

Exhibition in Bielefeld, Germany—Kazimir Malevich: The Later Work

New insights into the work of Russian avant-garde artist

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Showing at the Kunsthalle art museum in Bielefeld, Germany (February 2 through May 21, 2000)

An exhibition of the painter Kazimir Malevich's later work is currently on display in Bielefeld's *Kunsthalle* art museum. Malevich, who was born in Kiev in 1878, was without doubt a major innovator of twentieth century art and one of the most important avant-garde artists of Russia and the early Soviet Union. His artistic concept inspired many artists and schools of art after 1915.

Malevich re-painted his most famous picture—*Black Square*—several times, and one of these versions (from 1923) is on view in Bielefeld, together with two of the model-like sculptures evoking the idea of buildings which he called "Architectons" (" *arkhitektonty* ") (*Gota*, presumably 1923, and *Alpha*, 1920). These works serve as both a starting point for, and a contrast to, the exhibition of his later work comprising 60 display items, most of them oil paintings.

Malevich painted the pictures shown in Bielefeld after 1927. Most of them are from his estate which was bequeathed by his heirs to the State Russian Museum in today's St. Petersburg. Fortunately, the paintings were kept there, even though it was not possible to have them exhibited in the Soviet Union from 1930 to the 1980s.

This later work, which was created under conditions of increasing suppression of free artistic activity by the Stalinist bureaucracy, bears eloquent witness to the struggle of this enormously creative artist against an oppressive situation that was closing in on him more and more.

When the Bolsheviks took over power in 1917 Malevich, whose political convictions were of a more anarchist vein, was initially sceptical. But in early 1918 he decided to actively participate in building up new structures in the field of art and culture in the early Soviet Union, and soon became one of the most important and energetic leaders in this endeavour. He ran several of the newly created art and education facilities, including—together with Chagall—the Vitebsk Art School (where he introduced the UNOVIS collective teaching method) and the Studio of the Free Artistic Workshops (SVOMAS) in Petrograd and later in Moscow. He also took part with great fervour in the broad-based, passionate debate about appropriate forms of art for the construction of a socialist society.

Malevich was consistently following the path he had taken: to liberate art from the "ballast" of objective representation. Beginning with Impressionism, he moved on to the dissolution of objective forms in Cubism, to the "liberation of colour", to Fauvism and then to Futurism, which integrated these two currents and pushed them forward as a dynamic art movement, and finally to abstract geometrical shapes. He was the inventor and most important exponent of what he called Suprematism (derived from the Latin *supremus*, the highest). For Malevich, the objective of Suprematism was to overcome "the lie of a world shaped by will and notion".

For the ~~him~~, ~~current~~ ~~suprematism~~ the ~~was~~ ~~was~~ freedom and equality: "This is only achieved when objective reality is transformed into the complete elimination of all inequalities and differences in the *liberated nothingness* of a completely *non-objective world*." This perception of art underscores the utopian element inherent in all creative work, and was certainly in line with the forward-looking political concept of the Bolsheviks. But at the same time it stood in contrast to the restricted material conditions under which the first attempt of the working class to construct a classless, free society took place.

"Caught up in the concept of practical realism, Man wishes to shape all of nature according to his ideal design. But this entire objective, scientifically underpinned practical realism and the entire culture it has brought forth are an idea that will never be realised, because there is nothing that is ideal in nature, unless it is in non-objectiveness. In non-objectiveness, however, every notion of an ideal, of usefulness, of perfection disappears" (from K. Malevich: *Suprematism—the Non-Objective World*). "To be free is to know no limits, no hindrances ..." "For me ... the signs of non-objectiveness are the signs of the beginning of a new epoch in art. These signs reveal its true significance, its real truth that is merely misinterpreted by the object-laden intellect. Perhaps in the future the truth of non-objective art will unmask current 'reality' as an illusion, will show that it is nothing more than a façade, a fiction" (ibid.).

Behind the "façade" there remained, as the naked truth, pure surface in the shape of a square that was to be the point of departure of a pure construction transcending the objective world in art. Malevich did not want this to be perceived as an "empty square", but rather as the sensory cognition of non-objectiveness. With his geometrical shapes, which also included the circle, the rectangle and the cross, Malevich wanted to convey an impression of the largeness, the infinity and the supra-natural aspect of a higher truth than that which is directly perceived. To him, this was the essential task of art.

Based on this approach, Malevich vehemently attacked the limitation of art through the "feeding-trough" realism propagated in his opinion by the Productivists or Proletkult adherents, who rejected any independent role of art and subordinated it entirely to the construction of society and economy in order to thus unify art and life. Malevich was not against placing art and design at the service of Soviet society; in his view, however, art is not so much a material, productive activity as rather an "essential spiritual activity" that must not be subordinated to any purpose. Consequently, he regarded "industrial art" as an activity of secondary importance that was dependent on abstract creation. He explicitly did not consider his designs for articles of daily use (for instance, for porcelain teapots, cups and saucers) to be production models.

