

Locating Malevich within the Time and Space of the Revolution

On the Subject of space and time, Clark posits that Malevich sought to position his paintings, specifically those surrounding the period of the Black Square and the concurrent work of UNOVIS members in a new space or dimension. Malevich spent much time defining his work within this dimension and situating Suprematism between utilitarianism and intuition.¹ The individualism of this space originally didn't fit within the confines of the party, so he continued to mold his definition into one that supported party politics. At this juncture, Malevich's forms begin to represent the idealization of time Buck-Morss refers to in her essay, no longer occupying the present as he had originally intended. Once intertwined with the ideals of the party, whose focus was on the future or possible construction of the future, Malevich's non-objective Suprematist paintings left their autonomous state as a new art form, instead becoming inseparable from the linear trajectory, utopian idealism and dynamism of the revolution. Clark describes the space Malevich carves out for Suprematism and why it must be both material--adhering to the confines of the canvas, and immortal-- a totalizing force entwined in party politics. Buck-Morss discusses the repercussions of this once Suprematism becomes politicized and intertwined with the party and Lenin's conception of history making.

Clark puts forward a motion on page 244 of *God is Not Cast Down* that the ideals behind the War Communism of the revolution were more about a last ditch attempt to snuff out capitalism with a utopic future vision, rather than living in the present and focusing on the transition brought about by the ideals of the revolution. For the purposes of Clark's essay, this is where Lissitsky failed with his Prouns, because they were too architectonic. His Prouns, or Towns, through their resemblance to architectural constructions or real spaces, were limited by

¹ Malevich, Kasimir. "Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism." *Russian Art of the Avant Garde Theory and Criticism*. Ed. John E. Bowlt. 2nd ed. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988. 133

the confines of reality, something the revolution as first led by Lenin was bypassing in the present tense. Malevich's square through its abstraction and radical idealism was a vessel more suited to express the idealistic non-space the revolution resided in, which of course was not the productive, progressive, industry rich country it was presented as, but rather a poor country fighting a war on 5 fronts.

Malevich also wanted to create a new system of language through Suprematism that could withstand the test of time, as well as (later) the transitory nature of the revolution. This "system is constructed in time and space independent of any aesthetic beauty, experience or mood [...] at present man's path lies across space—across Suprematism [once this understanding is opened up, it allows for] eternity, or a conception of eternity."² This quote also allows for a window into the connection between non-objectivity and the representation of time Buck-Morss talks about, but for Clark, this objectifies the immortality and transcendence Malevich sought for this new system through painting non-objectively. Malevich saw the historical continuum of the academy as stagnation, he felt that non-objectivity could overcome the limits of our minds and succeed where mimesis (of nature) had failed unlocking the spiritual capacity of art.³ Clark sums up Malevich's essay, *The Question of Imitative Art* with the quote, "all representational orders are at heart systems of difference, of pure exchange values generated out of the relations between the elements of a signifying system." (Ibid.) Malevich was against totalization, but through the system of non-objectivity, he could nihilistically create a new totalization that could embody the limitations of knowledge and representation. (Clark, *God is Not Cast Down*, 267)

² Malevich, Kasimir. "Tenth State Exhibition: Nonobjective Creation and Suprematism; Suprematism." *Russian Art of the Avant Garde Theory and Criticism*. Ed. John E. Bowl. 2nd ed. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988. 144

³ Malevich, Kasimir. "Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism." *Russian Art of the Avant Garde Theory and Criticism*. Ed. John E. Bowl. 2nd ed. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988. 121

Clark argues that the strongest characteristics of Malevich's paintings are their ability to displace physical space or flatten dimensionality. This can be seen both in the Black Square and his Proun-like⁴ Suprematist constructions. "The variables on Malevich's paintings are flatness, hardness, separateness and weightlessness." (Clark, *God is Not Cast Down*, 285) Clark continues that the coexistence of these qualities continues to break down their ability to be read literally, and that ideologically, Malevich felt that if he rid art of dimension, he could rid the world of false appearances; appearances he felt pedagogical, representational art was steeped in. (Ibid.) However, Clark continues, that in order to carve out and occupy this new space, Malevich's work needed to still connect with reality in a tangible dimension. Malevich himself stated that "there is no empty space." (Ibid) No doubt this quote predates the organization of secondary significations in sign systems as later popularized by Barthes. Further, no matter how progressive Malevich's ideology, it needed to in some sense remain recognizable, or else it would become uninterruptible, which of course would not benefit the collective, UNOVIS, or the party. "A painted surface is a real, living form [where] intuitive feeling passes into consciousness."⁵ This is where Malevich's works become material for Clark, idealized on the "pictorial surface." (Ibid)

Returning for a moment to the sign system Malevich sought to create, I would argue Malevich compromised his ideology tremendously over a short period of time while creating parallels between Suprematism and the party in order for it to continue to flourish. Having read Malevich's essays, *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism, Suprematism* (from the Tenth

⁴ I am aware Lissitsky's Prouns came after and were influenced by Malevich's paintings, but I am just using this to describe this body of work since Malevich's paintings fall under a plethora of titles.

