of, for example, European suffrage movements.

interested in impressionism's history than its aim, which she takes to be "to depict an object not how it is in reality, but rather how it appears to [the artist] in a given moment."[53] How would this goal be materialized in paint? To answer this question, Erisman's reader anticipates an account of the grammar and rhetoric of painted marks whereby transitory appearance is made visible; this account is never given. Erisman's example of an impressionist technique is the work of Giovanni Segantini. But this is strange because Segantini is an artist who "*only in technique* strays close to the impressionists [my italics]." His paintings lack the "unsettled element" (*nespokoinogo elementa*) characteristic of impressionism.[54] Yet where, if not technique, does this element reside? Erisman does not make any argument for the importance of content independent of technique. Impressionism's aims, the article indicates, actually cannot be discerned as the product of a particular painterly technique. This ambiguity extends even to the idea of artistic nationality: Erisman concludes with noting the movement's French origins only to declare Goya the first impressionist.[55] The implicitly historical concerns of the article are undermined again and again by the refusal to isolate "impressionism" as a historical or technical particular. Gringmut's "devices" are the "technique" of Erisman's text. In both cases, the question of the "how" (in the latter instance, how an impressionist relates to his subject; the former, how the spiritual world of the picture is made available to a beholder) remains immaterial. Gringmut says that, for the impressionist, the material "*how*" (kak) is everything;[56] the promoter of

[53] Vera Erisman, "Impressionizm," *Zhenskoe Delo* II, no. 5 (1911): 22.

[54] Ibid., 23.

[55] Ibid.

[56] Gringmut, *Vragi zhivopisi*, 33.

impressionism (Erisman) once again postpones identifying what exactly, in literal terms of paint on canvas, this "how" *is*.

More familiar names too sought to call this or that artist an "impressionist." Fin-de-siècle Russia's most important art critic, Alexandre Benois (1870–1960) was well-travelled and well-acquainted with modern French art, a leader of the World of Art group, and an artist himself who represented a Western-looking and rather lighthearted tendency in Russian modernism.[57] For Benois, the Russian landscape painter Arkhip Kuindzhi (1842–1910) was an impressionist.[58] No urban geographer, Kuindzhi was always a landscape painter. Benois's assessment is puzzling because Kuindzhi's approach to landscape does not resemble that of the French impressionists. The virtuosic tonal control demonstrated by Kuindzhi over the blacks in *Moonlit Night on the Dniepr* (1880, fig. 1.8) is removed from the active and colorful surfaces of impressionism. These subtle modulations suggest the influence of the artist's experience as a photographic retoucher, someone familiar with the great potential of non-color.[59] *Night on the Dniepr* is not made from the "bright chromatic harmonies and free-flowing brushwork" associated with impressionist

[57] The *World of Art* was an exhibition group and also a journal of the same name; its other famous leader was Sergei Diaghilev, the founder of the Ballets russes. It was devoted, against the moralizing of Russian realism, to a vision of art for art's sake. Its contents were varied, but a preference for line and a retrospective tone characterizing much of its members' production. See John E. Bowlt, *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the Early Twentieth Century and the "World of Art" Group* (Newtonville: Oriental Research Partners, 1979); *Moscow & St. Petersburg 1900-1920: Art, Life & Culture of the Russian Silver Age*, 161-200; Janet Kennedy, *The "Mir Iskusstva" Group and Russian Art, 1898-1912* (New York: Garland, 1977), Thesis--Columbia 1976.

[58] Alexandre Benois, *The Russian School of Painting* (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1916), 158. Benois does not elaborate on *why* Kuindzhi is an impressionist; perhaps because he was overly attracted to the "too superficial technique and fondness for cheap effects" characteristic of his teacher, Ivan Aivazovsky (1817–1900), a noted painter of seascapes? But this hardly answers the question, because Aivazovsky's "effects" look quite unlike impressionism. No matter how violent the sea in Aivazovsky's work, it never loses a kind of glassy clarity; the romantic sfumato of his clouds are not at all the unmodeled forms of impressionism.

[59] M.P. Nevedomskii, "A.I. Kuindzhi. (Biografiia-kharakteristika)," in *A.I. Kuindzhi* (Saint Petersburg: Izdanie obshchestva imeni A.I. Kuindzhi, 1913), 10.

painting.[60] Perhaps, and this a stretch, its presentation of the emergent moon, caught in the open between the clouds, hints at an impressionist temporality, very broadly understood. Yet Kuindzhi abandons this temporal sensibility in a canvas such as *The Birch Grove* (1879, fig. 1.9). A half-present line vertically bisects the canvas, slightly off-center to the right. It is implied by the firm division of the creek into light and dark, and by the edge of the trees in the middle distance. This quasi-symmetry mirrors the beholder's own, rooting him or her in front of the canvas, and establishing a "reciprocity between [the viewer's] gaze and the object, [the viewer's] body . . . and the world."[61] We might say that Kuindzhi's birches are the product of grafting a hint of impressionist brushwork onto an organizational technique borrowed from Caspar David Friedrich.[62] The characteristically impressionist flattening of the organizational and spatial hierarchies of the canvas, such as that we find in Monet's *On the Bank of the Seine, Bennecourt,* is alien to Kuindzhi's assertive division of the canvas in *The Birch Grove* (1868, fig. 1.10).

Further frustrating our attempts to make sense of Russian impressionism, Benois goes on to assert that Korovin is *not* an impressionist. For Benois, who is apparently working with some version of the Renaissance binary typology of art based on color and that based on design, impressionism is not a coloristic kind of art and Korovin is a colorist.

> In [Korovin's] propensity to bitumen and "patina" effects he is just the reverse of the Impressionists with their quest for light. Korovin is a genuine colourist, that is,

[60] Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure, and Parisian Society*, xiv.

[61] Joseph Leo Koerner, *Caspar David Friedrich and the Subject of Landscape* (London: Reaktion Books, 2009), 14.

[62] Koerner writes of Friedrich's *Fir Trees in the Snow* that, despite the painting's "natural randomness of detail," "[s]uch apparent inconsistencies, however, are always gauged against that prevailing rage for order that points the center tree's snow-capped tip at the precise midpoint of the picture's upper framing edge [. . .]. The grove's episodes of asymmetry and randomness, its excursions into the accidental and particular, function merely to place the picture's order within the natural world." Ibid., 12.

> a painter not only able to render correctly the colours of nature, but also enamoured of the beauty of colours.[63]

Yet even Soviet historiography, which could muster considerable hostility towards even the earliest moments of modernist art,[64] was forced to acknowledge that "many of [the impressionists'] interests . . . were close to Korovin."[65] Korovin's *At the Balcony* (1897–1898, fig. 1.11—not to mention the *Paris Café* picture discussed above) demonstrates loose brushwork that equivocates between woman and her environment and a theme of urban voyeurism, both characteristic of what one normally takes to be impressionism. There is, of course, no point in accusing Benois of ignorance, for he *knew* impressionism as few Russians did: he was a new type of Russian critic, actively seeking encounters with new art, he wrote a whole series of "letters from Paris."[66] In this text, Benois seemingly revels in the ability of his own critical faculties to deliver profoundly counterintuitive evaluations of artworks and their status as impressionist.

Benois's idiosyncratic evaluations emphasize that each articulation of impressionism was unique. The doctor-turned-avant-garde-promoter (and rather eccentric theorist) Nikolai Kulbin discussed a particularly subjective version at the opening of the *Exhibition of Modern Trends* in 1908 (Malevich may have been in attendance).[67] Kulbin said

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[63] Benois, *The Russian School of Painting*, 169.

[64] Elizabeth Kridl Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art: The State and Society* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1977), 177-78.

[65] D. Kogan, *Konstantin Korovin* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1964), 56.

[66] For an overview of Benois and others' contributions to Russian art criticism from the mid-nineteenth century until the Revolution see R. S. Kaufman, *Russkaia i sovetskaia khudozhestvennaia kritika: s serediny XIX v. do 1941 g.* (Moscow: Moskovskii universitet, 1978), 6-103. Benois's "Letters from Paris" and other articles on the Parisian art scene may be found in S.P. Diagilev, ed. *Mir Iskusstva, no. 1-12*, 2 vols. (Saint Petersburg: Tipografiia Eduarda Goppe). On the *World of Art* see Bowlt, *The Silver Age: Russian Art of the Early Twentieth Century and the "World of Art" Group*; Kennedy, *The "Mir Iskusstva" Group and Russian Art, 1898-1912*.

[67] Charlotte Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1980), 5-6.

> We are impressionists, on the canvas we give our impression . . . In the world everything is relative. Even the sun is seen by some people as gold, by others as silver, others as rose, and still others as colorless. The right of the artist is to see it as it seems to him.[68]

By shifting the emphasis of impressionist painting from a particular kind of holistic experience to a radically subjective presentation of the visible world, Kulbin weakened the connection between visible forms and the name they take. Kulbin makes the puzzling implication of Gringmut, Erison, and Benois explicit: what counts as impressionism cannot be established through any quasi-objective test of technique or themes. There is a lot of negation on offer in Russian accounts of impressionism; it's an art that does not allow access to a hidden spiritual world (Gringmut), an art not defined simply by patinerly technique (Erisman), an aesthetic present in art that does not manifest impressionist painterly techniques, and absent in art that does (Benois's Kuindzhi and Korovin). And how could anyone give a positive account of Kulbin's "everything is relative"?

Understanding the family resemblances that would allow a grasp of impressionism in Russia presents something of a challenge, given the often counterintuitive language and judgments Russians gave to impressionist artists and artworks. It was a word that invoked a dangerous or desirable modernity and an internationalism that not everyone—not Malevich, certainly—could experience. For Kulbin, the term itself outlived the style of visual art it originally named. Kulbin's miscellany of writings by himself and his circle, *Studio of Impressionists* (*Studiia Impressionistov,* 1910, contains a color theory more reminiscent of Kandinsky's metaphysics than Seurat's scientism.[69] Its illustrations are more Moreau than

[68] Quoted in ibid.

[69] Nikolai Kul'bin, ed. *Studiia impressionistov* (Saint Petersburg: N.I. Butkovskaia, 1910), 3-26.

Monet. Some of its vignettes, with their meandering organic lines and sensuous forms are reminiscent of Malevich's decorative work of 1908, work that points towards art nouveau or symbolist influences, not impressionist ones (figures 1.12 and 1.13). In its presentation of symbolist theories of art, inclusion of proto-futurist work (most notably Velimir Khlebnikov's "Invocation of Laughter") and interest in exotic traditions, *Studio of Impressionists* gathered many of the main tendencies of the pre-war avant-garde under the umbrella of impressionism. In its reference to a group of French artists "impressionism" was a historical term, but in its broad domestic application it signaled the syncretism characteristic of Russia's use of Western art. In Russia, the loose relationships between impressionist technique, impressionist paintings, and the word "impressionism" created a space in which Russian artists could operate as both imitators (of Western painting) and innovators whose novelties might be legitimized through the use of an existing term.

The rapid proliferation of artistic styles and their names in Malevich's Russia exceeded the ability of contemporary players to agree on their definitions and value. This presented little obstacle to the artists who eagerly absorbed new trends. In the standard narrative it is only with the arrival of the avant-garde that one finds the "simultaneity of the radically disparate," a simultaneity that "makes it virtually impossible to determine a historical level of artistic procedures."[70] But, as art historian Dmitri Sarabianov has argued, stylistic syncretism was the defining feature of Russian art in the first half of the nineteenth century, when the generally diachronic succession of styles and trends in Western Europe arrived in Russia some time later and became all mixed up.[71] In intimating this stylistic mixture "early," Russian art shows its

[70] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 63.

[71] This argument is a leitmotif of Sarab'ianov's art history. It is articulated in, among other places, Dmitrii Vladimirovich Sarab'ianov, *Istoriia russkogo iskusstva kontsa XIX-nachala XX veka* (Moscow: Moskovskii

departure from that standard narrative. In Russia, the simultaneity of disparate styles was not the consequence of but the ground for the Russian avant-garde. Its avant-garde acted in the tradition of its modern art as a whole, which drew on disparate sources as if they emerged simultaneously. Oleg Tarasov writes that the Russian avant-garde "did not have gradual movement and evolution: stages which necessitated a decade to work through in the West were, in Russia, often blended together in the work of a single artist."[72] Or, in the case of Kulbin's impressionism, a single book.

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Failing to matriculate to the Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, Malevich trained with the painter Fedor Rerberg beginning in 1905 or 1906, still spending summers in Kursk until 1908, when he took up year-round residence in the old capital.[73] Although Russian critics still treated impressionism as a novelty, a lot had happened in the art world since Malevich first left home in 1896. In Russia, the World of Art had exhausted itself and the new society-and-journal the Golden Fleece (*Zolotoe runo*), a sort of decadent group, had emerged as Moscow's artistic center of gravity.[74] Members of the Russian avant-garde, absorbing the lessons of the post-impressionism, took symbolism in new directions, including Russian primitivism. Many of these artists, Malevich above all, drew inspiration from the

universitet, 1993), 6. William Todd has noted this syncretism in the nineteenth-century Russian novel as well: "Russian writers, coming to the attention of Europe during the age of naturalism, were drawing on trends—romantic, confessional, melodramatic, aesthetically self-conscious, gothic—that had been tried and rejected in the West by the early decades of the nineteenth century." William Mills Todd III, "The Ruse of the Russian Novel," in *The Novel*, ed. Franco Moretti (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 402.

[72] Oleg Tarasov, "Ikona v tvorchestve K. Malevicha," in *Istoriia kul'tury i poetika*, ed. N.V. Zlydneva, N.M. Kurennaia, and L.A. Sofronova (Moscow: Nauka, 1994), 183.

[73] Scholars puzzle over the exact date because of contradictory sources; see John Bowlt's discussion in Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder, eds., *Rethinking Malevich* (London: Pindar Press, 2007), 1.

[74] On the Golden Fleece see William Richardson, *Zolotoe Runo and Russian Modernism, 1905-1910* (Ann Arbor: Ardis, 1986).

Western paintings found in the collection of Sergei Shchukin, housed in the former Trubetskoi Palace at 8 Bolshoi Znamensky Lane (not far from the Kremlin walls) and open to interested parties on Sundays beginning in spring 1909.[75] At that time, works from Monet, Pissarro, Paul Gauguin, Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso and others (including such conservative modernists as Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and Maurice Denis) made it the finest collection of new art in Moscow, in Russia, perhaps anywhere. Nowhere else in Moscow was such art to be found; there was no public access to Ivan Morozov's collection, the only one comparable, and the younger collector was more conservative in his acquisitions than Shchukin. Shchukin's collection ultimately spanned almost the entirety of French modernism before the First World War, from a Monet of 1872 and a Courbet of 1874 to Picassos of 1914.[76] Shchukin met with artists, commissioned works, and bought from the most important Parisian dealers. Some of these works (such as the Monet) were more than a decade old when purchased, but others were new; most famously, Shchukin commissioned Matisse to paint *Music* and *Dance* expressly for his Moscow mansion.[77] For the most part the collection, installed in the various rooms of Shchukin's home, grouped a single artist's works together. Such a concentration of modernist art risked alienating critics. Describing Shchukin's Picasso collection in 1914, Iakov Tugendkhold wrote of "this triumph of quantity over quality, the many over the single."[78] Picasso's works,

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[75] Kean, *All the Empty Palaces: The Merchant Patrons of Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Russia*, 135.

[76] For a catalog of the Shchukin collection (in its most complete form before nationalization) with illustrations see Natal'ia Iu. Semenova, *Zhizn' i kollektsiia Sergeia Ivanovicha Shchukina* (Moscow: Trilistnik, 2002). For more on Shchukin and Morozov's collections see Georg-W. Költzsch and M. A. Bessonova. *Morosow und Schtschukin, die russischen Sammler: Monet bis Picasso.* Köln: DuMont, 1993. ex. cat.

[77] On the somewhat tense relationship between Matisse and his patron about this commission see Kean, *All the Empty Palaces: The Merchant Patrons of Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Russia*, 193-99.

[78] Iakov Tugendkhol'd, "Frantsuzskoe sobranie S.I. Shchukina," *Apollon*, no. 1-2 (1914): 37. A (very) partial translation of the article may be found in Ilia Dorontchenkov, Charles Rougle, and N. A. Gurianova, eds., *Russian and Soviet views of Modern Western Art: 1890s to mid-1930s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 89.

from the symbolist Blue Period *Two Sisters,* to the ambiguous *Woman with a Fan*, to the analytic cubist *Musical Instruments* hung cheek by jowl three frames high in a smallish room (fig. 1.14). Space forced a peculiar kind of unity upon a viewer such as Malevich, who nowhere else could see these kinds of pictures. The stylistic variety, not only of Picasso but in general, overwhelmed visitors.

Vasilii Kamensky's 1914 futurist poem *Tango with Cows* makes clear that this overwhelming effect of the collection's works undermined its comparatively neat physical organization. In *Tango with Cows* Kamensky created a kind of map of Shchukin's collection, analogous to the other maps on preceding and following pages (fig. 1.15).[79] These "maps" are composed solely of straight lines and define various irregular spaces on the page. The one preceding the Shchukin collection speaks of the modern city's urban attractions, of "*shansonetka*" (a Russified French *chansonnette*), "tango," "Turkish café"; "we drink champagne" reads one of the few complete sentences. In the case of the Shchukin page, the appearance of artist names in some of these spaces raises the possibility of an architectural diagram, that we are looking at the rooms of the mansion. Yet as the map, with its odd angles and complete lack of doors or other apertures, does not map any actual architectural space, it is clear that we are not looking at the mansion's actual disposition. Lines bind the heterogeneous typographical and textual elements on the page. They do not structure the rooms but limn a reaction to what those rooms contain, providing an alternative organizational plan governed by subjective response rather than physical architecture. Kamensky's map does not deny that "Matisse," "Picasso," and "Van Gogh" occupied different architectural spaces in Shchukin's

[79] Tim Harte has addressed the cartographical implications of Kamensky's poem. Tim Harte, "Vasily Kamensky's "Tango with Cows": A Modernist Map of Moscow," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 48, no. 4 (2004).

collection. But he suggests the virtual proximity of those names and the tenuous arbitrariness of their physical division. Other groupings are suggested: for example, the typeface of the first four letters of "Picasso" appears again elsewhere to say "Pissarro"; the same happens with Cézanne and Gauguin. *Tango with Cows*, despite its futurist, "ferro-concrete" subtitle, offers a lyric subject's experience of the modern city, with its cabarets, circuses, and picture galleries. Both urban life and Shchukin's gallery present an overwhelming experience that the subject must structure. The textbook division by chapter of various artists and "-isms" was not viable. Kamensky's poem makes clear that the diversity of the Shchukin collection was intimately connected to the fractured experience of modernity. This diversity was, for Russians, a "period style."[80]

II

The primary artistic strategy of Malevich's early career was the selection, modification, and redeployment of the art of the recent past. This strategy, which I have termed meta-modernism, resulted in works that bear close resemblance to known styles or artists in the history of modern art. The objects or models of imitation for Malevich in his pre-Suprematist period may be divided into two categories: the symbolism of nineteenth-century France (represented by Puvis des Chavannes and Paul Gauguin), followed by the various stages of Picasso's cubism.

I should clarify that what I term stylistic models are not objects of citation as one finds in, for example, Manet's *Old Musician*. Rather, Malevich's models are those discreet works of art that communicated to Malevich this or that discourse of style. Malevich's early works aren't

[80] Cf. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 18.

paving a road towards some Suprematist utopia but playful imitations of existing styles. This play is the space of dislocation, the space between original and new contexts, between painted mark and the set of meanings to which it might refer. This sense of play is what distinguishes an artist like Malevich (though you might also find this playful sensibility in some early work of Mikhail Larionov, before he became interested in primitivism). In Malevich's early works, imitation does not mean simply copying. His symbolism alludes to the icon, not the antiquity so beloved by Puvis de Chavannes. There are no *French Cafés* in any style: when Malevich imitates cubism, there is a samovar, not a bottle of Pernod; there is a red futurist spoon, not a bourgeois demitasse. Such iconographic changes are not simple substitutions; they index a shift in meaning.

A Malevich work like *Triumph of the Heavens,* part of a series of gouaches, demonstrates that his imitation of symbolist tropes did not simply ape his predecessors (1907, fig. 1.16). These works, which the artist deemed studies for frescoes, combine expressionist color with linear, planar formal construction. Though these coloristic and compositional interests in some ways echo those of the most significant Russian symbolists, Mikhail Vrubel and Viktor Borisov-Musatov respectively, they preserve neither the hot physicality of Vrubel's brushwork and demonic themes nor the cold, allegorical silence of Borisov-Musatov (see, for example, figures 1.17 and 1.18 respectively). Instead, Malevich emphasizes a non-local palette, perhaps under the influence of Kulbin's pronouncement on impressionist color, and the androgynous bodies of the figures. The presence of these bodies indicates these works' adoption of one of the major themes in turn-of-the-century Russian culture.

Olga Matich has argued that the utopianism generated by the difficult experience of modernity was responsible for the great interest in the androgyne in European culture and

Russian culture in particular at the turn of the century.[81] Matich writes that "[a]ndrogyny symbolize[d] perfection, plenitude or a godlike state, achieved by the transcendence of masculine-feminine polarity."[82] Matich's examination of this phenomenon deals with its expression in literature, poetry, and religious-philosophical thought. For example, Fyodor Sologub, in his popular symbolist novel *The Petty Demon* (sections of which were first published in 1905), contrasts the "aesthetic beauty of the androgyne . . .with the putrefaction which permeates the novel." The boy Sasha's ambiguous appearance allows his transvestitism to pass unnoticed.[83] Matich writes:

> Sasha, an unusually beautiful and gentle adolescent, is not yet sexually defined and sexually mature. The potential for sexual differentiation is present in him; yet he is sexually ambiguous. That is what makes him so attractive to the sensuous pagan Ludmila, who dresses Sasha in her clothes and worships him as a "boy-god," kissing the mystery of his "blossoming Flesh."[84]

Sasha's status as a "god," for members of Sologub's contemporary audience, linked him to the androgynous Dionysus, who in turn was linked to an androgynous Christ. From Matich's enumeration of the instances of the androgyne in Russian culture, we see that almost always the androgyne is androgynous because his *male* sex is not marked on the body. That is, the androgyne transcends gender from the position of a man. Christ may be androgynous but is never a woman; the same for Dionysus, who appears throughout the history of art as either draped or with male sex. Androgyny occurs as the loss of masculine signifiers through softening of the body and diminution or absence of visible sex. There were important exceptions, such as the

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[81] Olga Matich, "Androgyny and the Russian Silver Age," *Pacific Coast Philology* 14 (1979): 42-43.

[82] Ibid., 43.

[83] The name "Sasha" itself has a certain androgyny as it is a common nickname for both "Aleksandr" and "Aleksandra."

[84] Matich, "Androgyny and the Russian Silver Age," 44.

depiction of the poet Zinaida Gippius by Léon Bakst in 1906 (fig. 1.19). Yet even this figure looks more like a clean-shaven, made-up man with longer hair, than like a female transvestite. In the sphere of the visual arts in Russia perhaps the androgyne most influential for Malevich would have been Vrubel's *Demons,* which not only appear androgynous to contemporary eyes, but were conceived as such, despite the fact that the origin of the demon was a poem by Mikhail Lermontov in which the character was definitely male.[85]

Malevich reverses this conception of the androgyne. In his *Sketch for a Fresco* (fig. 1.20) the heavy outline that defines the square-jawed faces of many of the figures becomes a beard for the figure in the upper left. In fact, the very presence of such facial hair is almost an overdetermined sign of masculinity and simply does not agree with any other androgynous figures of the period. In *Triumph of the Heavens* Malevich begins with apparently female bodies (the sex of the lower-rightmost figure is the most visible) only to harden their angles into more generically "masculine" forms, reversing the normal flow of sexual mutation. This reversal marks the trope as such, demonstrating the constructed character of androgyny's utopian ambitions. Revealing how the androgyne is made through reversing the process casts doubt on its ability to offer what Matich terms a "sublimated sexuality." Malevich's picture shows no sublimation at work, only the ability of the artist to play with the visible signs of sexual difference. This rejection of this sublimation is most apparent in the self-portrait from the same series (fig. 1.21).[86] Malevich's masculinity, wide-open eyes, and oversized—almost comic—

[85] Natalia Budanova, "Utopian Sex: The Metamorphosis of Androgynous Imagery in Russian Art of the Pre- and Post-Revolutionary Period," in *Utopian Reality: Reconstructing Culture in Revolutionary Russia and Beyond*, ed. Maria Kokkori, Christina Lodder, and Maria Mileeva (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 27.

[86] Nakov, *Kazimir Malewicz: catalogue raisonné*, 74. Shatskikh identifies this work as a portrait of Malevich's friend Ivan Kliun, presumably because of the beard which Malevich does not wear in other early self-portraits. But Kliun's beard was always more closely cut, and Malevich kept his own, as evidenced by a late self-portrait, at the

bowtie sharply separate the artist from the androgynous, obsequious and naked bodies that surround him and over which he seems to stand. The artist, cut off from the collective of bodies, confronts the beholder who is likewise absent from the group. The flatness and frontality of the composition allude to the icon. But this image bears no trace of traditional Orthodox iconography and thus cannot make the icon's metaphysical claims. Malevich is there not as Christ surrounded by angels but as the inspired artist surrounded by his own labored creations, a faintly demonic builder of pictures. The androgynous bodies around him are not the product of metaphysical reconciliation but artistic caprice.

The second phase of Malevich's symbolism was in 1909–1910, and imitated the forms of Shchukin's Gauguins. The female figure in Gauguin's *Te Arii Vahine* (The King's Wife, one of Shchukin's paintings) poses outdoors like an odalisque (fig. 1.22). Her left hand covers her sex with a white cloth, and her right holds a fan flirtatiously behind her head as her eyes look to the left of the canvas. Her dark skin, her nipples whose warm tones rhyme with the mangoes strewn about the scene—all this signals sexual availability for the scene's viewer. Yet in Malevich's works there is little sense that the nude women depicted are objects of sexual desire. For example, in an untitled gouache of 1910 the nursing figure, though posed in a Gauguin-esque natural setting, is nothing but maternal (fig. 1.23). Her heavy breasts and hips seem less like the objects of sexual desire than they are areas for the artist to play further with the potential of non-local color. This picture is an extension of the artist's interests in color; he has progressed through the Shchukin collection, not along some imagined road towards abstract art.

length pictured here. Furthermore, the slight widow's peak of the figure matches the hairline visible in all other self-portraits and photographs much more than it resembles Kliun.

Malevich's drawing *Golgotha* shows the crucified Christ with mourners (1911, fig. 1.24).[87] The questionable gender of the Christ figure continues a theme from the earlier symbolist gouaches. This Christ could be modeled on the *kamennye baby,* a principal source of Russian neoprimitivism; as Katherine Lahti observes, despite the name modern Russians gave to these ancient "stone women," their gender is unclear.[88] Yet the maternal figure from the Gauguin-esque picture is a more immediate model than the *kamennye baby*: a full female body with wide hips and breasts is now turned upright and nailed to the cross of this passion scene. The femininity of this "Christ" is confirmed by looking at another, earlier, drawing of a crucified woman whose breasts are more obvious (fig. 1.25). The figure's twisted right arm draws further attention to the curvaceous body of the figure. There is a question as to how serious this image is; an inscription on the reverse seems to indicate that it is, in fact, a kind of meditation on the soul.[89] But it seems to me that this sentiment is not realized in the image itself, an image that combines symbolist gender-bending with primitivist fleshiness. This strategy of combination draws attention to the meta-modernist qualities of the image, its imbrication with multiple modernist styles, rather than its philosophical or spiritual claims. Furthermore, *Golgotha* takes up not only Gauguin's sensual

[87] This drawing was never translated into paint, perhaps because Malevich realized, based on Natalia Goncharova's experience with her *Evangelists*, that it would have been censored if publicly exhibited. Bowlt, *Moscow & St. Petersburg 1900-1920: Art, Life & Culture of the Russian Silver Age*, 76, 78.

[88] Katherine Lahti, "On Living Statues and Pandora, *Kamennye baby* and Futurist Aesthetics: The Female Body in *Vladimir Mayakovsky: A Tragedy*," *Russian Review* 58, no. 3 (1999): 451-52. Lahti's article focuses on the character of the Girlfriend (*Znakomaia*) in Mayakovsky's play, which was performed in 1913 on alternate nights with Malevich, Aleksei Kruchenykh and Mikhail Matiushin's *Victory over the Sun.* Though 1913, as noted above, marked the "official" debut of neoprimitivism, the *baby* had attracted study and many erroneous hypotheses for years, as Lahti demonstrates.

[89] On this drawing see Nakov, *Kazimir Malewicz: catalogue raisonné*, 95; *Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935: Drawings from the Collection of the Khardzhiev-Chaga Art Foundation.* Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1997. ex. cat., np (Catalog entry No. 4); Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 5 vols. (Moscow: Gileia, 1995), 5:383. The former texts overlook the Christological elements of the work, erroneously finding merely a drawing of a recumbent woman with children.

female bodies but also travesties an element of the pre-Petrine icon painting, the sort of icon painting popular in avant-garde circles (e.g. fig. 1.26). Here, the lines that stand for the protruding ribs of the emaciated Christ in the icon are translated by Malevich into rolls of this body's flesh.

Malevich's symbolist works are symbolist in their usages of particular tropes, not in their ambitions. He didn't have those ambitions, but there is nothing to indicate that Malevich felt that his Russian and French predecessors were anything other than some of the most significant artists of the day. He's not dismissive. Rather, Malevich's pictures take advantage of the fact of dislocation in order to let go of the philosophical or social concerns so characteristic of symbolist art in favor of investigating some of their common themes, as well as their undeniably "generic" modernist quality of flatness. They are modernist in part because the symbolist dissatisfaction with, most obviously, scientific positivism is staged as a dissatisfaction with the illusionistic painting whose attention to the visible is seen as allied with that positivism. Malevich emphasizes the modernist elements of these pictures through clearing away their literary associations, that is, through neglecting their connection with a philosophical project. For Malevich, the "what is made," in this case the programmatic ambitions of symbolism, is less important than the "how."

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The weighty peasant figures who kneel in to the right of Malevich's drawing *Golgotha*'s cross are common in his works of the period. The peasants in Malevich's *Reapers* labor as individuals, alone, without the play of gazes or gestures marking shared experience. Malevich's workers do not rest and when they step back from their task it is only to stand before the viewer's gaze (fig. 1.27). The non-naturalistic bodies seem unbelievably dense, filled with earth

rather than a normal human being's aqueous inside. With placid faces and solitary comportments, they are mysterious and silent. If in his impressionist work Malevich sacrificed the metaphorical potential of painting for modernist attention to surface, in this and related works the solidity of the figure marks a powerful interiority that is also "superficial" inasmuch as it seems to be full, dumb, without a space for thought or reflection.

The period in Malevich's career most scholars call "cubist" or "cubofuturist" was actually quite stylistically diverse, and begins with pictures that most clearly imitate aspects of Picasso's pre-cubist work.[90] What past scholarship has considered a drive towards further abstraction was in reality a new moment of an imitative practice. Shchukin's collecting habits rather than internal necessity spurred on Malevich's "progress." Malevich's imitation of Picasso's pictorial devices may be more clearly distinguished by considering Picasso's Russian reception. Prominent thinkers and critics saw in Picasso's work a man taking apart the world, not only as part of a painterly critique of representation, but indeed as a taking apart of Creation itself. In its Russian reception, cubism appeared to have symbolism's metaphysical stakes. Tugendkhold wrote that Picasso "forgets the third dimension"; for him "only the circle, triangle, and parallelogram exist, as a geometric drawing." His art, for Tugendkhold, is not about

> objects as such—but the law of depicting this object from small values. All parts of an object are equal before his objective gaze—he goes at them from every side, he counts and repeats their facets [*liki*] endlessly, he studies the object "like a surgeon dissecting a corpse" . . ., he decomposes musical instruments like a watch mechanism, torments them like an inquisitor.[91]

[90] Nakov, *Kazimir Malewicz: catalogue raisonné*, 112-20; Dmitrii Vladimirovich Sarab'ianov, "Kazimir Malevich i Kubofuturizm," in *Russkaia zhivopis': Probuzhdenie pamiati* (Moscow: Iskusstvoznanie, 1998), 361.

[91] Tugendkhol'd, "Frantsuzskoe sobranie S.I. Shchukina," 35.

In the view of the religious philosopher Sergei Bulgakov, the metaphor of bodily decomposition is even more pronounced. In his 1914 article "Corpse of Beauty" (*Trup krasoty*, published 1915) Bulgakov writes that Picasso's "horror of being" is reflected in his geometrizing violence towards the female body, a kind of vampiric spirituality.[92] Similar criticisms were voiced again in 1914 by Nikolai Berdiaev, who wrote in *The Crisis of Art* (Krizis iskusstva) that "[b]ehind captivating and alluring female beauty [Picasso] sees the terror of decomposition, atomization."[93]

Malevich didn't see those metaphysical valences in Picasso's painting identified by other Russian thinkers. Effects similar to those of Picasso's *Three Women*, one of Shchukin's most important pictures, are present in a Malevich work such as a *Woodcutter* of 1912; however, unlike in Picasso's works, the multiple light sources here do not lead to similarly contradictory conclusions; the articulation of volumes does not complicate the wholeness of the body in space or dislocate it. (figures 1.28 and 1.29). The conflicted modeling of surfaces in Picasso's *Women* constantly reminds the viewer that these signs don't refer to anything real, that, in reality, there's no depth to be had. In Malevich's works, this same modeling achieves depth, but does so in an obvious way that works against the naturalization of this technique in post-Renaissance painting. In some sense, the goal of Picasso's work is defamiliarization, whereas in Malevich's painting the device is likewise laid bare, and yet still allowed to perform its function in a way that makes sense. His art does not "decompose" or "analyze." Rather, his pictures draw on a geometrizing vocabulary, taken from the Picasso dictionary, to compose solid, integral, and obdurate peasant

[92] Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov, *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*, 2 vols. (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), 2:529.

[93] Nikolai Berdiaev, *Krizis iskusstva* (Moscow: SP Interprint, 1990), 30.

figures whose bodies are resilient, even mechanical.[94] The geometricization of figures here does not abstract them, and thus he might sidestep the critique aimed at Picasso.

Malevich's disinterest in "analysis" or "decomposition" is evident even in those works that are most obviously imitations of Picasso's analytic cubism. Malevich's *Sewing Machine* takes up cubism's gridded space (fig. 1.30). Compared to a painting in the Shchukin collection, Picasso's *Bottle of Pernod and Glass* (fig. 1.31), Malevich's work stresses the diagonals of the canvas, drawing the beholder's eye towards the center of the composition instead of allowing him or her to search for clues to construct the subject of representation. This orientation towards the center itself, rather than any putative representation, is what structures the viewer's looking. There is something contradictory about the fracturing of the picture's surface that does *not*, here, lead to a comparative fracturing of the work of the beholder. One never has a real doubt that a sewing machine is indeed "in" this work. This sense of centrality, of the sense of real presence in a particular location which is nonetheless disguised through the manner of its representation, belies the normal functioning of the cubist grid, even as that grid clearly appears. Similarly, in the *Knife Grinder*, Malevich's incessant fracturing of representation ultimately fixes the figure quite clearly (fig. 1.32).[95] The anachronistic subject plays off in obvious fashion the *au courant* cubist (or "futurist," but futurism in this sense is nothing more than a particular deployment of the cubist grid) technique. Again, the operations of analytic cubism serve no discernable analytic purpose. Simply put, when Malevich made obviously cubist pictures, or drew on cubist tropes,

[94] For Larissa Zhadova, the solidity of Malevich's peasants is something of a machine aesthetic, "of a coloured glow like that of hot metal objects just off the rolling mill." Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art 1910-1930*, 16.

[95] The work is invariably reproduced in catalogues and monographs, lending it a representative air, standing in for a whole set of works that, in reality, does not exist.

the results were not necessarily in line with what his (and our) contemporaries believed cubism to be.

The final set of paintings Malevich made before venturing into abstract art have rightly been likened to synthetic cubism for their collage aesthetic. Since Malevich famously "rejected reason" in a public reading of February 19, 1914, they are known as his "Alogist" works.[96] They have received more attention than all the other early work combined because of their inclusion of planes of color that indicate to many the gestation of Suprematism.[97] This attention has produced readings of these works that, besides highlighting their formal connections to Suprematism, focus on the salient difference between these works and Picasso's cubism. These readings show quite clearly how Alogist painting works along meta-modernist lines. At the same time, Malevich creates this difference using elements of Picasso's own visual language. For these works use synthetic cubist devices in a way that does not construct the world depicted by synthetic cubism. Malevich's recontextualization of this modernist style severed its connection to the world it originally depicted. This recontextualization manifested itself in pictures as a sensibility that thematizes the viewer's interpretative freedom. Picasso's synthetic cubist pictures, more often than not, are unambiguous still lifes; Malevich's pictures never are.

The absence of such clarity thematizes interpretive freedom. This freedom is made possible by the abundance of positive information in a painting such as *Woman at a Poster Column* (fig. 1.33). Here, the process of beholding becomes a kind of interpretation game, a game interrupted, kept alive, and ultimately thwarted by the numerous elements in the painting that

[96] Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:56.

[97] Bois et al., *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, 1:131; Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, 1:380; Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New Haven and London: Yale, 2012), 16-18.

cannot be reconciled to a single interpretation, or by the sense of the exercise's absurdity. As Dmitri Sarabianov points out, Malevich was inconsistent in the titles he gave individual works, suggesting he recognized the range of possible interpretations.[98] In *Woman at a Poster Column*, the title provides a frame of references otherwise completely absent from the image, for there is no woman here, and no column. This lack of clarity results from Malevich's particular use of Picasso's synthetic cubism. For unlike that cubism, Malevich's works refuse to synthesize or construct a coherent world out of their constituent objects; instead, collaged elements retain their separate identities on the picture plane. Whereas in Picasso's pictures a piece of newsprint might be a violin, the pink rectangle of *Woman at a Poster Column* is nothing but a pink rectangle. For Nancy Perloff, Malevich is simply not interested in making sense like cubism does.[99] Cubism "makes sense" because, for all their innovations, cubist paintings invariably cohere, sum up to something, usually a still life. Malevich, on the other hand, "works in some way *against* the [represented] subject, as undermining and challenging its importance and supremacy."[100] In order to explore a new way of picturing the world, cubism needed to take advantage of the consistency offered by a consistent subject matter. For Picasso, it was important to take representation to its breaking point but not break it. Malevich had no such qualms as he took up cubist means of picturing the world, its set of tropes, and deployed them in ways that do not cohere to a

[98] Sarab'ianov, "Kazimir Malevich i Kubofuturizm," 368.

[99] Cited in Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 65. Andrei Nakov has also argued that these pictures are "an attempt to destroy definitely all vestiges of formal symbol-making and by extension all remnants of cubism." Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, 1:418.

[100] John Golding, "Malevich and the Ascent into Ether," in *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Still* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 56. Golding's italics.

recognizable picture of the world. While Malevich's paintings are constructed with the materials of synthetic cubism, they never really portray its bourgeois world, or any other.[101]

Despite the refusal of Alogist pictures to offer a world, they offer a great many recognizable signs. Christina Lodder has shown us the iconographic plenitude of these pictures. This plenitude leads her to the conclusion that Malevich deployed elements of cubist painting "to destroy any contact with an identifiable experience and to evoke a totally transrational experience."[102] Yet the iconographic plentitude at issue here is reminiscent of what Umberto Eco calls "hermetic semiosis," wherein "the interpreter has the right and the duty to suspect that what one believed to be the meaning of a sign is in fact the sign for a further meaning."[103] Lodder's conclusion is easily reformulated: what transrational experience turns out to be is precisely the *abundance* of identifiable experiences. It is not only that a pink rectangle might be a face: this reasonably sized painting could be "about" anything from local literary polemics to the coming World War. Malevich's painting is a proposition whose viewer makes interpretative choices, no matter how tentatively, about the work. Interpretative choices here are not made in the face of an undifferentiated multiplicity of traces or a singular form—say, in a Pollock or Malevich's own *Black Square*—but discreet and enumerable objects. That is to say that the relevance of the particular within the picture is maintained in the process of offering conclusions.