Malevich was undoubtedly right in arguing that the idolisation of technology and production limited art to positivism and utilitarianism, and

that art's actual task was to explode and expand the limits of given reality. His critical attitude towards Constructivism and the reduction of art to the level of rationality or propaganda is expressed in a letter he wrote to the theatre director Meyerhold in April 1932 in which he warned Meyerhold against clinging to Constructivism, "a form that does not allow a single artistic question to be posed other than that which relates to pure utilitarianism and that is kept within the bounds of simple, theatre-like agitation. This may be absolutely consistent in terms of ideology, but it is completely castrated with regards to artistic problems, forfeiting half of its true nature" (quoted by David Walsh in "Bolshevism and the Artists of the Avant-garde", as published in *Vierte Internationale* 20/1994, no. 1, p. 162).

The heated, highly controversial but very fruitful debate on art and culture in the Soviet Union was stifled as of the mid-1920s by the Stalinist bureaucracy, which penetrated, then controlled, all sectors of social life in the period after 1924.

His positions on art brought Malevich into the sharpest conflict with the limited, retrograde, petty-bourgeois perception of art propagated by the bureaucracy, which culminated in the proclamation of "Socialist Realism" as the official Soviet art form in the early 1930s. Malevich now faced mounting ideological pressure and increasing reprisals. In 1926 he was removed from his position as director of the Petrograd State Institute of Artistic Culture (GINKhUK).

In 1927 Malevich traveled to Berlin, where 70 of his paintings were displayed in the Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung (Great Berlin Art Exhibition). His intention at first was to stay there for a lengthy period. He met with famous members of the Bauhaus movement in Dessau. There were plans to publish his book *The Non-objective World* in the Bauhaus book series. But after he kept on receiving disturbing news from home, he suddenly returned to the Soviet Union. He may also have been ordered back under threat of certain consequences for his work.

He left Berlin, but not before handing over important manuscripts, including *Suprematism—The Non-objective World*, to his hosts and leaving a large portion of his works of art in the West. The last paragraph of the letter he enclosed with his manuscripts suggests that he foresaw the fate that awaited him in the Soviet Union. And, indeed, a very difficult time for him began after his return. Even before his trip to Berlin in 1926 the State Institute of Artistic Culture (GINKhUK), which was established mainly as the result of his efforts, had been shut down at the initiative of other art historians who were loyal servants of the bureaucracy. The accusations of "formalism" voiced against him became more and more strident, and the scope of artistic activity allowed to him in public was swiftly reduced. Increasingly, he faced destitution as a result.

In late November 1929, the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow presented a last one-man exhibition of his work, for which Malevich painted—and, in some cases, re-painted—about 50 canvases from June 1927 on, back-dating several of them to the period prior to 1910. The exhibition was then shown in Kiev, but was closed there after only a few days. Malevich was arrested in 1930 and spent two months in jail, where he was interrogated as a political suspect.

His letters from this period are filled with despair. He planned to emigrate to the West and appears also to have entertained thoughts of suicide, although he wrote to a friend that "following Mayakovsky would be too embarrassing to me" after the famous poet committed suicide in 1930.

During this difficult time in his life, Malevich started painting in a new style without, however, distancing himself from the artistic insights he had gained during his earlier period. In the few years left to him (he died of cancer in 1935) he clearly waged a struggle for recognition at the very highest level of artistic achievement by returning to objective painting, and in a certain sense even re-creating his early work prior the Suprematist period, while at the same time seeking new forms of

expression.

As in his youth, he began once again to paint in the style of late Impressionism, following the tracks of Bonnard and Matisse and back-dating his canvases to 1908 or 1909. Other paintings are closer to Cézanne or are reminiscent of Fernand Leger's plump geometrical shapes and Picasso's work. Malevich appears to have passed through all the earlier stages of his artistic development again at a furious pace—Impressionism, Fauvism, Cubism and finally non-objective painting. He actually painted some of his early work (for instance, *Washerwoman*) a second time. In fact, several of the pictures displayed in Bielefeld have only recently been established by means of precise scientific examination as belonging to his later work.