⁵ Malevich, Kasimir. "Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism." *Russian Art of the Avant Garde Theory and Criticism*. Ed. John E. Bowl. 2nd ed. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988. 130

State Exhibition Catalogue) and *The Question of Imitative Art*,⁶ I would say there's a marked difference between the two former and the latter, where he explicitly links Suprematism to the communist movement and the ideals of the party. Suprematism at its heart was avant-garde and meant to rupture the seemingly linear flow of history and the stagnation of ideas. It drew on colour as an integral, individual form in the new system. It was meant to surpass/outlast temporality (the revolution). Time and again in Malevich's essays he argued that the new system should focus on the present rather than past or future, and that objects and colours (forms) should be free and individual.⁷ This is somehow contradictory in that by creating a system with which to re-educate and rescue the masses, Malevich's idealism is just as faulty as Lenin's in that a system exists in the present in anticipation of the future. The Black Square becomes the symbol of the party and Suprematism because it represents everything and nothing. It is interesting to note, that Malevich's coloured Suprematist constructions are post-square, yet still predate the height of the revolution in 1918. In my natural inclination to create a timeline of Malevich's work, I assumed the Square came last, especially when reading his arguments in *The Question of Imitative Art*, since Malevich seems to circle back to the non-objectivity and neutral colour of the square as superior to everything else. Since the square means everything and nothing, of course it's easier to decode by comparison, but I can't help but think that this cyclical reversal (Buck-Morss talks about history's tendency to do this, *On Time*, 80-84.) from Black Square to Suprematist Constructions to White on White Squares *back* to full colour peasant paintings, was

⁶ Malevich, Kasimir. "The Question of Imitative Art." *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*. Ed. Charles Harrison, Paul Wood. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2003. 293-298

⁷ Malevich, Kasimir. "Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism." *Russian Art of the Avant Garde Theory and Criticism*. Ed. John E. Bowl. 2nd ed. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988. 133,134

in part brought on by Malevich's avid incorporation of Suprematism into Leninist war communism.

Buck-Morss of course submits that by aligning the avant-garde (Suprematist works) with the Vanguard (politics), the avant-garde loses its freedom and ability to rupture or open up time to interpretation, (Buck-Morss, *On Time*, 62.) instead, succumbing to the political conception of time; a time that is always imaginary, one that can never attain wholeness, because it can never be fully realized. (Buck-Morss, *On Time*, 62, 68.) For Buck-Morss, politics move through time. Polemically, Malevich's non-objective work did not travel linearly through time, but "into a realm of metaphysical essences intuited out of the new technologies and urban perception... situated within mystico-utopian geometries of space." (Buck-Morss, *On Time*, 49.) She argues that Malevich didn't totally give up the freedom of Suprematism by aligning himself with the party, because the compelling nature of the non-objectivity of the square resided in its nihilism and its signification of time itself as eternal, whereas in reality the transitional period of the revolution was short lived. However, non-objectivity in this instance makes the intangible tangible, creating a much needed visual space or structure for the party to grasp on to.

Lenin looked to politicize art in order to create a sense of unity between the political subgroups and help supersede the senses with the notion of economic and technological progress integral to the success of the party and in turn the success of communism. (Buck-Morss, *On Time*, 42.) The party needed to capitalize on the avant-garde's capacity to arrest and open up the flow of time in order to mold and control history as well as continue the illusion of progress and solidarity in a country that was falling apart. (Buck-Morss, *On Time*, 49) Malevich didn't consciously give up the freedom of Suprematism, because he believed (as did other artists) that the square (and other Suprematist works) could realize the revolution and the communist dream;

he was caught up in the idea of Suprematism having a “social usefulness.” (Buck-Morss, *On Time*, 51, 55)

This social usefulness ultimately resulted in creating cultural legitimization for the Bolshevik regime and continuing the economic vision of history as progress. (Buck-Morss, *On Time*, 58.) This is where Buck-Morss characterizes the failure of the avant-garde, as they became subservient to the political vanguard. Both Clark and Buck-Morss see each party’s conception of time as their breaking point. Both authors recognized the idealism rooted in these utopic efforts to shape the future and the parallels to times role in the failure of Modernity. In revolutionary time, the political vanguard failed in part because of its refusal to accept the temporality of the revolution and the reality of the economic conditions in Russia. As for the avant-garde, in the end, Malevich became part of the linear progression of history he originally sought to rupture through the creation of Suprematism. The meaning of the Square left Malevich’s realm of control, which is part of what made it such a powerful piece of art. Buck-Morss contends on page 65 of *On Time* that great art should transcend the constraints of the creator’s intent. The party appropriated the square before discarding it because the Square was avant-garde and “continued to disrupt the continuum of history as [pre]defined by the party.” (Buck-Morss, *On Time*, 60.) Once losing the meaning of the square and his social usefulness in constructing the new society, Malevich returned to figurative painting. For Buck-Morss he held onto his integrity by rejecting the party (or was he rejected?), but more importantly this symbolized a realization and rejection of how the temporalities of the art and politics had merged. (Buck-Morss, *On Time*, 87.) As for myself, I can agree with this analysis to an extent, but I think Buck-Morss is giving Malevich a somewhat romanticized storybook ending he might not deserve. The misdating of these final works leads me to believe this was similar to Malevich’s writing *Suprematism* into

party politics in the first place. He needed to misdate these in order to keep painting. The usefulness he manufactured for the party in order to originally continue painting had run out. Malevich was again ensuring a space for his own temporality and disjointed but linear progression as a painter.