[101] T.J. Clark indeed argues that Picasso's entire oeuvre is an investigation of the constitution (and collapse) of bourgeois "room-space." See T. J. Clark, *Picasso and Truth* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013).

[102] Christina Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian Art, 1914-1937* (London: Pindar, 2005), 76.

[103] Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and Overinterpretation* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 47.

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The chronological reading of Malevich's early work presented above may be misleading if we assume that each style "superseded" the previous, rendering what came before irrelevant, invisible. But this wasn't how it worked in the minds of the prewar avant-garde. One could make the point that Shchukin's home was far from a traditional museum, as Kamensky's poem makes clear. It was more like the chaotic urban spaces of the modern city than the subdued halls of the museum; a space of simultaneity, not progress. Furthermore, contemporary exhibitions themselves challenged any notion of simple chronological supersession. The poet and translator Benedikt Livshits wrote of the exhibitions in these years that "[n]obody attempted to disguise what had been borrowed from the West. Nobody tried to remove all traces of the West. Everywhere one could see 'vestiges' of Futurism, Cubism, and Neo-Impressionism."[104] These exhibitions put on view the fact that, as Nina Gourianova notes, "Russian painting *expanded* stylistically from Impressionism and Symbolism to Neoprimitivism, Cubism, and Futurism (and Cubo-Futurism as well) [my italics]."[105] Gourianova draws our attention to the *diversity* of styles that characterized the exhibitions of the prewar avant-garde. Critics noticed this fundamental lack of unity. Reviewing the *Moscow Salon* exhibition of 1911 a critic for *Women's Affairs* called this mixture "the principle of tolerance [*printsip terpimosti*]," the "acceptance and recognition of everything of value in whichever trend it might be reflected."[106] The critic worried, "is such a

[104] Benedikt Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer*, trans. John E. Bowlt (Newtonville: Oriental Research Partners, 1977), 91-92.

[105] N. A. Gur'ianova, *The Aesthetics of Anarchy: Art and Ideology in the Early Russian Avant-Garde* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 17. That is not to say that all avant-garde artists were as attentive to Malevich in imitating Western modernist styles; Gourianova is far more interested with artists who sought their own original languages in this period before Suprematism.

[106] V. S-va, "Vystavka 'Moskovskogo salona'," *Zhenskoe Delo*, no. 5 (1911): 25. "Printsip terpimosti—priniatie i priznanie vsego tsennogo, v kakom by napravlenii ono ni otrazhalos'"

collection [of art] expedient?" Another anonymous reviewer, this one writing for the *Voice of Moscow*, shared this uneasiness with the show's stylistic diversity, and was disturbed by the inclusion of children's drawings in the exhibition.[107] Despite the *Women's Affairs* reviewer's sympathies with the aesthetic of tolerance and admiration for multiple works on view, she nonetheless argues that this diversity of images "quickly tires the viewer, [as it] does not let him get into the right mood."[108] In a successful exhibition, the set of pictures on view should allow viewers some experience of stability. He or she should be able to grasp the shape of the exhibition; however, in this exhibition, the density and variety of pictures does not allow this apprehension. It was not imitation per se that was the problem;[109] rather, Russian modernist exhibitions tired their viewers because they did not stage an evolutionary process whereby audiences acclimated with this or that modernist style before behind introduced to another one.

The rejection of the unity and closure secured by the traditional painterly *tableau* is one of the foundations of the modernist picture itself, and worry over this incompleteness was shared by Russian and Western critics.[110] The incompleteness of the modernist picture was thus thematized on the level of the exhibition. The viewer of the *Moscow Salon* could not ascertain a

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[107] Anon., *Golos Moskvy*, No. 33, February 11 1911.

[108] S-va, "Vystavka 'Moskovskogo salona'," 25.

[109] This *was* the problem for some viewers. Visiting Moscow in 1926–7, Walter Benjamin wrote, "I learned later that Larionov and Goncharova were big names. Their stuff is worthless. Just like most of the things hanging in the three rooms [of the museum], they seem to be massively influenced by Parisian and Berlin painting of the same period, which they copy without skill." Walter Benjamin, "Moscow Diary," *October* 35 (1985): 74-75.

[110] Michael Fried has identified the crisis of the *tableau* in French painting of the nineteenth century. "So during the 1850s, for example, the concept of the *tableau* was most often used by critics as a term of contrast with what they saw as the palpable failure of Courbet's Realist paintings, though often superbly painting, to conform to traditional notions of compositional unity; his canvases, it was typically said, were mere *morceaux*, pieces or fragments, regardless of their actual size." See Michael Fried, *Manet's Modernism, or, The Face of Painting in the 1860s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 268 and passim. As Hilton has noted in her study of Repin's *Exhibition of Experiments* of 1896, Russian critics too applied the epithet "incompleteness" to works that seemed modern, "impressionist." Alison Hilton, "The Exhibition of Experiments in St. Petersburg and the Independent Sketch," *The Art Bulletin* 70, no. 4 (1988): 694.

clear form produced from the variety of images on view. Years of further exposure to exhibitions of modern art could not shake the feeling that the exhibition *The Year 1915* was a "*balagan,*" a kind of chaotic fairground, of works from "Burliuk, Mayakovsky, Mashkov, Kandinsky and other futurists, cubists, rayonnists, ornamentists (the very newest) [*ornamestov* (*sic*)] and still other I-don't-know-what-kinds-of -ists."[111] This confusion was not merely aesthetic, but had a particular social basis as well. Jane Sharp has shown that the viewer of the avant-garde was him- or herself part of an equally formless audience, as "[r]econfigured by youth and gender, the new Muscovite audience lost much of its former class specificity, becoming increasingly amorphous and ill-defined, its social status an ambiguous reflection of the avant-garde community itself."[112] In short, to find a progressive aspect to Malevich's early work mistakes the nature of Russian modernism in this period, which troubled the judgment of its own critics even as it presents an alternative model to our received understanding of modernism.

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Rather than a linear progression, imitation is the appropriate paradigm for Malevich's early work because it allows us to understand Russian modernism as a distinct object of study while not bracketing the inextricable relationships of this modernism to its Western counterpart. Through imitation Malevich stripped modernisms of their original context and referents. This does not mean these styles were made meaningless. The liberation of painting supposedly

[111] Sergei Glagol', "1915 god.," *Golos Moskvy*, No. 68, March 24 1915. "Burliuka, Maiakovskogo, Mashkova, Kandinskogo, i drugikh futuristrov, kubistov, luchistov, ornamentsov (samaia posledniaia novost') i uzhe neznaiu kakikh eshche istov."

[112] Jane Ashton Sharp, "The Russian Avant-Garde and Its Audience: Moscow, 1913," *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 3 (1999): 95. Sharp is most interested in the audiences of Goncharova and Larionov for whom 1913 was an important year, hence the title of the article; however, her claims about audience composition are backed by evidence from as far back as 1905 and so relevant to the 1911 date of the *Moscow Salon* as well.

brought about by Suprematism itself—its refusal to reproduce "little corners of nature"[113]—had been secured by Malevich in advance through this process of imitation. Modernist painting, like all painting, began as a set of techniques for picturing or building a world, whether that world be understood as divinely ordered, contingent, under analysis, or something else. The difference is that modernism took pleasure in questioning the illusionistic work painting can do through emphasizing these techniques. Russian modernism was not an exception in this regard. But in this early moment Russian art was behind the West, as it had been for over a century—and *here* is its exceptionality, given that Russian modernism after 1915 will indeed be incorporated into the Western canon and allowed to be simultaneous with, or even prior to, other modernisms and postmodernisms.

Techniques are imitable, as is apparent from any utterance that names something made by Malevich "impressionist." Such imitation is not a simple repetition, because it occurs elsewhere. Devin Fore makes this point in his discussion of interwar realism, asserting that "the recurrence of a paradigm [in this case realism] does not mark a return to a previous moment, but, to the contrary, underscores the temporal difference from this earlier moment."[114] The "temporal difference" marked by recurrence should also make us ask questions about differences in meaning. The old moment of meaning is neither completely recovered nor completely lost.

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[113] Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:35 and passim; *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:19. The phrase was a favorite.

[114] Devin Fore, *Realism after Modernism: The Rehumanization of Art and Literature* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), 11. Fore's claim that the "orphaned devices [of realism, that is, linear perspective, the novel, naturalistic drama, autobiography, and portraiture] persist in the cultural production of the interwar period" only "as mere technique or device (to use Shklovsky's well-known term) rather than as a binding period style" is sympathetic with but far from identical to my own claim. His argument essentially takes up Bürger's notion of the avant-garde's "liquidation of style," discussed in a previous footnote. I argue Malevich's own use of technique and device was generated from a particular cultural situation. Prewar Russia is not the Weimar Republic; indeed, although Fore gestures expansively, even mentioning Malevich on the first page of his book, his argument is particular, drawing on Peter Sloterdijk's idea of Weimar's "cynical consciousness" (13). The inclusion of Malevich is perhaps driven by Benjamin Buchloh's condemnation of interwar art, here too Weimar and Malevich are mentioned in the same breadth.

Imitation does not necessarily mark deficiency just as originality does not always mark greatness. Scholars of "global modernism," the modernist painting of decolonizing African, American, and Asian nations, are quick to defend their subjects from the charge of imitation leveled by an earlier generation that fully embraced the modernist discourse of priority; in this discourse, being first is the only position of significance. But if, as the scholar of comparative literature Eric Hayot writes, "the notion of a Western origin was embedded in the concept of the modern or the modernist from its first apprehension," then a Russian modernist practice such as Malevich's can never shake off its "unoriginality."[115] Impressionism and cubism came from Western Europe, and non-Western European modernist painters like Malevich knew this. Cubism was not Russian, and was even attacked for its supposed hostility to Russia's world of Orthodox tradition. To ignore this plain fact and to instead redefine modernism as the mere "expressive dimension of modernity" because the notions of imitation and belatedness damage the prestige of non-European modernism is to embrace that Eurocentric account of modernism that holds imitation to be worthless.[116] To recover imitation as a productive category, as mimesis, both acknowledges the historical fact of belatedness and does not dismiss its results as mere copy.[117]

This chapter investigated the productivity of imitation in the early twentieth-century Russian context. This was an exceptional context and Malevich an exceptional example. Yet considering imitation in this fashion, despite its unpopularity in discussions of modernist art, has a long tradition. Aristotle states that the poet is "just like the painter or other maker of

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[115] Eric Hayot, "Chinese Modernism, Mimetic Desire, and European Time," in *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms*, ed. Mark A. Wollaeger (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 152.

[116] The phrase is Susan Freidman's. See Susan Stanford Friedman, "Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies," *Modernism/modernity* 13, no. 3 (2006): 432.

[117] To reiterate: "belatedness" is not only a category of historical analysis, but one intrinsic to Russian culture of the modern period.

likenesses."[118] The citation is of course taken from a text, the *Poetics*, whose subject is tragedy, not painting, but I think we are right to take it as a guide in the context of painting too, and Aristotle seems to license the analogy. The poet imitates actions, yet is not an eyewitness; these actions are not wholly original, they too occurred elsewhere. Tragic poetry is constructed, using known characters whose original existences are uncertain. The poet imitates action in a certain manner that makes those actions intelligible, meaningful, and effective for his audience. Eikhenbaum offers a more extreme formulation of the constructive principle at work in a different genre: "[Gogol's] characters are only petrified poses. They are dominated by the mirthful and ever-playful spirit of the artist himself, as stage director and real hero."[119] The essence of Gogol's story lies in the relations between its constituent elements, which again, are mimetic, not its plot. Eikhenbaum's polemical emphasis on something like "means" over "content" is aligned with one of the defining traits of visual modernism. Malevich's early modernism is likewise mirthful in its attention to the various devices of modernist painting, the varying ways artists from Monet to Picasso concerned themselves with the workings of their chosen medium.

Still, Malevich's visual art shouldn't be forced to accord with theoretical models made with an eye towards antique drama or literary realism. Its ultimate aims are not cathartic, nor purely formal; after these pictures he thought more about his own conception of art. What we should take from both Aristotle and Eikhenbaum is something broad, perhaps obvious, but which nevertheless bears repeating: that to make works of art the artist often uses materials that are not

[118] Aristotle, *Poet.* 1460b6. *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, trans. Ingram Bywater (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

[119] Eikhenbaum, "How Gogol's 'Overcoat' Is Made," 275.

all his or hers, that exist somehow as materials before he or she comes upon them and transforms them into new works of art. Artworks are things, things crafted by an artist. The poetics of Aristotle and Eikhenbaum both operate with a conception of the artist as a maker more or less like other kinds of makers, a sort of craftsman: indeed for Shklovsky the "formal method" was itself "a return to craftsmanship [*vozvrashchenie k masterstvu*]."[120] Lest we overstate the case, we might call this a tendency in Russian modernism: a tendency towards a conception of artistic production as *techne*, encompassing both "art or fine art (e.g. poetry, music, painting) on the one hand and craft (e.g. shoemaking, carpentry) on the other."[121] And so for Eikhenbaum Gogol's "Overcoat" is made (*sdelana*) like an actual overcoat is made: the artist-craftsman performs concrete operations on his or her materials. More specifically, as we shall see in the next chapter, Malevich saw his own origins in traditional forms of village making, and, as we shall see in Chapters 3 and 4, he found his innovations compatible with forms of making other than painting.

Though the kinds of literary making recounted in Aristotle or Eikhenbaum result in singular works of art (a tragedy, a story), in the visual arts the situation is somewhat different because the oeuvre itself is often held to be a unity: this humanist position assumed by much of the discipline holds that "an artist's style should be no more thought of as susceptible to fragmentation or fission than his personality." [122] Malevich complicates this formulation through the imitative stylistic diversity of his early work. His style was indeed fragmentary: the imitation of the fragments of the new art he saw in reproduction, exhibition, and finally at the home of the great archaeologist Shchukin.

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[120] Viktor Shklovskii, *Sentimental'noe puteshestvie, vospominaniia, 1917-1922* (Moscow: Gelikon, 1923), 327.

[121] J. J. Pollitt, *The Ancient View of Greek Art: Criticism, History, and Terminology* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 32.

[122] Richard Wollheim, *Painting as an Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), 36.

The imitation of fragments: Malevich had little involvement in the conditions of modern life that originally made impressionism or cubism. The gap between Malevich and his models did not destroy the meaning of works of art, but neither did it allow an easy substitution, as style does not move indifferently between times and places. In the Russian context, Malevich painted pictures whose styles were dislocated from their original meanings, or, more accurately, from the meanings discernable by contemporary art history's most common methodologies, which rely on art's—even abstract art's—referential capacities. Yet this does not mean they were meaningless. As Victor Erlich writes in his study *Russian Formalism,* meaningfulness or a "[s]emantic aura," need not be fixed; "[c]learly what was really at issue [for the formalists] was not emancipation from meaning, but autonomy *vis-à-vis* the referent."[123] The historical discourse that locates the meaning of, for example, impressionism in a suite of relationships to modern France cannot operate smoothly when impressionism goes to Russia—for impressionism was also a particular attitude towards and technique for representing its modern subjects, an attitude held by similarly modern subjects. To say that Malevich paints impressionist pictures echoes the artist's own use of the term and accounts for some of its formal characteristics; however, one needs to go farther and acknowledge the meaningful autonomy of this impressionism.

This meaning, or meaningfulness, cannot be encapsulated in a neat phrase because it obtains to a negative relation between style (impressionism) and world (Russia). It is something like the meaning of modernism: if the standard narrative of modernist art turns on art's increasing self-reflexivity, this self-reflexivity is nevertheless occasioned by forces external to the work of art. But Malevich's painting could not abjure a world it did not know. What he could

[123] Victor Erlich, *Russian Formalism: History, Doctrine*, 3rd ed. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981), 185.

do was explore the relationship of stylistic markers to styles themselves as, on the level of the work, the modernist artist explores the relationship of the illusion of the painted mark to the physical conditions of the picture plane. To extend modernist self-reflexivity to the level of style, to be “meta-modernist,” is the implicit project of Malevich’s early work.

CHAPTER TWO

AN ARTIST OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

> There were no discussions of art, and it took me quite a long time to find out that the word art existed, that there were artists who did nothing but draw whatever they liked.
>
> —Kazimir Malevich[1]

Modernist pictures were the beginning of Malevich's output. Radically abstract Suprematist canvases came next, then architectural models of impossible structures and, finally, a return to figurative painting. Meanwhile, he made decorations for revolutionary festivities designed "avant-garde" porcelain and taught a generation and a half of students, among them El Lissitzky and Władysław Strzemiński, whose own contributions to the history of art are indebted to their experiences with Malevich in that unlikeliest of modernist centers, the small provincial city of Vitebsk.[2] In order to understand the diversity of Malevich's work we need to investigate its historical roots and the image world they form. To start, we might consider a more familiar theoretical model. In Vitebsk, Malevich met the literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin.[3] For Bakhtin, the novel as a literary form is defined by its heterogeneity, a "phenomenon multiform in style and variform in speech and voice." As opposed to genres such as poetry, which are founded upon the unity of the author's speech, a disparate variety of internal voices—whose utterances

[1] Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 2:148; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 4:287. Translation modified.

[2] On Lissitzky see Clark, "God Is Not Cast Down."; El Lissitzky and Sophie Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1968); *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow*, ed. Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed (Los Angeles, CA: Getty Research Institute, 2003). On Strzemiński see Yve-Alain Bois, "Strzemiński and Kobro: In Search of Motivation," in *Painting as Model* (1993); Lodder, *Constructive Strands in Russian Art, 1914-1937*.On Vitebsk see Aleksandra Semenovna Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

[3] Bakhtin recounted his acquaintance with Malevich in an interview given late in life. See M. M. Bakhtin, *M.M. Bakhtin: besedy s V.D. Duvakinym* (Moscow: Soglasie, 2002), 155.

interpenetrate and affect one another—is a "prerequisite" for the novel.[4] Students of literature and Russian culture are familiar with Bakhtin's argument. Less noted, on the other hand, is that this theory of the novel is roughly analogous to the situation of the visual arts in modern Russia, wherein disparate image-making practices dialogued with one another. The implicit and explicit thematization of this variety was an important aspect of avant-garde practice.

This background is important for our understanding of Malevich's art, because he wasn't raised in Paris but far from centers of power and prestige, in the deeply conservative yet modernizing Russian Empire, near Kiev, in a dispossessed Polish family of gentry origins.[5] In his autobiography, Malevich briefly described the place of the icon, the devotional image, in his childhood home:

> The house was furnished simply; there were icons, which hung more for the sake of tradition and society, than from some religious feeling,—neither my father nor my mother were particularly religious [. . .]. My father like very much to have some fun by inviting the Catholic and Russian Orthodox priests, unexpectedly for them both."[6]

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[4] See "Discourse in the Novel," in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 261-64. The synthetic character of the novel, in Bakhtin's analysis, is but one expression of a culture that at many times understood its destiny as one of utopian synthesis, whether in religious or secular terms. See Andrew Wachtel, "Translation, Imperialism, and National Self-Definition in Russia," in *Alternative Modernities*, ed. Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001). Wachtel argues that Russian poets, from Mikhail Lomonosov (1711–1765) to Malevich's colleague Velimir Khlebnikov (1885–1922) were heavily invested in notions of a universal language—often taken to be Russian—that would absorb global cultures.

[5] Most accounts of Malevich's life place his birth in 1878; however, newly discovered archival materials establish 1879 as the correct year. See Andrzej Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie: Rekonstrukcje i Symulacje* (Krakow: Universitas, 2002). The most comprehensive account of Malevich's family origins may be found in Volume IV of Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*. Several documents pertaining to family history are reproduced in Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, *Malevich o sebe, sovremenniki o Maleviche: pis'ma, dokumenty, vospominaniia, kritika*, 2 vols. (Moscow: RA, 2004). On Malevich's non-Russian origins see Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, 4:12-17. Kiev, where Malevich spent some of his youth, was in fact quite multinational and was inhabited by many Poles, Russians, and even a sizable Jewish population. See Michael F. Hamm, "Continuity and Change in Late Imperial Kiev," in *The City in Late Imperial Russia*, ed. Michael F. Hamm (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), 96-97. Cf., for example, Myroslav Shkandrij's arugment for the particular importance of Ukrainian nationality for Malevich and others in the avant-garde: Myroslav Shkandrij, "Reinterpreting Malevich: Biography, Autobiography, Art," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 36, no. 4 (2002).

[6] Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 2:148; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 4:288.

The icon mediated between the artist's family and the world. Importantly, Malevich emphasizes this function of mediation over the icon's physical appearance. In this instance, although the devotional image's main role was not as an object of religious devotion (though we don't hear that Malevich's family *never* venerated icons, and in any case the visiting priests surely did), it had a social purpose nonetheless. This second, secular role puts the icon on the same plane as other kinds of images; but again, we will need to consider the character of this plane itself. The pictures in the family home were not simply for visual pleasure but important social objects. We never hear from Malevich about the appearance of these icons. What was a typical icon in nineteenth-century Russia? Usually, in the context of the avant-garde, the appearance and role of the icon is not described but rather assumed, and unfortunately this assumption tends to be that the icon in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was simply a more or less pure expression of unbroken medieval tradition. This wasn't the case. Antique icons were mostly held out of sight by isolated groups of sectarians, among which Malevich's family did not number. The icon had long been influenced by Western modes of painting, even reproductive technologies, and it was *this* kind of icon that almost certainly hung in Malevich's home, an object containing the voices of different artistic traditions.

The second part of this chapter considers the text of Malevich's late autobiography as a key to understanding his formation from and involvement in Russian ideas about art in the modern period. Russian modernism, after all, did not begin as simply the mimesis of Western modernism, and Malevich's aesthetic education was broader than his initial work might indicate. Thus, we are moved to consider the construction of Russian modernism before Malevich's interventions in an attempt to illuminate the stakes of his own modernism.

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In place of post-Renaissance illusionistic painting, the Russian avant-garde (broadly speaking) favored Russia's own artistic heritage, especially its inheritance of the Byzantine icon and the "primitive" sculptures of Russia's lost civilizations. On this point the scholarship is in agreement.[7] The importance of these national and folkloric traditions to the avant-garde in Russia is indisputable, as not only do the forms of avant-garde art at times resemble these alternative traditions, but some artists, namely Mikhail Larionov, made a point of bringing these objects into public view through the organization of exhibitions.[8] The avant-garde then affirmed and appropriated alternative traditions and rejected those it found dominant and stifling. Yet while the primitivism of the Russians nicely rhymed with that of Western artists from Vincent van Gogh to Pablo Picasso, the structures to which these primitivisms appeared as alternatives or challenges were not identical. Russian primitivism responded to a different image world.

I take the aesthetics of Immanuel Kant as an initial point of departure, but I prefer the term "image world" to refer to the larger discourse of which such aesthetics (and those of, e.g., the icon) are an element. An image world is a discourse of and about images, of both philosophical and other accounts of visual images, including conceptual categories of visual

[7] Anthony Parton, for instance, suspends his otherwise chronological account of Mikhail Larionov's career for a discussion of folk prints (*lubki*), icons, craft, shop signs (both metropolitan and provincial), amateur artists, graffiti, children's art, Western modernism, mythological tradition, and Petr Uspensky's ideas on the fourth dimension. See Anthony Parton, *Mikhail Larionov and the Russian Avant-Garde* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993). Also discussing Larionov, John Malmstad attempts to show that the artist's primitivism was not a question of influences received but an operational term; rather than calling upon the low or primitive for their connotations and forms, Larionov *made* primitive, "primitivized" as it were, the already-low, thereby debasing urban life. See John E. Malmstad, "The Sacred Profaned: Image and Word in the Paintings of Mikhail Larionov," in John E. Bowlt and Olga Matich, eds., *Laboratory of Dreams: The Russian Avant-Garde and Cultural Experiment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1996). Larionov and his associates' interests in these "low" artistic practices are documented much more heavily than Malevich's own. That Malevich held similar interests is hardly clear, and those that claim it to be the case do so not with particular evidence but through generalizations about the avant-garde; see, for example, Innesa Levkova-Lamm, ""Litso" kvadrata," *Iskusstvoznanie*, no. 1 (2001).

[8] See Sarah Warren, *Mikhail Larionov and the Cultural Politics of Late Imperial Russia* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2013).

representation—and of course material objects themselves.[9] This is not primarily an issue of the visual itself, because Russians seem to have been less interested, when they wrote about art, in appearances than the effects produced, or affects engendered, by a work.[10] Images were functional: they were thought to have a purpose beyond visual pleasure. This difference between Russia and the West becomes particularly apparent when the question of modernism arises. For Western modernism, no longer was it the painter's task to depict an illusory world, but rather he or she began to attend to the technical supports of the practice: the materiality of paint and the ineluctable flatness of the canvas. This is a twofold move that both divorces media from one another, for what is literary or photographic is not painterly—in other words art should be medium specific—and also abjures involvement in the quotidian world. Under this rubric, a work of art's claim to modernism rests on its visual appearance. This appearance suggests the work's own status as an object, for example, a painting. It is self-reflexive in its identification of itself as a painting, engaged with the specific qualities of its medium and, historically, part of a project to ascertain the essence of that medium. This short definition of the term "image world" is limited but will suffice for the historical difference discussed below.[11]

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[9] To compare the philosophical aesthetics of Russia to those of the West would struggle in vain with issues of inclusion and exclusion for, as Iurii Mann observes, in the Russian context it is impossible to separate the history of philosophical aesthetics from the history of, for example, the practice of literary criticism. See Iu.V. Mann, *Russkaia filosofskaia estetika (1820-1830-e gody)* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1969), 5.

[10] This seeming disinterest in the visual aspects of visual representation is one reason I avoid terms used by some art historians such as "visuality," which in any case is a term burdened by such debate that its deployment tends to be less the use of a convenient sign and more the occasion for continual polemic.

[11] This definition is basically Clement Greenberg's classic formulation of modernist painting, which has been criticized but not done away with. Greenberg's notion of "flatness" as essential to modernist painting means something even for non-"formalist" histories of art, such as T.J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea*. Clark describes flatness as a "metaphor for materiality" in Cézanne (159); as something "tawdry" in Pollock (311), and so on. The idea of "medium specificity," crucial for Greenberg, as central to the identity of modern and contemporary art has been productively revitalized by Rosalind Krauss's work. See Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); "Modernist Painting," in *The Collected Essays and Criticism*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Rosalind E. Krauss, *A Voyage on the North*

Although Russian artists explored issues of medium specificity, Russian modernism did not hold medium specificity in the same central place it occupies in the standard Western modernist narrative. Indeed, having learned lessons of Western modernist art, Malevich created his own style that showed how these lessons could be applied in an image world that blurred the boundaries of artistic media. This blurring is characteristic of Russian art before and including modernism far more than medium specificity is. In Russia, photograph, painting, and icon were imbricated with one another and with the social spaces they inhabited and defined. Although the images created by Russians often resemble those made in the West, they cannot be understood as part of a similar project of differentiation along the lines of media, because, despite this *visual* resemblance, the Russian image world confounded attempts at differentiation and preferred the blurring of various visual practices in attitudes towards the idea of art or visual representation in general. At a basic level we can heuristically make a two-part division: on the one hand the icon, a sacred and *useful* image, and on the other hand the oil painting, the secular and "purposeless" work of art. Somewhere in between these poles lies so much of modern Russia's visual production, such as the critical and influential paintings of the Russian realists and the artisanal work of the peasant, the decorated stoves that impressed (as we shall see) the young Malevich.

This leads to a problem of terminology in describing an image world whose contents were not "pure." If the history of Western aesthetics and art history (especially standard accounts of modernism) are concerned with the identification and study of a particular phenomenon called "art," a phenomenon we now consider to be both geographically and historically circumscribed,

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Sea: Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition (London: Thames & Hudson, 2000); *Perpetual Inventory* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2010). There is no point in burning the straw man of "Clement Greenberg," done often enough and (generally) without particularly interesting effects. Western modernism is, after all, not reducible to a caricatured Greenberg. I would like to simply remind readers how deeply certain basic assumptions about modernism penetrate into any attempt to study its many formations.

then something happening at another place and another time is simply not art in this sense, because art's necessary conditions are negated. *But also:* Russians loved this art, they sought it out and used it. So there remains a strong connection with art. Accordingly, the modern Russian image world was filled then with something like "nonart." This reflects both the non-identity of the Russian image world with that of the West, while still preserving that important connection. At the most material level the term reflects the fact that Russian modernism and Russian modernists were interested in image-making traditions from outside the fine arts; the icon, peasant craft, and so on. More tendentiously, I mean by this term a sort of inversion of Marcel Duchamp's interest in the ordinary object's potential to acquire the status of art: the condition of nonart meant that even the most artlike image, a naturalistic oil painting, always contained within itself something irreducible to the beautiful object of aesthetic experience.

The art of the Russian avant-garde was produced within a particular cultural field whose analysis is inseparable from and yet irreducible to the standard histories of Euro-American modernism. As Dipesh Chakrabarty notes, while modern European thought is indispensable to any understanding of modernity, simply to "translat[e] diverse forms, practices, and understandings of life into universalist political-theoretical categories of deeply European origin" renders difference falsely transparent.[12] What is the starting place for considering this difference? Russian modernism in the visual arts is peculiar, among other reasons, because Russia played no significant role in the history of Western art before 1915, and from that peripheral and unknown place launched its avant-garde assault that has by now become canonical.[13] Nonetheless what we

[12] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 17.

[13] Russian modernism both coincides with the period of "traditional modernism" (the "the later nineteenth- through the mid-twentieth century" as defined by the Modernist Studies Association) and trades with it as an equal, making it unusual in the list of "other modernisms," most of which appear *after* the traditional one. A "diffusionist ideology,"

have is a grand narrative of modern art that tends to obscure the specificity of "marginal" artists such as Malevich and submits them to judgment based on supposedly universal criteria of value embodied in this canon.[14] In general, the authors of this narrative underwrite it with an appeal to Enlightenment philosophy in the figure of Kant.[15] The art historian Michael Fried asks incredulously if one could really argue "against Kant and Wittgenstein" that there are no criteria available to separate "empty avant-gardism [from] the far smaller and often less obviously extreme body of work that really matters."[16] Philosopher Arthur Danto says no, the modernist critics have it wrong: the analytic of the beautiful is not the appropriate basis for a theory of art—but, for Danto, Kant's conception of the *artist* is.[17] Thierry de Duve gives a more expansive account of modernism in part through reformulating Kant's account of aesthetic judgment.[18] And yet the kinds of holistic thinking characteristic of Russian modernity reveal a troubled relationship to the ideas of Kant and philosophy in general; though these thinkers knew Kant, his

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the object of critique of Susan Stanford Friedman and others, is not to blame for the problem that I identify because Europe did not defuse to Russia practices such as Malevich's. As I attempted to demonstrate in my introduction, it is Malevich who was diffused and continues to diffuse. See Friedman, "Periodizing Modernism: Postcolonial Modernities and the Space/Time Borders of Modernist Studies," 429.

[14] That this narrative cannot be dispensed with does not change the fact it has been modified, supplemented, questioned. Works dedicated to the problem of "other modernisms" (during the period of the historical avant-garde) in art history include *Cosmopolitan Modernisms*, ed. Mercer Kobena, et al. (London and Cambridge: Institute of International Visual Arts and MIT Press, 2005); Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890-1939*; *Modern Art in Africa, Asia, and Latin America: An Introduction to Global Modernisms*, ed. Elaine O'Brien (Chichester and Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

[15] For Kant's account of aesthetic judgment, see Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthew (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). §9 and passim. Scholars have noted the ways in which modernist criticism, although it invokes Kant, is not particularly concerned with an accurate reading of Kant. Similarly, as will be discussed in more detail, nineteenth-century Russian readers of Kant could also be inaccurate and unfair in their assessments. "Kant," for these parties and this dissertation, is shorthand for a conception of art as secular, disinterested experience of the beautiful developed in the West during and after the Enlightenment, which followed other, also Western, developments in attitudes towards the image during the Renaissance and Reformation.

[16] Michael Fried, "How Modernism Works: A Response to T. J. Clark," *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 1 (1982): 229.

[17] Arthur C. Danto, *What Art Is* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 116-34.

[18] See de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*.

philosophy was frequently either attacked, substantially modified, or both.[19] The most important Russian thinkers were not practitioners of critical philosophy and the disinterestedness at the heart of Kant's aesthetics plays little role, if any, in important Russian discussions about art. Enlightenment thinkers themselves postulated Russian difference, creating for the modern imaginary a map of a Europe whose primary cultural division lay not (as previously) between North and South but between West and East.[20] This cartography of difference remained in the imaginary through at least through the famous *Map of the World according to the Surrealists* of 1929, wherein the Soviet Union's alien immensity dwarfs a condensed Western Europe and nonexistent America. From both perspectives, Russia was on the other side of a border.

One would be right to question generalizations of the scale I have made above. To be clear: Malevich was not the manifestation or emblem of "Russian modernism." He was a *participant* in it. Additionally, I do not mean to suggest a straightforward relationship between intellectual history and the actual production of works of art; one would be remiss to ignore the potential for art history to write an account "from below;" that is, taking into account the potential of artworks to generate their own critical frameworks. I do not intend to ignore such

[19] Thomas Nemeth's study of Kant's reception in Russia relates that the Imperial government went so far as to exile some students of the philosopher's supposedly atheistic thought. See Thomas Nemeth, "Kant in Russia: The Initial Phase," *Studies in Soviet Thought* 36, no. 1/2 (1988); "Kant in Russia: The Initial Phase (Cont'd)," *Studies in Soviet Thought* 40, no. 4 (1990). Hyperbolic Russian dislike of Kant and what he supposedly represented did not always make for the clearest thinking: as T.B. Dlugach notes, the religious philosopher Pavel Florensky's constant polemics against Kant blinded him to areas of potential agreement. See T.B. Dlugach, "Problema vremeni v filosofii I. Kanta i P. Florenskogo," in *Kant i filosofiia v Rossii*, ed. Z.A. Kamenskii and V.A. Zhuchkov (Moscow: Nauka, 1994), 189. In a review of this book, Randall Poole argues that, in the Russian case, the attempt to contextualize the thought of Kant draws attention to the attempts of Russian philosophy to distinguish itself from its Western models. Randall A. Poole, review of *Kant i filosofiia v Rossii*., Z. A. Kamenskii, V. A. Zhuchkov, *Slavic Review* 55, no. 1 (1996): 165.

[20] See Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994). But cf. Marshall Poe, who has questioned Wolff's insistence on strictly Enlightenment origins of a discourse of "eastern" or "northern" Europe; Poe's sees the stirrings of this discussion earlier, in the Renaissance. See Marshall Poe, "Review: *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment* by Larry Wolff," *Russian Review* 55, no. 4 (1996).

considerations. But here the central and indisputable point is this: though nineteenth-century Russia grappled with the developments of Western philosophy and art, it did so from its own, predominantly Orthodox, intellectual and artistic tradition, and this, in turn, generated a unique cultural situation that must be addressed. In short, if "Kant was the first real modernist," then Russian modernism followed a different lineage.[21] This lineage needs to be developed with an eye to the fact that the crucial shift from "cult image" to "art" was far more tentative and incomplete in Russia, which remained full of venerated cult images long after such practices had retreated in Western Europe, indeed even after the 1917 Revolution.[22] Secularizing Enlightenment aesthetics did not penetrate Russian discussions about art. The development of naturalistic painting in the West in concert with this aesthetics gave rise to new canons of artistic greatness, ones at odds with Russian practices. The internalization of these canons induced a late seventeenth-century English visitor to Russia to write, "[t]heir imagery is very pitiful painting,

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[21] Clement Greenberg, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, IV: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969*, ed. John O' Brien (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85. One could continue and say that both historians who continue Greenberg's project and even those who dispute it, namely Rosalind Krauss, "remain within the horizons of modernist theory to the extent that neither breaches its conceptual cornerstone—Greenberg's equation of medium-specificity and aesthetic value," a conception of medium-specificity rooted in an understanding of Kant's aesthetics. Diarmuid Costello, "Greenberg's Kant and the Fate of Aesthetics in Contemporary Art Theory," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 2 (2007): 220.

[22] See Hans Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Robert L Nichols, "The Icon and the Machine in Russia's Religious Renaissance, 1900-1909," in *Christianity and the Arts in Russia*, ed. William Craft Brumfield and Miloš Velimirović (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Vera Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Oleg Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia* (London: Reaktion, 2002). Anyone going to a contemporary exhibition of icons quickly discovers the enduring Orthodox commitment to the power of images. For example, the icons exhibited in the Getty's *Holy Image, Hallowed Ground: Icons from Sinai*, on view November 2006—March 2007, were installed in large, climate-controlled vitrines. The attempt to transform the exhibition hall, because of these obtrusive conservation necessities (among other things), into a sacred space appropriate for a functioning icon was obviously incomplete. Nevertheless, Orthodox viewers navigated large crowds in order to kiss the glass enclosures protecting the objects of their veneration. Scholars have argued that the Russian discourse of the image persisted in secular fora as well. The Soviet poster, for example, distinguished itself from both capitalist advertisements and "art." The poster did not present the illusion of choice, subjective interpretation, nor material singularity. Rather, "[l]ike a Byzantine painting, the effective Soviet poster was meant to instruct. Yet it was also meant to agitate, to spur an empathetic pang. And it was meant . . . to do so again, and again, and again." See *Vision and Communism: Viktor Koretsky and Dissident Public Visual Culture*, (New York: New Press, 2011), 10.

flat and ugly, after the Greek [that is, Byzantine] manner . . .."[23] On a conceptual-philosophical *and* at times on a formal level, Russian painting did not fully comport itself to modern Western European frameworks—even, as we shall see, in the period directly prior to the emergence of the avant-garde.

So neither the secularization of the work of art nor the development of philosophical aesthetics happened in Russia as they did in the West, despite the fact that images from the West came to Russia. The development of modern art in the Russian Empire must be written with the complex relationship between "foreign" and "domestic" cultural practices in mind. A Russian such as Malevich ("Russian" here describes a cultural situation in space and time, not an ethnic or strictly geographical description) made and saw images differently than the subject of art history; that is, the more often than not French, German, or (especially after 1945) American maker and viewer whose experiences comprise the largely unexamined standard for most modernist scholarship. Scholars have already noted this difference between Western and Russian attitudes towards art in the post-Revolutionary context. The origins of this difference have unfortunately and incorrectly been ascribed solely to the Revolution. Alfred Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, ran into difficulties when he scoured post-Revolutionary Russia for modernist painting. With surprise and no small frustration he exclaimed that the important critic and theoretician Sergei Tretiakov "had no interest in painting since it had become abstract!"[24] Confounded by Tretiakov and his ilk, Barr wrote, "I must find some painters if possible," more specifically, "painters of my particular problem."[25] Reconsidering this

[23] Samuel Collins's *The Present State of Russia*, excerpted and reprinted in Anthony Cross, *Russia under Western Eyes, 1517-1825* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1971), 116.

[24] Alfred H. Barr, Jr., "Russian Diary 1927-28," *October* 7 (1978): 14.

[25] Ibid., 21, 43.

"problem"—call it modernism—will show that the divergence between Western and Russian modernisms runs deeper in history and culture than the post-Revolutionary situation wherein it is usually located, the situation when the avant-garde found the need "to dismantle itself and its specialized activities in order to assume a different role in the newly defined process of the social production of culture."[26] Considering Malevich's intimacy with the histories of modernism and the Russian avant-garde makes the difference between Western and Russian modernisms more intelligible. More than this, we must return to nineteenth-century Russia in order to find those ideas and pictures that structured Malevich's image world. Making this return will show that the particularly socialist rejection of the idea of artistic detachment and the self-reflexive modernist project was not motivated by the Revolution alone. Rather, this phenomenon should be seen as a continuation of Russia's own image practices that generated a modernism in tension with its common formations.