Parallel and subsequent to these paintings with their clear reference to the artistic movements of the early twentieth century and to his own early work, Malevich struck out in a new direction with paintings of usually faceless people positioned in a given space. These paintings are clearly reminiscent of Suprematism in their colours and shapes, but their abstractness has nothing more to do with the philosophical simplicity of the *Black Square*. It is not easy to interpret this return to objectiveness. It would certainly be wrong to see an adaptation to the demands of the bureaucracy or resignation in them. But nevertheless Malevich, as an artist, was reacting to the changes in society with the instruments of art. Perhaps one should see it as an attempt, by means of moving "one step back" aesthetically in leaving aside the formal severity of non-objectivity, to move one step forward in a new direction by placing the old into context to the new, to what could not as yet be realised.

In Malevich's painting *Peasants* (1928/29), we see three slim figures without arms dressed in white and green smocks standing on an ochre-coloured grounding with a dirty-blue sky behind them. These figures convey a feeling of oppressiveness that is automatically reminiscent of the suppression of peasants during forced collectivisation which was enforced with brutal cruelty. The painting *Reapers*, which is (now) dated from the same period, stands in complete contrast to this. Three sturdily built peasant women are symmetrically positioned in a blossoming, almost radiant landscape with golden-yellow ripe crops. The two women at the left and right have bent down to sheave the crops. The one in the middle is standing upright with a sickle in her hand, looking straight at the observer with an earnest expression on her face. As realistic as this painting appears at first glance, it must have evoked an almost idyllic vision of an idealised past in the eyes of Malevich's contemporaries.

Another, much more abstract painting from this period, *Landscape with Five Houses*, draws forth more sombre emotions in the observer. Five windowless, black-roofed houses of different sizes stand along a perfectly straight horizon underneath a cloudless, dark blue sky. The brick-red foreground gradually changes its colour to a dirty-white pink.

The painting *Complex Presentiment*, which was completed around 1932, produces an even stranger impression. A huge, faceless torso in a yellow tunic with a thin dark rope around its waist stands in front of a landscape that consists of horizontal stripes—a wide red one, a black one about half the width of the red stripe, a narrow yellow one and a dark blue one. Above this is a dirty-blue sky that becomes lighter near the horizon. To the left of the figure, on the horizon, stands a red house that is also windowless. There is an enigmatic interrelationship between the figure and the landscape in this painting that is peculiarly moving.

There is an extremely subtle return to Suprematist elements in *Portrait of a Youth* (1933). This work is strongly reminiscent of Picasso's Harlequin paintings. The face and arms of the half-figure and the background are all painted in the same dirty-beige shade. The most prominently colourful element of the picture is the youth's horizontally striped vest, half of which is red-black and the other half blue-black. The boy's curiously piercing blue eyes correspond to this. Looking more closely, one discovers that the right pupil is a small black circle and the

left one a black cross.

Malevich made an attempt to observe the "Socialist Realism" style demanded by the bureaucracy in only a very few of his pictures. He painted *Portrait of a Shock Worker* in 1932, for instance, as if he wanted to demonstrate that, had he thought it right, he could have painted such pictures, too. But, looked at more closely, the worker in this painting is far removed from the radiant "heroes of labour" painted by Malevich's Stalinist fellow artists. Malevich retains his independent approach to colour, brushwork and background design here, as well. Besides, this worker with his deep-set, brown shaded eyes and pale face looks more tired and overworked than anything else.

The (presumably) last pictures painted by Malevich in 1933 and 1934 are particularly impressive. These are mainly portraits of people the artist was close to, the faces painted in finest detail and very realistically. They closely resemble Renaissance portraits by artists such as Dürer or Holbein. The persons are portrayed down to about waist level in front of a black background. The portrait of Nikolai Punin, at whose initiative Malevich's last exhibition was organised, shows Punin in profile. He is wearing a grey fantasy costume with a red collar and a red-black stripe in the front that resembles a mitre. The costume is uniformly pleated at the waist by a blue-edged red belt. On his head Punin wears a red, blue and green cap with black and white stripes that is painted geometrically flat and is not adapted to the shape of the head. The collar consists of two triangles. The belt and the costume's red-black stripe form a cross that is scarcely adapted to the shape of the body. These elements are strongly reminiscent of the geometrical shapes used in Suprematism, and form a peculiar contrast to the face and the right hand of the portrait subject which, curiously, is raised to an anatomically inappropriate height. This picture, as with the *Female Worker* portrait, is signed with a small black square.

These last paintings, which also include portraits of Malevich's daughter Una and of one of his wives, are enormously intense, even though their composition almost gives the impression of having been constructed with a pair of compasses and a ruler, and the figures are somehow unapproachable in their rigid postures. They are "abstract" and "objective" at the same time. Malevich thus transformed his closest confidants into icons of Suprematism. Perhaps to remind us that, for a few years, this artist hoped to be in congruence with a great rising of humanity and believed he had found his place within that movement?



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