I

Aleksandr Ivanov's *The Appearance of Christ to the People* (completed in 1857) is arguably the most important Russian painting of the nineteenth century (fig. 2.1).[27] This was an immense work by an ambitious history painter. Ivanov worked on the theme for twenty years, producing study after study, sketch after sketch, making not only a painting but a myth of tortuous and laborious creation. By the mid-nineteenth century, Russian artists had mastered academic genres, from the history painting of Karl Briullov to the portraiture of Vasily Tropinin

[26] Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," *October* 30 (1984): 82.

[27] A summary of Ivanov's career and of the genesis of this work in particular may be found in Dmitrii Vladimirovich Sarab'ianov, *Russian Art: From Neoclassicism to the Avant-Garde, 1800-1917* (New York: Henry N. Abrams, 1990), 70-84.

and the genre painting of Aleksei Venetsianov. To look at such works only as the successful emulation of Western models would neglect their particular significance within their own cultural milieu. For although standard enough in its technique, Ivanov's painting meant something in Russia it could never have meant in Western Europe.[28]

Ivanov's painting contains a scene from sacred history and also figures from contemporary life: Ivanov placed Nikolai Gogol standing in the middle ground. Gogol's face is turned towards, his body away from, the approaching figure of Christ to his right. Ivanov himself appears as a seated figure in a red hat. The inclusion in a history painting of the artist himself and his contemporaries was in itself no novelty; however, in Ivanov's work this detail serves to figure other, more exceptional, strategies of combination: the poet and theologian Aleksei Khomiakov wrote that Ivanov's practice sought "that the object itself moved [*predmet sam pereshel*] to the canvas, by means of some kind of spiritual daguerreotype, under which disappears the very personality of the artist."[29] This picture was only possible in Russia, continued Khomiakov, for Ivanov was a student of icon painting as well as an observer of European work. Ivanov's picture was a site for Russia's entangled discourses of the icon, the oil (i.e. Western) painting, and photography. Khomiakov's remark prompts an investigation of how

[28] Indeed, the picture has retained its force through the past 150 years. Erik Bulatov, an important artist of the late Soviet period, turns to Ivanov's work in his recent visual meditation on author- and spectatorship, a painting entitled *Painting and Viewers* (Kartina i Zriteli; fig. 2.7). He depicts, all in paint, viewers and tour guides, the latter gesturing like so many John the Baptists, before Ivanov's canvas. There is no break in the style of his marks between the depiction of the canvas and its spectators, thus fusing in the medium of paint what, for example, Thomas Struth's photographs of similar scenes respect as separate (for example, *Louvre 4*, fig. 2.8). In this intentional "inattentiveness" to ostensibly essential differences between media, Bulatov continues, as we shall see, a tradition of Russian modern art.

[29] A.S. Khomiakov, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii A.S. Khomiakova*, 8 vols. (Moscow: Universitetskaia tipografiia, 1900), 3:353. Laura Engelstein has pointed to this remark in her consideration of the reception of Ivanov's picture over time in its divergent interpretations by Slavophiles (who emphasized its supposedly iconic character) and Westernizers (who saw in it contemporary social concerns). I build on her account in my claim that this picture should play a part in our understanding of Russian art more generally, even that of the avant-garde. See Laura Engelstein, *Slavophile Empire: Imperial Russia's Illiberal Path* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2009), 151-91.

exactly a history painting, following Western conventions imported in the previous century, could also be a photograph (I use "photograph" to indicate any image created through the fixation of an image to a surface through light) and, in its "spiritual" elements, a kind of icon. This phrase "spiritual daguerreotype" (apropos of an oil painting) in other words, points to a culturally specific conception of image making in contradistinction to theories of medium specificity that dominate received modernist narratives.

Khomiakov was a Slavophile, a group of nineteenth-century thinkers dissatisfied with the models of thought and society they saw conceived and promulgated in Western Europe.[30] Slavophilism's consideration of national specificity was an unavoidable theme (even when it was opposed) in the work of subsequent thinkers and, though often indirectly, artists. The national chauvinism of Alexander III and Nicholas II and avant-garde primitivism all find partial origins in this line of thought, and thus it is worth investigating its key terms, for these terms contain insight into the image world of Russian modernism.

Khomiakov's emphasis on Russian particularity was historicized by his contemporary Ivan Kireevsky. Kireevsky found a model of society in the traditional Russian peasant commune superior to that of modern Europe:

> When . . . we imagine ancient Russian society, we do not see castles, lowborn rabble surrounding them, noble knights, nor a king struggling against them [as, for Kireevsky, in the West]. You see instead a countless multitude of small communes scattered over the face of the Russian land . . . These small worlds, or communities, merge into other, larger communities, which in turn form territorial

[30] I should note that the term "Slavophile" (like that of "Westernizer") and its membership is in no small measure the creation of intellectual historians and are debatable. On Slavophilism in general see *On Spiritual Unity: A Slavophile Reader*, trans. Boris Jakim and Robert Bird (Hudson, NY: Lindisfarne Books, 1998); Susanna Rabow-Edling, *Slavophile Thought and the Politics of Cultural Nationalism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006); Andrzej Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy: History of a Conservative Utopia in Nineteenth-Century Russian Thought* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989).

> and then tribal communities. Out of these is formed the one shared, vast community of the entire Russian land under the Grand Prince of All the Russias.[31]

This society is *sobornyi,* an adjective and neologism from the word for cathedral or council (*sobor*) whose abstract noun form, *sobornost'* (sometimes translated as "counciliarity"), became a key term of Russian thought, a term that names the transcendental church comprised of a free unity of people living collectively in Christ. Khomiakov faulted European aesthetics for being too individualistic, because European artworks were not, in his mind, rooted in such a collective life.

Against the holism of the Russian idea, the fragmentation characteristic of the West allowed the development of the fine arts, or, as Khomiakov put it, the "Pagan worship of abstract beauty . . . founded . . . on a delusion of the imagination." These Western works are the fragmentary and insincere expressions of a culture that has eliminated collective life through its excessive rationality. But *true* art, for Khomiakov, is "born of the sum total of human relationships." Counterposed to the fragmentary one-sidedness of Western art is the aesthetics of ritual:

> Each Christian should set a high value upon the unity of Church rituals, for it is here that the unity of spirit and doctrine is made visibly manifest, even for the unenlightened; for the enlightened, on the other hand, it is the source of living and Christian joy.
>
> The Church accepts any ritual that expresses spiritual striving toward God, just as she accepts any prayer and icon, but above all rituals she recognizes the holy liturgy in which all the fullness of church teaching and spirit is expressed, and expressed not by some kind of conventional signs and symbols, but by the word of life and truth inspired from on high. Only one who understands the liturgy can understand the Church. Above all else is unity of holiness and love. [32]

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[31] Ivan Kireevsky, "On The Nature of European Culture and on Its Relationship to Russian Culture," in *On Spiritual Unity: A Slavophile Reader*, 219.

[32] Kireevsky, "On the Nature of European Culture . . . "; Khomiakov, "The Church Is One," in ibid., 226, 34, 51.

Art—the icon—is understood as necessary inasmuch as it expresses unity of spirit and doctrine, but its ability to do this is generated by a sort of spiritual dynamic and not a circumscribed vocabulary of signs, such as conventions of academic painting. Although Ivanov's painting is not itself a ritual, this static image in the Western mode of oil painting is not (for Khomiakov) deprived of its potential to be a genuine Orthodox work, in part because it pictures the dynamic at the heart of the ritual: the literal appearance of Christ's body before congregants. This ritual origin of the painting, in other words, is what makes it a successful picture, not its skillful deployment of the "conventional signs and symbols" of oil painting.

Khomiakov's approval of Ivanov's picture makes clear that the deployment of the conventions of Western painting—the oil painting, the history painting—are *not* sufficient conditions for generating the fragmentary aesthetics of the West. The bad aesthetic values of Western painting do not necessarily follow from a picture that "looks like" a Western painting. Rather, Khomiakov's commentary leads us, through its photographic metaphor, to consider Ivanov's painting a peculiar kind of icon.

"Icon" names the devotional image in the Orthodox tradition originating in the Byzantine Empire, the Greek-speaking eastern portion of the former Roman Empire. Eastern Christianity, struggling with the Mosaic prohibition on image making (Exodus 20:4; Deuteronomy 5:8-9), theorized the image during and in the wake of the iconoclast controversy in Byzantium (730-754; 780-813 AD). These theories operated on polemical readings of scripture and other early Christian texts in order to demonstrate the acceptability—the necessity in fact—of the image to the Christian faith.[33]

[33] For a history of Byzantine iconoclasm whose analysis focuses on its theological-aesthetic debates and theories see Charles Barber, *Figure and Likeness: On the Limits of Representation in Byzantine Iconoclasm* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

Regardless of whether or not his own picture was successful as a religious image, in Ivanov's time such an iconic image put on view some essential relationship between the depictions of sacred personages and their prototypes in heaven.[34] Whereas Western painting since the Renaissance aimed to show the painter's command of *disegno* and *colorito* and his ability to imitate God's creative power, the icon painter created an object that functioned as a connection between the beholder and the divine. The functionality of the icon means that its medium is that *of a medium* (in the sense of a device or person that acts as an intermediary between two otherwise distinct things) and this is more important than the other, physical, media that constitute it. Khomiakov was conscious of the consequences of this thought, and saw the icon in historical terms, as the scholar E.I Annenkova has noted. For Khomiakov, a return to the form of the ancient icon was impossible as "the icon, as a form, unified [faith and truth] and having historically justified itself . . . could not serve as a model for spiritual creativity" in the modern age.[35] The forms of medieval painting once secured the religious essence of the icon, but such forms were contingent, and may no longer prove functional at another historical moment. The future forms of true Russian artistic creativity were for Khomiakov unknowable.[36] The most important thing about images is not what they look like, and Khomiakov puts this fundamental feature of the Russian image world in forward-looking terms. The acknowledgment of the

[34] The general praise accorded to Ivanov's work was not universal, and its detractors could make its academic appearance a target for their criticism. Vasily Rozanov (1856–1919), one of *fin-de-siècle* Russia's most eccentric intellectual voices, criticized the painting for precisely this, its historical and "ethnographic" concerns. For Rozanov, Ivanov's painting pictured mere appearances, the "look" of Christ in his time, rather than the spiritual meaning of Christ's appearance. See V. V. Rozanov, *Sredi khudozhnikov*, ed. A. N. Nikoliukin (Moscow: Respublika, 1994), 242.

[35] E.I. Annenkova, "Problema sootnosheniia iskusstva i religii v vospriiatii slavianofilov," in *Slavianofil'stvo i sovremennost': sbornik statei*, ed. Boris Fedorovich Egorov, V. A. Kotel′nikov, and Iu.V. Stennik (Saint Petersburg: Nauka, 1994), 66.

[36] He wrote, towards the end of his life, "We cannot say or guess what artistic forms the richness of Russian thought and Russian feeling should eventually pour out." Quoted in ibid., 71.

historicity of the icon did not mean its inevitable sublation into the category of art (though other nineteenth-century Russians, such as the great art historian Nikodim Kondakov, certainly saw the icon as a form of artwork analogous to Western painting and evaluated it in similar, secular terms).[37] Despite the fact that it figures Orthodox cultural tradition, there is nothing necessarily conservative in the icon's relationship to actual practices of image making. Functional images like the icon could take the form of avant-garde artworks. The recognition of this fact by artist and critic alike would prove important to the reception and refinement of Malevich's Suprematism.

A pair of historical facts makes the conceptual blurring between oil painting, photograph, and icon easier to grasp. First, the icon is not necessarily a painting; from its earliest days the icon "could be made from ivory, enamel, or any other media."[38] Additionally, in early twentieth-century, Russia icons began to be printed on paper on a large scale.[39] Clearly then the icon is not synonymous with any one physical medium or even any one genus of medium in the normal sense: neither the unique oil painting or daguerreotype nor the infinitely reproducible print (or, later, the photograph proper). Thus establishing the form of the icon—a kind of *material* consistency proper to it, its "medium"—would not answer the question of meaning, for meaning is the product of relationships performed and at times theorized between images and viewers. The ancient cult image was venerated for its antiquity and for its power, it both demanded and

[37] Kondakov thought that the Russian admiration for Western painting had resulted in the neglect of icon painting, ultimately reducing it to unartistic "handicraft." N. P. Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, trans. Ellis H. Minns (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1927), 2-3. Kondakov saw little difference in character between the Russian icon and Western religious painting. He wrote that an icon was merely "for the most part, a depiction causing a prayerful mood." *Ikonografiia bogomateri* (Saint Petersburg: Tipografiia imperatorskoi akademii nauk, 1914), 1:1.

[38] Robin Cormack, *Icons* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 8.

[39] See Nichols, "The Icon and the Machine in Russia's Religious Renaissance, 1900-1909."

offered protection to its viewers, it took on "real power."[40] Iconicity lies not in a medium itself but in this cult relation between image and viewer. Something invisible lies at the center of a particular notion of the image. Because the controversies over cult images were not waged on grounds of taste or beauty, art-historical "analysis of painters or styles" proves of little use.[41] The crisis of the cult image arrives with the Protestant Reformation, that is, with a shift in attitudes toward representations as much as in the representations themselves.[42] A visual description of paradigmatic forms does not define the icon, as the icon qua icon depends on a historically contingent mode of human subjectivity, and one that, in the West, was no longer solicited by the image by the nineteenth century.

Yet while in the West change occurred on the level of image production *and* image praxis, in Russia the image still functioned as a cult object even as it and its beholders undertook a process of formal "Westernization" beginning in the eighteenth century under Peter the Great. Though over the centuries various authorities have attempted to set standards for the icon in regards to its allowable originality (in what measure may a newly made icon deviate from its models?), quality (what is the relationship between the icon and normative canons of beauty?), and mechanical reproducibility, these attempts should not obscure the iconic form's historical plasticity. Art historian Hans Belting's contempt for those people who today venerate icons reveals the depth of this plasticity:

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[40] Belting, *Likeness and Presence: A History of the Image before the Era of Art*, 7.

[41] Ibid., 2.

[42] Ibid. See especially the introduction and chapter 20, "Religion and Art: The Crisis of the Image at the Beginning of the Modern Age."

> Today, emigrants from an Eastern Orthodox background and religious souls yearning for a pure, "original" art vie with each other in their cult of the icon itself, a cult satisfied willy-nilly by any example.[43]

Though a scholar of the cult image, Belting cannot fully disabuse himself of the need to see icons as objects of aesthetic judgment, and thus he does not recognize the implicit claim he makes, which is really quite startling: that the modern icon's *raison d'être*, its spiritual function, has nothing to do with the particulars of its physical appearance.

Very little then stood in the way of the photograph's entry into the discourse of the icon. The photograph's commensurability with the icon is present in the Russian language itself: one common word for photographic processes, used through the early twentieth century, was *svetopis',* "light-writing."[44] This made it rhyme with painting, *zhivopis'*, "life-writing" (from the Greek *zoographos*, life-writer). The linguistic root of these two terms (*-pis'*) relate them both to the sacred Word. Nevertheless, while all three modes of image making (painting, photograph, and the icon) share a relationship to the Word, the icon's relationship was consciously developed beyond etymological implication. The icon is that image for which the Word is central: Boris Uspensky notes that although the language-like character of the icon is manifested formally in the texts that appear on icons (such as the written labels, titulae or *titly* in Russian, that identify sacred personages) and the consistent use of certain visual forms, it is more important that "the semiotic approach . . . is *internally* inherent to a work of icon-painting."[45] That is, the discourse

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[43] Ibid., 17. It should be noted that, for Belting, the "rediscovery" of the icon in the later nineteenth century is not a recovery of the cult relationship between image and viewer. In Belting's account, Kondakov, the foremost scholar of Byzantine-Russian art and archaeology at the time, is the representative of the sort of identity politics behind the reassertion of iconic form in late Imperial Russia, a politics of little interest to the objective inquiries of the art historian.

[44] Katherine Hill Reischl, "Objective Authorship: Photography and Writing in Russia, 1905-1975" (University of Chicago, 2013), 20.

[45] Boris Andreevich Uspenskii, *The Semiotics of the Russian Icon*, trans. Stephen Rudy (Lisse: Peter de Ridder Press, 1976), 9.

of the icon is a primary source of its semiotic character. Although semioticians may find all sorts of visual representations suitable objects of analysis, the icon is unique in that its makers, viewers, and advocates identify it *as a text*. Uspensky points to identical devotional practices for both sacred texts and images, such as their veneration by kissing, placing them in particular locations in the home, and prohibitions on their improper disposal.[46]

Furthermore, Khomiakov's photographic metaphor, citing the disappearance of the artist Ivanov in the making of his picture, proposes a kind of modern *acheiropoieton,* a miraculous image made "without human hands," the self-representation of the divine impressing itself on matter.[47] In other words, essentially no human agent was responsible for *The Appearance of Christ to the People.* Yet this proposition has its own complications: the invocation of the *acheiropoieton*, in the nineteenth century, did not always pertain to objects displayed for religious devotion. Invoked here in the context of a society that retained traditional devotional practices vis-à-vis the image while at the same time influenced by Western notions of art, the *acheiropoieton* could be and was drawn out of the realm of religious specificity. This complication accounts for the poetic use of the figure of the *acheiropoieton*, demonstrated most famously by Pushkin in his well-known adaptation of an Horatian ode that begins, "I have set up

[46] Ibid., 10.

[47] The great historian of Byzantine art Ernst Kitzinger writes that "[a]cheiropoietai are of two kinds: Either they are images believed to have been made by hands other than those of ordinary mortals or else they are claimed to be mechanical, though miraculous, impressions of the original." Ernst Kitzinger, "The Cult of Images in the Age before Iconoclasm," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 8 (1954): 113. Kitzinger writes that "[u]ndoubtedly one reason why the cult of these miraculous images began to enjoy official approval and encouragement was that they could be defended relatively easily against charges of idolatry"; furthermore, "[n]ot only does the acheiropoieta appear as a direct and lasting record of the Incarnate God, it owes its existence to a reproductive act which repeats, on a lower level, the miracle of the Incarnation. Hence the use made of these images in defense of orthodox christology [*sic*]" (143). Stephen Hutchings shows that even the avant-garde identified the qualities of the photograph with those of the icon. See Stephen C. Hutchings, "Photographic Eye as Poetic I: Maiakovskii's and Rodchenko's *Pro eto* Project (1923)," *History of Photography* 24, no. 4 (2000).

a monument to myself not made by human hands [*nerukotvornyi*]."[48] Pushkin's use of the *acheiropoieton* metaphor signals the elision of creative genius and divine creation broadly characteristic of modern aesthetics in the West.[49] Khomiakov, unlike Pushkin, emphasizes that the miraculous quality of the image stems *not* from the sovereign artist, but from actual divinity. Yet, as Pushkin's ode demonstrates, it might be possible to see Ivanov's image otherwise even while retaining the metaphor of the *acheiropoieton.* Certainly, as in the West, photography's emergence in Russia in the 1840s and 50s occasioned debates over its status as art (one writer criticized some photographic portraits as "products of fashion and resourceful industry").[50] In the 1880s photography became the preferred means of reproducing paintings in print and, in 1889, an exhibition commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the photograph in Russia opened in Saint Petersburg.[51] The photographic metaphor could be used to invoke a type of sacred image, but the photograph itself might be simple technical process or an artwork as well. So it would be wrong to argue that Ivanov's picture necessarily would have been seen as a kind of icon. What I want to stress is the *potential* for this understanding, a potential that would not have been present in the

[48] A.S. Pushkin, *Sobranie sochinenii v 10 tomakh* (Moscow: GIKhL, 1959-1962), 2:460.

[49] On the development of the idea of the sovereign artist in Western Europe, see Ernst Kantorowicz, "The Sovereignty of the Artist: A Note on Legal Maxims and Renaissance Theories of Art," in *De artibus opuscula XL: Essays in Honor of Erwin Panofsky*, ed. Millard Meiss (New York: New York University Press, 1961).

[50] Quoted in Elena Barkhatova, *Russkaia svetopis': pervyi vek fotoiskusstva 1839-1914* (Saint Petersburg: Al'ians -- Liki Rossii, 2009), 99. See also S. Morozov, "Early Photography in Eastern Europe: Russia," *History of Photography* 1, no. 4 (1977).

[51] The "expert committee" which sent out invitations to exhibit included not only well-known photographers, but also such painters as Ivan Shishkin. Alexandre Benois, the man who would call Malevich's *Black Square* an "icon," was a member of the committee as well. *Russkaia khudozhestvennaia fotografiia: ocherki iz istorii fotografii 1839-1917* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1955), 63; Elena Barkhatova, "Nauka? Remeslo? Iskusstvo!," in *Russkaia fotografiia: seredina XIX-nachalo XX veka*, ed. Nikolai Rakhmanov (Moscow: Planeta, 1996), 11. The photograph could also reproduce singular artworks such as paintings. As Barkhatova notes, these "authentic" (*podlinnogo*) reproductions of "high" art were seen to possess "self-sufficient aesthetic meaning" (7).

West, and a potential that has nothing at all to do with the fact that the work looks like and is a construction of oil and canvas.

Khomiakov's remark that Ivanov's picture was a "spiritual daguerreotype" shows how the aesthetics of the icon could permeate conceptions of photography and oil painting. The social promise extended in such Slavophile aesthetics made both photography and oil painting more than art in the usual sense. Nevertheless, a painting like *The Appearance of Christ to the People*, with its naturalistic figures and perspectival construction, traffics in the conventions of art. The spiritual qualities of Ivanov's picture, identified by Khomiakov through his invocation of the icon, inhabit visual forms that are unquestionably the product of careful study and education in the tradition of Western post-Renaissance art. In the Russian image world, such conventions did not demand the reception of a picture as "mere" art. The icon offered for Russian viewers an alternative paradigm for the experience of the image, even when the image in question was not technically an icon. The paradigm was not art but nonart and it worked—in images such as Ivanov's—to defeat the stylistic (oil-on-canvas) artfulness of image.

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The icon was not principally a theoretical object. In fact, Imperial Russia was insufflated with millions of icons.[52] Far from an abstract theological discussion, the icon maintained its presence in culture in the twentieth century alongside the secularizing forces of modernity. In the

[52] Oleg Tarasov notes that the "millions of icons [in Russia] made the space surrounding a person resemble a kind of 'icon,' the image of a 'realized' eschatology of 'Holy Russia.'" See Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia*, 31. Jefferson J.A. Gatrall points to the work of the nineteenth-century scholar Ivan Snegirev, who "explained in an 1862 article [that] holy faces, watching over the faithful from the cradle to the grave, were always in the visual field: at church, at home, at work; on city gates and bridges; in the marketplace; interceding for soldiers on land and at sea; presiding at births, marriages, and deaths; and mediating family disputes." Jefferson J. A. Gatrall and Douglas M. Greenfield, eds., *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010), 9.

nineteenth century, Russian icons combined quasi-medieval Byzantine conventions with Western ones, resulting in a compositional freedom echoing the conceptual horizon discussed above. The icon could encompass both Russian and Western painterly conventions, just as Ivanov's oil painting, for Khomiakov, could hold in it something iconic. The post-Petrine icon has been hidden from view and has received little affection from the first Russian art historians. From the later nineteenth century to the present it has been the medieval Russian icon, whose forms were based on Byzantine models, that held the most value for students and scholars of the icon and which remains the image held in the mind's eye when the word "icon" is pronounced (see, for example, fig. 2.2).[53] In such an icon figures are presented on a flat plane, their size and prominence generally reflecting their status within the sacred hierarchy. Furthermore, the medieval icon represents fictive space differently, using a technique still commonly called (though somewhat questionably) "reverse perspective."[54] In contradistinction to perspective in a picture like Ivanov's, reverse perspective allows parallel lines to diverge rather than converge towards the back of the fictive space of the picture.

Reverse perspective and other conventions inherited from Byzantine painting and developed by Russian painters were the norm until the introduction of oil painting, which only

[53] That this prejudice continues to the present day is clear from the entry for "icon" in the *Orthodox Encyclopedia*, for which the vast majority of reproductions are icons from the fifteenth century and earlier. See "Pravoslavnaia entsiklopediia," ed. Patriarch of Moscow Aleksii II and Patriarch of Moscow Kirill (Moscow: Tserkovno-nauchnyi tsentr "Pravoslavnaia entsiklopediia", 2000), "ikona".

[54] According to the polymath and priest Pavel Florensky (1882–1937), reverse perspective aimed at establishing the transcendent character of the depicted figures: "There are realities [depicted in the icon] . . . that submit to their *own* laws, and each of which therefore has its *own* form. Therefore, nothing that exists can be seen as indifferent and passive material for fulfilling whatsoever kind of schemas, still less taking into account the schema of Euclidean-Kantian space. And so forms should be apprehended according to *their own* life, they should be represented through *themselves*, according to the way they have been apprehended, and not in the foreshortenings of a perspective laid out beforehand." In the system of reverse perspective "[w]e are not drawn into this space; on the contrary, it repels us, as a mercury sea would repel our bodies. Though visible, it is transcendent to us, . . ." P.A. Florenskii, "Reverse Perspective," in *Beyond Vision: Essays on the Perception of Art*, ed. Nicoletta Misler (London: Reaktion Books, 2002), 218, 42; *Sochineniia v chetyrekh tomakh* (Moscow: Mysl', 1994), 3:61, 3:72. Translation modified.

during the reign of Peter I (1682–1725) emerged as a widespread (at least in elite Saint Petersburg circles) and privileged form of visual production.[55] Its teaching was later codified in the new capital's Academy, founded in 1757 and given its "Imperial" status by Catherine II in 1764. Western masterpieces were acquired for public view by a succession of autocrats, beginning with Peter, and their advisors. The taste for Western visual culture began with the elite before spreading to other classes.[56] The international success of Karl Briullov's massive history painting *The Last Days of Pompeii* showed how Russian artists had mastered Western genre conventions by the middle of the nineteenth century.[57] Briullov's work further demonstrated the appeal of Greco-Roman antiquity to Russian painters wishing to legitimate themselves as artists in a post-Renaissance tradition whose canonical figures were not Russian.

Already in the seventeenth century icons had begun to show the influence of naturalistic oil paintings. Faces became more modeled, fleshy (see, for example, fig. 2.3). Still, they were not fully transformed according to the canons of Western painting: painters continued to make devotional images whose uses of medieval conventions were recognizable even if modified. For example, an eighteenth-century icon from the iconostasis (the "screen" of images in a Russian church that conceals the altar) of the Church of the Descent of the Holy Spirit in Moscow's Novodevichy Convent combines a traditional wooden support and sacred subject matter with oil

[55] James Cracraft writes that "by 1700 scarcely any of the new art had yet reached Russia," and that what had arrived was mostly represented by prints. Only in the Petrine period did "oil on canvas replace[] painting in tempera on wood as the painting of choice among the Russian elite." James Cracraft, *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Imagery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 21, 218.

[56] As David Ransel notes, it took about a hundred years for Russian merchants to adopt European strategies of self-representation after their exposure to such images. Valerie A. Kivelson and Joan Neuberger, *Picturing Russia: Explorations in Visual Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 76.

[57] Sarab'ianov notes that "[Briullov] was well known in Europe, particularly Italy, and became the first painter to earn fame for Russian art beyond the country's borders." Sarab'ianov, *Russian Art: From Neoclassicism to the Avant-Garde, 1800-1917*, 57.

paint instead of the traditional, for the Russian icon, tempera (fig. 2.4). In this picture those worthy of veneration are placed in the depth of Western-style landscape, rather than a space governed by the traditional reverse perspective. In this painting, St. Zosima encounters the uncorrupted body of the penitent Mary of Egypt (the lion, here on the left of the canvas, assisted him in the burial of her body). Not only the medium of oil painting, but the compositional strategies of Western painting, in this case landscape, are mustered for the icon. The painter has chosen not to situate this encounter in the desert, as recounted in these figures' vitae, but in a quasi-Russian clearing in a birch forest. The trees on the left act as a repoussoir, framing the central figures and directing the eye into the fictive depth they inhabit, a depth which extends into the haze of atmospheric perspective. The diminutive figures and the landscape setting immediately distinguish this image from the medieval icon; however, the identification of these figures through painted titulae, the picture's setting in the church's iconostasis, and therefore its intended devotional use make it without doubt an icon. The common conflation of the Holy Land and Holy Russia is made here with the aid of the materials and conventions of Western painting.[58]

An icon of 1837, depicting St. Michael gesturing towards the miraculous appearance of water in a town, is another example of the mixture of traditional and Western-influenced conventions characteristic of the nineteenth-century icon (fig. 2.5). In the center of the image St. Michael gestures to the fountain. The art historian Oleg Tarasov writes that "[the] earthly action is presented before a background consisting of the real main buildings and streets of a town, thus

[58] Tarasov argues that the shift towards landscape as reflects a reconceptualized relationship between the worldly and the sacred in post-Petrine Russia. This reconceptualization may have been driven by changes in representations themselves. In other words, in order to "give landscape an active role in fashioning religious experience" landscape *itself* had to appear as a possible mode of painting. Tarasov, *Icon and Devotion: Sacred Spaces in Imperial Russia*, 234-37.

localizing the symbolism of the scene in a concrete historical space."[59] Historical space is signaled by the attention to neoclassical architecture, represented in perspective; however, in no way does this perspective attempt to describe the spatial relations of the personages depicted. There is an odd elision between their foreground presences and the middle ground of the buildings. Furthermore, the two angels on clouds displaying the Holy Face are, according to the bald recession of the central road, "behind" the main scene, yet according to the logic of the sacred image must really be "above" the scene as a whole. That the miraculous fountain itself is perspectivally incoherent reminds us that the successful production of illusionistic space is irrelevant to the making of icons. The conventions of Russian and Western painting are obviously mixed and matched. If an image successfully activates and receives the veneration of its viewers it matters little whether its construction is internally consistent with certain norms of art. All conventions are fair game in the making of the devotional image.

Nineteenth-century icon painters use of conventions from Western painting alarmed those who feared that formal influence marked spiritual perversion. Amidst the obvious influence of naturalistic painting on the icon in the post-Petrine era, some commentators still insisted that Western religious painting had nothing in common with the icon "as such." Even some who conceded the formal influence of Western painting on the icon argued that this meant nothing in terms of essential similarity. Therefore, though it was "true that Orthodox icon painting had emulated western European styles . . . this was constantly overcome [*postoianno preodolevalos'*]."[60] Despite its emulation of Western styles, the icon did not become a Western painting. Something internal to, hidden in, the icon ensured that it transcended what it had

[59] Ibid., 244.

[60] Annenkova, "Problema sootnosheniia iskusstva i religii v vospriiatii slavianofilov," 61.

superficially in common with other kinds of images (Khomiakov's praise of Ivanov's painting is an extreme case of this invisible iconicity). Thus, the stylistic influences of the West exhibited by nineteenth-century icons do not diminish the image's functionality despite the unease such influences occasioned in some Orthodox commentators. The supposed contamination of the icon by Western styles could not nullify the icon's value as a bearer of religious truth.

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Perhaps unnerved by the heterogeneous forms of the modern icon, in the early twentieth-century the polymath and priest Pavel Florensky (1882–1937) emphasized the importance of proper (i.e. medieval) visual forms in his theory of the icon. Writing in 1922, Florensky argued that the space of the church is organized as a series of "superficial membranes" (*poverkhnostnykh obolochek*) at the center of which lies the altar, which signifies the invisible *noumenon,* God.[61] It is as if the temple as a whole were the body, and the altar the soul. This presents a problem of accessibility to an imperfect human viewer. Florensky continues, "heaven from earth, the heavenly from the worldly [*gornee ot dol'nego*], [and] the altar from the temple may be defined only *by the visible witnesses of the invisible world.*"[62] These witnesses are those represented in the iconostasis, the rows of icons that screen the altar from the congregation in the Russian Orthodox church. To perform this witnessing for us, the figures in the iconostasis conform themselves visibly to the invisible world. They are available to our sight while at the same time formally marked as existing elsewhere. Form is thus important. But consider for a

[61] P.A. Florenskii, *Iconostasis* (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996), 59-60; *Sochineniia v chetyrekh tomakh*, 2:439. Translated modified. Florensky, unlike Khomiakov, would reject the photograph as a metaphor of iconic creation. For Florensky, as Robert Bird notes in his discussion of Andrei Tarkovsky's cinema, mechanical reproduction—even the engravings of Dürer—was decidedly non-iconic. Robert Bird, *Andrei Tarkovsky: Elements of Cinema* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008), 95.

[62] Florenskii, *Iconostasis*, 60; *Sochineniia v chetyrekh tomakh*, 2:440. Translation modified.

moment this claim. Florensky's icon defines itself against naturalistic painting. In order to understand the depicted saints as conforming themselves to some other world, we need to understand the "look" of our world. That is, Florensky's claim presupposes the existence of naturalistic painting that claims fidelity to the human world. And this sort of painting is a historical phenomenon that did not exist in the Byzantine Empire and medieval Russia. Florensky's theory of the icon requires a situation in which multiple kinds of representation are available as competing ways of picturing worlds. It acknowledges the heterogenous nature of the Russian image world.

In establishing the religious significance of artistic form (something others such as Khomiakov declined to do), Florensky resacralized the medieval icon that had been rediscovered and evaluated by secular researchers in late Imperial Russia. For Florensky, the icon transmits the spiritual vision it depicts into the consciousness of its viewer, and this transmission is aided by the use of particular and canonical forms. Yet these forms are not ultimately evaluated along normative art-historical lines, because the success of the icon has nothing to do with beauty. The icon, if it fails to transmit spiritual vision, is merely a marked-up board. In Florensky's thought we again find that the stakes raised by the icon are not those of a kind of "art" experience. Success and failure here have nothing to do here with the experience of aesthetic pleasure. If making a beautiful work of art hinges on the painter's skill, in the icon, "[t]he question is not whether an image of a woman is 'skillfully' or 'poorly' executed [but] whether or not the image is, in reality, the Mother of God."[63] In Florensky's writing this central question supersedes all other concerns. In the midst of a text arguing for the superiority of canonic forms, Florensky

[63] *Iconostasis*, 82; *Sochineniia v chetyrekh tomakh*, 2:457. Translation modified.

makes a slightly puzzling aside: an anecdote about an icon he saw in a monk's cell "that had been composed with insufficient sensitivity by an artist whose brush was permeated by naturalistic habits," that is, the habits of Western painting.[64] Furthermore, for Florensky has expressed his disapproval of allegory, the image is allegorical, depicting the Mother of God as Demeter. Nonetheless, although in its allegorical subject this late nineteenth-century icon "disobeyed true spiritual discipline," it nonetheless showed "how the Church said 'yes' to the ancient image of graceful Demeter, wherein the ancient Greeks gathered part of their premonitions about the Mother of God."[65] Formal characteristics of allegory and naturalism, two of Florensky's main targets, are redeemed through non-formal criteria of success.

The formal concerns that Florensky brought to bear on the icon were possible because, by the end of the nineteenth century, the icon could be seen as not only a component of religious practice but also an artwork, at least in its medieval form. Yet the obvious dissimilarity in form between the medieval icon and art qua naturalistic painting challenged received standards of beauty in art. In a 1917 book, *The Russian Icon as an Art of Painting,* Aleksei Grishchenko (who exhibited for a time in the same circles as Malevich) wrote:

> In any European collection of old Italian painting you may immediately distinguish the Sienese master from the Florentine [one], regardless of their national and geographical proximity and general core of development [*obshchii koren' razvitiia*]. The time will come when the Pskov masters will be also distinguished from the Novgorodians, and Pskovian ancient painting will take an honorable, visible place not only as a "variant of Novgorodian style [*novgorodskikh pisem*]," but as an interesting branch of all old Russian art.[66]

[64] *Iconostasis*, 87; *Sochineniia v chetyrekh tomakh*, 2:461.

[65] *Iconostasis*, 88; *Sochineniia v chetyrekh tomakh*, 2:462.

[66] A. Grishchenko, *Russkaia ikona kak iskusstvo zhivopisi* (Moscow: Avtora, 1917), 72.

Grishchenko contended that in the past scholars approached the icon only with an eye to church history and archaeology. For this group, the icon's aesthetic qualities held no interest and were indeed lost in the process of "translation" or "rendering" (*perevodov*) for published reproductions.[67] The icon was schematized and classified according to systems uninterested in its aesthetic dimension. Contemporary artists too, continues Grishchenko, have either neglected or travestied the icon; the author attacks Viktor Vasnetsov and others who would prettify the "ugly" icon according to late nineteenth-century standards of beauty.[68] If one looks at, for example, Vasnetsov's careful rendering of the drapery falling on the legs of *God the Father*, one finds a command of the conventions of naturalistic painting. The combination of these conventions with the formal frontality of icon creates an image neither here nor there (fig. 2.6). At the same time, the relative coherence of *God the Father* distinguishes it from the nineteenth-century icons previously discussed, which trafficked East and West in their selective deployment of representational convention. Like Florensky, Grischchenko finds something at stake in the form of the medieval icon; change that form, and what is best about it is lost. The difference is that Grischchenko's forms contain "art," rather than religious meaning.

Grishchenko's critique, leveled from the perspective of an art historian and a modernist artist—he exhibited as a member of the Donkey's Tail and Union of Youth—is conservative in its appeal to connoisseurial thinking even as its rejection of contemporary realist painting places it in agreement with the main line of modernist thought. To distinguish the work of Novgorod from the work of Pskov was precisely the task of Imperial scholars of old Russian art. Grishchenko shows a surprising sympathy (given his own artistic allegiances) to this official line

[67] Ibid., 9.

[68] Ibid., 14-15.

of inquiry. For him, Old Russian art deserves our attention in its rejection of realism and "beauty," yet this attention in turn deserves the kind of structure accorded to the paradigmatic art of the Renaissance. The dialectical turn here means that the ugliness of the old icon stages, in the end, the aesthetic experience previously manifested only under the flag of the beautiful. For Grishchenko, the embrace of the old aesthetic values of the icon, renewed by modernist art—values which reject the canons of post-Renaissance painting—, is coincident with the need to classify knowledge about these objects in canonical forms, precisely like those generated for Renaissance painting. That the organization of thought about the icon would be identical to that regarding existing knowledge about art demonstrates a certain commensurability of art and icon. Nationalist sentiment about the icon could not make up for the fact that it had already been assimilated to an international conception of art making, albeit one that retained real valences of religious experience. If Khomiakov represents the pole of Russian aesthetics identified by its disregard for appearance in favor of function, Grishchenko represents the pole of art. And yet, it is not quite so simple: the traditional canons of beauty, those of Renaissance painting, are not satisfied and should not be satisfied by the icon. Grishchenko lets us see that turning the icon into an artwork, making the icon fulfill the compositional requirements of Art, results in failure, as his example of Vasnetsov demonstrates. The icon may exist alongside art, subjected to artlike evaluations of quality; nevertheless, it is still nonart.

II

So we know a few things about the Russian image world as it stood at the turn of the century. This general information gives a background to Malevich's career. Now we need to turn to the artist himself to understand how he navigated this image world, how he perceived it and

how it entered his conception of art. Unfortunately, what Malevich made of the Russian image world in his early years we can discern only with the help of his autobiography.[69] There are no other primary sources from this period of the artist's life, save a few reminiscences by family members that do not bear on his art. Nevertheless, a careful reading of the autobiography gives us a sense of what Malevich took art to be in these early years. What we gain from this document is idiosyncratic; there are no references to past or present theories, and yet this idiosyncrasy should be understood as emerging from, in important if imprecise ways, from some of the positions sketched above. The autobiography contains personal recollections of a particular image world and the sorts of images it contained. The first part of this chapter argued that image practices in Russia were varied in both form and reception. This has hopefully prepared us for Malevich's autobiography, in which we find a not inconsiderable, and sometimes even confusing, level of play in his positions towards various types of images.

Two objects of the nineteenth-century Russian image world already discussed, the icon and the artwork, find their proper homes in the church and in the museum. As we have seen, the history of the image in Russia is not simply a story of its secularization and move from the former institution to the latter. Beyond this binary, Malevich's autobiography introduces us to another object and space, the artistry of the village. The village is perhaps an unlikely space for modernist art, given as it is a locus of the "tradition and society" inhabited by the artist's family icons. Nevertheless, this third space proves crucial to the development of Malevich's modernism and any understanding of his art.

[69] Malevich the fullest version of his autobiography in 1930. He delivered this incomplete text to Nikolai Khardzhiev in two parts, the first typed and the second handwritten, in 1933. The first portion bears affinities with autobiographical notes that were written in 1918. See Malevich, "Detstvo i iunost' Kazimira Malevicha (Glavy iz avtobiografii khudozhnika)," 100.

Malevich recalled that the village's peasant inhabitants engaged in a wide variety of image-making practices. The young Malevich spent time with these peasants. He also knew workers, such as his father, who labored in the beet-sugar factories that comprised a good portion of the Kiev-area economy (far from a folk industry, sugar refining was an industrial operation suffused with, as Malevich noted, the "stench of gas and filth"[70]). Malevich saw no historical difference between peasant and factory worker: there is no sense in this text that the peasant is the figure of the past being displaced by the worker. The reader of this autobiography will not come across the term "modernity" or the meanings to which the term might refer. Peasants and workers shared the world with Malevich, who, in this document, stood apart from both.

> The main thing that separated the factory workers and peasants for me was drawing [*risovaniem*]. The former didn't draw, didn't know how to paint their houses, didn't engage in what I'd now call art [*iskusstvom*]. All peasants did.[71]
>
> The village, as I said earlier, engaged in art (at the time, I hadn't heard of such a word). Or rather, it's more accurate to say that it made things that I liked very much [*ona delala takie veshchi, kotorye mne sil'no nravilis'*]. These things contained the whole mystery of my sympathies with the peasants. I watched with great excitement how the peasants made wall paintings, and would help them smear the floors of their huts with clay and make designs on the stove. The peasant women were excellent at drawing roosters, horses, and flowers. The paints were all prepared on the spot from various clays and dyes. I tried to transfer this culture [*etu kul'turu perenesti*] onto the stoves in my own house, but it didn't work. I was told I was just making a mess on the stove. In turn came fences, barn walls, and so forth.[72]

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[70] "Chapters from an Artist's Autobiography," 25; "Detstvo i iunost' Kazimira Malevicha (Glavy iz avtobiografii khudozhnika)," 103. By the "1890s Kiev served as the corporate headquarters for seventy refiners" and "the city's largest refining facility . . . employed 1,200 workers in 1897." Hamm, "Continuity and Change in Late Imperial Kiev," 85.

[71] Malevich, "Chapters from an Artist's Autobiography," 26; "Detstvo i iunost' Kazimira Malevicha (Glavy iz avtobiografii khudozhnika)," 104-05.

[72] "Chapters from an Artist's Autobiography," 29; "Detstvo i iunost' Kazimira Malevicha (Glavy iz avtobiografii khudozhnika)," 107.

The truth of the statement that he didn't know about "art" is less important than what it signifies: a world of image making apparently without categories, and a reluctance to call such practices art, even towards the end of the artist's life (when, again, his autobiography was written). "If we must call it something," the passage seems to say, "then I suppose that something will be 'art,' despite the fact it's not art." The assertion that he never heard the word "art," however dubious, held great value for Malevich, as he insisted upon it in earlier autobiographical sketch as well.[73] By the time of this autobiography, Malevich had sought a place outside the museum for his creations. Indeed, he, in some sense, came back inside the museum only at the behest of the Soviet government. Once off the streets his art was isolated and criticized. The stuff of Malevich's childhood, for which he has no better word than "art," was not in the museum, and the evocation of this "art" signals, I think, is nostalgia not only for the culture of his childhood but also that of the earlier 1920s. In both cases Malevich had an inchoate sense of what art was and what it was for. There were many possibilities.

The peasant practices Malevich mentions are a form of nonart. They are made things that are visual, but the visible pleasure they generate is subordinate to, or accompanies, their necessarily functional purpose. Malevich and his contemporaries would refer to them as practices of artistry (*khudozhestvo*) or craft (*remeslo*). Additionally, participation in cottage industries was commonplace in non-metropolitan Russia.[74] Malevich neglects this commercial

[73] The claim, made in a fragment from the early 1920s, formed this chapter's epigraph. *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 2:148; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 4:287. Translation modified. "There were no discussions of art [*razgovorov ob iskusstve ne bylo*], and it took me quite a long time to find out that the word artistry [*khudozhestvo*] existed, that there were artists, who did nothing but draw whatever they liked."

[74] One historian writes that "[a]t the turn of the twentieth century the Ministry of Internal Affairs estimated that four-fifths of the adult men and one-half of the adult women were employed in local or nonlocal cottage industries" in the rural districts near Moscow. See Joseph Bradley, *Muzhik and Muscovite: Urbanization in Late Imperial Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 17.

form of "craft" altogether (perhaps this is why he himself does not use the word), preferring to focus on its forms that, in their lack of obvious utility and commercial aims, seem more art-like. By claiming his ignorance of art and neglecting commercial craft practices, Malevich argues for the authenticity of village culture rooted in traditional forms of life. In Russian, as in English, "art" (*iskusstvo*) and the "artificial" (*iskusstvennyi*) are related.[75] On the other hand, this passage also intimates the potential of these practices to become uprooted. This culture is somehow *portable*—it may be acquired, "transferred." As a whole, then, these passages suggest that Malevich wanted both to preserve a certain kind of practice's rootedness in a world of tradition and, at the same time, to mobilize it as (non)art, not commerce. And yet Malevich underscores that he does not truly belong to the peasant community by recounting his incompetent imitations of this work. He wasn't good at it. But he would attempt to capture something of its spirit when he began to create images and make things himself.

Malevich first encountered art in the usual sense on one of his annual trips with his father to Kiev. Although "[a]rtisans, service personnel, and day laborers continued to form the backbone of the city economy," for Malevich it must have seemed like a big place.[76] He would look at pictures in shop windows.

> One picture on display strongly struck me [*porazhala*]. In Kievan art everything depicted was very lifelike and natural. The picture which fascinated me was of a young girl sitting on a bench and peeling a potato. I was struck by the lifelikeness of the potato and the peelings, which lay like ribbons on the bench next to an incomparably drawn pot. This picture was a revelation [*otkroveniem*] for me, and I remember it to this day. I was strongly moved by its technique of expression

[75] Though Malevich knew Polish, Ukrainian and Russian, his autobiographical sketches were written in Russian, a language in which the artist had been writing for many years.

[76] Hamm, "Continuity and Change in Late Imperial Kiev," 87.

> [*Trevozhila menia sil'no tekhnika vyrazheniia*]. To be able to draw a picture like that was my desire . . .[77]

This picture of a girl on a bench peeling a potato, whose title and appearance are lost, caused Malevich to ask his mother for a paint set and to begin making pictures, to begin the process to become an artist. The vernacular subject matter of this work points inextricably to the fact that, in the case of Malevich, the avant-garde rhetoric of rejection has hidden from history a more complicated relationship to realism.[78] Despite contemporary excitement over the "rediscovery" of the pre-Petrine icon, usually cited as a chief stimulus to the avant-garde, it played no role in this formative moment.[79] Malevich wants us to recognize that this simple genre painting, the product of a painter's studied if unexceptional hand, was the original reason for his art.

Russian realism played important roles in the later nineteenth century, as an enemy of the avant-garde, and later as a model in the development of Socialist Realism in its high Stalinist form. Its history began in 1863, when a group of art students challenged the classical values of the Russian Academy by withdrawing from its most prestigious annual competition in protest

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[77] Malevich, "Chapters from an Artist's Autobiography," 30; "Detstvo i iunost' Kazimira Malevicha (Glavy iz avtobiografii khudozhnika)," 108. Translation modified. Malevich noted the same picture in his earlier autobiographical notes as well, even emphasizing it over the icon: "[The picture of the girl with potatoes] too, was essentially the representation of a human figure, as on the icons, but for some reason the former had a very powerful impact on my mind and produced an unusual animation in me; the latter had absolutely no effect on me." *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 4:290; *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 2:151.

[78] In trying to problematize later Russian art's relationship to realism I am not alone: Ekaterina Degot polemically installed, in 2007, contemporary art alongside realist pictures in the Tretiakov museum, arguing that realism should be seen as foundational for twentieth-century Russian art. See her *Mysliashchii realizm: spetsial'nyi proekt 2-i Moskovskoi biennale sovremennogo iskusstva, 21 marta - 15 aprelia 2007 goda.* Moscow: WAM, 2007. ex. cat.

[79] See Shirley A. Glade, "A Heritage Discovered Anew: Russia's Reevaluation of Pre-Pretrine Icons in the Late Tsarist and Early Soviet Periods," *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 26, no. 1-3 (1992). Glade notes the excitement around the icon but is also careful to note the doubts of others such as Kondakov, who thought many of the claims made about the aesthetic significance of the pre-Petrine icon "far-fetched nonsense" (cited in note on 159). On the efforts to research and restore the icon in into the Soviet period, Gerol'd Ivanovich Vzdornov, *Restavratsiia i nauka: ocherki po istorii otkrytiia i izucheniia drevnerusskoi zhivopisi* (Moscow: Indrik, 2006).

over its assigned theme.[80] Many from this group would later become known as *peredvizhniki* or itinerants, including Ivan Kramskoi, Nikolai Ge, and most famously Ilya Repin (though he was not a founding member), who comprised an exhibition group aimed at ending academic hegemony on art's content and audience.[81] In Malevich's later writings, Repin featured personally and metonymically as an enemy of the new art; Malevich wrote in 1929 of one of Repin's works that it "has no artistic features to give us the right to relate it to artistic works."[82] That is a blunt condemnation. Yet writing only a year later Malevich indicated his debt to Realists such as Repin: "We Futurists had been raised in the old school of the *peredvizhniki,*" he acknowledged.[83] This acknowledgement of the importance of Realist painting for an artist of the avant-garde—Russian or Western—is unusual. In Malevich's account, his early modernism was not a reaction against or attack on realism, but an attempt to capture its affective address (it *impressed* upon him, it *moved* him) by other means.

By placing a realist canvas at this juncture in his autobiography, Malevich also established his desire to be a painter. This is not to argue that Malevich's attitudes towards this mode of painting never changed; however, this passage reminds us that for Malevich painting

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[80] Valkenier, *Russian Realist Art: The State and Society*, 33-34. Valkenier's book is the definitive English-language account of the history of Russian Realism in the visual arts.

[81] The name *peredvizhniki* was from the full name of the group from 1870, The Society of Travelling (*peredvizhnykh*) Art Exhibitions, reflecting its practice of exhibiting in the provinces.

[82] Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 2:123; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 2:253. Malevich anticipated the criticism of Greenberg, who put Repin's work into the category of "kitsch," an ersatz art synthetized by the union of academic art and mass culture. Greenberg imagines an idiotic peasant standing before a Picasso and a hypothetical "battle scene" of Repin's (the critic betrays his total unfamiliarity with the artist's oeuvre). The latter picture is instantly comprehensible, its style does not contradict the peasant's own physiological perception of the world, it dramatizes reality with narrative spectacle. Ultimately, "Repin predigests art for the spectator and spares him effort, provides him with a short cut to the pleasure of art that detours what is necessarily difficult in genuine art." See Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," 15-17. In 1967 Hilton Kramer noted a return to "genuine" art by Soviet artists outside the official Soviet artworld. See Hilton Kramer, "Art: A Return to Modernism," in *Anatomy of the Soviet Union*, ed. Harrison E. Salisbury (London: Nelson, 1967).

[83] Malevich, "Autobiography," 168; "Posledniaia glava neokonchennoi avtobiografii Malevicha," 312.

was almost always central. This moment in the autobiography affirms that centrality. This is only surprising if we forget that Malevich maintained this identity as a painter (*zhivopisets*) throughout his life, even when he made objects other than paintings.[84] The term "painter" then does describe the particular medium employed by the artist. Instead, Malevich uses this word as a way to unify his practice. This somewhat confusing nomenclature reflects the deep admiration Malevich maintained for artistic tradition and the structures that enable such traditions. After all, Malevich would seek power and responsibility in art schools. Even if he was a revolutionary painter in a revolutionary state, he was an "academic" nonetheless. That position must have been especially appealing to Malevich given his own (thwarted) academic ambitions. From 1904 to 1907 Malevich sought to enter the Moscow Institute of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, where he would have received proper academic training.[85] Given his repeated (unsuccessful) applications, one must agree with Irina Vakar that it is dubious that Malevich would have considered the school not "left" (i.e. formally radical) enough for his then-taste. Vakar points out that Malevich, later in life, sometimes claimed that he attended the Moscow Institute, only to leave when he discovered its "shortcomings."[86] At the outset of his career, Malevich wanted to paint more or less academically. In light of the retrospective quality of these autobiographical reminiscences, written after all the radical abstractions of the 1910s and 20s, it is clear that Malevich's claim to be a painter is not a simple identification with a particular style. The

[84] In the 1920s Malevich, with the assistance and collaboration of his students, began to make fantastic "architectural" drawings and models. Nevertheless, he continued to refer to himself as a painter, and never an architect (see Chapter 4).

[85] Malevich's application forms are published in Malevich, *Malevich o sebe, sovremenniki o Maleviche: pis'ma, dokumenty, vospominaniia, kritika*, 386-88.

[86] Irina Vakar, "Malevich's Student Years in Moscow: Facts and Fiction," in Petrova, *Malevich: Artist and Theoretician*, 28. Malevich would study with the painter Fedor Rerberg, whose own school aimed at preparing students for the Institute's exams. He clearly wanted to attend the Institute.

specificity of this narrative matters, as it contradicts conventional wisdom about the avant-garde that one of its members would find a realist picture at the origins of his practice.

Malevich moved to Moscow to seek academic training in 1905, and at the same time he became attracted to the icon, recognizing its affinities with peasant art and culture:

> In spite of my naturalistic leaning, of my feelings towards nature, icons made a strong impression on me [*sil'noe vpechatlenie proizveli ikony*]. I felt some kinship and something splendid in them. I saw in them the entire Russian people with all its emotional creativity [*V nikh mne pokazalsia ves' russkii narod so vsem ego emotsional'nym tvorchestvom*]. I'd then recall my childhood: the horses, flowers and roosters of the primitive murals and wood carvings. I sensed some bond between peasant art [*krest'ianskogo iskusstva*] and icons: icon art is a high-cultural form of peasant art. I discovered in them the whole spiritual side of the Peasant Age; I came to understand the peasants through icons, saw their faces not as saints, but as ordinary people. And also the coloring and the attitude of the painter [*zhivopistsa*]. I understood Botticelli and Cimabue. Cimabue was closer to me; he possessed the spirit I had sensed in peasants.[87]

Though context would seem to indicate that the "painter" referred to here in the antepenultimate sentence is the icon painter, understanding this painter implies an understanding of Cimabue—a figure of the Proto-Renaissance notable for his moves *away* from Byzantine iconography[88]—and Botticelli, whose connection to any kind of peasant spirit is dubious. Malevich's writing here does a lot of work: it identifies and equivocates between these various practices. The icon is a kind of peasant art, and peasant art like Cimabue. Malevich suggests that various kinds of art making are fungible, that there is some kind of transitive property to art: thus, Cimabue is like an icon. The Malevich of the text seems naïve, unable as he is to differentiate between Botticelli, Cimabue, icons, and peasant ornament. Or, perhaps our perception of Malevich's naiveté results

[87] Malevich, "Chapters from an Artist's Autobiography," 38; "Detstvo i iunost' Kazimira Malevicha (Glavy iz avtobiografii khudozhnika)," 117. Translation modified.

[88] This understanding of Cimabue goes back to Vasari: " . . . Cimabue broke decisively with the dead tradition of the Greeks [that is, the Greek-speaking Byzantines], for whereas their paintings and mosaics were covered with heavy lines and contours, his draperies, vestments, and other accessories were somewhat softer and more realistic and flowing." Giorgio Vasari, *Lives of the Artists (Volume I)*, trans. George Bull (London: Pengiun, 1965), 50.

from our received understandings of the cultural categories at issue. I mean that perhaps it is equally naïve for us to presume the validity of these categories, categories the older, biography-writing Malevich doesn't use.

Malevich was not the only one for whom these categories meant surprisingly little. He wrote later that "secretly all the new groups [of the pre-war avant-garde] acknowledged the Old Masters, whom neither society, nor the establishment every really understood."[89] And one wonders if he caught word of the story Sergei Shchukin told Henri Matisse: that Shchukin saw a tiny reproduction of the French artist's work standing, as an icon, in the cell of a monk in the monastery of Saint Catherine at Sinai.[90]

Malevich's emphasis on the affinities between peasant culture and high art resembles that of the symbolist poet and theorist Viacheslav Ivanov (1866–1949), who, around the time of Malevich's arrival in Moscow, expressed a similar conflation of image-making categories in the language of the *fin-de-siècle* intelligentsia. The two came from very different backgrounds, suggesting the breadth of this idea in Russian culture. Malevich's education was partial; Ivanov studied in Moscow, Berlin, and Rome, learning classical languages, the European philosophical tradition, and completing a doctorate in ancient history.[91] In his essay "On the Joyful Craft and the Joy of the Spirit" (1907), Ivanov pictured the Dionysiac revitalization of Russian culture as the meeting of artist and nation (*khudozhnik*, *narod*). To be a "craftsman" is to go beyond a purely material definition of craft as a set of products of cottage industry. It means a particular

[89] Malevich, "Autobiography," 168; "Posledniaia glava neokonchennoi avtobiografii Malevicha," 312.

[90] Kean, *All the Empty Palaces: The Merchant Patrons of Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Russia*, 149.

[91] On Ivanov see Robert Bird, *The Russian Prospero: The Creative Universe of Viacheslav Ivanov* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2006).

relationship between a maker, his work, and his social world. This relationship is an ethical one: the artist-craftsman should be responsive to the needs of the world.

> [T]rue mythopoesis will be resurrected in the action of a tragedy or comedy, a national dithramb [a hymn, especially to Dionysus] or a national mysterium (for true mythopoesis is collective [*soborno*]), where freedom itself will find hearths for its absolute, unsullied, immediate self-affirmation […]. Then . . . our artist will be only an artist [*tol'ko khudozhnikom*], a craftsman [*remeslennikom*] of the joyful craft, the executor of the commune's [*obshchiny*] creative commissions, the hand and voice of a crowd [*tolpy*] that knows its beauty, and a vatic medium of the nation-artist [*naroda-khudozhnika*].[92]

Despite the elevated register of Ivanov's language, his lexicon implies that "people" has a peasant referent: the invocation of *sobornost'* and the *obshchina* squarely place Ivanov within the tradition of Russian thought, going back to Khomiakov and others, including even socialist thinkers as Alexander Herzen and Nikolai Chernyshevsky, that located the peasant community as both Russian antiquity and its hoped-for future. Yet this "craftsman," though discussed as a representative of a peasant crowd, has at his disposal only examples of "high" art: Ivanov points to Virgil, Dante, Michelangelo, Beethoven and Pushkin among others—no mere stove decorators. Calling artists "craftsmen" once again suggests art as something other than itself in the normal sense, suggests nonart. Like Malevich, Ivanov understands high art and peasant craft as parts of a single world.

The peasant culture of the icon is not necessarily a religious culture. Instead, the creativity at issue is "emotional." The language of affect suggests the icon's similarity to realist art in its relationship to viewers: Malevich's uses the adverb "strongly" (*sil'no*) in reference to both realist picture and icon, suggesting their shared force. Furthermore, that vocabulary

[92] Viacheslav Ivanov, "Ancient Terror: On Leon Bakst's Painting *Terror Antiquus*," in *Selected Essays*, ed. Michael Wachtel (2003), 127; *Sobranie sochinenii* (Brussels Foyer Oriental Chrétien, 1971), 3:77.

disabuses the icon of its cultural specificity, for *emotsional'nyi* has obvious non-Slavic origins. The word internationalizes the icon, which makes sense given what Malevich identified as its commonalities with non-Russian art, and even personalizes it with the language of individual subjectivity instead of craft tradition. It also modernizes the icon, allowing it to occupy a space in a culture that is at least partially secularizing.

The icon, which Malevich saw as an expression of the painter, manifests or makes known the fullness of peasant spirituality, "not as saints, but as ordinary people." This is a vague formulation, but one that clearly distinguishes itself from a religious conception such as Florensky's. There, the saints were the extraordinary witnesses of the invisible divinity. Nothing invisible is at stake for Malevich. The icon is not a key to spiritual ascent but one that unlocks something of the ordinary world. Malevich does not divide peasant culture from the spiritual subjects of the icon, but rather brings them together. It allows the full understanding of what was only intimated by that "low" peasant culture. This conception of the icon denies its special ontological or epistemological status. In Malevich's view, the icon has to do with "ordinary people" and their ordinary ways of being. This icon is no longer an object of veneration, veneration then given over to the sacred prototype. The spirituality to which the artist hazily referred is present most of all in the world and it makes *this* world emerge more clearly, rather than disclose something about a specifically Christian, eschatological horizon. Thus, the icon was an object significant as an artwork, as peasant craft, and as a center for spiritual meaning.

In the early twentieth century the old capital of Moscow was a mixed environment, appearing to contemporary observers as both a "European city and . . . a big village."[93] Historian

[93] Bradley, *Muzhik and Muscovite: Urbanization in Late Imperial Russia*, 68.

Joseph Bradley notes that "[m]any contemporaries," foreign and Russian, "were invigorated by Moscow's blend of huge modern buildings and log cabins, European-looking avenues and unpaved side streets, fancy stores and Asian-style open-air markets, businesslike European behavior and shoving crowds, and the cries of dumpling and kvass [a beverage made from fermented bread] vendors."[94] Its mixed quality figured the mixture of art it contained. Malevich wrote:

> Icon Moscow [*Moskva ikonnaia*] overturned all my theories and led me to the third stage of development. Through icon art, I understood the emotional art [*emotsional'noe iskusstvo*] of the peasants, which I had loved earlier, but whose meaning I hadn't fully understood. In what way did this art overturn my striving for lifelikeness and the sciences—anatomy, perspective, the study of nature through the drawing of sketches? All of the *peredvizhniki*'s convictions regarding nature and naturalism were overturned by the fact that the icon painters, who had achieved a great mastery of technique [*bol'shogo masterstva tekhniki*], conveyed meaning outside of spatial and linear perspective. They employed color and form on the basis of a purely emotional interpretation of theme [*Tsvet i forma byli imi sozdavaemy na chisto emotsional'nom vospriiatii temy*].[95]

The icon may have overturned Malevich's previous affection for naturalism, but his admiration for the icon painter's "technique" reminds one of that previously expressed for the realists. In that earlier passage, the realist painter's technique generated an emotional response but particular techniques were not identified. Had these identifications been made, surely they would have included the "spatial and linear perspective" mentioned here; the *peredvizhniki* were academicians by training, after all. But Malevich's language in the later passage suggests that painterly technique is more than a matter of mastery of convention; indeed, the best techniques are outside such narrowly defined and identifiable conventions as perspective. It is not simply

[94] Ibid.

[95] Malevich, "Chapters from an Artist's Autobiography," 38-39; "Detstvo i iunost' Kazimira Malevicha (Glavy iz avtobiografii khudozhnika)," 117-18.

that the icon painters have a set of alternative techniques to those of the *peredvizhniki*. It is rather that technique cannot be understood as a mastery of particular technologies, of devices or methods such as perspective. Technique, in this usage, is not the fluent implementation of certain schemas of representation (for example, perspective or chiaroscuro, each of which symbolically locates bodies in space). Rather, technique is something inherent in, but not materially identical to, those visible forms generated by the "purely emotional interpretation of theme." In this usage, technique turns on the affective engagement of the artist with his or her theme, as a kind of modal relationship, rather than being the deployment of technologies of representation that would be materially present on the surface of a picture. Technique is recognizable, but invisible.

Malevich acknowledged this mixed character of the icon, as an object that joined art and craft, only in this cited autobiography written near the end of his life. We cannot be certain that Malevich made these associations in his early years as an artist. In fact, one supposes he did not. Despite the devotion to the icon he claims in his autobiography, he never apprenticed himself, nor sought to apprentice himself, to an icon painter at any point during his career, whereas he continually sought academic training in Moscow.[96] The record is clear on this point alone: that Malevich wanted to be an artist. His earliest extant works are sincere but unremarkable studies of the nude body and of family members. Before moving from Ukraine in 1906, he destroyed these works, which were likely realist in orientation. And, despite the radicalism of some of his students and his affection for impressionism, the teacher whom Malevich ultimately found in Moscow, Fedor Rerberg, "upheld the nineteenth-century canon, insisting on the need for technical prowess in anatomy and perspective, and on the precedence of the classical

[96] In seeking out academic training Malevich was not an exception among the Russian avant-garde. Among others, Ilya Mashkov, a member of the *Jack of Diamonds,* actually attended the Moscow School before he was expelled; Varvara Stepanova trained at the Kazan Art Academy, and Vasily Kandinsky at the Odessa Art School.

aesthetic."[97] Rerberg's *Short Course of the History Art,* published almost contemporaneously as with Malevich's studies in 1908, emphasizes the Western European tradition; practically nothing betrays the Russian identity of its author or publisher.[98] Rerberg praises in true modernist fashion impressionism and other modern movements as "having liberated art from its slumber . . . [and] from the subordinate role it played to literature, politics, and science."[99] But Rerberg did not follow Russian modernists in their appreciation of the icon: in this textbook, the icon goes unmentioned even in the very brief chapter on Byzantium.

The first major Moscow exhibitions of restored, pre-Petrine icons took place in 1913, more than five years after Malevich's arrival.[100] Whereas these exhibitions put forward the icon as a particular set of forms, and a national or religious art, Malevich had adopted the icon as a symbol or image bridging art and craft. For Malevich, although the icon had something to do with the craft practices of Russian peasants, it linked them not with a specifically national tradition in art but the history of art in general. Bridging the crafts of the peasant to the art of the artist, the icon thus connected the social world of peasant Ukraine to the Renaissance. For Malevich, art is craft's high cultural form. As an eager consumer of art, icon, and craft, Malevich could not escape his relationship to his immediate *peredvizhniki* predecessors. In the figure of the icon, the "peasant spirit" sensed in the Renaissance masters—the spirit of village craft—overlaps the peasant subjects of the *peredvizhniki* whose technical skill Malevich admired.

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[97] John Bowlt, "Kazimir Malevich and Fedor Rerberg," in Douglas and Lodder, *Rethinking Malevich*, 6.

[98] Fedor Rerberg, *Kratkii kurs istorii iskusstv* (Moscow: V.M. Sablina, 1908).

[99] Ibid., 324. "osvobodivshiia iskusstvo ot ego sna . . . ot podchinennoi roli, kotoruiu ono igralo u literatury, politiki, nauki."

[100] The *Exhibition of Ancient Russian Art* was organized for the Romanov dynasty's tercentenary.

Malevich gathers up all these art-making traditions in the text of his autobiography as he did in his art. His was an exceptional and expansive version of what Sarabianov called "Russian syncretism" in the visual arts. In Malevich's conception, "art" became an umbrella term for all kinds of visual production, from peasant craft to the icon to the art of the Renaissance, just as "painter" became the term that included practitioners of not only painting, but architecture and design. Art was thus something not confined to a museum or an art gallery, although it might be found there. Art was also a presence in the world, something that appeared in domestic spaces and religious ones. No "pagan worship of abstract beauty," in the end, the function of art for Malevich was demonstrated in its power to affect its audiences emotionally. Malevich never theorized emotion in his many writings. The term is empty. More than anything else, its varied application unites different practices of image making by giving them something in common, even if what they have in common remains ambiguous.

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In his short essay of 1919 "On the Museum," Malevich wrote that "we may burn all [past] eras [of art] as the dead, and arrange them in one pharmacy."[101] As Boris Groys observes, this essay responded to the revolutionary state's museum policy, which aimed to preserve the art of the past.[102] Yet Malevich's words are dialectical. For while past art is violently disabused of its former beauty, it is also moved into a space of use. The pharmacist-artist who mixes his remedies out of the stuff of the past is not creating beautiful objects, but the ingredients of the new art. Arranged on one shelf, Malevich brings together the art of the past that had been separate. Burnt,

[101] Kazimir Severinovich Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh* (Moscow: Gileia, 1995), 1:133.

[102] Boris Groys, "Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich," *e-flux Journal* 47 (2013): np.

the particular aesthetic forms of this art reveal a singular powdery essence. “On the Museum” demonstrates no interest in the kinds of art it proposes to burn; it sees no difference between icons, oil paintings, or photographs. In articulating this essential similarity between image-making traditions as jars of burnt powder Malevich presents a new image for a concept that was already present in the nineteenth-century Russian image world.

Malevich’s functional conception of art blurred the boundaries of artistic media, and did not distinguish between “high” and “low” kinds of visual production. Nevertheless, it is clear that Malevich entered and exited the field of Russian modernism as a painter. It would be as wrong to deny the differences between specific Russian modernists as it would be to deny the differences between broad cultural formations themselves. To discuss the differences within the broader difference is too big a project for this dissertation. So I will simply stress now that Malevich’s conception of art included Western pictures introduced first from on high, from Peter the Great, and then by the artists and critics who avidly sought out the visual products of Western modernity. The final pages of the first part of the artist’s autobiography make clear that its narrative form has concealed a certain simultaneity, a sense that all of these various modes of image making have at their core a singular content. Here, Malevich writes that his impressionist work, which he previously mentioned only in passing, was “like that of a weaver [*podobno tkachu*] who weaves an amazing texture of pure fabric, with the sole difference that I gave a form to this pure fabric of painting, a form which sprang only from the emotional requirement [*emotsional’noi potrebnosti*] and qualities of painting.”[103] Malevich continues to note that impressionism allowed him to discover that this form need not be those forms of nature. And this

[103] Malevich, "Chapters from an Artist's Autobiography," 42; "Detstvo i iunost' Kazimira Malevicha (Glavy iz avtobiografii khudozhnika)," 122.

is something even his realist predecessors unconsciously understood as they "sensed pure painting . . . the nonobjective, but made representational things."[104] The various modes of image making are phenomenally and historically distinct, occupying separate moments in the artist's autobiography as they did in the history of art. Malevich's conception of art affirmed the identity of all these forms of making while at the same time recognizing their distinctiveness. It is this drive to preserve a unity of the disparate that animated his modernism.

[104] "Chapters from an Artist's Autobiography," 43; "Detstvo i iunost' Kazimira Malevicha (Glavy iz avtobiografii khudozhnika)," 123.

CHAPTER THREE

SUPREMATISM IN 1915

> "The Last Exhibition of Futurist Paintings 0.10" aroused many rumors both in society and in the press. The strange things in this exhibition, which in the catalogue were called paintings, were found to be very unusual and were little understood. The perplexity of the public did not diminish even after a series of clarifications and lectures by the exhibition participants on the theme "Cubism, Futurism, Suprematism," so painfully muddled and undefined were the arguments of the Messrs. "Suprematists." The grains of undoubtedly original and interesting artistic paradoxes, which [one] met in their theoretical constructions, hopelessly drowned in a bottomless ocean of unnecessary words, tangled concepts, [and] baseless assertions.
>
> —Leonid Annibal[1]

Roughly geometric forms and white grounds define the formal economy of Malevich's Suprematist pictures, and these commonalities linked them with each other and united them against the wall of an unknown color on which they were displayed at the month-long *Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings "0.10" (zero-ten)* (Posledniaia futuresticheskaia vystavka kartin "0,10" [nol'-desiat']; fig. 3.1).[2] This uniform ground effects a kind of slippage between individual works, a perception aided by Malevich's decision not to frame his pictures. On the other hand, the space between works does not vanish altogether: the visible wall undergirding the ensemble of paintings ensures that the viewer nonetheless perceives a set of independent works of modest size.[3] And this perception of independent works is supported by the irregular hanging of the

[1] Leonid Annibal, "Khudozhestvennye vystavki istekshego sezona," *Argus*, no. 4 (1916): 42.

[2] Much about the content of the exhibition I take from A. A. Strigalev, "An Excursion around the 0.10 Exhibition," in *The Russian Avant-Garde: Representation and Interpretation*, ed. E. A. Petrova (Saint Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2001). Strigalev's essay also contains information about the current locations of the extant works by Malevich on pp. 95-98. The exhibition's title presents an interpretative puzzle that does not concern us here, but its "last" (which could alternatively be translated as *latest* but Malevich at least did see it marking the end of Futurism) refers back to the exhibition *Tram-V,* held in March of the same year, which was billed as the *first* futurist exhibition.

[3] There are no grounds for calling the ensemble a vision of "universal and infinite space," as Evgenii Kovtun and others claim, under the influence of Malevich's at times cosmic rhetoric and their own deep admiration for the pictures' novelty. Riffing on this cosmic theme, Kovtun writes that "[t]he final earthly attachments are broken by the

variously sized canvases. There are no implied lines extending from those defined by the paintings' edges, as would have undoubtedly occurred should the paintings have been hung according to a strict grid.[4] Although the language of Malevich's manifesto, authored for this show, may imply the boundlessness of Suprematist space, this boundlessness expressed itself only in discreet works of art. The room *itself* was not given over to a new form as it would be in El Lissitzky's *Proun Room* of 1923 (fig. 3.2). There, Lissitzky freed the geometric forms of Suprematist painting from their confinement on canvases, translating them into low relief and allowing some to move through the orthogonal corners of the room, resulting in what we might term today an "installation" and not an exhibition of paintings.

In 1915, Suprematism was Malevich's invention in painting. Malevich attempted, on the eve of the show, to unify other artists under his Suprematist banner. But it is clear that Anatoly Strigalev is correct when he writes that, although Puni, Kliun, Ksenia Boguslavskaia, and Mikhail Men'kov grouped together as "Suprematists," this was mostly a matter of Malevich's self-aggrandizement, not indicative of any real collaboration or unity, and it "did not lessen Malevich's isolation at the exhibition."[5] None of Boguslavkaia's works from the exhibition survive (from the catalogue she appears to have experimented with sculptural objects); Menkov

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Suprematist paintings and with them disappears weight and gravity, the ideas of 'high' and 'low,' of 'left' and 'right' – all directions are equal in the universe. The space of Malevich's Suprematist paintings is universal and infinite, in imitation of the space of the universe." See M. Lamac et al. *Suprematisme.* Paris: La Galerie, 1977. ex. cat., 26. In the very same catalogue Yve-Alain Bois argues that indeed the paintings have a fixed or optimum orientation (this is precisely what El Lissitzky moves beyond in his own work). I think Bois is correct, as the visual evidence, slim as it is, points to a certain consistency in exhibition hangs performed by Malevich and his associates.

[4] Compare this hanging to a later installation of works by Malevich and his UNOVIS (Affirmers of the New Art) students organized by Aleksei Gan in 1923 at the *Exhibition of Pictures of Petrograd Artists of All Tendencies*. There, at least one row of paintings was aligned horizontally on the wall according to the works' bottom edges (fig. 3.17).

[5] A. A. Strigalev, "O Poslednei futuristicheskoi vystavke kartin '0, 10'," *Nauchno-analiticheskii informatsionnyi biulleten' Fonda K.S. Malevicha "0,10" (Nol'-desiat')* (2001): 19. The exception to the lack of unity amongst the ostensible Suprematists appears to have been what was listed in the catalogue as a *Collective Painting,* now lost.

went all but unmentioned at the time. The works these other artists exhibited were not recognizable Suprematist pictures. Therefore, when I speak of Suprematism here I refer only to Malevich's works unless otherwise noted.

Most of these Suprematist pictures contain only a few colors, each of which wholly defines and is defined by a shape, outlined in pencil (sometimes still visible), whose bounds are sometimes not much respected by the paintbrush. The precision implied by geometry is qualified by this apparent sloppiness. In certain pictures these shapes overlap (the overlap is implied; Malevich did not paint shapes on top of one another), creating the shallowest sense of depth. Depth is also implied, or at least hinted at, in the "emptiness" of the white ground; however, Malevich ensures that these grounds are never too free from brushmarks that locate the planar surface, qualifying the rhetorical force of "pure" white paint through evidence of its construction. In one work (second from the top left) a parallelepiped invokes the third dimension left unmentioned by any of Malevich's titles (the painting is lost). This canvas was an exception amongst its neighbors. It punctuated the wall on which it was hung, disrupting—much like the *Black Square* itself—the "normal," as it were, order of things. Both individual pictures and the hanging as a whole create a back and forth between the regularity of geometric shapes on white grounds and the disruptive enjambment that certain images create amidst the larger whole. The paintings gathered here do not create a perfect unity. Although there is a way in which certain compositions may be understood as deriving from others (the *[Black Cross]* can be seen as derived from the *Black Square*, for example), any attempt to justify the whole in this fashion quickly breaks down. This means that the *Black Square,* although it would become the most important work, was not a perfect synecdoche of the entire enterprise. Therefore, understanding the *Black Square* is not identical to understanding Suprematism; interpreting Suprematism is not

an interpretation of the *Black Square*.[6] At the outset, Malevich had little idea that this painting would acquire its ultimate significance.

Though sharing white grounds, Suprematist pictures differ considerably. In fact, they differ in ways that are almost analogous to the tradition of academic genres. The avant-garde, however disruptive their efforts, still had uses for typologies. Larionov explicitly titled his abstract Rayonist paintings things such as "portrait" and "landscape."[7] In Suprematism's case, the viewer attempting to make sense of what he or she was seeing might distinguish between the singular, monumental forms of the *Black Square* or [*Black Cross*];[8] the expansive and populated *Painterly Masses in Motion* and a much simpler and direct composition of the same title (catalogue no. 55, [*Eight Red Rectangles*]), smaller works such as [*Airplane Flying*]; and the almost intimate use of the new abstract vocabulary in [*Suprematist Composition*] (figures 0.1, 0.2, 0.11, 3.3-3.6). Suprematist paintings were paintings, and if we keep this in mind the persistence of such things as genre—however modified—is unsurprising.

Malevich's contemporaries noticed the continuity between Suprematism and past art. In a short essay "The Space of Painting and the Suprematists," originally published in 1919, Viktor Shklovsky wrote that "[t]he goal of the fine arts is not the depiction of existing things; the goal of the fine arts was and will be the creation of artistic things—of an artistic form."[9] "Was and will

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[6] Cf., for example, Hubertus Gassner. *Das schwarze Quadrat: Hommage an Malewitsch.* Hamburg: Hamburger Kunsthalle, 2007. ex. cat; Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*. While this painting became the central ideological figure in Malevich's later thinking, in this early moment it must be considered amidst the other works as an equal.

[7] See *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, 22.

[8] NB: for Suprematist paintings, titles in brackets are those commonly used but which did not appear in the 0.*10* catalogue and were not necessarily Malevich's.

[9] Viktor Shklovskii, "Prostranstvo v zhivopisi i Suprematisty," in *Gamburgskii schet: stat'i-vospominaniia-esse (1914-1933)* (Moscow: Sovetskii Pisatel', 1990), 95. "Izobrazitel'nye iskusstva ne imeli tsel'iu izobrazhenie sushchestvuiushchikh veshchei; tsel'iu izobrazitel'nykh iskusstv bylo i budet sozdanie khudozhestvennykh veshchei—khudozhestvennoi formy."

be": Shklovsky's assessment agrees with something subtending Malevich's art in general: specifically, its persistence as *art*. This persistence was emphasized by comparison with works by some of the other exhibited artists. Down the hall, Vladimir Tatlin installed assemblages of materials that occupied real space against the walls of the room (fig. 3.7). The novelty of these works necessitated, for Tatlin, the new term of "counter-relief" to mark their distance from existing forms of art.[10] They were not sculptures in the traditional sense, lacking figurative subjects or independence as freestanding objects; so too was their difference from the other quasi-volumetric medium of "relief" enough to identify them as abnegations of that medium, "countering" it. Other exhibitors were also more dismissive of traditional fine-art media than Malevich: Ivan Puni (aka Jean Pougny) presented *Relief with a White Ball* and Ivan Kliun *Running Landscape* (figures 3.8 and 3.9). Somewhere between painting, relief, and sculpture, these works questioned the material limits of painting in a way Malevich's works did not.

For all Malevich's stated desire to throw away the art of the past, Suprematism was, in the final analysis, an expansive practice that restated a conception of art as encompassing practices of image extending beyond "art" and including the icon and peasant craft. The rhetoric of rejection in this instance conceals a modernist practice that aspired to be something else than painting, something else besides the tradition of Western art, while at the same time insisting on painting as essential to its aims.

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The imitation characteristic of Malevich's practice to this point was a dynamic, ceaseless investigation of the newest Western modernism. What would appear in Shchukin's collection this

[10] Somewhat incongruously given his actual artworks, Tatlin and his allies exhibited under the banner of "professional painters," which signaled less their allegiance to painting as a medium than their dissatisfaction with what they saw as Malevich's domineering amateurism.

month?—Malevich had no way of knowing. The beginning of the war in mid-1914 coincided with his final considerations of Picasso's cubism. It perhaps granted him a certain freedom as his Western European models stopped coming to Moscow. This freedom culminated in Suprematism, his original creation. Scholars describe the move from imitation to originality as one of "evolution" that culminated with the emergence of the *Black Square.*[11] Viewers of Malevich's work are attracted to the metaphor of evolution because the artist himself did as much as possible to portray the sequence of his oeuvre as governed by universal artistic principles of development external to the artist himself, but dependent on him for its realization. In his later years, Malevich made considerable efforts to stage a process of "evolution" that puzzled his contemporaries and, for decades, historians.[12] The dead metaphor of evolution is

[11] Yve-Alain Bois observed how *Black Square* "rather abruptly evolved from the Alogism of 1913–14." Bois has in mind the synthetic cubist-esque works paintings discussed in Chapter 1, such as *Woman at a Poster Column,* where one can find broad expanses of unmodeled color resembling what would presently appear in Suprematist paintings. Charlotte Douglas's account of Suprematism's emergence likewise hinges on the identification of formal similarities: she points to Malevich's stage designs for *Victory over the Sun* as a potential model for the *Black Square*. Shatskikh narrates this episode as "[p]lanes, so successful in [Malevich's] drawings, fought for living space in his painting as well . . . [m]arvelous geometric figures seemed to lead a life of their own, surfacing out of the depths"—this animism of painting holds to the same metaphorical paradigm. Bois's oxymoronic turn of phrase and Shatskikh's attribution of agency to forms themselves draw attention to just how difficult it is to narrate Malevich's path as an artist. What artist doesn't evolve, when evolution simply means formal departures from past work? Bois, "Back to the Future: The New Malevich". Douglas, *Swans of Other Worlds: Kazimir Malevich and the Origins of Abstraction in Russia*, 46-47. Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, 18.

Shatskikh's text aims to displace the most canonical account of Suprematism's origins by a Russian scholar: see E. Kovtun, "The Beginning of Suprematism," in *Kasimir Malewitsch zum 100 Geburtstag : Ausstellung Juni-Juli 1978* (Köln: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1978). Shatskikh supplements and revises Kovtun's account with new evidence, but also takes issue with his interpretation of, for example, the title of the *0.10* exhibition.

[12] For example, Malevich created "impressionist" works in the 1920s that deliberately prefigured his abstract Suprematist paintings (confusing art historians for decades) and misdated the evolution of that most famous of his projects, the *Black Square*. On the question of Malevich's dates see Charlotte Douglas, "Malevich's Painting: Some Problems of Chronology " *Soviet Union/Union Soviétique* 5, no. 2 (1978); Elena Basner, "Malevich's Paintings in the Collection of the State Russian Museum (The Matter of the Artist's Creative Evolution)," in Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum, 15-27. This practice was at times noticed by contemporaries; for example, in a letter to his wife, El Lissitzky notes this practice and ties it to the decline of his former teacher's health and fortune: "I met Malevich . . . He's getting old and in a very difficult position. He is to go abroad again in the autumn, and paints representational art and signs it with 1910 etc. Pitiful state of affairs. Does it very seriously and thinks he'll catch out fools . . . " See Lissitzky and Lissitzky-Küppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts*, 95.

unhelpful because it weighs down the study of Suprematism with a fixation on its origins as something with an objective and independent character, ignoring the fact that art is a series of exchanges in a social world between artists, past artworks, and viewers. Its forms are shaped by these exchanges, not through any agency of their own. At the same time, the huge art-historical investment in Suprematism threatens to displace the metaphor's naturalism with a notion of ultimate triumph, as if Suprematism *really was* the realization of modernist ambitions.[13] This takes its cue from, as we shall see, Malevich's own language, but I suggest that it should not be our language, because it leads less to insight than to the kind of language historians ought to avoid.[14]

On the other hand, I want to also avoid the preoccupation with establishing positive facts. These are crucial, to be sure, but scholars have basically established these facts for Malevich and there is more to works of art then the material circumstances of their creation. That history, let alone art history, is not a positive science is not now a particularly contentious claim, but the state of Malevich studies, so dominated by a particular kind of narrative teleology, necessitates that this now be stated explicitly and reacquire historiographical force. For example, Malevich wanted to show how the half-eclipsed "sun" of a theatrical backcloth was finally eclipsed by the Suprematist *Black Square.* He felt that he needed to write a plausible and powerful history for his work, facts notwithstanding. But problematically, to find the real date of the *Black Square*'s

[13] "This close formal analysis and description [of Malevich's painting] provides us with a universally valid reading; this is because the pictorial elements are defined beyond historical or cultural constraints, displacing individual specificity. The geometric forms are universally understandable." Rainer Crone and David Moos, *Kazimir Malevich: The Climax of Disclosure* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 70.

[14] For example: "Like signs of a sort of mystical ecstasy, these first non-objective planes blossom in a lyrical scale, with an expressive tonality that flatly refutes the edgy Cubo-Futurist patter of those [earlier] paintings. The majestic paring-down of two-dimensionality is given a triumphant expression in a spatial arrangement of elements that exude the freedom of a novel conception of space." Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, 2:46.

creation one needs, according to Shatskikh, to take Malevich at his word when he reported to his pupil Anna Leporskaia his inability to eat, sleep, or drink for a definite time after the work's creation.[15] The "correct" date hinges, in other words, on the testimony of an unreliable narrator repeated decades later.

Malevich's earlier modernisms and his Suprematist abstractions face each other across the gutter of the page. Decades ago, Otto Pächt identified the technology of vision that manuscript viewers needed to develop in order to make narrative sense out of discrete images. What I am suggesting is that we need to *set aside* the temptation to see the development of Suprematist painting in such a way.[16] The historical component of art history in this chapter means to take up a past moment in time for investigation and resist the immediate creation of an explanatory narrative. In part, this chapter shares Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht's discomfort with the principle that "one can undo paradoxes by transforming the simultaneity of thesis and antithesis into a narrative"; instead, why not allow for the thicket of paradox that Suprematism's original viewers often felt?[17] Despite formal similarities between Suprematism and the works preceding it, they are not the same. And Suprematism inarguably represents Malevich's emergence as *the* key artist of the avant-garde; or, keeping in mind that the artist's historical place was less certain

[15] "[I]f we consider the incredible agitation that overtook Malevich, preventing him from eating, drinking, and sleeping, then—taking into account the spontaneity of its creation—*Black Square* came into being on June 8, 1915." Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, 46-47. Leporskaia's testimony was published as "The Beginnings and the Ends of Figurative Painting—and Suprematism," in *Kasimir Malewitsch zum 100. Geburtstag: Ausstellung Juni-Juli 1978.* Köln: Galerie Gmurzynska, 1978. ex. cat., 65-69.

[16] Otto Pächt, *The Rise of Pictorial Narrative in Twelfth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

[17] See "After Learning from History," in Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *In 1926: Living at the Edge of Time* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 1997), 411-36.

than is his historiographical one, Suprematism is coincident with his desire *to be recognized* as this key figure, as the charismatic leader of a seminal movement in the history of art.[18]

This transformation in the discourse Malevich generated for his art, this new place he saw for it and, to a large extent, the new place it acquired is more important than the fact that some parts of Alogist pictures look like elements of Suprematist painting. The perceptible difference between these two sets of images, this qualification "some," really does mark a qualitative one. Iconographic similarities in *part* are less than the perception of *whole* works of art. Whereas the Alogist and previous works are clearly shaped by Malevich's imitations of Western modernisms, wearing their exposure to cubism on their sleeves (no matter how many planes of unmodeled color are added to the mix), Suprematism was a new visual style, one that seemed to be without precedent: unexpected, revolutionary, and consequential. So let's examine what Suprematism was in 1915.[19]

I

The literal surfaces of Suprematist painting were caught up in existing discourses around the visual arts. Their texture is at once materially clear and semantically opaque, signaling their own handmadeness in a distinctly undramatic way. Whether read as imperfection or subtlety neither the figures nor the grounds of Suprematist paintings are cleanly formed. These surfaces show themselves as having been worked, demonstrating what was known in avant-garde

[18] I want to emphasize the *rhetorical* and *functional* quality of this break as its most important aspect. A "scientific" observer, in my opinion, would find it difficult if not impossible to understand why exactly Suprematist abstraction precipitated something that, for example, Larionov's Rayonism did not.

[19] For the sake of convenience and because, by late 1916, Malevich began to rapidly expand the corpus of Suprematism, I have not called this chapter "Suprematism in 1915–1916" despite the fact that the exhibition only opened at the end of 1915 and that several of the texts under discussion here appeared in 1916.

discourse as *faktura*, what the Russo-Latvian theorist Vladimir Markov (aka Voldemārs Matvejs, no relation to the eponymous scholar of Futurism cited in the previous chapter) termed in 1912 the "noise" of the picture surface. In Maria Gough's gloss, this noise is "static interference that interrupts or impedes the communicative function of visual and other signs, thereby drawing one's attention to. . . the surface or material properties of the object."[20] Markov condemned academic painting for its tranquility of surface which for him signaled a greatly impoverished art.

Yet Suprematism's *faktura* could have easily been seen not as the deliberate, even quasi-sculptural, working of a surface but merely the index of a clumsy maker, of unskilled work. Despite Malevich's desire to proclaim its novelty, Suprematism's own material being—its *faktura*—mapped onto contemporary anxieties about the loss of craft tradition. In the view of the reviewer writing for *Vecherniaia Gazeta* (The Evening Newspaper) the "more than thirty" Suprematist canvases Malevich painted were only "a small number, for one can cook up even a hundred in a day [*eto eshche malo, ibo ikh v den' mozhno nastriapat' i do sotni*]."[21] The verb here underscores how apparent the material reality of Suprematism was for some of its first viewers. This reviewer does not see any of the grand visions that would be ascribed to Suprematism. He sees a bunch of poorly made pictures. This visible lack of skill points towards their hurried construction (though it could also be said that Malevich did not hurry enough, for he succeeded

[20] Gough, "Faktura: The Making of the Russian Avant-Garde," 39. I take "communicative function" here to mean something beyond simple reference to the world. For Roman Jakobson, "verbal communication" may be described by multiple functions ("we could . . . hardly find verbal messages that would fulfill only one function"); beyond the referential, there are the poetic, expressive, conative, phatic, and metalingual functions. *Faktura* disrupts the normative pictorial code at work in 1912; that is, it is not to say that art without identifiable *faktura* is without poetry, etc. See Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge: Technology Press of Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1960), 353-56.

[21] Anon., "U Petrogradskikh futuristov," *Vercherniaia Gazeta*, No. 113 December 29, 1915.

in creating less than a third of a day's potential output). This loss of human skill is reflected in the reviewer's syntax because, although it is fully idiomatic, the clause "for one can cook up a hundred in a day" contains, in Russian, no grammatical or even logical subject.[22] Without the subject, a place for him or her nevertheless remains open. *You* can bungle a hundred in a day; *I* can do the same—the reviewer's language allows such readings of his text. It points to an individual engaged in a kind of pseudo-mass production, neither skilled handicraft nor machine-made precision at scale.[23] In describing Suprematism in this way, the reviewer links it to nonart forms of making whose debasement and disappearance provoked nationalist anxieties. The reviewer's language uses tropes in the criticism of craft objects in late nineteenth-and early twentieth-century Russia: that the *special* skill of making craft objects was weakened, in such a view, by the general tempo of modern production, for which Russians were ill-equipped after the liberation of the serfs and the replacement of manual labor by machines.[24] "The old materials, patterns, colors, even the very working methods [of the village] are giving way to cheap rubbish bought in city stalls," fretted one commenter. [25] Those concerned about the fate of the Russian icon similarly saw it reduced to "handicraft" and, still worse, cheap mechanical reproduction.[26]

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[22] The Russian construction would accept such a logical subject in the dative case: e.g. "*for him* [it is] possible" (emu *mozhno*)—meaning "he can").

[23] I think it is important to distinguish here between art produced hurriedly on a relatively large scale and actual commodity production, as the technical meaning of this latter phrase, as Dave Beech notes, has been lost in much art historical writing concerned with relationship of art to political economy. See Dave Beech, *Art and Value: Art's Economic Exceptionalism in Classical, Neoclassical and Marxist Economics* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

[24] Wendy R. Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia: Reviving the Kustar Art Industries, 1870-1917* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17.

[25] Quoted in ibid., 6.

[26] Kondakov, *The Russian Icon*, 2-3. See also Glade, "A Heritage Discovered Anew: Russia's Reevaluation of Pre-Pretrine Icons in the Late Tsarist and Early Soviet Periods."; Nichols, "The Icon and the Machine in Russia's Religious Renaissance, 1900-1909."

For contemporary critics Malevich's paintings demonstrated a failure of craftsmanship that sent his work to the province of cheap and anonymous reproduction. And not only Malevich. Boris Lopatin wrote in the newspaper *Petrogradskii Listok* that Suprematism—he uses the word indiscriminately to refer to the entire lot of *0.10* modernists, even those aligned with Tatlin—was "dry, monotonous, no kind of painting and no kind of individuality. Malevich is like Popova. Popova is like Puni. Puni is like Udaltsova. You can't tell them apart!" Lopatin added that "switching the labels under the paintings changed nothing."[27] These artworks are identical. Moreover, they may not even be paintings! What then are they? Perhaps the kind of degenerate craft that was so worrisome to some Russians. If so, this wouldn't have been a completely new worry: Nikolai Gogol's story "The Portrait" begins with the description of an art shop, full of pictures so generic that the store's owner makes his tout in terms of types, crying "there's this winter, take this winter! Fifteen roubles! . . . Look, what a winter!"[28] Little surprise then that the shop also displays popular prints, the *lubki* that would so appeal to the avant-garde decades later. Their proximity serves to remind the story's reader that bad painting appears fungible, like the products of a reproductive technology; the store's paintings are made by the "same practiced, habituated hand, belonging rather to a crudely made automaton [*avtomatu*] than to a man!"[29]

Malevich, as it turns out, had designed craft objects alongside his paintings. This domestic application of Suprematism is worth exploring not only for the insight it gives into

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[27] Boris Lopatin, "Futurism--Suprematism," *Petrogradskii Listok*, December 1915. "Sukho, odnoobrazno, nikakoi zhivopisi i nikakoi individual'nosti. Malevich—kak Popova. Popova—kak Puni. Puni—kak Udal'tsova. Ne otlichish'!" Of course, this is critical hyperbole: Malevich may indeed be "like" Popova, Puni, and Udaltsova, but one can tell them apart. Look at Popova's *Still Life,* which is clearly not Malevich's Suprematism (fig. 3.18). Rather, works could not be associated with their actual creators because these works did not rise to the level of art—painting—to begin with. They are somehow unworthy of association with proper names, despite the fact that such names are their real authors.

[28] Nikolai Gogol, "The Portrait," in *The Collected Tales of Nikolai Gogol* (New York: Pantheon, 1998), 342.

[29] Ibid., 341.

painterly Suprematism but also because it forms part of the prehistory of post-Revolutionary efforts to reformulate the relationship of subjects to the objects of daily life; in fact, Liubov Popova, who exhibited here alongside Malevich, would go on to design textiles and clothing in an attempt to reconcile the twin demands of the Soviet consumer—someone as ordinary as a "peasant woman from Tula"—and Constructivist ambitions.[30] Malevich is usually not part of that later story, but attending to this early moment shows how Suprematism helped set up the conditions in which modernist artists saw their work as potentially something more than painting.

A month prior to the *0.10* exhibition Malevich contributed abstract designs to the *Exhibition of Contemporary Decorative Art* (Vystavka sovremennogo dekorativnogo iskusstva) of the Kiev Kustar Society from the Verbovka (a town near Kiev) and Skoptsy (from Poltava province [*guberniia*] on the east bank of the Dnieper) workshops. This was an important show, widely reviewed. Malevich exhibited with the Verbovka group. His designs for two scarves and a pillow would presently appear as paintings at the next month's exhibition of paintings.[31] Held at the Lemarse Gallery in Moscow, the show included other avant-gardists, some of whom, such as Puni, would also turn up at *0.10*.[32] In Malevich's case, it was *not* that the abstract motifs of

[30] The phrase is from the editors of *Lef,* commenting on Popova's and her colleague Varvara Stepanova's work at the First State Cotton-Printing Factory. Quoted in Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, 89. Kiaer examines how these women's experiments in textile and fashion design—the most successful realizations of Constructivist theory—showed as "Constructivism itself, as theory and practice, can be understood as an avant-garde that unsettles some of the gendered hierarchies of modernist art" (92).

[31] See Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, 89.

[32] For general information about the exhibition see Charlotte Douglas, "Suprematist Embroidered Ornament," *Art Journal* 54, no. 1 (1995); Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, 88-98. Wendy Salmond describes this event as "Verbovka [coming] within the orbit of the Petrograd avant-garde" and thus a departure from the society's explorations of "Ukrainian folk embroideries and carpets in the Kiev Museum of History and Antiquities." See Salmond, *Arts and Crafts in Late Imperial Russia: Reviving the Kustar Art Industries, 1870-1917*, 159.

craftworks led to abstract art, for he had already designed and painted Suprematist works on canvas.[33] Suprematist forms were both art and nonart.

Malevich's geometric vocabulary did not particularly alarm the critics at the *Exhibition of Contemporary Decorative Art.* They didn't even think it was that exceptional. In reviews, his name usually appears as part of a list, "so-and-so, Malevich, and others." Broadly, reviewers found that the Skoptsy workshops produced more traditional work while Verbovka's was noticeably influenced by the "latest trends" in art. The former was better received, but reviewers found bright spots in the latter's work as well. Writing for *Women's Affairs* (Zhenskoe delo), V. Dudareva asserted that the folk art of Ukraine demonstrated the survival of traditional skills, a reminder of a time "when compliant factory cheapness did not reign with its market-oriented tastelessness in even the most forlorn corners of our motherland."[34] Iakov Tugendkhold's review for the daily *Russian News* (Russkie Vedomosti) agreed with Dudareva when he happily observed that Russia (unlike the West) still fostered applied art (*prikladnoe iskusstvo*).[35] Both favored the more traditional work of the Skoptsy artists. For Tugendkhold, Verbovka's eclecticism was too much. It included everything from "[traditional] folk ornament" to "the exoticism of Japan and China, and even the non-objective confusion [*nerazberikha*] of Futurism."[36] Futurism's foreignness, shared with the art of Japan and China, at the same time

[33] Shatskikh shows that "[t]he Suprematist subjects of the Verbovka sketches derived directly from Malevich's canvases"; i.e. the sketches for decorative objects followed the paintings. Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, 89.

[34] V. Dudareva, "Vystavka sovremennogo dekorativnogo iskusstva," *Zhenskoe Delo*, no. 23 (1915). "Narodnoe iskusstvo v Malorossii doneslo do samykh poslednikh dnei shchastlivye navyki iz togo davnego vremeni, kogda usluzhlivaia fabrichnaia deshevka ne tsarstvovala svoim rynochnym bezvkusiem dazhe v samykh zateriannykh ugolkakh nashei rodiny."

[35] Iakov Tugendkhol'd, "Vystavka sovremennogo dekorativnogo iskusstva," *Russkie Vedomosti*, November 8 1915.

[36] Ibid.

deprives it of its iconoclastic rhetoric; without its manifestos and public demonstrations, Futurism supplements rather than supplants other artistic traditions. For Dudareva, on the other hand, the Verbovka group's contributions exemplified "the newest searches of contemporary Western painting into the province of embroidered artistry and, in doing so, perhaps open new broad perspectives."[37] Though disconcerting, the new forms of the Verbovka workshop were greeted with restrained judgment.

Indeed, Tugendkhold's criticism of Verbovka's eclecticism was qualified by his observation that many of them were beautiful:

> The peaceful melody of the Poltavan carpets gives way here [in the Verbovka section] to the nervous and passionate cry of modernity. Here there are many beautiful works [. . .]. But here there is not still that organic harmony between applied art and its vital application, that respect for material present in the Poltavan folk carpets . . .[38]

The Verbovka works should probably be considered "decoration, or decorative art" (*skoree dekoratsiia, ili dekorativnoe iskusstvo*) rather than real folk crafts. Tugendkhold distinguished between the *applied* (prikladnoe) and the *decorative* (dekorativnoe), consigning the modernist-influenced works to the latter category—a distinction particular to him (the terms seem to have been interchangeable for most critics). Tugendkhold doesn't elaborate much on the distinction, but in his comments on the arabesque form we gain some insight into his thought. Both kinds of work contain this basic ornament, realized in two qualitatively different forms: "[f]airy tales cluster in the arabesques of the people, but in the arabesques of Puni and Iakulov—the chaos of

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[37] Dudareva, "Vystavka sovremennogo dekorativnogo iskusstva." "S drugoi storony, zamanchivoi risovalas' popytka vvesti noveishie iskaniia sovremennoi zapadnoi zhivopisi v oblast' vyshival'nogo khudozhestva i tem otkryt', byt' mozhet, novye shirokie perspektivy."

[38] Tugendkhol'd, "Vystavka sovremennogo dekorativnogo iskusstva." "Spokoinaia melodiia poltavskikh kovrov smeniaetsia zdes' nervno-strastnym krikom sovremennosti. Zdes' mnogo krasivykh rabot . . . No zdes' net eshche toi organicheskoi garmonii mezhdu prikladnym iskusstvom i ego zhiznennym prilozheniem, togo uvazheniia k material, kotorye est' v poltavskikh narodnykh kovrakh . . ."

mechanical modernity [*mashinnoi sovremennosti*], fragments of pipes and broilers."[39] Tugendkhold puts aside Chinese and Japanese motifs and concentrates his criticism on Futurism with its pipes and broilers. In his view, the presence of modernity in the work—the presence of contemporary experience—marks the merely decorative. The visibility of modern life makes discordant the relationship of the work and its "vital application." In this author's view, the persistence of unmodern folk motifs, the presence of the mythic fairy-tale past, allows the vital application of applied art. Tugendkhold's review implicitly calls for an untimeliness of ornament whose *seeming* incongruity with "mechanical modernity" constitutes its very vitality, its usefulness for life.

While Tugendkhold complicated the relationship between ornamental style and contemporary life, another prominent critic, Sergei Glagol, struck a more ambivalent note. Glagol distinguished both the Skoptsy and Verbovka workshops from traditional craft workshops (*kustarnaia organizatsiia*), because both introduced distinctively modern art into "art industry" (*kudozhestvennaia promyshlennost'*).[40] Glagol wrote that, in both cases, almost nothing of the "popular" or "national" (*narodnogo*) remains. These workshops are *not* the agents of a "Renaissance" of "native Russian folk artistry." They are rather developing a "a new type of artistic craftwork" that may influence folk tastes, tastes already "perverted" or "distorted" (*izvrashchaiut*) by foreign images.[41] Yet this distortion is not all bad, for beauty once again qualifies critical judgment. Glagol singled out for praise Evmen Pshechenko, an autodidact and the most universally admired artist of the show, for managing "to combine beautifully in [his

[39] Ibid.

[40] Sergei Glagol', "Vystavka 'sovremennago dekoratavnago iskusstva'," *Utro Rossii*, November 6 1915.

[41] Ibid.

work] ordinary Ukrainian embroidery of colors with motifs carried into the village by modernism [*modernizmom*—a rare use of the word]."[42] Like Tugendkhold, he allows that there are many beautiful things on display—even modernist ones, such as an "original umbrella" by Aleksandra Ekster.[43]

Finally, for critic Nikolai Lavrsky, the "machine age" did not mean the image world of modernity, as for Tugendkhold, but the material facts of production. "Machine production has murdered originality [and] beauty in applied art."[44] This is true, he notes, for both domestic and foreign work. One might expect that a critic bemoaning machine production would also despair of its high culture analogue, modernist art. This is not the case. "[Verbovka] set up their goal to reflect in embroidery some painterly trends of modernity [*sovremennosti*], and also to show contemporary folk art [*sovremennoe narodnoe iskusstvo*]."[45] Lavrsky finds no contradiction in the terms *narodnoe* and *sovremennoe* (folk and contemporary, respectively)—terms that Tugendkhold saw in opposition to one another. For Lavrsky, folk describes a mode of production rather than a repertoire of visual forms: embroidery, for example, has an essentially folk character that cannot be lost even in the service of modern themes.

Only a month before the *0.10* exhibition, Malevich's Suprematist forms were not worth singling out. If Malevich and his Verbovka colleagues introduced the supposedly "revolutionary" motifs of the new painting into the decorative arts, they did not revolutionize the purpose of the decorative arts; indeed, for some reviewers these innovations affirmed the viability of those arts.

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[42] Ibid. " . . . sumel krasivo sochetat' v nikh obychnye malorossiiskie vyshivki tsvetov s motivami, prinesennymi v derevniu modernizmom."

[43] Ibid.

[44] N. Lavrskii, "Vystavka dekorativnogo iskusstva," *Ranee Utro*, November 6 1915.

[45] Ibid.

Even for those critics who saw modernity as a menace to craft production, the location of that modernity was unclear. It could be in the forms themselves, or in methods of production. If Suprematism in painting reminded certain viewers of modernity's destruction of tradition, Suprematism in the decorative arts, if problematic for some, nevertheless offered some hope that the visual forms of modernity might not in themselves be antithetical to tradition. The image of "peasant women" embroidering modernity's "final cries," an image from Tugendkhold's review, represents, despite its ambivalence, the possibility of a reconciliation between modernist art and traditional culture that is only possible because of its particular historical situation.[46] This is a picture in which "peasant women," the common femininity that frequently served as a target of modernism, are understood to produce this very modernism.[47] As it turned out, the concerns over the state of craft production in Russia were not heightened when craft embraced elements from modernist painting. Russian critics had trouble synthesizing the critique of modern forms with that of modern production. Though critical writing reflected national concerns about the prospects of applied art in the modern world, these concerns were not expressed in the dramatic tones that accompanied the *0.10* exhibition.

Malevich's participation in the *Exhibition of Contemporary Decorative Art* was an experiment that turned his contemporary fine art innovations towards other, applied ends. At the time, the ideological project of Suprematism was developing, but had not been publicized. The artist's charisma and ambition went almost without notice when they first appeared in the sphere of craft, and one imagines he cannot have been satisfied with such a lack of response. Drawn

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[46] Tugendkhol'd, "Vystavka sovremennogo dekorativnogo iskusstva." " . . . mozhno li davat' krest'iankam vyshivat' 'poslednie kriki' sovremnnosti?"

[47] Cf. Andreas Huyssen, "Mass Culture as Woman: Modernism's Other," in *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986).

from the same dictionary of forms, Suprematist applied art sought to invest craft objects with the radicalism it would presently realize in painting, but Suprematism's visual novelty alone—its spare vocabulary of geometric forms—could not secure its recognition at the time of the Moscow exhibition. The Russian image world was prepared to recognize, with a bit of nervousness, even these sorts of images as part of its eclectic whole. This makes sense, as Russians were accustomed to seeing modern things, Western things, absorbed by their own culture; they had two hundred years of experience. After his radicalism was recognized in painting, Malevich would once again attempt to bring his geometric abstraction to applied art. This return was first proposed in the pages of the never-published journal over which Malevich and his collaborators unsuccessfully labored in 1916 and again in many forms and with more success after the Revolution.[48] When Malevich's abstractions appeared as paintings, alongside their manifestos, critics paid attention. Again, something besides form itself was at issue.

II

The viewer of the *0.10* might have been surprised to learn of Malevich's first deployment of Suprematist forms, because Suprematism in *painting* emerged with all the possibility of a newborn while being presented as if fully formed, like (as one art historian has actually claimed) Athena.[49] This protean quality has frequently been mistaken by scholars for a perfected form. That Suprematism was not a completed thing can be seen by turning to its earliest programmatic texts in which Malevich attempted again and again, without apparent satisfaction, to talk about his invention. First, I will turn to the untitled short statement or manifesto, published alongside

[48] Douglas, "Suprematist Embroidered Ornament," 43.

[49] "It might be fair to say that Malevich's abstraction sprang, Athena-like, ready formed from the brow of its creator." Golding, "Malevich and the Ascent into Ether," 67.

those belonging to the other exhibitors and distributed at the exhibition. Then, to the longer version published for sale, "From Cubism to Suprematism," which in turn was revised, again extended, and republished (after the exhibition had closed) as "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism."[50] Malevich had not published such programmatic texts for his earlier works. His characteristically problematic attempts to define Suprematism differentiated it from this earlier work as well as other early abstract works of art. Although all early abstract art broadly shares certain modernist pictorial conventions (the self-reflexive attention to the picture plane most famously) and, it could be argued, shares similar philosophical sources (direct or indirect exposure to the philosophy of Henri Bergson,[51] for example)—Suprematism did not articulate in text or image clear aesthetical or philosophical propositions that would grant it a conceptual unity. Malevich, for example, lacked Vasilii Kandinsky's literary talent for symbolist myth-making, did not care for the musical metaphors that provided a steady "ground bass" for Kandinsky's abstract art, and paid little attention to the notion of abstraction as an essentializing process (indeed, Malevich hardly ever uses the word "abstraction").[52] Suprematism lacked the systematic consistency of, for example, Piet Mondrian's Neoplasticism, whose rigorously

[50] An anonymous review that appeared in December 1915 testifies to the fact that "From Cubism to Suprematism" was on sale for most, if not all, of the exhibition's run, despite the 1916 date given by its publisher. Anon., "U futuristov," *Petrogradskie Vedomosti*, December 22, 1915.

[51] Hilary Fink argues that shared interest in Bergson's thought was characteristic of Russian modernism. Her case is persuasive, but of greater interest to those interested in Bergson and philosophy in Russia. Malevich's thought may be influenced by but is not reducible to Bergson's, and there is no evidence that Malevich ever read Bergson. Thus Fink takes care to qualify her conclusions. For example, "[a]lthought Malevich's *vremennost'* is quite similar in meaning to *dlitel'nost'*, his use of the term to indicate temporal succession is . . . fundamentally opposed to the Bergsonian meaning." Hilary L. Fink, *Bergson and Russian Modernism, 1900-1930* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 83.

[52] The reference here is to Vasilii Kandinsky, "On the Spiritual in Art [1912]," in *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, ed. Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (New York: Da Capo Press, 1994). See also Rose-Carol Washton Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style*, Oxford Studies in the History of Art and Architecture (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, 1980).

defined formal elements created a syntax for exploring the problem of formal stability in painting.[53] Whether in texts or visual forms, both Kandinsky and Mondrian granted their viewers clear frameworks with which to approach their art as a whole. Malevich did not provide such a framework for Suprematism.

Suprematist pictures departed from Malevich's past work in that they showed no human beings and no recognizable objects. But only in the closing lines of "From Cubism to Suprematism" did Malevich speak of this new, "nonobjective" (*bespredmetnoe*) art: "I have moved towards Suprematism—towards the new painterly realism, nonobjective creativity."[54] The meaning or rules of "nonobjective creativity" (*bespredmetnoe tvorchestvo*) are not elaborated beyond its proper name of Suprematism. Acknowledging this openness, Malevich closes with a promise to say more later, leaving his reader without a list of creative principles or demands for the new art. He admitted in a letter to his friend Mikhail Matiushin that "it's all about Cubo-Futurism and that there's very little about Suprematism . . . [the text] is missing the main thing."[55] The absence in the manifesto of a clear program for Suprematism is not filled by anything in the extant letters, and one surmises that Malevich may not actually have had many particulars in mind, consumed as he was with the material task at hand: painting pictures. For example, the manifesto speaks of the future elaboration of ideas about "the dynamic of musical masses" (*dinamike musikal'nykh mass*), but this theme is virtually absent from his published (and unpublished) writings, pointing towards a certain lack of clarity at this moment in late 1915 regarding the direction of his future efforts. Even in the revised manifesto, "nonobjective art" is

[53] See Yve-Alain Bois, "The Iconoclast," in *Piet Mondrian 1872-1944* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1995).

[54] Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:34.

[55] Letter from Kazimir Malevich to Mikhail Matiushin, n.d. [late October, 1915], published in *Malevich o sebe, sovremenniki o Maleviche: pis'ma, dokumenty, vospominaniia, kritika*, 1:72.

always the limit, the thing that is an "exit" (*vykhod*), the thing to which Malevich "goes past the zero."[56] This trio of citations constitutes, in fact, the only mentions of "nonobjective" in the manifesto and its revision. The paucity of mentions of nonobjective creativity is surpassed only by the total silence regarding what it opposes: what Malevich will term in later texts "fine" or "imitative" art (*izobrazitel'noe iskusstvo*; translations vary).[57] At the beginning, Malevich did not define Suprematism's relationship to nonobjectivity.

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The revised version of Malevich's manifesto, with the title "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism," is quite long. It gestures towards being a complete theoretical-historical document. It appears to say, "this is what the history of art is, this is how Suprematism, building on and breaking with cubism and Futurism, represents a departure from that history and, moreover, here is what Suprematism is." No one has really questioned this rhetorical set up. But, in fact, the text does not do any of these things as it claims organizational principles to which it fails to adhere. Its title points to a tripartite division: cubism, Futurism, Suprematism. Instead, after an explosive preamble, the first section entitled "The Art of the Savage and Its Principles" (*Iskusstvo dikaria i ego printsipy*) begins towards the bottom of the first page of text (page number three). There is no similar subtitle until more than halfway through, where Malevich places "Futurism in Painting" (*Futurizm v zhivopisi*) in the middle of page twenty-two (of thirty-one). These subtitles do not correspond in name and number to the title of the manifesto; they nevertheless implicitly describe a kind of historical progress. Yet the rhetoric of the argument

[56] *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:45, 53; *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:19, 37.

[57] "Fine art" is normal, but a certain text is normally translated as "The Problem of Imitative [*izobrazitel'nogo*] Art." In that text Malevich seems to make a distinction between Suprematism and the non-abstract art of the past.

they contain isn't so straightforwardly historical: instead, it is often dissonant in such a way that distracts from the overall celebration of Suprematism. A careful look at a few of the text's opening pages reveals a few of these dissonances.

Discussing the art of the "savage," Malevich points to the foundational act of representational art, a self-portrait: "fashioning his drawings out of a dot and five little sticks, [the savage] tried to recreate his own image." The success of the act does not guarantee artistic quality. The image's "weakness on the technical side" denies it the status of art, "[f]or inability is not art." Thus, the savage "merely pointed the way to art"; that is, the greater (but still insufficient) accomplishments of antiquity and the Renaissance.[58] This distinction is an echo of Malevich's unconsummated desire for academic training, and suggests that Suprematism still has something to do with the technical quality of past representational art. Otherwise there would be no cause for what Malevich writes here. To concede in the midst of this argument a division between the wholly inadequate mark making of the savage (something like "proto-art") and true—but nonetheless representational—art complicates the structure of the text in that it deliberately introduces criteria of judgment irrelevant to the main project of promoting Suprematism. Malevich's continued investment in notions of technical quality stands uneasily in relation to his present project, not least because, as the above citation noted, the *faktura* of Suprematist pictures is not an academic one. Malevich will propose a striking new image of the artist, but, as the continuing attachment to painting suggests, one grounded in some kind of tradition.

[58] Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:20; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:36-37.

The author's attitude towards Futurism is similarly contradictory. Malevich affirms Futurism and its "slap in the face" to the "rag-merchant from the Academy." Futurism is *necessary*: "I affirm," Malevich continues, "that whoever has not trodden the path of Futurism . . . is condemned to crawl forever among the ancient graves and feed on the crusts of the past."[59] But quickly the relationship of the manifesto's narrator to Futurism shifts. Not only does it lie in the past of the Suprematist collective, "[w]e have abandoned Futurism," it is also attacked, "[w]e . . . *have spat on the altar of its art*." Returning to the first-person singular, Malevich asserts that "you will not see the new beauty and the truth, until you make up your minds and spit." Yet to spit is, here, somehow not a gesture of total rejection.

> We did not renounce Futurism because it was languishing, and its end was approaching. No. The beauty of speed which it discovered is eternal and the new will still be revealed to many.
> As we run to our goal through the speed of Futurism, thought moves more swiftly, and whoever finds himself in Futurism is nearer to this aim and further from the past.[60]

Futurism's values are eternal values, and moreover Futurism is something inhabitable by the artist on his or her way to a (still undefined) ultimate goal.

Malevich wanted this revised and expanded version of his manifesto to correct problems with the original, specifically the insufficient attention paid to the new art as noted by Matiushin. Yet his additions, rather than fully incarnating the earlier, skeletal structure, were often tangential, elaborations that draw the reader's attention away from the ostensible task at hand. "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism" is interesting not because it argues that the new art it affirms is both historically necessary and radically new, but because it goes on for so long, in

[59] *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:26; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:42.

[60] *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:27; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:43.

such a doggedly messy way, in its attempt to express these contradictory modernist themes. Malevich's vision of a history of art that comes ever closer to fulfilling itself as a pure creative act needs a sublated past, whereas the idiom of the text as manifesto needs that past to be wholly set aside, beaten, humiliated. The former history demands a superindividual subject yet the latter finds creativity only in the person of the sovereign artist. The vacillation between singular subjects, which blurs the distinction between the lonely prophetic voice and the collective movement of modern subjects, echoes that between these images of history. The notion of necessity, the alignment between individual, historical subjectivity and eternal truths, so important for modernists from Charles Baudelaire to Kandinsky, is expressed in Malevich's manifestos as a fundamentally contradictory thing, one that he refuses to harmonize into a single conception of how art happens.

The dissonances of Malevich's text ensure that its reader does not encounter a document that builds an argument. For example, Kandinsky's *On the Spiritual in Art* is progressive narrative (as Lisa Florman has shown, modeled on Hegel's *Aesthetics*).[61] In contrast, in Malevich's text what he or she encounters is a huge amount of manifesto language whose "energy," the epithet art historian John Bowlt applies to Malevich's writings, escapes simple paraphrase. Not only do Malevich's texts fail to "clarify the meaning of paintings," Bowlt writes, but it is "as if the essays were written in spite of, or counter to, the visual works."[62] "Countering"

[61] See Lisa Carol Florman, *Concerning the Spiritual and the Concrete in Kandinsky's Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014). Kandinsky worried about the reception of abstract painting, whether or not audiences were "ready." Rose-Carol Long argues that Kandinsky's move to abstract art was a slow process that increasingly obscured figurative content that provided a kind of formal pedagogy, letting viewers gradually learn a new vocabulary of color and form through increasingly abstract works. This is in contradistinction to Malevich, whose sudden move into abstract and violent rhetoric indicates a certain pleasure in shocking an unprepared audience. See Long, *Kandinsky: The Development of an Abstract Style*, 11.

[62] John Bowlt, "Kazimir Malevich and the Energy of Language," in Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935, 181.

quite rightly suggests a kind of responsiveness. Texts are made with an eye toward works of art, just as works of art anticipate, are generative of, the textual responses of viewers (including their author).[63] Malevich's contemporaries noted the energy of his language, not always favorably. The journal *Apollon* demonstrated interest—perhaps surprising given the general conservatism of the publication—in the works on view at the *0.10* exhibition but was confounded by this relationship between textual theory and pictorial practice:

> The theories of these innovators contain more than a little that's "curious," they undoubtedly sharply pose some questions to painting, but the practical implementation of "non-objective" painting and sculpture at the 0.10 exhibition (an arithmetically illiterate name!!) and at [their] lectures does not speak in favor of these theories.[64]

The *Apollon* critic considers the artists' theories themselves of some interest; it seems that the questions they pose of painting are valid ones. He would like to see the visible realization of theory, a solid correspondence between the verbal and the visual. The failure to do this calls into question the theory itself. The disappointment suffered by the critic is generated not by painting or theory but their failure to effectively clarify one another.

Critics saw Suprematist painting and Suprematist textuality as two separate things, whose relationship was problematic. In this they both identified a real problem and failed to pick up on a key aspect of Suprematist poetics. Contemporary readers too struggle to understand the relationship between Malevich's texts and images, leading to a situation in which the former are

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[63] See Holly, *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image*.

[64] Given that Malevich was the significant writer of exhibitors and aimed to speak for the group, in all probability the "theory" mentioned here is Malevich's. A. Rostislavov, "Iskusstvo i voina. Vystavki i khudozhestvennye dela," *Apollon* 7, no. 1 (1916): 37. "V teoriakh novatorov nemalo 'liubopytnogo',' imi nesomnenno ostro postavleny nekotorye voprosy zhivospi, no prakticheskie osushchestbleniia 'bezpredmetnoi' zhivopisi i skul'ptury na vystavke 0,10 (negramotnoe arifmeticheski nazvanie!!) i na lektsiiakh ne govoriat v pol'zy etikh teorii." Similar criticism was repeated by Abram Efros at Malevich's retrospective exhibition in 1920, which is republished in Malevich, *Malevich o sebe, sovremenniki o Maleviche: pis'ma, dokumenty, vospominaniia, kritika*, 2:527.

either studied independently or bracketed entirely. This justifies a shift in our own approach to this relationship. Even if one were, for example, to dispute the *Apollon* critic and argue that Suprematist pictures *do* somehow answer their theoretical challenges, the dynamic play between text and image ensures that these pictures cannot be understood with methodologies such as iconographic analysis that depend on stable textual meanings. These texts remind us of modernist precedents while also providing an array of idiosyncratic metaphors whose relationship to painting is at once doubtful and certain, inasmuch as they always claim to be about painting. Thinking about the novelty of these metaphors will let us understand something of the relationship between text and image in Suprematist painting.

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Malevich's linguistic energy should be contrasted to its probable model, Filippo Marinetti's *Futurist Manifesto* of 1909. Malevich's manifestos exhibit a far greater similarity with the Italian manifesto in terms of their rhetoric and lack of real poetic experimentation than they do with the written works of his Russian contemporaries and collaborators such as Velimir Khlebnikov and Aleksei Kruchenykh.[65] This is not to say Marinetti's manifesto was Malevich's only source. He took up the telegraphic style and tone of absolute certainty towards art history adopted in Albert Gleizes and Jean Metzinger's *Du "cubisme,"* which Matiushin had translated for the *Union of Youth* journal in 1913.[66] In the same journal, an article by the artist Olga

[65] For example, Malevich's manifestos of 1915 use ordinary syntax and lexicon (apart from his sometimes odd choices owing to his Polish-Ukrainian origins). Cf. the libretto to the co-authored opera *Victory of the Sun,* with its many neologisms and phonetic inventiveness—devices that in fact characterize some of Malevich's explicitly poetic work. See Rosamund Bartlett, ed. *Victory over the Sun: The World's First Futurist Opera* (Exeter, Devon: University of Exeter Press, 2012); Margarita Marinova, "Malevich's Poetry: A "Wooden Bicycle against a Background of Masterpieces"?," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 48, no. 4 (2004).

[66] Mikhail Matiushin, "O knige Metsenzhe-Gleza "O kubizme"," *Soiuz Molodezhi*, no. 3 (1913). Translated in Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983). Matiushin interpolated his translation with passages from P. D. Ouspensky's esoteric *Tertium Organum.*

Rozanova clearly influenced Malevich's later manifestos. In this article, Rozanova argues against the artist as a "plagiarizer" (*plagiat*) and "imitator" (*imitator*) of nature, "repeating" (*povtorivshii*) its forms (though this lexical similarity to Malevich's writings of 1915-1916 shouldn't hide the fact that neither artist was making nonobjective pictures in 1913).[67] And Troels Andersen speculates that Fernand Légér's lectures of 1913–1914, given in Paris at the Académie Vassilieff, might have made their way to Moscow (Christopher Green has noted their distinctly Futurist tone).[68]

But the particular poetics of the manifesto form, best embodied by Marinetti, especially appealed to Malevich. As Martin Puchner has shown, beginning with Karl Marx and Friedrich Engel's *Communist Manifesto,* the manifesto aspired to, in J.L. Austin's phrase, "do things with words." As Puchner shows, manifestos exceed the scope of Austin's account of perlocutionary acts (those speech acts that effect real change, such as pronouncements of marriage or baptism) because they do not speak from a position of real power. *Pace* Austin, who thought that theatrical performance *precluded* perlocutionary speech acts, Puchner argues that the manifesto's hoped-for source of authority is indeed its theatricality:

> [T]heatricality is what enabled the manifesto to speak in the first place, in the absence of proper authority. Since the manifesto speaks from a position of weakness, it must hope that the presumption of future authority, the projective usurpation of the speaking position of the sovereign, will have effects and consequence. [. . .] [T]heatricality describes a space between absolute powerlessness and the secure position of the sovereign, a play that the manifesto exploits without yet knowing whether the project of usurping power will work out. Without theatricality, in other words, there would be no pose, no

[67] Reprinted in N. A. Gur'ianova, *Ol'ga Rozanova i rannii russkii avangard* (Moscow: Gileia, 2002), 189-90. Translated in John E. Bowlt, ed. *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism, 1902-1934* (New York: Viking Press, 1976), 101-10.

[68] See Andersen's introduction, "Malevich on New Art," in Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 10-11; Christopher Green, *Art in France, 1900-1940* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 153.

> presumption, no projection, no futurity; without theatricality there would be no manifesto.[69]

Speaking mediocre Russian, from the marginal position of the modernist artist, in the midst of the Great War, Malevich in 1915 is nothing but a poser. Malevich could have written a history of art as a history; he could have written about art in established poetic tropes. But only the form of the manifesto could grant him the advance on power necessary to stage, as I will detail below, his *coup de théâtre*, his own "transfiguration" into the "zero of form."

Marinetti's paradigmatic manifesto was almost immediately translated and published in Russia, and though its importance was not immediately felt among the Russian artistic community, by 1912 members of Malevich's circle were increasingly attracted to Futurism as the new term—supplanting "impressionism"—of vanguard art.[70] Marinetti himself visited Russia in early 1914.[71] Though there are formal comparisons to be made between Italian and Russian futurist painting (including works such as Malevich's own *Knife Grinder*, mentioned briefly above), an examination of Malevich's new interest in quasi-futurist textuality will prove more valuable here as it presents a striking contrast to and conflict with the mute visual potency of his new style.[72]

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[69] Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifestos, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 25-26.

[70] See Charlotte Douglas, "The New Russian Art and Italian Futurism," *Art Journal* 34, no. 3 (1975). First translated in periodicals, Italian Futurist manifestos including Marinetti and Boccioni's were then collected and published in two different volumes in 1914: *Futurizm: (na puti k novomu simvolizmu)*, trans. G.E. Tasteven (Moscow: Iris, 1914); *Manifesty ital'ianskogo futurizma*, trans. Vadim Shershenevich (Moscow: Rus. T-va, 1914).

[71] Benedikt Livshits, in his memoir, humorously recounts how Velemir Khlebnikov and Larionov staged an oedipal drama in their polemics against Marinetti. See Livshits, *The One and a Half-Eyed Archer*.

[72] More specifically, Douglas compares Malevich's works with those of Gino Severini. See Douglas, "The New Russian Art and Italian Futurism," 234. But she also discusses potential conceptual affinities: "Like the Italian Futurists, Malevich made use of Bergsonian concepts concerning the nature of memory and the mutual interaction of object and environment" (235)—though these concepts only play out in later Alogist works of Malevich which themselves bear far more resemblance to synthetic cubism than Italian Futurism.

The title of "From Cubism to Suprematism" invokes a historical perspective not present in Marinetti's text. Malevich wanted to carefully distinguish exactly where his art differed from that of the past, and not simply the antique but the *recent* past.[73] (Here it is perhaps worth noting that Malevich's art, unlike Italian Futurism, the visual components of which were in the main various revisions of neo-impressionism and cubism, was *visually* novel.) Marinetti writes of the Futurists:

> We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot; we will sing of the multicoloured, polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals; we will sing of the vibrant nightly fervor of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons; greedy railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents; factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke [etc.][74]

Modernity demands a new kind of art to adequately represent its forms and experience. This new kind of art comes to terms with the speed and scale of new modes of transportation and production. It is the art of aggressive masculine youth. Though its subjects may be new, nothing in Marinetti's manifesto challenges representation in art; artistic expression as *song* ties it, indeed, to classical (and thus broadly representational) forms. The Futurist painters seemed to suggest a path beyond representational art when they wrote that

> The gesture which we would reproduce on canvas shall no longer be a fixed *moment* in universal dynamism. It shall simply be the *dynamic sensation itself*.[75]

But this "dynamic sensation," in theory and practice, manifested itself in things in the world, human beings, trains, and so on. No matter how fractured and dynamic the Futurist world, in

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[73] The creative production and theorization of Italian and Russian Futurism in poetry was more closely linked than that in the visual arts. See Anna Lawton, "Russian and Italian Futurist Manifestoes," *The Slavic and East European Journal* 20, no. 4 (1976).

[74] *Futurist Manifestos*, ed. Robert Motherwell, trans. Robert Brain, et al. (New York: Viking Press, 1973), 22.

[75] Ibid., 27. This "Technical Manifesto" was translated into Russian and published by the summer of 1910. Douglas, "The New Russian Art and Italian Futurism."

works such as Boccioni's *States of Mind: The Farewells* (fig. 10) elements of representational painting not only remain, but secure the meaningfulness of the work. The train, the soldiers, and the crowd are the dynamic masses of bellicose Futurist modernity. The Futurists attack the museum and the "old pictures" it contains, but not the idea that the artist's responsibility is to represent things in the world. Though by 1913 Giacomo Balla had begun painting abstract pictures, or at least pictures of abstractions such as *Dynamic Expansion + Speed*, these pictures can be assimilated to his previous "photodynamic" works (most famously *Dynamism of a Dog on a Leash*) which picture, on a singular canvas, consecutive "frames" of movement, a sort of painterly Eadweard Muybridge study run through the philosophy of Bergson (figures 3.11 and 3.12).[76] His abstract pictures are only abstract in that they do not contain figures from the world; they continue to represent the pictorial structure of motion.

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Malevich began his revised manifesto in Marinetti-esque fashion:

> Only with the disappearance of a habit of mind which sees in pictures little corners of nature, madonnas [*sic*] and shameless *Venuses, shall we witness a work of pure, living art.*[77]

The rejection of "little corners of nature" is not simply the rejection of Madonnas and Venuses, those traditional subjects of painting. Malevich is, in fact, prepared to do away with all representational painting. All bodies must be pushed off the canvas. Though his language is certainly informed by the misogynistic Italians and their "scorn for woman," Malevich goes

[76] On Italian Futurism in the visual arts and Balla in particular see *Italian Futurism 1909-1944: Reconstructing the Universe.* New York: Guggenheim Museum Publications, 2014. ex. cat., 103-05.

[77] Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:35; *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:19. Emphases are Malevich's unless otherwise noted.

much further than the rejection of representation in art, both described in his texts and in the paintings themselves.[78]

In these texts, Malevich's rejection of representation is a repudiation of his previous modernist paintings: the rejection of "little corners of nature" and "Venuses" alerts us that the imitative moment has come to an end. Neither the world out there nor the works of art which previously represented and inhabit it should be imitated for, while "little corners of nature" may refer simply to the natural world, Malevich's feminine dyad is a metonym for artistic production in general. The prohibition on Venuses spans anything from a classical sculpture in the Hermitage to the avant-garde, such as Larionov's *Venus* of 1912 (fig. 3.13). No past production is an appropriate model for imitation, not even that outside the post-Renaissance tradition: Suprematism's centrality to discourse about the Russian icon in modern art is in spite of the fact of the artist's own rejection of the icon under the umbrella of past art in his original manifesto:[79]

> There has not been realism of painting as an end in itself, there has not been creativity. One cannot consider compositions of various women in pictures to be creativity.
> One as well cannot consider [as creativity] the idealization of Greek statues, because there was [nothing] but the desire to better the subjective ego.
> Neither can one consider [as creativity] those pictures where there is the exaggeration of real forms: icon painting, Giotto, Gauguin, etc., and also copies of nature.[80]

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[78] Tatiana Goriacheva has argued that, in general, Russian futurist misogyny differed from the Italian in that the latter emphasized the physical subjugation of the female "sex" (*pol*) rather than the former's metaphorical triumph over the feminine "principle" (*nachalo*) that had characterized Symbolist art. See Tat'iana Goriacheva, "" . . . smotri, vse stalo muzhskim . . .": Muzhskoe i zhenskoe nachala v ritoricheskikh zhestakh futurizma," *Voprosy iskusstvoznaniia* 1 (1994): 218.

[79] On the relationship of the icon to Russian modernism see, for example, Gatrall and Greenfield, *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity*; Andrew Spira, *The Avant-Garde Icon: Russian Avant-Garde Art and the Icon Painting Tradition* (Aldershot and Burlington: Lund Humphries, 2008). To Malevich in particular see, for example, Cortenova and Petrova, *Kazimir Malevich e le sacre icone russe: avanguardia e tradizioni*; Bruno Duborgel, *Malevitch: la question de l'icône* (Saint-Etienne: Publications de l'Université de Saint-Etienne, 1997).

[80] Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:29.

In short, Malevich rejects the broadest notion of "art." That is, one should read the rhetoric of rejection here as specific to the context of Malevich's own oeuvre to date, which, as its foundational principle, systematically investigated through imitation past modernist styles. Malevich rejects these and all prior art because he has rejected the depiction of the world—and the artworks that previously inhabited it—altogether. In anticipation of the themes he develops in his autobiography, discussed in Chapter 1, here too Malevich groups together kinds of work that nationalist discourses and mainstream art history classify separately: the icon is a devotional image unconcerned with aesthetic experience as such and the canons of naturalistic painting; Giotto is an important figure for breaking from the stiff forms of the middle ages towards a renewal of classical naturalism; Gauguin abandoned the post-Renaissance naturalistic tradition in both formal style and in subject matter. In other words, the three practices mentioned here by Malevich stand uneasily in relationship to any kind of putative "mainstream" of painting. They are works of art that are prior to (the icon), inaugurate (Giotto), or threaten the continued existence of (Gauguin) this mainstream. Malevich's selections limn the entirety of what art had been before the advent of cubism and Futurism, communicating the thoroughness of his rejection.

Malevich rejected all art, even past modernism and the icon. Others also embraced this encompassing view of visual production in order to affirm its shared character. This difference of opinion appears in Malevich's conflict with his greatest critic at the *0.10* exhibition, Benois. As is well known, Malevich hung the *Black Square* at the *0.10* exhibition more or less in the place of the icon in a traditional Russian home. He didn't comment on this in his manifestos. It was Benois who introduced the term "icon" to describe the square:

> But at the exhibition we find an illustration of this "prophecy of zero and death." Without a number [*sic,* the picture was indeed numbered in the catalogue], but high in the corner under the very ceiling, in the sacred place, hangs a "work" undoubtedly by that same Mr. Malevich, depicting a black square in a white frame [*obramlenii*]. Undoubtedly this is that "icon" that the Messrs. Futurists propose to replace the madonnas and shameless *venuses* . . .[81]

Benois is not citing Malevich; those are scare quotes thrown around "icon." Malevich included the icon amongst the things he rejected (like the Madonna and Venus).[82] For Benois, although the *Square* hangs in the sacred place it replaces not only sacred icons but also the secular venuses. These secular images are related to God inasmuch as, for Benois, the history of art expresses a love for creation. Malevich's *Black Square*, in this reading, is *not* merely a "bad" or "anti" icon. It is rather a singular object that rejects a love diffused throughout the history of art not only in the icon itself but also in the figures of Dürer and Dante, Rembrandt and impressionism, etc. "And the main thing is what [these artists] loved, *how* they loved, how they expressed their cult of living, their attitude toward God and universe."[83] For Benois, the cult image is an art image and the other way around: the art image maintains a relationship with divinity characteristic of the cult image. To say that the icon's displacement is also Rembrandt's is not mere aestheticism, the elevation of the icon to the status of "art," but allows for art the kind of power accorded to the icon. The icon still had power in this image world: Russian troops at the front paraded icons for their miraculous protective powers, the Tsar maintained a whole suite of images that he hoped might intercede for his family and empire; even the future theorist of Productivism

[81] Aleksandr Benua, "Posledniaia futuristskaia vystavka," *Rech'*, January 9, 1916 1916.

[82] If Benois is citing anyone it is the religious philosopher Sergei Bulgakov, who wrote in 1914 that the Picasso's pictures presented "miraculous icons of a demonic character" (*chudotvornykh ikon demonicheskogo kharaktera*). So although his text resonated greatly with the artist it attacked, Benois did not pioneer the identification of avant-garde art with a sort of icon or anti-icon. Bulgakov, *Sochineniia v dvukh tomakh*, 2:530.

[83] Benua, "Posledniaia futuristskaia vystavka."

Nikolai Tarabukin wrote, in his 1916 *Philosophy of the Icon,* that "the purpose of the icon is not simply a reminder of the Divine Countenance; the goal [of the icon] is miracle working."[84] For Benois as well as for Malevich artistic practices that may look very different actually occupy the same conceptual or, in this corner of the *0.10* exhibition, literal space. Malevich's gestured towards something that was not merely a product of his particular artistic formation (as we saw him narrate in Chapter 1) but part of Russian culture more broadly.

For Malevich, all of these past artists were simply "lawyers, merry joke-tellers, psychologists, botanists, zoologists, archaeologists."[85] This is not the case for the Futurists and cubists and cubofuturists. Despite still being "before Suprematism," these movements form a peculiar coda to the art of the past. Malevich does not distinguish between these three terms with any care; all of them essentially name the destruction of the *ancien régime* of artmaking. The cubist, in Malevich's reading, highlights the "dissonance" of objects, transforming the purpose of painting: "In the principle of cubism lies the very valuable task to not transfer an object [to the canvas], but to make a picture" (*V printsipe kubizma lezhit eshche ochen' tsennaia zadacha, ne peredavat' predmety, a sdelat' kartinu*).[86] But cubism is too imperfect because its creation of pictures still requires an object, a problem retained by Futurism and Russian cubofuturism:

> [Futurism] was unable to get rid of objectivity in general and only destroyed objects thanks to the achievement of dynamics.
> [. . .]

[84] Robert L Nichols, "Nicholas II and the Russian Icon," in *Alter Icons: The Russian Icon and Modernity*, ed. Jefferson J. A. Gatrall and Douglas M. Greenfield (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010); N. M. Tarabukin, *Smysl ikony* (Moscow: Pravoslavnogo bratstva Sviatitelia Filareta Moskovskogo, 1999), 83. "Pridanie takzhe gorovit o tom, chto naznachenie ikony ne prostoe napominanie o Bozhestvennom Like, a tsel' ee—chudotvorenie."

[85] Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:28.

[86] Ibid., 1:32.

> The cubofuturists gathered in the square [*na ploshchadi*—the Russian word refers only to the public space and not the geometric form] and broke all the things, but did not burn them.[87]

The object (*predmet*) or thing (*veshch'*)—Malevich does not distinguish between these words—needs to be present in cubist painting in order to be eclipsed as the purpose of painting. The need to be gathered and broken in public, on the canvas itself that needs to suffer for the legacy of representational art. Things gathered on the square, broken, to be burnt: this is an image of an unconsummated *auto-da-fé*. Most importantly, and as is often the case in this text, "things" and artworks are really human bodies. This is how Malevich talks about art: as so many bodies. Malevich's manifestos are oriented around this central anthropomorphic point, and grasping this will provide a key insight into the meaning of Suprematism in 1915.

III

Important responses to Malevich's painting had little to do with his ideas about nonobjectivity, and, as I have indicated, these ideas were often confused or contradictory. Despite this, commentators recognized the importance of texts to Malevich's Suprematism. These texts, they felt, were confusing and difficult to relate to the paintings. The relationship between text and image was therefore a puzzle. Contemporary scholars have attempted to solve this puzzle, but their efforts are grounded in assumptions about how texts and images are supposed to make sense together, assumptions that make it impossible to understand this relationship in Suprematism at this time.

[87] Ibid., 1:29.

Malevich's coordination (or lack thereof) of text and image resists formulae that propose a stable relationship between text and image in art. For example, W.J.T. Mitchell claims that "'theory' is the 'word' (or words) that stands in the same relation to abstract art that traditional literary forms had to representational painting."[88] In this, Mitchell follows Robert Morris's claim that "early abstraction . . . builds principally on the theoretical manifestos written by the artists themselves, and based on their readings of nineteenth-century idealist philosophy."[89] Without disputing the manifestly true claim that abstract art, like any art, generates and is subject to linguistic discourse, this relationship is not the simple analogy, figurative art is to literature as abstraction is to theory, it is here made out to be. This has to do, I think, with both the kinds of texts associated with figurative art as opposed to those associated with abstract painting, as well as the qualitative difference between figurative and abstract art. Regarding the former issue, in representational painting, texts can be coordinated with works while maintaining a kind of independence. Although the writings of painters since the Renaissance interest us greatly for the conceptions of artistry and painting they give us, those texts are supplemented by others from which the represented subjects are sourced. So art historians have scrutinized the writings of the Neoplatonists in order to uncover the allegory undergirding Botticelli's *Primavera.* On the other hand, the ability to decode the painting according to the artist's plan is not understood to be the main goal of beholding such pictures. Thus the *Primavera* is beautiful even for a beholder lacking the resources to decode its allegory. This is an issue of viewing praxis, but the praxis is generated (or at least helped) by the pictures. When the beautiful no longer becomes the relevant

[88] W.J.T. Mitchell, ""Ut Pictura Theoria" Abstract Painting and the Repression of Language," *Critical Inquiry* 15, no. 2 (1989): 355.

[89] Ibid., 356.

category for judging pictures, and when the content of pictures no longer expresses narratives given elsewhere, the relationship with texts necessarily shifts. So while scholars may attempt to decode Suprematist painting, they cannot depend on the same kind of resemblances between pictures and texts. Suprematism *may* have something to do with, for example, the structures of turn-of-the-century scientific thought, but not in the way the *Primavera* certainly contains figures from classical mythology. And the fact that Malevich developed his theory *after* he made his paintings complicates Morris's notion that such theory was always prior to early abstraction.

The relationship of abstract paintings to their theoretical texts is different than that between representational paintings and literary sources. I am not prepared to offer a comprehensive account of this difference here. I would rather show it in operation in Malevich's work. The textual and visual components of Suprematism are brought together only through an insistent interpretative process that forces the issue of the relationship of texts and images. Without clear instruction from Malevich, we need to find a tool to mediate narrative texts with non-narrative pictures. This chapter uses mimesis as this tool to address key aspects of Suprematist poetics. Misunderstanding the manifesto's announcement of nonobjectivity obscures Suprematism's relationship to nature and thus its mimetic qualities. This relationship is understood in novel terms, as Malevich departs from two established modes of Russian thinking on the relationship of art to nature. In the first, developed by Nikolai Chernyshevsky in the mid-nineteenth century, art cannot hope to capture the beautiful, which exists only in nature; the best art can hope for is to be an accurate "handbook" for the study of nature.[90] In the second, developed by the religious philosopher Vladimir Solovev later in the same century, art is part of a

[90] Nikolay Gavrilovich Chernyshevsky, *Selected Philosophical Essays* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1953), 376.

project of world transformation; in its sensual embodiment of the spiritual Idea, art is superior to blind nature and prophetic in its depiction of "object[s] and phenomena from the point of view of [their] final, definitive status, or in light of the world to come."[91] Despite the many differences between the thought of Chernyshevsky and Solovev, in both cases art is concerned with the depiction of nature either in its contemporary actuality or in its eschatological form.[92]

That Malevich's Suprematism is "non-" or "anti-mimetic" is a notion broadly shared.[93] In this art-historical writing, "mimesis" is taken as a synonym for "figuration," which is again taken to mean "representation" in the sense of depicting things, in a conventional and recognizable manner, in the world. This kind of artwork involves signs that resemble those things to which they refer, an easily complicated but commonsense enough notion.[94] Yet the founders of modern art history already complicated such a simplistic account of mimesis. Heinrich Wölfflin, for example, wrote that, "there is a style which, more subjective in attitude, bases the representation

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[91] Vladimir Sergeevich Solov'ev, "The Universal Meaning of Art," in *The Heart of Reality: Essays on Beauty, Love, and Ethics*, ed. Vladimir Wozniuk (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003), 76.

[92] Solovev demonstrates some sympathy for Chernyshevsky's position as to the insufficiency of existing art and the objective beauty of nature, reserving his main objection to the notion of "art for art's sake." See "A First Step toward a Positive Aesthetic," in *The Heart of Reality: Essays on Beauty, Love, and Ethics*, ed. Vladimir Wozniuk (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2003).

[93] *Inter alia:* In their discussion of Malevich's attempts to collaborate with the avant-garde filmmaker Hans Richter, Timothy Benson and Shatskikh note that Richter's "depart[ure] from mimesis" was an "essential prerequisite for the epochal change Malevich envisioned." Rainer Crone and David Moos write that Malevich sought to "liberate" painting from the "constraints imposed on it by a merely mimetic function." Boris Groys writes that Malevich, and the Russian avant-garde in general, "wanted to be non-mimetic." Kent Minturn calls it "Malevich's Adorno-esque abhorrence of mimesis" which both gets Malevich wrong (though predictably) and is an inexcusable misreading of Adorno. Timothy O. Benson and Aleksandra Shatskikh, "Malevich and Richter: An Indeterminate Encounter," *October* 143 (2013): 67; Crone and Moos, *Kazimir Malevich: The Climax of Disclosure*, 41; Groys, "Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich," n.p; Kent Mitchell Minturn, "Seeing Malevich, Cinematically," review of *Kazimir Malevich: The White Rectangle; Writings on Film*, Oksana Bulgakowa; *Malevich and Film*, Margarita Tupitsyn, *Art Journal* 63, no. 4 (2004): 143.

[94] In the discipline these signs are commonly referred to as "icons." The term "icon" was given by the philosopher Charles Peirce for a sign that represents through likeness, in distinction from those that represent through convention ("symbols") or through real or imagined causality (such as a footprint, "indices"). I do not use the term here because the word risks confusion in the context of the Russian image world, and also because, as scholars have noted, the generally art-historical use of "icon" bears little resemblance to the rather confusing complexity of Peirce's semiotics. See Charles S. Peirce, *Philosophical Writings of Peirce* (New York: Dover, 1955), 102.

on the picture . . . which has often retained so little resemblance to our conception of the real form of things."[95] This "painterly style," Wölfflin writes, "has more or less emancipated itself from things as they are."[96] The difference between representing *things as they are* and the *semblance* of things may be, Wölfflin acknowledges, "philosophically intolerable" (isn't it all representation?) but it allows us to make a critical distinction between modes of picturing. In both cases one can talk about mimesis as *imitation* but that the *object* of imitation is not identical, for only in the former case does Wölfflin acknowledge the imitation of the world out there, the things as they are. Emancipating ourselves from things as they are does not mean abstract art—even in the most painterly Baroque picture there are human bodies, bits of cloth, etc.—but it does mean that the object of mimesis has qualitatively changed. Mimesis then should not be understood as the representation of nature but the act of imitation or mimicry itself. Understood this way the art-historical use of mimesis would be compatible with other uses of the term. For example, the anthropologist Michael Taussig uses the term in an attempt to understand how cultures assimilate one another.[97] Mimesis needs to be understood as generative of and present in human activities *such as* art and not merely a category of art making. Ancient writers understood this when they spoke of mimesis vis-à-vis art and also as a sociological (Plato's view that mimesis molds the mind of the Republic's youth as gymnastics does their bodies) or anthropological (Aristotle's claim that imitation is natural to man) phenomenon.

[95] Heinrich Wölfflin, *Principles of Art History: The Problem of the Development of Style in Later Art* (New York: Dover Publications, 1940), 20-21.

[96] Ibid., 21.

[97] See Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

Malevich states that his art does not contain the forms of nature: his "painterly masses . . . do not repeat and do not change the original forms of the objects of nature."[98] Yet Malevich articulates a naturalistic conception of artistic creation. Instead of performing transitive operations on nature (reflecting it, transferring it, copying it, imitating it, perfecting it), the artist will parallel nature's own operations. To be an artist/creator is to create independently of nature, but nature is *the* paradigm for the creative act. If artistic realism was the "counterfeiting" of the natural world, the "new realism" of Suprematism is the adoption of its methods. In this new conception, "forms will live in the art of Suprematism, as all the living forms of nature."[99] Nature is a "living picture" (*zhivaia kartina*)" of which we, as human beings, are a part, but at the same time "painting" (*zhivopis'*) allows *us*, artists, to create "living forms" (*zhivye formy*).[100] Malevich thematizes the etymological relationship of life and painting present in the Russian language by thoroughly assimilating it to his ideas about artistic creation. The "life" (*zhiv-*) "writing" (*pis'*) of painting is not, for Malevich, the writing of iconic representations of living things, but quite simply creating life. Art is not mimesis in representing the natural world out there, but is mimetic in that it imitates nature's creative power. The life in painting is real, like nature's, and not counterfeit like that of past representational painting. Malevich's conception of nature in this passage develops some of Rozanova's ideas of 1913, and it also provides a real contrast to some of the painters he most admired, such as Cézanne, who found the whole essence of art in the relentless contact with and study of nature. Suprematism's natural origins allow it to

[98] Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:29.

[99] Ibid., 1:53; *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:38.

[100] *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:40; *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:24.

participate in the living picture of creation, rather than painting creation as so many *natures mortes*.

Suprematism's relationship to nature is expressed as an imitation of process rather than form. But there is another, more complex form of Suprematist mimesis involving the nature of the artist himself. An account of this mimetic change in the artist can be found in a draft of an open (in fact never published) letter to the aforementioned Alexandre Benois, written some months after the critic's review of the exhibition. This letter defended the new art. Associating the artistic tradition championed elsewhere by Benois with the "fathers," Malevich says he does not "resemble" them.[101] The artist's refusal can only be possible were he to consider "resemblance" an action the artist chooses, a mimetic action. It is not enough, in other words, that Suprematist *paintings* do not resemble anything made by the World of Art or anything else, the Suprematist *artist* is also different. But this is puzzling. What is at stake in the figure of the artist resembling or refusing to resemble the artist of the past? Surely more than the bourgeois tastes in dress and comportment that Benois undoubtedly had and Malevich could not cultivate or afford. In the letter, Malevich writes in clipped sentences and has a habit of starting almost all of them with a conjunction. This is a sort of biblical affectation. And sure enough, "resemblance" has such a metaphysical resonance, for later in the letter Malevich hints at the sort of image to which he will comport: "But the happiness to not resemble you gives me the strength to go ever further and further into the emptiness of deserts. For there is only transfiguration."[102] This language conflates Christ's temptations in the desert in the forty days following his baptism with

[101] Letter of Kazimir Malevich to Alexandre Benois, dated May 1916, published in *Malevich o sebe, sovremenniki o Maleviche: pis'ma, dokumenty, vospominaniia, kritika*, 2:85. "Ia ne slushal otsov, i ia ne pokhozh na nikh."

[102] Ibid. "No schast'e byt' ne pokhozhim na vas daet sily idti vse dal'she i dal'she v pustotu pustyn'. Ibo tam tol'ko preobrazhenie."

the story of the Transfiguration in the synoptic gospels, which recounts how Christ led the apostles Peter, James, and John to witness his own transfiguration, his appearance to them as God. "And was transfigured before them [*i preobrazilsia pred nimi*]: his face did shine as the sun, and his raiment was white as the light" (Matthew 17:2).[103] Benois's failure to apprehend Malevich's glory means that (in the words of the artist) he passes him by, "as the Jews," failing to see the incarnate God, "passed Christ."

Malevich already wrote in his manifestos "I have transfigured myself into [or "in" in one variant] the zero of form" (*ia preobrazilsia v nul' formy*).[104] The claim is first introduced at the end of "From Cubism to Suprematism" and repeated twice in the expanded edition, towards the beginning and again near the ending, almost bookending the text. *Preobrazilsia* is a past tense verb governed by a singular, masculine subject. It is a reflexive version of the verb meaning roughly "to form" but rooted in the word "image" in the broad sense, *obraz*. To this verb is added the emphatic prefix, "*pre-*." While the true meaning of the biblical transfiguration may lie in its relationship to the mystery of the Resurrection, we can say that in Malevich's understanding both he and Christ "image" themselves for an audience. The Gospel's recount the moment when a human being revealed himself as God. Although Malevich's imitates Christ's own transfiguration, he does not claim to reveal himself as God, but as the "zero of form." The fact that Malevich does not dispute Benois's reading of the *Black Square* as the "illustration" of the

[103] An exegesis of the transfiguration narrative, as well as a synthetic analysis of its interpretation, may be found in John Anthony McGuckin, *The Transfiguration of Christ in Scripture and Tradition*, Studies in the Bible and Early Christianity (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 1986).

[104] Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:34-35, 53. Malevich alludes to an important theme of the Russian *fin de siècle* when he proclaims his own transfiguration: the religious philosopher Vladimir Solovev's conception of "godmanhood" is perhaps the original form of this thought, but concepts such as "god-building" held appeal to atheists as well, including future important Bolshevik figures such Anatoly Lunacharsky (the first Commissar of Education) and the writer Maxim Gorky. Jonathan Sutton, *The Religious Philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov: Towards a Reassessment* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), esp. 59-62.

"prophecy of zero and death" has led most commentators to think that the *Black Square* is itself the zero of form. But this is too specific, because Malevich's claim of transfiguration precedes Benois's own response to the work.

From a consideration of a Suprematist titles, we can propose that "transfiguration" here expresses a profoundly new relationship between a human being and artworks. Malevich's transfiguration into the "zero of form" is thus a general act not identified with a particular picture. It is rather the affirmation of the artist's creative power and the assertion of another kind of existence, that of the work of art.[105] Through the imitation of Christ's transfiguration, the Suprematist artist imitates the authentic—that is, the Suprematist—work of art. Through acts of mimesis, the artist becomes artlike. Because this artist is himself responsible for Suprematist works of art, the relationship is circular, and thus this transfiguration becomes the condition of possibility for making works of art.

We are led to this possibility of becoming artlike through the figurative titles Malevich used at the *0.10* exhibition. Six paintings in the *0.10* catalogue had these titles ([*Airplane Flying*] was exhibited at the *0.10* exhibition and bears that title on its reverse but was not listed as such).[106] These works were, with their catalogue numbers:

- No. 40, *Painterly Realism of a Football Player: Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension*
- No. 41, *Painterly Realism of a Boy with Knapsack: Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension*

[105] In asserting this identity with the work of art itself, and not simply the means of its production, Malevich's statement can be distinguished from two more famous ones; first, Jackson Pollock's claim, "I am nature"; and second, Andy Warhol's, "I want to be a machine."

[106] Later in life, Mikhail Larionov wrote that Malevich "did not consider [himself] a non-figurative painter." Mikhail Larionov, "Malevitch: Souvenirs de Michel Larionov," *Aujourd'hui*, no. 15 (1957): 7.

- No. 43, *Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions*
- No. 44, *Self-Portrait in Two Dimensions*
- No. 45, *Automobile and Lady: Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension*
- No. 46, *Lady: Color Masses in the Fourth and Second Dimensions*

All other paintings were grouped under two titles, *Painterly Masses in Motion* or *Painterly Masses in the Second Dimension in a State of Rest*, though the visual difference between the paintings holding these titles is unclear. An explanatory note in the catalogue followed the list of titles:

> Naming a few pictures—I do not want to show that one should search for their forms, rather I want to indicate that real forms were discerned, many as piles of formless painting masses out of which a painterly picture was created that had nothing in common with nature.[107]

The note seems to refer to the pictures with figurative titles in its urging of viewers not to attempt to locate "forms"—those football players, boys, etc.—in the works.

I take Malevich's injunction about looking for forms to prohibit iconographic readings.[108] At the same time, given these titles we need to consider the relationship between bodies and pictures, a relationship suggested also by Malevich's own transfiguration. These entries followed Malevich's first entry in the exhibition catalogue, number 39, the *Black Square* (given as its original title of *Black Quadrilateral*). We now know that the *Black Square* was painted over not

[107] "Nazyvaia nekotorye kartiny—ia ne khochu pokazat', chto dolzhno v nikh iskat' ikh form, a khochu ukazat' chto real'nye formy razematrivalis' mnogo kak grudy bezformennykh zhivopisnykh mass iz kotorykh byla sozdana zhivopisnaia kartina nichego obshchego ne imeiushchaia s naturoi." The catalogue (containing this text) is reproduced in Matthew Drutt et al. *In Search of 0,10: The Last Futurist Exhibition of Painting.* Riehen: Hatje Cantz, 2015. ex. cat., 80.

[108] Cf. Christina Lodder, "Malevich, Suprematism and Aerial Photography," *History of Photography* 28, no. 1 (2004): 31. To say that Malevich "reduced objects to—or transformed them into—a geometric configuration" similarly searches for iconographic sources, such as aerial photography, that will somehow explain works of art in lieu of an examination of their particular poetics.

one but two previous works, one "proto-Suprematist," one Cubofuturist.[109] Furthermore Malevich titled or captioned the picture, on a dry layer of the background's white paint, *A Battle of Negros in a Dark Cave* (Bitva negrov v temnoi peshchere) after an Alphonse Allais caricature of 1897, *Combat de Nègres dans une cave pendant la nuit* (fig. 3.14).[110] Before the *0.10* exhibition he painted over this text with another layer of white paint. The remaining titles are less obvious in their ostensible comedy and allude to bodies not racially or allusively marked. The effacement of the Allais title for the *Black Square* rejects that title's comedy but also, importantly, its overdetermined iconography of black bodies in a black space. This strange prehistory of the *Square* (only recently recovered) shows precisely that Malevich did not want dissemblance to be read as a bad joke.

Both the *Square*'s text and the titles of these Suprematist pictures develop an interest whose origins lie in a series of drawings of 1914, but which were never exhibited by the artist. These drawings contain short enframed texts (for example, fig. 3.15). The texts are as follows, transliterated and then in translation:

- *Derevnia*: Village (with an additional inscription discussed below)
- *Koshelek/ vy tashchili/ v tramvae:* Purse/ was dragged out [the spacing of the words here also permits reading "you were dragging"]/ in the tram
- *Draka/ na/ Bul'va/ re*: Fight/ on/ the Boule/ vard

[109] The term "proto-Suprematist" (*protosuprematicheskaia kompozitsiia*) belongs to the Tretiakov Gallery's research team, not Malevich. See "Na *Chernom kvadrate* obnaruzhena avtorskaia nadpis'," http://www.colta.ru/news/9223.

[110] The title—and specifically its status as title (*nazvanie*) or inscription (*nadpis'*)—was the subject of a heated debate between Malevich scholars Irina Vakar and Aleksandra Shatskikh at the conference *100 Years of Suprematism* held at Columbia University December 11-12 2015. Shatskikh asked if the inscription was really Malevich's, and observed that vandalism was not antithetical to avant-garde poetics, raising the possibility that the inscription was the result of an anonymous third party at a later date; however, I find Vakar's version more persuasive given the absence of evidence in support of Shatskikh's hypothesis.

- *Polety/ peru*: Flights/ [of?] peru

Chronologically in between Malevich's cubism and Suprematism, these drawings marked a withdrawal from language as central to the making of visual art. Malevich's earlier works, modeled after cubist ones, drew on fragmentary texts in their constructions. Here texts appear alone and—despite being broken, misspelled or ambiguous—are sensible at a glance. Unlike in the Suprematist paintings with figurative titles, the viewer does not have to reconcile them to anything else in the picture. Malevich withheld pictorial representation from these little drawings, even as their framed appearances ask us to look at them as pictures. For Malevich, drawings served their traditional purpose as a place of testing and revision. One could hypothesize then that these drawings too were preparatory.

But Malevich did not make paintings from these drawings, and this points to, I think, a certain dissatisfaction with them. After 1915, texts stopped appearing on exhibited works of art (limited to sketches with notes, theoretical charts, studies for agitational materials, etc.). This suggests an interest in preserving what Nelson Goodman called the "density" of pictorial representation.[111] The density of pictorial representation means that *any* mark in a picture, no matter how slight, may turn out to be significant for the meaning of the picture as a whole, and may stand for the difference between the verbal and visual (that is, I suggest that "pictorial" may lack a positive technical definition). This distinction may be complicated, and it might be tempting, for example, to think that we might "recognize in handwriting images that the unconscious of the writer conceals in it," or that these drawings are the product of the pre-electric moment in modernity wherein "once a hand took hold of a pen, something miraculous

[111] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 226-27.

occurred: the body. . . left strangely unavoidable traces."[112] In these accounts, the concealed traces of handwritten texts are nothing if not the sensual excesses of pictorial density. But this is not what's at issue here: the fragmentary texts of Malevich's drawings are not normal usages of language—they insist that we take them to be images, for in their lack of standardized letterforms, odd spacings, and fragmentary senses that in turn draw attention to their physical constructions. The language of concealment and the unconscious in these citations does not seem appropriate to these drawings, whose idiosyncratic deployment of language seems nothing if not deliberate. The drawings tested the proposition that acts of picturing need not be pictures at all.

Malevich had illustrated avant-garde books of poetry, whose lithographed texts appeared similar to the handwriting on his drawings. The Russian Futurist poets insisted on "considering handwriting a component of the poetic impulse," as they insisted on the sensibility of the poetic word; surely Malevich, who collaborated so closely with some of these poets, was in broad agreement.[113] But even if Malevich granted that text can have pictorial density, he also might have recognized that simply because texts and images could share some quality that did not mean they were the same. The faint remnants of text in Suprematism indicates that this decision was made after some reflection. Besides the abandoned drawings and the effaced inscription on the *Black Square*, Malevich painted over a letter on another painting, *Suprematist Composition with Black Rectangle and Blue Triangle* (fig. 3.16). The Russian character "B" can be seen through a layer of white paint above the blue triangle, to the left of the rectangle (reproductions

[112] Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty," in *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings* (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 335; Friedrich A. Kittler, *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, trans. Geoffrey Winthrop-Young and Michael Wutz, Writing Science (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 8.

[113] David Burliuk et al, "A Trap for Judges 2" [1913] and "Poetic Principles" [1914], in Anna Lawton, ed. *Russian Futurism through Its Manifestoes, 1912-1928* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 54, 82.

often fail to convey this ghostly figure). From the 1914 drawings that were all text he arrived at paintings with none. Text was now quarantined in enigmatic titles.

Not all of these titles were figurative in a straightforward way. Nos. 42 and 47 are respectively entitled *Movement of Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension,* and *Painterly Realism of Color Masses in Two Dimensions*; however, despite the fact there is no real figure here, Malevich implies figuration through parallelism with the other titles. There is a self-reflexive relationship in these pictures between title and image that is not present in those other pictures. In those pictures, titles suggest the imitative transformation of objects in the world that are re-presented as paint on canvas, even as they make no attempt to *do* this (and indeed make this disinterest a central theme). But color masses (the adjective here, *krasochnye*, might also be translated as "paint") are unlike human beings in that they are the closet things to the material stuff of the picture itself.

Unfortunately for us, Malevich never discusses "color" masses in his manifesto, only "material" ones, so we need somehow to establish the relation between matter and color. Malevich's paint came in tubes. As Thierry de Duve has observed, there's no alchemy to the tube of paint, it's "devoid of mystique" as Marcel Duchamp realized.[114] On the other hand, de Duve sees that some artists such as Kandinsky attempted to reinvest this colored material with metaphysical significance. There is no reason to think that these two artists, however significant, held the only possible positions. Here, the material reality of color allows it to take part in a constructive project in parallel with nature, a nature that has not been secularized and objectified for the scientific gaze but rather which has real creative power. The most relevant manifesto

[114] de Duve, *Kant after Duchamp*, 177.

passage is the declaration, "[e]verything has vanished, there remains a mass of material, from which the new forms will be built." This mass of material for artistic creation is not included in the universal annihilation indicated by "everything." It is not named as color or paint, but it must be, because it is Suprematist *painting* that contains the new forms. The visibility of this mass depends on the artist consciously making an aspect shift:

> And this [absolute creation] is possible when we free all our thought from vulgar thought—subject matter [*siuzheta*]—and teach our consciousness to see everything in nature [*prirode*] not as real forms and objects, but as material masses from which forms must be made, which have nothing in common with nature [*naturoi*].[115]

In this passage, "material masses" are simply the forms of nature seen otherwise *as well as* the raw materials for artistic creation. In the pictures with figurative titles, the "painterly realism" is of human beings, affirming the raw material status of the masses. In this other pair of pictures, the painterly realism *of* color masses highlights the ability of the mass to be the product of a kind of aspect shift. This would mean that the pictures whose titles do not reflect entities in the natural world are, in fact, elements of the natural world. These works affirm both a hyperbolic modernist reflexivity and an essential relationship to a nature external to them. Suprematist creation and natural creation are imagined in this passage as two sides of the same coin.

The titles of the two sets of pictures "rhyme," in a manner of speaking, relating them firmly to each other and asking us to reflect on this relation. Both color mass and human being are titles for paintings; they are subjects of painting. The deliberateness with which Malevich juxtaposes these titles makes the argument that there is something fundamentally similar between human beings and paint. And this similarity is coincident with the artist's transfiguration into the

[115] Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:25; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:41. Translation modified. I have not been able to distinguish the difference in meaning Malevich intends to signify with his use of both *priroda* and *natura* in this passage and elsewhere.

zero of painting. The color masses at the heart of Suprematist painting are, in other words, always already bodies in an essential respect. They are not merely bodies because they resemble bodies, or because their configurations "stand for" bodies in a quasi-symbolic way. If painting paint could sum up modernist painting in general, understanding that painted paint as somehow *human,* and its painter as somehow *paintlike* (having become the zero of form) argues for a shifting dynamic of subject and object.

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In works culminating in his *Aesthetic Theory*, Theodore Adorno makes the case for mimesis as an activity of the subject in concordance with the work of art. Originating in a zoological drive to resemble inert matter in order to avoid death, for human beings mimesis also showed itself in practices of magic: in order to control nature, man identified with it by wearing the masks of animals or gods.[116] Such an "identification with" nature is the identification with an object without its reification. Under the conditions of modernity driven by instrumental reason, mimesis is driven from social practice more broadly (which cannot tolerate such magic) more into its refuge in the work of art.[117] The experience of the work of art, its active interpretation (for Adorno all aesthetic experience has something of the character of the realization of a musical score), is at least the *appearance* of the potential reconciliation with nature.[118] As a loss of the

[116] Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 6.

[117] Ibid., 13-14.

[118] Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Wlad Godzich and Jochen Schulte-Sasse, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997). Miriam Hansen explains, "[m]imesis for Adorno does not pertain to the relation between sign and referent; it is not a category of presentation. Rather, it aims at a mode of subjective experience, a preverbal form of cognition, which is rendered objective in works of art, summoned up by the density of their construction. Such moments of trans-subjective expression constitute art's *promesse de bonheur*, the unfulfilled promise of reconciliation." Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Mass Culture as Hieroglyphic Writing: Adorno, Derrida, Kracauer," in *Critical Essays on Adorno and the Postmodern*, ed. Max Pensky (Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), 90.

subject's autonomy, this is an exhilarating but not an entirely pleasurable prospect, a character that is well represented in Malevich's frenetic texts.[119]

Adorno's arguments about art and aesthetic experience are sweeping, not made with an eye to any particular works (*Aesthetic Theory* is polemically devoid of aesthetic experiences), and emerge in the social and cultural conditions of post-World War II Europe and America. Still, a notion of mimesis rooted in the process of modernization and its attendant crises is relevant to art made on the eve of the Russian Revolution. Taking Malevich's art seriously should mean considering its forms and rhetoric as not simply the idiosyncratic whims of creative genius, but as textured by a historical social world., even if we can't "see" that world in the pictures themselves. After all, Suprematism couldn't serve the old state, the church, or the Revolution in 1915. But it could give this moment of crisis--of both artistic production and society itself—some kind of form.

I mean to find a way of understanding this *moment,* not create a paradigm for Suprematism in general. Malevich would never again use such titles when he exhibited Suprematist works of art, perhaps finding their linguistic sensibility too closely linked with that of his unexhibited drawings.[120] Regardless of their fate, they speak to the fact that before it was a

[119] Michael Cahn glosses Adorno's mimesis as "an adapting and correlating behavior" that "does not presuppose a clear line of demarcation between subject and object or inner and outer." The artwork's constitutive refusal to stage this demarcation signals its critique of the modern instrumental logic that "suspends any dynamic tension [between subject and object] and tends towards totality." Michael Cahn, "Subversive Mimesis: T.W. Adorno and the Modern Impasse of Critique," in *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An Interdisciplinary Approach, Volume I: The Literary and Philosophical Debate*, ed. Mihai Spariosu (Philadelphia and Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984), 35.

[120] Cf. Shatskikh, who contends that Malevich got rid of these titles for their "unnecessary and arbitrary 'objective' associations" and a vestige of the artist's pre-Suprematist titling practice. To me, this claim does not explain why the titles were present at the *0.10* exhibition at all. Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, 107.

system for construction or philosophy, Suprematism staged, in manifestos and images, a drama of artist and artwork.

The same exigencies of the early twentieth century that produced Suprematism could not secure for it a positive critical response. One critic supplied the following anecdote in a review of the *0.10* exhibition:

> "And what's this?" the first woman jumps to another thought and points to a white square inside of which is a red one, of a slightly smaller area. "That is a portrait of a peasant woman," says the second with a condescending smile, "but in two dimensions, so it cannot be taken literally."[121]

The critic here attempts to exposes the absurdity of Suprematism with the caricature of the condescending second woman, confident in her metaphorical reading of the picture. Art historians often bemoan bourgeois critical judgment, such as the above-cited example, when its conservatism takes the form of dismissal, when it consigns artworks—what we contemporary people *know* are artworks beyond a shadow of a doubt—to the status of not-art or meaninglessness. Suprematist titles demonstrate that we would be equally remiss to follow the model of the knowing woman in affirming the intelligibility of works of art as if simple intelligibility was their goal. The Suprematist artworks on display at the *0.10* exhibition intentionally troubled their own reception as such; they used their innovative imagery, absurd titles, and loose facture to push back against easy comprehension.

In the 1920s Malevich came up with his "theory of the additional element," a pathology of the history of modern art that saw successive styles as characterized by infectious forms that enter and transform established norms. In cubism, for example, this form was the sickle-shaped

[121] V.G., "Vystavska "nol'—desiat"," *Vecher Petrograda*, January 20 1916. "'A eto chto takoe?'—onachet mysl' u pervoi i ona pokazyvaet na belyi kvadrat, vnutri kotorogo narisovan krasnyi—nemnogo menshei ploshchadi.—'Eto portret krest'ianki',—govorit vtoraia, sniskhoditel'no ulybaias', —tol'ko eto v dvukh izmereniakh, tak chto ego nel'zia ponimat' bukval'no.'"

line, for Suprematism the straight line. Malevich considered this theory an important part of his practice's theoretical component, including it in the mangled German of the pedagogical charts that he brought abroad in 1927, and publishing portions of it in his Bauhaus book *Die gegenstandlose Welt.*[122] Its central metaphor bears a clear connection to early Suprematism:

> Painting for me has become the body in which are set forth all the causes and states of the painter, the structure of his entire understanding of nature and of the relationship between them [i.e. the causes and states] and the effects of nature.[123]

Those things (causes and states) that previously characterized the painter in his or her relationship to nature are now transferred to painting itself. In this passage Malevich does not speak of a particular painting but painting in general, that notion that replaces nature as the subject of making art. What I want to suggest is the conception of painting as a body originated in the confrontations between the language of Suprematist manifestos, titles, and works of art. Malevich found that he could not sustain the claim that the transfiguration of the artist into the body of painting was an exceptional event only possible through the discovery of Suprematist forms. The already questionable claim to absolute novelty needed to be qualified. Through postulating painting as a body Malevich could, on the one hand, show the novelty of his forms while, at the same time, acknowledging the continuity of the larger structure, painting, they inhabited.

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[122] On this text and its history see Shatskikh's comprehensive notes in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 2:312-19.

[123] *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 3:147; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 2:55.Translated modified. "Zhivopis' dlia menia stala telom, v kotorom izlozheny vse prichiny i sostoianiia zhivopistsa, stroi vsego ego prirodoponimaniia i otnosheniia mezhu nimi i vozdeistviiami prirody." Malevich is not consistent in how he views the relationship between the body of painting and the body of the painter, writing in the same paragraph, "I should like to clarify which additional elements have managed to creep into the organism of the painter and changed his behavior."

***

Suprematist nonobjectivity was not a repudiation of the natural world or the human being in art, even as the violence of its rhetoric was directed against the representation of nature and human beings. If this chapter has eschewed iconographic readings of Suprematism it is because such readings, in my opinion, substitute a crude psychology for history: because one cannot assert that things in Suprematism painting resemble, for example, contemporary scientific concepts as in past art certain configurations of bodies manifest scriptural narratives, all one is left with is the hazy idea that the artist was "thinking about such-and-such" during his execution of the artwork. And so what really comes through the door marked "iconography" is a soft expressionism that would disavow the cut between the human artist, his theory and his practice.

My claims about the mimetic character of Malevich's art, and its investment in an anthropomorphic poetics in general, potentially raises the objection that this is a characteristic of all abstract art and thus not a particularly interesting avenue of inquiry. In an aside to his discussion of minimalist and pop art, Hal Foster distinguishes the repetitive logic of this art—"*serial production made consistently integral to the technical production of the work of art* [Foster's italics]"—from the supposedly referential legacy of modernist abstraction:

> For abstraction tends only to *sublate* representation, to preserve it in cancellation, whereas repetition, the (re)production of simulacra, tends to *subvert* representation, to undercut its referential logic.[124]

The response to this objection is twofold. First art historians should be interested in the peculiar way such a generality (if it indeed this claim could be sustained) plays out in a specific and historically influential practice. And secondly: whatever the potential heuristic value of such a

[124] Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 1996), 63.

formulation, it fails to capture the contradictory tendencies of both kinds of art (even with its attempt to hedge with the phrase "tends to"). On the one hand, Malevich's Suprematism certainly exhibits a kind of seriality or quasi-seriality in its method and ambitions in that Suprematist artworks are *equal* without ever being *identical*. On the other, Michael Fried's critique (for example) of minimalism's anthropomorphism revealed the dialectical reemergence of something like a represented subject in the objectivity of "simulacral" sculpture.[125] Furthermore, that the serial character of Malevich's Suprematism does not hide its craft elements is echoed in certain minimalist practices and Andy Warhol's screenprinting, for starters.[126] Given the importance Foster accords minimalism and pop in establishing the terms of postwar art, one should note that Donald Judd saw Malevich as an *exception* to the European modernism whose time, Judd felt, had past. "It's obvious now," the artist wrote in 1973, that, before Malevich's Suprematism of 1915 "no form, color, surface, anything, existed as itself."[127] Malevich's art, in Judd's assessment, is a prolepsis. And, while Foster finds the of origins of seriality in the postwar period, John Coplans, who introduced the term "serial" to art history in 1968, contends that Claude Monet was the originator of serial practices in the visual arts, linking his art to nineteenth-century innovations in mathematics.[128] Emerging at or beyond the traditional geographical and *historical*

[125] "[T]he beholder knows himself to stand in an indeterminate, open-ended—and unexacting—relation *as subject* to the impassive object on the wall or floor. In fact, being distanced by such objects is not, I suggest, entirely unlike being distanced, or crowded, by the silent presence of another *person*." Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 155.

[126] The attitude of so-called minimalist (the epithet is anachronistic) artists towards industrial production was varied. And the works themselves, in most cases, were not industrially produced; think of Robert Morris's handmade wooden gestalts or even many of Judd's precision-finished works, made by hand by New York craftsman with whom the artist had a personal relationship; as Robert Slifkin as observed, "the process was less technological or even industrial than artisanal." Robert Slifkin, "Donald Judd's Credibility Gap," *American Art* 25, no. 2 (2011): 69.

[127] Donald Judd, "Malevich: Independent Form, Color, Surface," in *Donald Judd: Collected Writings 1959-1975*, 211.

[128] John Coplans. *Serial Imagery.* Pasadena: Pasadena Art Museum, 1968. ex. cat., 7.

limits of European art, it should come as no surprise that Malevich's modernism touches but eludes its categories, somehow distorted at their edges.

Russian avant-garde artists both affected by and critical of Malevich viewed the Suprematist project with suspicion. Both and neither sublation and subversion of representation, the *Black Square* was, for them, notable for its audacity but not the ordinariness of the physical reality of its construction. Only with immense difficulty could one reconcile Malevich's compelling and grandiose ambitions with the things he actually made. The meaningfulness of the work of art seemed fragile, a fragility echoed in its physical construction. Puni thought that the *Square* was simply "tossed off."[129] And Varvara Stepanova recounted in her memoirs a statement made by the artist Aleksandr Drevin in a discussion in January 1919:

> Here's the square, what did [Malevich] want to express by it? Abstraction above all? . . . The graphic depiction of a form, if you look at the square without any kind of mystical faith, like at a real earthly fact, then what is this? Nothing . . .[130]

Drevin's questions are not merely rhetorical. His "nothing," which trails off elliptically in Stepanova's transcription, is a bit of puzzled irony, a kind of amazement that it really is *something*.

[129] Quoted in Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, 2:56.

[130] Published in Stepanova, *Chelovek ne mozhet zhit' bez chuda: pis'ma, poeticheskie opyty, zapiski khudozhnitsy*, 65. Ellipses in cited text. "Vot kvadrat, chto on etim khotel vyrazit'? Abstraktsiiu vsego?...Graficheskoe izobrazhenie formy, esli smotret' na kvadrat bez vsiakoi misticheskoi very, kak na real'nyi zemnoi fakt, to chto eto? Nichto . . ."

CHAPTER FOUR

CODA: SUPREMATISMS AFTER SUPREMATISM

> But what does this word "transition" mean? Does it not indicate, in reference to economics, that in the present system there are elements, pieces, bits of capitalism and socialism? [. . .] And therein lies the crux of the problem. I will enumerate these elements . . .
>
> —V.I. Lenin[1]

After its appearance at the *0.10* exhibition in 1915 and especially after the Revolution, Suprematism became, like the Russian state itself, in transition, fragmented into a variety of painterly, architectural, and decorative practices. Of these architecture was primary: beginning around 1919 Malevich's painterly output slowed and the artist dedicated himself "almost exclusively" to volumetric forms,[2] writing in 1920, for the publication of the artist's book *Suprematism, 34 Drawings*, that "painting was done for long ago" and that "at the present time Suprematism is growing, as a new architectural construction in space and time."[3] "Architecture," in Malevich's usage, never meant utilitarian form; the unqualified nouns "space" and "time" here should not be taken to mean real earthly life. Malevich's insistence on moving towards space (*prostranstvo*) and volume (*ob"em*) did not mean that the profession of the artist changed: he remained a painter (*zhivopisets*), and never an architect or even simply an artist. In case his readers and viewers had any doubt, he declared that "Suprematist forms, as an abstraction . . . have no longer anything to do with the earth" (Malevich went so far as to call some architectural sketches "planits," a term formed from the Russian word for planet). This does not mean that

[1] V.I. Lenin, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 5th ed., 58 vols. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Politicheskoi Literatury, 1963), 43:206-07.

[2] Milka Bliznakov, "Suprematism in Architecture," *Soviet Union/Union Soviétique* 5, no. 2 (1978): 242.

[3] Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:126-27; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:187-88.

Suprematist forms bear no implications for earthly life; Malevich is quick to state that this lack of involvement is not "a rift" or abandonment: "architectural" Suprematism is indeed "established in a link with the earth."[4]

This passage sums up the contradiction in Malevich's twin ambitions for Suprematism after its emergence: to both hold on to its character as modernist art and to exceed it through entering other spheres of human life. These contradictory ambitions made it unstable. Suprematism was a school of modernist abstract painting that focused its attentions on the universal surface of the picture plane. Yet Suprematism's hyperbolic modernist claims could not obscure its particular and culturally specific points of contact with the world. Though it made its debut in a metropolitan art gallery—modernism's "proper" place—contemporary critics understood Suprematism's relationships with these other cultural practices (the icon, craft), usually for the worse. Now, Suprematism strove to actualize itself in different materials and spaces, not simply oil painting and the art gallery. It strove to be, in the tradition of Russian making, nonart. Without losing its connection to modernist painting, Suprematism wanted to demonstrate its hegemony in the human world whose practices had, in part, informed its formation and whose transformation in the period after the Revolution was of utmost importance to cultural and political workers.

Malevich's ambitions of the period connect him conceptually and connected him personally with Western European artistic movements, most notably the Bauhaus in Germany and De Stijl in the Netherlands. In his early period, Malevich imitated the practice of Western European modernists; in his later period, he proselytized. Malevich recognized that these

[4] *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, I:124-27; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, I:188-89.

European groups also sought to demonstrate modernism's relevance for architecture and design. But Malevich was a leader, not a collaborator, and he wasn't about the join any project that was not profoundly his own, as demonstrated by his 1922 letter to the "Dutch artists." Here, he acknowledges shared interests while spending the majority of the text articulating his own views on nonobjectivity without reference to any other group.[5] Malevich sought opportunities to expand Suprematism's sphere of influence, not dialogue. This sense of ships passing in the night extends to his relationship with the Bauhaus as well. The ideological position of this institution, headed by Walter Gropius from its formation in 1919 until 1928, matured in such a way as to gradually lose its attachment to traditions of craftsmanship embodied in media such as painting.[6] The Polish modernist poet Tadeusz Peiper picked up on the tension engendered by this loss during his time at the Dessau Bauhaus in 1927, writing that the relationship between the school's instruction in painting and its "scientific goals" was utterly unclear.[7] Peiper met Malevich during the Russian artist's only trip abroad in 1927, which included a stop in Dessau. Although a problematic relationship between painting and theories of the built environment was shared by Malevich and the Bauhaus, Peiper observed that the Russian artist sharply distinguished himself from the Bauhaus' utilitarian goals:

> For [Gropius] the type of structure is closely dependent on the building's function; the essence of a building determines the technique, and the technique determines the form of the building.

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[5] *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:183-87. The Russian original of this letter is inaccessible in a private collection.

[6] Leah Dickerman writes, "[t]he autonomy of the discrete easel painting was challenged from the school's first years . . . It seems clear that the structure of the Bauhaus, with its Gesamtkunstwerk aspirations, spelled the obsolescence of traditional painting." Leah Dickerman, "Bauhaus Fundaments," in *Bauhaus 1919-1933: Workshops for Modernity*, ed. Barry Bergdoll and Leah Dickerman (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 29. See also Éva Forgács, *The Bauhaus Idea and Bauhaus Politics* (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 1995), 81-117.

[7] *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910-1930*, ed. Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 630.

> Malevich, by contrast, would be happy if the builders would simply erect structures according to his sculptural models. Strange. Something created for a specific purpose should serve another one! A system of spatial forms based entirely on artistic goals should fulfill the tasks of a utilitarian object![8]

For Malevich, to enter the world did not mean the adoption of utilitarian ideas but was a continuation of the non-utilitarian ideology of painting. Painting was "done for" only in the material sense. Still, the idea of entering the human world put pressure on this ideology. Only made more urgent by the Revolution, the central and ultimately unsolved question after the *0.10* exhibition was clearly about how Suprematism could develop and enter the world without undermining the modernist principles it embodied as painting.

Of the members of the artistic groups addressed by Malevich, Piet Mondrian was perhaps the only other artist to maintain the conceptual centrality of painting to practices of architectural design. Broadly speaking, his De Stijl colleagues, as Nancy Troy has shown, arrived at a conception of the architectural *Gesamtkunstwerk* as an egalitarian unity of the arts, whereas for Mondrian painting remained dominant. Yet despite Mondrian's position outside of the De Stijl "mainstream" (though even this perhaps overstates the unity of the group), the group's conception of the total work of art was itself fundamentally modernist: each art would reduce itself to its essence before being combined with its sisters, what Yve-Alain Bois has described as a process of "elementarization and integration."[9] Mondrian merely emphasized a particular practice within a set of modernist practices. On the other hand, after the Revolution Malevich's colleagues contested the value of the fine arts for Russian society, and thus the value of modernist versions of that art. They sought explicit involvement by their creative practices in the

[8] Ibid., 629.

[9] See Yve-Alain Bois, "The De Stijl Idea," in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990); Nancy J. Troy, *The De Stijl Environment* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983).

modern world. This meant that they were unconcerned about preserving the identities of the fine arts. Malevich saw opportunity after the Revolution too, but his attachment to painting in the face of his colleagues' rejection of traditional modes of artmaking meant that he and his students stood apart. While the Revolution's energy and opportunities affected his work, Malevich's abiding faith in modernist painting necessitated a different set of strategies from those artists more willing to displace painting from its privileged position or even to abandon it.

Beginning around 1919 Malevich's avant-garde contemporaries shifted their focus from the creation of works of fine art to experiments outside the realm of art and the rigorous and tendentious documentation of everyday life. They adopted the discourse of the natural and social sciences to reflect the shift in focus from notions of personal subjectivity to the elaboration of objective principles of both art and social development, and became known as Constructivists.[10] The move from art to life was aided by the potential of photographic reproduction. Benjamin Buchloh notes how artists such as Aleksandr Rodchenko or (in Germany) Raoul Hausmann made photomontages that at once maintained "modernist virtues," such as "the transparency of construction procedures; the self-referentiality of the pictorial signifying devices; the reflexive spatial organization; and the general emphasis on the tactility"—while reintroducing (via photographic reproduction) images of the world out there (what Buchloh and many call "iconicity").[11] The modernist virtues of these pictures were realized not through mobilizing abstract painting forms, but by photographs of contemporary life. The photograph, in Buchloh's reading, was a crucial element in the avant-garde's shift from art to life because it bridged modernist collage practice with claims to truth beyond the frame of modernist art, truths exterior

[10] See Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*.

[11] Buchloh, "From Faktura to Factography," 97-98.

to the artist's own subjectivity. In the course of the 1920s the emphasis on this truth grew and the ties to modernist collage frayed. Artists answered the theorist Osip Brik's 1923 directive to go "into production" by designing everything from clothing to confectionary packaging with the aim of reformulating the texture of everyday life.[12]

Malevich's path was distinct from that narrated by Buchloh; with one exception he never bothered himself with photomontage (and even this example, which I will discuss, does not resemble the images of Rodchenko or Hausmann). Yet I suggest that something in Suprematist painting itself changes and provides a loosely analogous moment of transition, or at least hints at a change in his conception of artmaking that might make such a transition possible. Malevich's 1917 painting—in a similar sketch it is called *Suprematist Element the Moment of Dissolution of Sensation (of Non-Objectivity)* (Supr. element moment [*sic*] rastvoreniia oshchushcheniia (bespredmetnosti)[13]—suggests a new interest in a sort of narrative that had not appeared in earlier Suprematist paintings (fig. 4.1). Dissolution here is not the disappearance of objects, "like smoke," practiced at Suprematism's original 1915 moment. Those objects, recognizable objects in the world, are already gone from the canvas. What have been left are those color forms on which the artist might still perform a disappearing trick. The completion of *this* action might be the monochrome, a white expanse devoid of any color forms, the sort of which some scholars believe Malevich exhibited at the *Sixteenth State Exhibition* in late 1919 (its generic title obscures the fact that it was a Malevich retrospective), a monochrome which either did not exist or proved

[12] On the reformulation of these quotidian objects see Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*.

[13] See Nakov, *Kazimir Malewicz: catalogue raisonné*, 286. Catalogue entry S-491.

a dead end.[14] The *Suprematist Element* pictures a kind of movement or operation lacking in the original group of Suprematist paintings. It suggests that the visibility of Suprematist forms might not be once-and-for-all; that they might not simply "float off" the canvas at its edges but disappear from view within the expanses of white that contain them. Or that this white is not simply space or neutral ground but a kind of substance ready to absorb colored forms. This image's theme of disappearance is a basic kind of narrative that earlier Suprematist pictures lacked. No one questioned the durability of the *Black Square*'s monumental form, nor did they ask after the directions and aims of the colored forms inhabiting the other paintings. It is this narrative dimension that questions the finality of Suprematism's initial shape at the *0.10* exhibition and thus demonstrates affinities, however tenuous, with the general return of the avant-garde to narrative and iconic representation. In this image the artist has caught a form in transition. It is not as if we can say the yellow quadrilateral "stands for" anything in particular. But it is important to appreciate how different the implied motion of this form is from the dynamic configurations of earlier Suprematist paintings.

To make a painting about dissolution, within a style defined by disappearance, the artist (one would think) would martial all his mastery of the medium to convey the slip into invisibility: the diaphanous picture plane of illusionistic painting, a traditional sign of this mastery, would not allow things to appear but precisely the opposite. That is not what happens here. The titular plane here is a singular, yellow quadrilateral form but one whose long lower

[14] As Aleksandra Shatskikh notes, the material traces of this exhibition are almost nonexistent. She nonetheless is confident from the extant sources in asserting that the canvas was in fact blank; however, Andrei Nakov views the assertion of this "emptiness" to be part of the rhetoric of Suprematist painting and not evidence for an actually blank canvas. This dispute cannot be resolved barring an improbable major discovery; I am inclined to agree with Nakov as it is abundantly clear that Russian critics and Malevich himself held little interest in the accurate written description of Suprematist paintings. Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, 269-70; Nakov, *Malevich: Painting the Absolute*, 2:331.

side, extending from the vertex at almost the lower edge of the canvas, differentiates it from the relatively mild geometric distortion of the original quadrilateral, the *Black Square.* The very acuity of that angle intensifies the form's sense of physical presence: this is something sharp and ready to penetrate. It calls to mind Malevich's [*Suprematist Composition with Black Rectangle and Blue Triangle*] and his student El Lissitzky's later creation *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge*; in the latter picture, the triangle allegorizes actual violence (figures 3.16 and 4.2). And this sense of presence is out- or underlined, if faintly, in black. The question of disappearance is raised only on the form's right side, where the black line is omitted and the side loses its linear definition under layers of white paint. Rather than manage a color gradient of regular texture, Malevich builds up the surface, creating a noticeable three-dimensionality at the very place of "dissolution." That is, the form loses figurative presence in favor of the literal presence of white paint. It is the appearance of literal paint that takes precedence over the figurative disappearance of the colored shape and throws into question the narrative structure outlined above. That is, Suprematist poetics of disappearance and nonobjectivity are articulated in modernist language that draws the viewer's attention to painting as a material production and its inability to effect any sort of real "dissolution." This makes dissolution its subject while at the same time it denying its possibility, turning back onto itself in showing itself to be a static image of oil paint. This move, this sort of aesthetic feint, likewise characterizes Malevich's architectural practice.

I

This makes sense because, in Malevich's imagination, architecture is firmly linked to painting. At the same time, painting remains conspicuously distinct from architecture and other utilitarian practices. Yet the volumetric work made by a painter—what looks like architecture

and indeed what Malevich calls architecture—is nevertheless still like a painting. This is because Malevich has a very particular view of what architecture as such should be, and it is *this* kind of architecture that is like painting. Or perhaps the other way around, painting is like, or becomes like, architecture.

But this usage of "architecture" isn't consistent. Sometimes it just means architecture in the normal sense, the real making of buildings for human use. For example, in a 1926 published fragment of his monumental and continuously revised "World as Non-Objectivity," Malevich writes, "painting has become analogous to other art—architecture, or technics in general. But this *does not* mean that the forms of painting will resemble those other forms and strive after their ideology."[15] The phrase "analogy of identity" indicates that Suprematist painting approaches what architecture is like, rather than what architecture is. Architecture here is a utilitarian discipline, allied with other sorts of kinds of making going under the heading of "technics." These utilitarian things are what other avant-garde artists saw as central to their practice after the Revolution. Christina Kiaer writes that the central concept to emerge from the debates that took place at the Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK) in 1920–1922 was that of *tselesoobraznost',* that is, the quality of something "formed in relation to a goal."[16] Malevich's disinterest in the building or even design of actual structures is a polemical response to this sort of avant-garde ideology. I think his continued affiliation with painting must be seen as a conscious attempt to refute this ideology. There were other ways of expanding on one's painterly practice in pursuit of new ends. For example, Kiaer shows how Liubov Popova and Stepanova drew on their experiences as painters in their chosen field of production, textile design. They sought to

[15] Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 2:48.

[16] Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*, 8.

leverage their experience to go beyond painting as a medium and to go beyond what painting stood for in the post-Revolutionary context in a way that Malevich refused.

We need to see that Malevich is indeed refusing. He is not refusing as an ostrich with his head in the sand refuses, but rather refusing in the active sense of refusal. Although to my mind T.J. Clark's reading of Malevich's post-Revolutionary refusals (to go with Lissitzky into the service of building the new state) places too much emphasis on its ironic or nihilistic qualities, Clark alone has captured the aggression of Malevich's efforts.[17] This isn't someone whose continued faith in painting meant that he was standing idly at the easel, oblivious to the chaos around him. If one refuses *tselesoobraznost',* then what should one do? This is, I think, the motivating question for Malevich at this time. He never asks it explicitly, nor are his answers clear. Terms like architecture and technics float in a metaphorical cloud in a mass of texts, even as he made architectural models. To explore the relationship of metaphor to model is our task.

One can't emphasize enough just how insistently metaphorical Malevich's writing on architecture is. He barely mentions real buildings. In fact, his discussions on architecture for the most part are not about buildings at all. A lot of the time, he writes about trees. For example, in one passage of 1924 he claims:

> The hollow in the tree was never formed as a nest of comfort. Similarly, a temple is not destined for religious habitation. The creator of the temple admires the spatial form, not the fact that religious services will take place in the temple. The hollow remains a hollow, not a nest.[18]

[17] See Clark, "God Is Not Cast Down."

[18] Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 4:156.

Architectural forms are like these natural volumes in that they are without purpose. The similarities between the architect and the nonobjective artist are easy to identify in another passage from the same year, which now deals explicitly with human beings:

> [I]f an architect creates an architectural structure which will serve as refuge for others, then let them find in architecture those free spaces which have arisen in it, not through the solution of their comfort and appointment, [but] through an artistic decision. Let the architect always be abstract [*abstrakten*], not subject to a utilitarian concept or to science, for that is the concern of the engineer.[19]

Aesthetic forms emerge prior to their occupation by meaning, that is, they emerge before any function.

Curiously, the particular image of nonfunctional architecture Malevich consistently provides in his texts, the hollow in the tree, seems at odd with his actual designs. There are no hollows in these works at all. So the hollows mentioned in the texts figure the sort of nonfunctional architecture Malevich claims to support, but the presence of hollows themselves isn't necessary and, it seems, actually *unwanted*, a sort of defect.

> The new art, on the other hand, is still solid . . . it is not a hollow into which the content of life [*soderzhanie zhizni*] can be poured, not yet a hollow in which the hoopoe or some other bird can weave a nest, and that is why the birds of the forest cry that all trees are abstract [*abstraktny*] and only hollow trees are real [*konkretny*]. The hoopoes will try to set up housekeeping in the new art and fill it with their content, but they will not succeed and so will shout at the top of their profane lungs that it is abstract and art should return to the healthy Renaissance, the forms of the Parthenon, …for those forms are hollows which the hoopoes can move into and express, mold their lives.[20]

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[19] Ibid., 3:280; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 4:207-08. Translation modified. Note that this is not the same version of the essay that appeared in *Praesens* in 1926; Malevich continually returned to this text, substantially revising, expanding, and editing it over the course of some years.

[20] "Through My Experience as a Painter," in *Malevich: Artist and Theoretician*, ed. Galina Demosfenova (Paris: Flammarion, 1991), 208; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 4:44-45. Translation modified. This passage is also dated 1924; it may have been written slightly earlier than the previous citation. Both belong to a series of manuscripts whose titles are simply fractions, beginning with 1/40 and extending to 1/49. They are clearly elements of the same project. The sequence of Malevich's dates doesn't track the increase in the fraction's denominator; for example, 1/49 apparently bears the date 1923. Malevich was not, as we know, above falsely dating his works, but in

The new art actively resists content while, at the same time, it frustrates the birds owing to its similarity to those "hollow" trees. Taking solid forms for hollow ones provokes anger and the denial of the very reality of the solid. And yet one imagines, given the "still" and "not yet" of the cited text, that hollows will eventually form and the birds will make a home. This process by which the new art becomes habitable is not detailed; readers, like the birds, are frustrated by these texts that seem likewise superficial, refusing to answer obvious questions.

The emphasis on surfaces in Suprematist paintings and these texts is continued in the objects of experimental architecture that Malevich and his students assembled. This emphasis on surface, an aesthetics of outsidedness, furthermore asks after role of the viewer amongst Suprematist forms: what are we if not hoopoes, seeking to some kind of entry into works of art? As Suprematism became much more than a series of oil paintings and entered into a dialogue with the world-building ambitions of the post-Revolutionary period, as artists joined Malevich's "party in art" (UNOVIS, the "Affirmers of the New Art") and imagined a new world, a place for the viewer was defined outside the work of art.

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During the period of the Civil War, Malevich took a position at the Peoples' Art School in Vitebsk, a city in the former Pale of Settlement (modern-day Belarus).[21] There, Malevich somewhat contentiously reoriented the school according to his own ideas. His work was influenced and supported by his students, the most important of which, especially in the realm of

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this case I do not see a reason for him to have done so and thus the most sensible interpretation is to see these texts as virtually simultaneous.

[21] On Malevich and Lissitzky in this period see Clark, "God Is Not Cast Down."; Shatskikh, *Vitebsk: The Life of Art*. On the relationship of avant-garde artists, including Malevich, to early Soviet art institutions see Pamela Jill Kachurin, *Making Modernism Soviet: The Russian Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era, 1918-1928* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2013).

architecture, was Lissitzky.[22] Despite the clear influence of Lissitzky, who was himself an important theoretician, the discourse Malevich developed for his work was very much his own. Lissitzky was not prone to the kind of philosophizing that captivated Malevich, and his experiments, unlike those of his teacher, always demonstrated a draughtsman's concision and clarity.[23] After returning to Petrograd in 1922, where he became the head of the city's State Institute for Artistic Culture (GINKhUK) in 1923, Malevich developed the "arkhitektons," models of architectural structures, in collaboration with his student Nikolai Suetin (1897–1954).

The term "arkhitekton" was a neologism derived from "architectonics" (*arkhitektonika*), which Malevich defined as "architectural formulae with the aid of which one can give form to architectural structures" (fig. 4.3).[24] The phrase is basically accurate but very pretentious. The arkhitektons are titled after letters of the Greek alphabet, hinting at the kind of classicism that became especially apparent in the second generation of models. Like Suprematist paintings, these models are at once grossly obvious and profoundly weird. Almost without exception, the

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[22] Lissitzky had in fact begun his studies in Vitebsk under Yuri Pen before travelling in Europe, most notably to receive architectural training in Darmstadt from 1910–1914, then returning to Vitebsk in response to an invitation from Marc Chagall after the Revolution. After encountering Malevich and under the influence of Suprematism, Lissitzky conceived of his *Prouns* (a portmanteau for *proekt utverditel'nogo novogo,* project for the affirmation of the new). Lissitzky's writings emphasized the *prouns*' status as an intermediary step between the Suprematist canvas and architecture in the world. Recent scholarship has broadened the scope of the inquiry into Malevich's artistic circle. An attempt to develop a more holistic view of Suprematist work by looking also to the production of Malevich's students can be found in some recent work, for example, Khan-Magomedov, *Suprematizm i arkhitektura: (problemy formoobrazovaniia)*. Khan-Magomedov detects an important shift towards volume, and thus in his view irrevocably towards architecture, in the years 1920–1921 made by Malevich's students in UNOVIS.

[23] Konstantin Rozhdestvensky, who studied under and worked with Malevich in the mid-1920s, insisted that the distinction between the *Prouns* and Suprematist architecture lay in the former's lack of a "cosmic" dimension. Quoted in Kazimir Malevich: *Suprematism*, 80. Malevich would write to Lissitzky in 1924, accusing him of being a "constructor, scared of Suprematism." Letter of Kazimir Malevich to El Lissitzky, dated 17 June 1924, published in Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 4:297.

[24] *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 2:16 (footnote); *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 2:140 (footnote). Selim Khan-Magomedov sees the *prouns* and Malevich's own architectural models as handing the "baton of innovation" from painting to architecture; yet this is misleading given, as Khan-Magomedov's own comprehensive researches demonstrate, neither Lissitzky, Malevich, nor any other primarily visual artist—even among the Constructivists—became important as an architect. See S. O. Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture*, trans. Alexander Lieven (New York: Rizzoli, 1987), 66.

arkhitektons are simply collections of plaster blocks. That's it. Given all the talk of trees, we might also be surprised to find no biomorphic forms at all in Malevich's models, not even curved surfaces. The material out of which arts-academy students once sculpted ornaments is here used to model completely unornamented structures, obliquely raising the question of utility that Malevich addressed directly in his writings. Ornament is the very definition of the non-expedient; although the arkhitektons may not look like ornament they still share its non-utilitarian character.

The models' monumental appearance is belied by the inherent dynamism of their modular method of construction, a sort of construction that invites considerations of, or desire for, continual construction and of rearrangement. Potentiality, not concretization, is the main idea here. Consideration of this potentiality is encouraged by the haptic appeal of the blocks' imperfect, slightly rough plaster surfaces. One can easily imagine other possibilities for the more than 100 regular and monochromatic pieces used in some of the models.[25] When presented with these units, one cannot tell to which model they belong; they are fungible, and bear no mark of any necessity binding them to a particular position.[26] This form of construction is both unlimited, in the modularity of the units, and yet, because of their simplicity, formally constrained. In this

[25] Bella Toporkova, "Restoring Malevich's Arkhitektons" in Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum, 35.

[26] While the rigidly geometrical quality of the models invites speculation as to the existence of formally determinative algorithms, they never in the end seem to balance out and allow their viewers such an algebraic victory; the extant or reconstructed models never rid themselves of irregularity or messiness, those visual cues that would work against claims of perfect systemization. Cf. John Milner, who writes apropos *Alpha*: "Having established his proportional system [with the *ur*-cube], Malevich could have blocks that were all related to each other in their proportions, subdivisions and so on. This permitted an endless variety of designs to be explored. But another important quality also arises from this process. The scale of parts can be enlarged or reduced *ad infinitum*. Visually this means that a close-up of part of such a structure would resemble in essence the structure as a whole. Thus, Malevich is beginning to develop fractal structures unaffected by enlargement or reduction." Milner, *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry*, 192. Close looking at the works themselves reveals definite irregularities that refute Milner's assertion.

respect, the vocabulary of the monochromatic arkhitektons is even more limited than that of Suprematist painting. The dynamism here is contained in the relationship between model and viewer. The imaginative relationship to the arkhitekton models is a kind of play.

Once the blocks coalesce, they will look like buildings. No longer playthings, our perception will shift its aspect, and try and find our bodies' place in relation to them. This is a question of scale, and is the other dynamic element of the viewer-arkhitekton relationship. The relationship of the human being to a building was, in Malevich's time, a question for photography. Rodchenko's defamiliarizing framing of architectural spaces was a particularly notable example of a pan-European phenomenon in the 1920s.[27] Malevich, on the other hand, uses his models to take up this question of scale in a unique way. In doing this, he distinguished them from the radical designs of contemporary architects, even those avant-garde "paper" ones like Ivan Leonidov and Iakov Chernikov.[28] For example, Leonidov's model for the Lenin Institute and Library is more properly an "architectural model" than anything Malevich made, in that it is a "mechanism that helps architects develop an understandable scale with which to measure the unknown thing" (fig. 4.4).[29] Malevich's models are of no help in this regard. Unlike, for example, Le Corbusier's much later, obsessively relational architecture that is

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[27] The 1926 publication of publication of Erich Mendelsohn's *Amerika, Bilderbuch eines Architekten* challenged what Jean-Louis Cohen calls "the static tradition of American urban photography," wherein the photographer sought to deliver an image of the entirety of a structure for the viewer's consumption. Mendelsohn's innovation, which would prove hugely influential to photographers like Rodchenko, was to emphasize the scale of architectural structures by photographing them with the vision of the ordinary pedestrian, who looks up, amazed (like at a gothic cathedral's vault) at the structure that towers over him or her, and of which he or she can only see part. See Jean-Louis Cohen. *Scenes of the World to Come: European Architecture and the American Challenge, 1893-1960.* Paris and Montreal: Flammarion and Canadian Centre for Architecture, 1995. ex. cat., 90.

[28] On Soviet architecture in the 1920s the definitive text is Khan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture*. Khan-Magomedov's research clearly demonstrates Malevich's idiosyncratic position far outside even something like an avant-garde "mainstream."

[29] On these sorts of models see Albert C. Smith, *Architectural Model as Machine: A New View of Models from Antiquity to the Present Day* (Amsterdam and Boston: Elsevier Architectural Press, 2004), xvii-xxi.

comprehensively scaled to a hypothetical man's height, Malevich's models do not bespeak a fixed anthropometric unit to determine forms (or, for that matter, any other unit).[30] The architectural models are never accompanied by human miniatures with whose gazes we might identify. And the forms of the models mean that we would need such an external reference point to determine their scale. The forms themselves, without doors, windows, or other obvious forms, do not help us do this. The models' simple initial appearances are confounded by the small cubes and parallelepipeds that constitute portions of them: if one considers these small volumes to be usable spaces for human activity, the overall effect is that of the represented structures being vertiginously large, an effect difficult to reconcile with their actual modest size. Other visual aspects of certain models actually seem intentionally designed to confound a stable reading of their forms. For example, take the vertically oriented arkhitekton *Zeta* (fig. 4.5). Such a building's scale would seem to indicate that those "steps" on the model are something rather like the side of a massive ziggurat, yet unlike the stepped sides of a ziggurat these stepped forms are not axially aligned around the model's main vertical volumes. This lack of clear architectural purpose, combined with the relatively small size of the individual steps, means that these forms could be alternatively identified as staircases. The absurdity of this potential conclusion ensures that one does not embrace the stepped form-as-staircase as a conclusive reading. Thus, even with only a small portion of the overall structure brought into view, that portion can potentially sustain a perception of an entire building itself. Without traditional cues present on the object, scale is unstable. Instead, the arkhitektons invite continual viewing to consider and re-consider both the internal relationships of their forms and the relationship of those forms to the viewer him- or

[30] Catharina Manchanda. *Models and Prototypes.* St. Louis: Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, 2006. ex. cat., 18.

herself. These formal relations, such as those we might find in modernist painting, take precedence over the notion that these are models for real structures.

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And yet, in Malevich's imagination, these models are more than things designed to thwart our sense of scale while encouraging us to play with them. They are imagined to be somehow the same kind of dynamic creatures that we ourselves are. In other words, the anthropomorphic thinking that characterized painterly Suprematism also characterized Malevich architecture. In Chapter 1 we dealt with a notion of mimesis articulated in Malevich's texts to discuss the relationship of the Suprematist artist to painting. Here, I'd like to turn to Malevich's metaphors more generally, because many of them depict the human body as both vulnerable and subject to violence, but also something that can be transformed through dress and conduct. This human body of the mid-1910s became the architectural body at the end of the decade and in the 1920s.

Clearly Malevich recognized clothing and the body as potential vehicles for new forms. His designs for the 1913 futurist "opera" *Victory over the Sun* gave form to its heroic "futurist strongmen."[31] In 1914, along with fellow Futurists David Burliuk and Aleksei Morgunov, he participated in a futurist demonstration along a fashionable Moscow street with a red peasant spoon in his lapel, showing how practices of dress and adornment were also part of avant-garde practice. Futurist dandyism "redefin[ed] ideas about what could be considered an aesthetic object and what constituted adornment," confusing the relationship between body and artwork that would be taken up in Suprematist painting.[32] Malevich's writings on Suprematism extended the

[31] On this production see Bartlett, *Victory over the Sun: The World's First Futurist Opera*.

[32] Colleen McQuillen, *The Modernist Masquerade: Stylizing Life, Literature, and Costumes in Russia* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2013), 189. Such practices were an early example of what a recent exhibition named

discourse of clothing and the body. In a 1916 lecture the artist urged his audience to "[t]ake off the skin of the centuries" (*[s]nimaite s sebia kozhu stoletii*).[33] About a month later, in a letter to his friend Mikhail Matiushin, Malevich wrote, "[t]he time has come when we must flay the skin [*sodrat' kozhu*] from the faces of the young, because the skin on them is not theirs, but [that of] their authorities."[34] And he published a version of this language in "From Cubism to Suprematism" as well.[35] The metaphor is violent but also holds out the possible that skin is something changeable, a kind of clothing. In fact, it seems virtually synonymous with clothing. He writes in the letter to Benois:

> But how has the World of Art enriched our own times? It has given a pair of crinolines [*paru krinolinov*] and a few uniforms from the time of Peter [*petrovskikh mundirov*].
>
> [Y]ou and your right-wing colleagues simply cannot rid yourselves of crinolines . . .You, as president of the critics, will always cover the dandy's trust with your dressing gown [*khalatom*], pawning his last diamond and drinking away his last pair of trousers [*briuki*].[36]

Malevich insisted on the needs to be clothed in the fabrics and skin suitable for the age over and over again. The poetics of his texts are ground in the repetition and variation of these assertions. Repetition and variation themselves give meaning; they are not simply ways of varying a stable allegorical core. This means it is difficult to sort out the different stakes of "skin" versus "clothing," because it remains unclear how they differ. Though confusing for the reader who

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"Russian performance." See *Performans v Rossii, 1910-2010: kartografiia istorii.* Edited by Aleksandra Obukhova. Moscow: Artguide Editons, 2014. ex. cat.

[33] Reported in I. Gr., "O skuchnom," *Den'*, January 14 1916.

[34] Letter from Kazimir Malevich to Mikhail Matiushin, dated February 14, 1916, published in Malevich, *Malevich o sebe, sovremenniki o Maleviche: pis'ma, dokumenty, vospominaniia, kritika*, 1:77.

[35] *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:30.

[36] Letter from Kazimir Malevich to Alexandre Benois, dated May 1916, published in *Malevich o sebe, sovremenniki o Maleviche: pis'ma, dokumenty, vospominaniia, kritika*, 1:84, 86; *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:44, 47. Translation modified.

wants to "get to the bottom" of what Malevich actually meant, who wants to reduce his metaphor to straightforward concepts, this discourse's lack of stable allegorical referents is also the reason that it could be rapidly adapted for other creative ends.

Human bodies could be adorned in appropriate or inappropriate manners. Architectural ones too. Here, the metaphor of the *clothed* body fades behind the metaphor of the body in general. Still, there are a few moments in which we still find the notion that the body can be spoiled through improper adornment. So, although Malevich admired skyscrapers for their "lifts, electric lights, telephones," he attacked their propensity for ornament in the form of "Venuses [and] cupids."[37] For Malevich, these obnoxious ornaments resulted from his contemporaries' nostalgia and unwillingness to let go of past forms. This resulted in an eclecticism that papered over the "whole dynamism of the ferro-concrete life," and filled "the fields of our swift age with manure."[38] This modern "new life" needs a new architecture. This architecture's birth is accompanied by the annihilation of the old: it "burns the remains of the Greeks in the crematorium."[39] New bodies will replace what Malevich calls the "corpses" of past architecture.[40] Not content with simply saying that buildings are like bodies, Malevich goes on to say that material and energy themselves, iron and electricity, can be "insulted like a girl" if

[37] *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:61; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:89. Admiration for skyscrapers was but one component of the Russian phenomenon of *amerikanizm*, the continual fascination with the technological and social modernity America stood for in the Russian imagination, which lasted well into the post-Revolutionary years. America was something like a symbol, characterized in part not by particulars but by imagined virtues, allowed it to be read many in ways, for America could not be seen, read, or heard as France could be through Cézanne, Germany through Goethe, or Italy through Verdi. America, to avant-gardists and Bolsheviks alike, came forward first through secondhand impressions of its alien nature. See Hans Rogger, "*Amerikanizm* and the Economic Development of Russia," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 3 (1981).

[38] Malevich, *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:61; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:70.

[39] *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:64; "Arkhitektura, kak poshchechina betonozhelezu," *Iskusstvo Kommuny*, December 7 1918.

[40] *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:61; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:70.

utilized in an incorrect, retrograde fashion.[41] Malevich saw his contemporaries build disfigured forms from disfigured materials and found this grotesque. Buildings are like people, capable of feeling and death. He imagines the sad figure of the resurrected Lazarus himself shambling through contemporary life like some sort of beggar "amidst the furious speed of our electric machines."[42] Lazarus incarnates the building of the past, a dead corpse animated only through the sort of miracle Malevich rejects. Thus, Malevich extends Suprematism's theoretical anthropomorphism into three dimensions, into projects that look towards their realization in the world.

But could such things ever appear in the world? After all, the arkhitekton models seem to be isolated bits of extremist ambition. Their exhibition at in 1926 at GINKhuK shows this isolation well; each appears on its own plinth, as if it were a classical sculpture, a reading encouraged by Malevich writing on the central plinth, "Suprematist Order" (fig. 4.6). At the same time, didn't Malevich, who was constantly asserting the primacy of Suprematism for everything—didn't he *want* his models to acquire some sort of reality beyond that of crude plaster blocks? I think that he did: this is the one moment in which photomontage was important, not as point of transition from modernist painting to practices of reportage or production in general, but as an attempt to preserve the formal economy of modernist painting within a more expansive sense of modernity. This photomontage was published in 1926 in the Polish journal *Praesens* alongside the previously cited version of his text "The World as Non-Objectivity" (fig. 4.7).[43] In this image, a volumetric form based on an earlier drawing published in a different

[41] *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:63; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:72.

[42] *Essays on Art, 1915-1933*, 1:61; *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 1:70.

[43] Praesens (1926–1939) was the artistic group responsible for this eponymous journal. Its program "emphasized the union of new architecture with social demands," but tensions within the group arose between trained architects and

Polish journal in 1924, *Blok,* under the title *Dynamic Construction* (Konstrukcja dynamiczna), the composite forms of which suggests the arkhitekton models, has been reoriented vertically (fig. 4.8).[44] The title of *Dynamic Construction* suggests it was not conceived of as an architectural design. Its inclusion for this photomontage shows Malevich vacillating between understanding his three-dimensional works as simply volumetric and as architectural. The simultaneity of these two conceptions of volumetric form points to Malevich's uncertainty as to how much purchase his works are to have in the world. Malevich wanted to see, in this image, what would happen if any kind of intermediate step was skipped, and nonobjective forms—the solid trees that caused the birds such consternation—all at once assumed a kind of reality.

This photomontage is the only attempt Malevich ever made to imagine his architectural experiments in an environment with other structures, real or fictive. Malevich's structure—a "Suprematist skyscraper"—takes the place of certain structures, effacing them from the skyline, yet simultaneously seems joined to others. Malevich pictures the structure's potential for continual growth using elements from both his arkhitekton models and the American metropolis. The forms of Malevich's arkhitektons, the form of the Suprematist skyscraper present in this

painters. The latter group, which included Władysław Strzemiński (who had earlier studied with Malevich in Vitebsk along with several other Polish artists), strained against the architectural functionalism considered crucial by others. See *Constructivism in Poland 1923–1936 Constructivism in Poland 1923-1936: BLOK, Praesens.* Edited by Ryszard Stanisławski. Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi,, 1973. ex. cat., esp. 39-41. Though it seems that in this dispute between radically abstract architectural thinking and (nevertheless radical) functionalism Strzemiński takes the former, Suprematist position, the term "Constructivism" served for Praesens and related groups in Poland as the general title of the avant-garde.

[44] When I presented elements of what would become this chapter at a conference in 2012, Nina Gourianova offered her opinion that Malevich did not make this photomontage. She is correct that its form is uncharacteristic, and there is not conclusive proof. On the other hand, the fact that the *Dynamic Construction* drawing was repurposed suggests access to the artists' own archive of drawings. I see no reason to *not* credit Malevich with the image. Although this is a unique image—Malevich's other photomontages were all pedagogical charts—it is not a particularly sophisticated one, and suggests no particular skill that he was unlikely to possess. Therefore, I follow most scholars, foremost among them Shatskikh, in attributing the image to Malevich.

particular image, parallel or are analogous to the condition of architecture inasmuch as they are volumetric and that they occupy a position in a world of some kind.

There are three clear components of this image. First, the Suprematist skyscraper itself. Then two sets of New York buildings: the foreground structures, taken (it seems) from a single image and maintaining their real relationships, and then those behind them, whose displacement from real space and frontal "poses" emphasize the flatness of the picture plane. Despite this displacement, they, like all the structures taken from the actual skyline, maintain a sort of integrity, they communicate in reproduction their real existence: their stable bodies might be given by an architectural plan. The Suprematist skyscraper resists such knowledge, because although it too is a static image because it lacks the spatial integrity of the structures that surround it.

A small, rectangular, black plane begins contiguously with the lower building in the left of the frame. It extends onto a large, light-colored plane that appears to be oriented similarly. They continue, in the other words, the face of the real structure to which they seem attached: if one were to extend the plane to the right, they would recede into depth. Follow this light plane to the right, where it appears to make contact with a more darkly-shaded plane orthogonal to it. This plane in turn, were one to extend it rightwards in the frame, would approach the viewer.

And yet, we may observe that the light-colored plane has other potential orientations. It could be, in fact, seen as perpendicular to that original structure in the left of the frame. This is puzzling considering the contact with our original black plane, but clearly makes sense if we look towards the top of the image, where a number of parallelepipeds attach to its surface. Perhaps if we consider only Malevich's skyscraper, ignoring its contacts with its surroundings, it looks as simple as the drawing from which it comes. But surely these contacts matter, these

details that lead us to contradictory conclusions. Although its monochromatic, linear structure doesn't resemble the sometimes messy forms of Suprematist painting, in its effects the Skyscraper is quite similar. After all, it too can be seen as either a remarkable economy of formal means or a sort of cheap trick.

The shifting aspects of these contradictory vertices take us back to the lessons of cubism. Malevich now rejects the axonometric organization of space with which, following Lissitzky, he had experimented with in drawings; if that system aimed at positing an objective image, one freed from dependence on the singular controlling eye and thus the singular implied subject of traditional perspective, here that stable, independent objectivity cannot sustain itself and space is contested. While travelling from a Revolutionary state, personally presenting his hugely influential work to a broader European audience for the first and only time, Malevich demonstrated his experiments' debt to European modernist painting. In this image, Malevich insisted on the continued relevance of a past painterly style whose bourgeois origins and subjects have here been totally evacuated, even as its formal conventions persist. In order to imagine itself in real space, Suprematism relied on conventions it had supposedly left behind. The traces of Malevich's experience with cubism in the 1910s are undeniably in this photomontage, suggesting that the Suprematist artist may continue to draw upon the art of the recent past in order to achieve his or her particular aims. Here, that aim is to explore the friction between the two-dimensionality of painting and the kind of exploration into volume and space to which painting qua Suprematism aspired. This is the place where Suprematism most clearly makes visible its ambitions to occupy a place in the world, and yet this ambition is compromised through its articulation in modernist-painterly terms. The Suprematist skyscraper is an expression

of an avant-garde desire to enter the world, yet in its form it is nothing but a kind of modernist painting.

II

The arkhitekton models solicited a different mode of perception and looked towards real space in a way abstract painting could not, and are at the same time conceptually bound to Suprematist painting: they take up its naturalistic conception of art making and its nonobjective anthropomorphism. Apart from his models, Malevich's work with his students in Vitebsk and beyond similarly turned towards real space and, explicitly, real social life in both its quotidian/private and celebratory/public forms. The simple colored forms of Suprematist painting realized themselves in other venues: they "branded" a student group-*cum*-artistic collective at a regional art school, they provided a new illustrative language to accompany government texts, adorned façades of existing buildings, and even served to decorate the porcelain of the former imperial factory. The forms of Suprematist painting persisted in forms other than painting.

In what terms are these projects to be evaluated? On the one hand the disregard for the relationship of Suprematist forms to these alternate supports would seem to result in an aesthetic failure under the traditional criteria of modernism. Under these criteria, you simply cannot expect that posting colored shapes on the neoclassical façades of a provincial city or applying abstract architectural principles to teacups will be successful artistic gestures. Perhaps this is a caricature of modernism; perhaps this makes objects take a test for which they have not prepared and are designed to fail. Yet the notion that forms of successful paintings might not find equal success in other applications, a kind of weak modernism, certainly had subscribers besides

midcentury ideologists. Writing for the Vitebsk publication *Art* in 1921, M. Kunin cited Malevich's own ambitions before condemning their results:

> "All things, all our world should be clothed in Suprematist forms, i.e. fabrics, wallpaper, pots, plates, furniture, signboards, in a word everything, should be with Suprematist illustrations, as a new form of harmony" (Malevich).
> And what happened? Suprematism began to play the petty role of applied art [*prikladnichestva*] . . . it became frighteningly wild, absurd, and funny.[45]

Kunin was apparently unaware of the use of Suprematist forms for the decorative arts before the Revolution. Despite this missing background, Kunin's criticism identifies the fact that Malevich's eagerness to make painting the dominant category of Suprematism led to a situation in which its return to the decorative arts was deeply implausible. Malevich did not make an effort to recast Suprematism's ambitions as its forms migrated to the realm of daily life. For the critic Vsevolod Voinov in 1927, the porcelain designed by avant-garde artists simply served to remind viewers of the debates around "left" art that had been percolating for twenty years.[46] Little in the hundreds of pages of the artist's writings offers a rebuttal to Kunin's criticism: that Malevich parodied his own painting when Suprematism moved into the applied arts. Rather than theorizing Suprematism anew in order to account for its new physical forms, Malevich developed a so-called philosophy in which art played little role and which, in its emphasis on the "0" or "nothing" at the heart of existence, would seem to rule out in advance the possibility of such gestures to inform or shape life: in other words, to rule out doing what almost everyone else was hoping at that moment to do. His later writings seem to conform to Mitchell's account of abstraction that we originally rejected, because unlike the texts of 1915–1916, the philosophy of

[45] M. Kunin, "Ob Unovise," *Iskusstvo* [Vitebsk]. No. 2-3, 1921 p. 15-16 reprinted in Malevich, *Malevich o sebe, sovremenniki o Maleviche: pis'ma, dokumenty, vospominaniia, kritika*, 528.

[46] Vsevolod Voinov, "Iubileinye vystavki v oktiabrskie dni v Leningrade i Moskve," *Krasnaia Panorama*, December 3 1927, 8.

the 1920s does strike one as a set of a priori claims. Although Adrian Barr has argued that Malevich's very late writings do, in fact, grant art a unique position in revealing the fundamental undifferentiated character of existence, these writings in no way account for Suprematism's interventions in daily life.[47] There is a sense of futility in the Suprematist teacup not only because it seems a baroque elaboration on a functional form, comically drawing on architectural volumes for no real advantage, but also because it seems like such a small gesture. Small against the background of the revolution (the kind of problem other members of the avant-garde sought to ameliorate) and small against the background of Malevich's own philosophical ambitions. Neither economy has space for this fragile porcelain.

Kunin's article appeared at the beginning of the NEP, the New Economic Policy formulated by Lenin in the wake of the Civil War and War Communism's policies of nationalization and expropriation. NEP was a system of state capitalism that to many members of the avant-garde felt like a step back. For these avant-gardists the NEP was also a challenge. It was in response to this challenge that Boris Arvatov, founding member of the Productivist association and journal *LEF* (*Left Front of the Arts*), imagined the replacement for bourgeois commodity fetishism:

> The construction of proletarian culture, that is, of a culture consciously organized by the working class, requires the elimination of that rupture between Things and people that characterized bourgeois society.[48]

For Arvatov and others, human relationships with Things—objects—was a problem of "material culture," meaning that the question of proletarian culture was as much one of the constitution of

[47] Cf. Barr, "From *Vozbuzhdenie* to *Oshchushchenie*: Theoretical Shifts, Nova Generatsiia, and the Late Paintings."

[48] Translated and reprinted as Boris Arvatov, "Everyday Life and the Culture of the Thing (Toward the Formulation of the Question)," *October* 81 (1997): 121.

objects *themselves* as it was one of a specifically proletarian subjectivity. As Christina Kiaer has shown, members of the avant-garde took it upon themselves to reconceptualize and quite literally re-form the objects of quotidian existence.[49] We see here a marked contrast to Malevich's interventions. Whereas the *LEF* group and others directly engaged with the real socioeconomic questions of the day, Malevich demonstrated a remarkable constancy with Suprematism. Suprematism could subsume new circumstances and heroes within its own established framework. For Constructivists and Productivists, art must confront the truth of its historical situation and abandon its attachment to forms of bourgeois creation; for Malevich that historical situation is less truthful than its image. Even Lenin could be "transfigured into an image" (*preobrazilsia v obraze*). Like the artist's own transfiguration, this image was not any kind of illusionistic representation: Lenin was to be immortalized as a cube.[50]

The work of Malevich and his students almost always refers back to its origins in Suprematist painting.[51] Few of Suetin's designs for porcelain, for example, make an effort to acknowledge the circularity of their supports in a way that makes them distinct from rectangular canvases. Even Lissitzky, whose position under Malevich's umbrella was always more tenuous, maintained in such projects as the *Proun Room* a relationship to Suprematist painting—here was a "real" architectural space, but one whose functionality was prospective rather than responsive to immediate needs.[52] This then is another standard under which Malevich and Suprematism

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[49] See Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Objects of Russian Constructivism*.

[50] Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, 5:213. On Malevich's proposal to memorialize Lenin with the cube see Konstantin Akinsha, "Malevich and Lenin: Image, Ritual, and the Cube," in *Rethinking Malevich*, ed. Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder (London: Pindar Press, 2007).

[51] Tatiana Goriacheva notes that Suetin based his porcelain designs on earlier Suprematist easel paintings. See "Nas budet troe": Kazimir Malevich, Il'ia Chashnik, Nikolai Suetin: zhivopis' i grafika iz kollektsii Sepherot Foundation (Likhtenshtein), 133.

[52] In this, the *Proun Room* might be seen as part of Lissitzky's struggle to find what Kristin Romberg describes as an "appropriate object category," a problem she discusses in her analysis of the journal *Veshch'*, which the artist co-

might be found wanting: that of the historical avant-garde. Contemporary art history admires this group because the destruction of the bourgeois notion of the aesthetic during and after World War I and the Russian Revolution appears like a legitimate historical shift in the way that the chronicle of modernist styles—"From Cubism to Suprematism"—does not. Art, at this moment, *really did* become a thing of the past (at least for some people, at least for a moment). Art-historical interest in the period could be seen as sadomasochistic, because after *this* end of art its institutional study is both hopelessly marginal and politically suspect. Contemporary art's frequent invocation of the historical avant-garde reminds us that in the contemporary situation even the most advanced projects, though perhaps through no fault of their own, fail to deliver such a trenchant critique of the art object. The historical avant-garde provided a new standard for criticism, under which nominally artistic practices may be evaluated in ethical-political rather than aesthetic terms.[53] Under these terms, Suprematism erred, as its reactionary attachment to painting in the face of painting's obsolescence caused it to fall off the historical materialist train not yet derailed by the supposed neoliberal end of history.

On the other hand, looking beyond Suprematism's failure of both these art-historical tests, we see how its attachment to the forms of easel painting reminds us that painting survived the Revolution. Its attachment to painting allowed it to avoid the central contradiction of Constructivism and Productivism: "on the one hand, its desire to address the Marxist problematic of the alienation of labor and, on the other, its submission to the mainstream Bolshevik policy of

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edited. See Kristin Romberg, "From *Veshch'* to *SA*: Journal as Object," in *Architecture in Print: Design and Debate in the Soviet Union, 1919-1935* (New York: Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Art Gallery, Columbia University, 2005), 16-17.

[53] On this relationship with contemporary art see Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London and New York: Verso Books, 2012), 11-76. Regarding a similar situation in contemporary poetry see also Aaron Kunin, "Would Vanessa Place Be a Better Poet If She Had Better Opinions?," *nonsite.org* (2015), http://nonsite.org/editorial/would-vanessa-place-be-a-better-poet-if-she-had-better-opinions.

economic rationalization."[54] This contradiction propelled at least one Constructivist, Karl Ioganson, to adopt a position that resembled more than anything that of a contemporary management consultant. To think that the critique of the autonomy of art, part of a project of human emancipation, ends in such prosaic fashion is a disappointing conclusion.[55] On the other hand, Malevich's relentless advocacy for non-utilitarian art practice, coupled with his efforts to make this practice somehow intrude on the world, made for a contradictory, sometimes unsuccessful, but always protean method of art making.

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In Chapter 2, we dealt with Malevich's rapid assimilation of painterly styles from Western Europe that found their way to the Shchukin mansion. We remarked that he had little way of knowing and no control over what would come next. That unpredictability has resurfaced in this chapter in the form of the rapidly shifting landscape of revolutionary Russia. These contingencies are of great importance, and yet to focus on them exclusively would mean to miss, for examples, how important human metaphors and an alternative practice of mimesis was to Suprematism, a style often held to be the pinnacle of antimimetic art. Even as the textual component of Suprematism became ever loftier, its retained an interest in the human body that manifested itself in sometimes surprising ways. Ultimately, the changing political and social climate of Malevich's world may have activated certain potentials within Suprematism but did

[54] Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*. 154. In his participation in Party-led production efforts Ioganson was an exception; later Soviet art history, though it restored (albeit in a very limited way) the historical place of Constructivism, focused more on its willful attempts to escape art's role as officially understood by the Communist Party. See A.I. Mazaev, *Kontseptsiia "proizvodstvennogo iskussta" 20-kh godov: istoriko-kriticheskii ocherk* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975).

[55] On the relationship of entrepreneurial and managerial discourses to the avant-garde cf. Matthew Jesse Jackson, "Managing the Avant-Garde," *New Left Review* 32 (2005).

not, in my view, determine its character.[56] Many have speculated that the turn from abstraction happened because the new cultural environment that demanded heroic figurative art rather than "formalism," and surely external forces are due some credit; however, as we have seen, painterly abstraction lost its pride of place long before Malevich's return to figurative art.[57] The return to figurative art visible in the work of the late 1920s and the early 1930s was less a return than a change of location and visibility of the human subject that was always present in Suprematism.

Suprematism never rejected anthropomorphic conceptions of the art object even as it rejected figuration. The construction of the arkhitekton models appealed to the viewer for their continual (re)construction, and were imagined in the world as avoiding the sort of fixed spatial logic of other structures. The human viewer and work of art were both dynamic. The final set of arkhitektons, made sometime before 1932 (when they were displayed at the exhibition *Artists of the RSFSR during the Last 15 Years*), visualize the anthropomorphic rhetoric present in many of Malevich's texts through actual figurative elements (fig. 4.9). The figures placed atop these models double the implied "figures" present in the anthropomorphic forms of the columns themselves. They separate out a human being from that which is merely anthropomorphic. The transfiguration of artist into artwork is somehow reversed, and the dualism of art subject and object returns. These forms look suspiciously similar to the classical models denigrated by the

[56] Malevich acknowledged in a letter to the great theater director Vsevolod Meyerhold that "building Socialism" necessitated a revisiting of "objective" painting; nevertheless, he seriously criticized what he considered the propagandistic efforts of Constructivist theater, which, "divorced from the artistic problem . . . loses half its value." Letter of Kazimir Malevich to Vsevolod Meyerhold, dated April 8, 1932, published in Malevich, *Malevich o sebe, sovremenniki o Maleviche: pis'ma, dokumenty, vospominaniia, kritika*, 1:231.

[57] Arguments that Malevich's late work returned to figuration because of such external pressures may be found, for example, in Hilton Kramer, "Art, revolution, and Kazimir Malevich," *The New Criterion* 9, no. 3 (1990); Andrew Wachtel, "Meaningful Voids: Facelessness in Platonov and Malevich," in *Russian Literature, Modernism and the Visual Arts*, ed. Catriona Kelly and Stephen Lovell (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000). Cf. Buchloh, who saw in such returns to figuration a peculiar kind of complicity on the part of the artist: Buchloh, "Figures of Authority, Ciphers of Regression: Notes on the Return of Representation in European Painting."

artist. Yet on the other hand, these forms also exhibit formal continuities with their predecessors: Tatiana Mikhienko stresses that the "drawn-out forms" of the vertically oriented arkhitektons always "gravitate[d] toward the column."[58] The vertical arkhitektons look like Stalinist neoclassicism, such as Boris Iofan's design for the Palace of the Soviets (fig. 4.10). The resemblance is perhaps not altogether misleading, want as we might to preserve the modernist autonomy of Malevich's art. Although recent scholarship has shown the complexity of these pressures (not simply a sudden imposition from the Central Committee in 1932) it is hard to contest the notion that Malevich, in these works, is somehow compromising with external demands; understandable, given the artist had been arrested and interrogated upon his return to Russia and was in poor health. The monumental form capped by a monumental figure bears affinities to Iofan's work while, at the same time, despite the fact that at least one of these models was exhibited under the title of "Column for a Monument to the Land of the Soviets," there is no indication that Malevich seriously sought to realize these forms in the world. He never sought to create "prototypes for buildings in the future Suprematist utopia"—or a socialist one, for that matter. For Malevich, utopia probably wouldn't be visible at all.[59]

If the last arkhitektons look forward to Socialist Realist architecture, Malevich's final paintings look back at the creative world of the village he so admired and whose crafts he found commensurate with both the icon and masterpieces of Western painting. These peasant works intertwine these three threads of making art with reference to Malevich's specific brand of

[58] Tatiana Mikhienko, "The Suprematist Column—A Monument to Nonobjective Art" in Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism, 83.

[59] Christina Lodder, "Kazimir Malevich. New York," *The Burlington Magazine* 145, no. 1204 (2003): 543. On the relationship between Malevich and Soviet Utopia cf. Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond*.

colorful modernism. In a work such as *Suprematism in the Form of a Peasant Woman* landscape and human figure rhyme in color and paint handling, drawing attention to the fact that both figure and landscape are painted constructions (fig. 4.11). They are made of the same material, and exist on the same flat surface. This rhyme is a gentle reminder of that equality of human being and artwork sounded so loudly in Suprematist manifestos. The predominantly horizontal bands of paint that form the background of the image and the ground upon which the woman stands occur again and again in works of this period.

Academics have seen this departure from the abstract dynamism of prior work as "alienating" or "defamiliarizing."[60] The real disorientation may be that we, modern viewers, *feel* disoriented, for the return to figuration was a return to a longstanding tradition in the visual arts that only quite recently—for Malevich, 1915—had been overthrown by abstract painting. It was not as if representational painting ever left the scene.[61] The glimpse at the world Malevich offered in these late works draws on past modes of representation: icons, both because of their figures' frontality but also, and more problematically, because they seem to reflect on a mode of life *associated* with the icon which was violently disappearing in the name of collectivization. But what characterizes the icon is not simply its form, which is various, nor its social context, which is as well—it is its relationship with its human viewers as established by a particular form of Christianity. So these aren't really icons, even as they allude to their forms and image world.

[60] See Anna Wexler Katsnelson, "My Leader, Myself? Pictorial Estrangement and Aesopian Language in the Late Work of Kazimir Malevich," *Poetics Today* 27, no. 1 (2006); Wachtel, "Meaningful Voids: Facelessness in Platonov and Malevich."

[61] On illusionistic painting from 1917 until the official establishment of Socialist Realism in 1932 see, for example, Matthew Cullerne Bown, *Socialist Realist Painting* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 41-130.

Nothing about these peasants calls for their veneration. The sacred iconography visible in only a few marginal places is simply raw material.

Alongside the peasant pictures are late portraits. Some are more Realist in character, but others, such as his *Head of a Modern Girl*, suggest Malevich's admiration of Botticelli (fig. 4.12). If the peasant paintings looked towards a particular Russian form of life and creativity, these works look West, to those other roots of Malevich's modernism. They might be described as eclectic, and this eclecticism was generated from Malevich's own brand of modernism. Texturally these images are rougher, closer to the late peasant works and nonobjective Suprematism than to the translucency of Botticelli—they also conspicuously retain Suprematism's bright palette. The detail on the girl's collar is nothing less than a Suprematist form repurposed for human use. Chapter 2 introduced the term "meta-modernism" to describe Malevich's imitation of earlier Western modernisms. This characteristic imitation is visible again in these late paintings, works that demonstrate the same self-reflexivity as those earlier works in their status as imitations of something else.

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Malevich's gestures towards classical columns, to the icon, and to Italian painting seize upon what he identified as the fundamental similarity of these modes of making art. These final three figurative moments make the most sense when taken together. Only together do they restore Suprematism's origins through their retrospective mediation of its nonobjectivity. There are these three moments because the challenge of Malevich and his Suprematist project always lay in its many conceptual sources, its lack of singularity in appearance or meaning. This lack of a univocal aesthetic I have tried to relate to its varied cultural origins. Malevich's modernism came from the adoption of certain cultural objects of secular, Western European modernity in a

landscape still inhabited by vestiges of a sacred past. It is not simply Repin the realist but the icon and the peasant over which Suprematism recoded the world. Those elements of other artistic practices are visible in these late works, as they were in his modernist explorations before Suprematism.

From its debut, Suprematist was an instable thing. Traces of Suprematism that represent it as a stable whole, such as the famous *0.10* exhibition photograph, mislead us if we understand them to represent the nature of Suprematism throughout its history. The array of art making practices that generated Suprematism contributed to its contradictory character, more visible at some moments than others. Malevich's life has traditionally secured the unity of his oeuvre, and indeed his origins are important in an understanding of the art. But more than anything these origins account for the fundamental instability of the Suprematist project, the remarkable ways in which it has been read and understood, adapted and attacked, in short, its position in art history. This instability was always governed, in the end, by the discourse and conventions of modernist painting: Malevich's art strove to affirm these conventions of abstract forms through highlighting the essential flatness of the picture plane and of finding in this work historical necessity. At the same he confounded this hermetic modernism through insisting on the place of modernist forms in the modern world. And it is the insistent rehearsing of this fundamental instability of place, between modernism and modernity, that was Malevich's achievement.

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