



Unframe Malevich!: Ineffability and Sublimity in Suprematism

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The Blank

Malevich is on a roll, and everything suggests that the resurging interest in his work has just reached its high point. It began in Russia, where over the past decade the art historians caught up with their own past with commendable quickness and rigor: the publication of Kazimir Malevich's complete writings

Branislav Jakovljevic

Unframe Malevich!: Ineffability and Sublimity in Suprematism

in five volumes under the editorship of Aleksandra Shatskikh is certainly a groundbreaking achievement, and Yevgenia Petrova's work on Malevich's legacy in the stacks of the Russian Museum in Leningrad is no less significant.¹ In France, the publication of Andrei Nakov's catalogue raisonné of Malevich was followed by the major exhibition staged at the Musée d'art moderne de la Ville de Paris.² At the same time in Lisbon and Madrid there was an attempt to approach the master of

Suprematism from a different angle with an exhibition dedicated to Malevich and cinema.³ In 2003–04, Malevich rolled westward as the exhibition *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism* moved from the Deutsche Guggenheim in Berlin to New York on the way to the Menil Collection in Houston, Texas.⁴ Unfortunately, outside of Russia the renewal of interest in Malevich's visual work has not been accompanied by a comparable reconsideration of his theories (the notable exception is the Iberian show). As a result, Suprematism, one of the most decisive attacks on convention in the history of modern painting, is receiving conventional museum presentations. However, a turn to its original theoretical premises reveals Suprematism's resilience to aesthetization.

Malevich painted *Black Square* in 1915. He immediately presented this work as a breakthrough and a milestone in his artistic career as well as in the history of art in general. It seems to have had the power of a revelation. In what now looks like a masterly stroke of avant-garde self-mystification, he reported that he could not sleep, eat, or drink for an entire week after he finished the painting. Over the following twenty years, he repeated the *Black Square* three times in the same technique (oil on canvas), and then whenever and wherever he could: in his lithographed books, on the buttons his Vitebsk students carried on their lapels and sleeves, and appended to his signature. In 1918, he painted *White on White*. Another milestone; another breakthrough—from polychrome to monochrome-white Suprematism. If *Black Square* was a revelation, then *White Square* was the ultimate act of painting—and the herald of its end. His first solo exhibition, which opened in March 1920 in Moscow, was a Suprematist tour de force; one room after another was covered with nonobjective paintings, and, according to numerous witness accounts, the last room contained empty canvases.⁵ It was part of a much broader renunciation of painting, which in itself served as a declaration of the end of art. Then, in a sudden return to easel painting, between 1927 and 1928, he produced a series of “post-Impressionist” works, which he backdated to the period between 1910 and 1916, thus forging a development parallel to Suprematism.⁶ To this series belongs the painting *Female Figure*, which features the outline of a woman reduced to basic geometrical forms. Atypically for this series, most recognizable for the faceless human shapes in open fields, painted in bright colors,

1. Kazimir Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v pyati tomakh*, ed. Aleksandra Shatskikh (Moscow: Gilea, 1995–2000). Four volumes have been published so far. Translations from these volumes that appear with this article are by Branislav Jakovljevic. Yevgenia Petrova, *Kazimir Malevich in the Russian Museum* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2000).

2. Andrei Nakov, *Kazimir Malewicz: Catalogue raisonné* (Paris: Adam Biro, 2002).

3. *Malevich e o Cinema/Malevich y el Cine* was organized by Margarita Tupitsyn for the Fundação Centro Cultural de Belém, Lisbon (May 17–August 18, 2002) and the Fundacion la Caixa, Madrid (November 20, 2002–January 19, 2003). The significance of the exhibition goes far beyond the Iberian peninsula. It was accompanied by Tupitsyn's very engaging book/catalogue *Malevich and Film*, published in English (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).

4. The exhibition, organized by Matthew Drutt, Chief Curator of the Menil Collection, was shown in Berlin January 18–April 27, 2003, in New York May 13–September 14, 2003, and in Houston October 3, 2003–January 11, 2004. Recent exhibitions of Malevich's work in Berlin, Paris, and New York have been marked by highly publicized discoveries of works that were either unknown or deemed lost. The discoveries come from the collection of Nikolai Khardziev, a passionate collector, critic, and one-time friend of many protagonists of the Russian avant-garde of the 1920s and 1930s. Khardziev's life story reads like a Nabokov tale. See Tim Golden's, “A Murky Trail behind Rediscovered Works by Malevich,” *New York Times*, March 31, 2003.

5. Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Vitebski: Zhizn iskusstva, 1917–1922* (Moscow: Yaziki russkoi kulturi, 2001), 127–28.

6. Elena Basner, “Malevich's Paintings in the Collection of the Russian Museum (The Matter of the Artist's Creative Evolution),” in *Malevich at the Russian Museum*, ed. Yevgenia Petrova (St. Petersburg, Russia: State Russian Museum, 2000), 22.



Kazimir Malevich. *Suprematism: Female Figure*, 1928–29. Oil on canvas. 49⁵/₈ x 41³/₄ in. (126 x 106 cm). State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg.

the figure in this painting is dark and almost monochromatic: head, torso, and feet are painted in black, and skirt in dark green. On closer inspection, two additional, much smaller figures in similarly frontal posture seem to be painted in white on the white field that surrounds the black-and-green skirted figure.

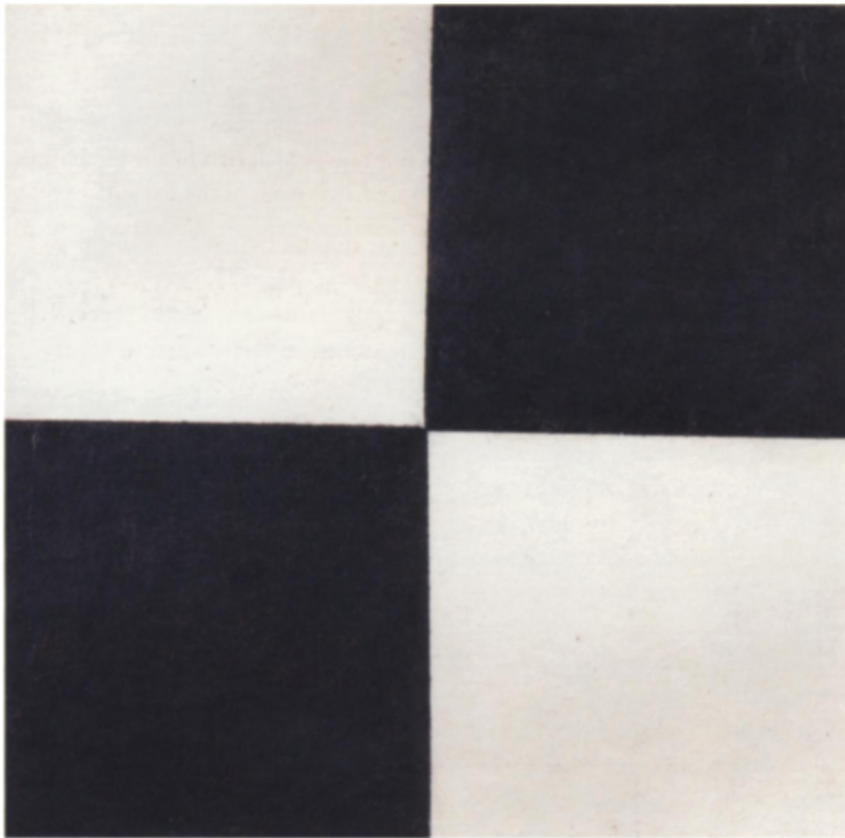
Black Square and *Female Figure* mark the beginning and the end of the exhibition *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism*. They are prefaced by a selection of Malevich's pre-

Black Square works and appended by another post-Suprematist figure. The centerpiece of Suprematism, *White on White*, is missing from the show. This lack points to two significant aspects of Malevich's work. First, for Suprematism, concepts are just as important as paint and canvas. Second, the very accident of the implication rather than inclusion of *White on White* in the exhibition calls attention to the evolution of the notion of white as one of the central developments of Suprematism. I will start with the latter.

There is a machine at work in *Black Square*, a mechanism that turns the purely nonobjective painting into a figurative one. That machine is powered by the hierarchical ordering of foreground and background. This simple partition reveals itself as the figurative minimum: there is no ground without figure and signification. Even in the most empathically nonfigurative paintings, white comes

to signify the neutral background, the "space" in which geometric forms seem to float. Malevich was keenly aware of the stubborn persistence of signification. The abolition of figuration in painting does not automatically annihilate the object. Abstraction comes only halfway to full nonobjectivity. Absolute nonobjectivity requires not only the removal of mimetic or even abstract forms, but the radical restructuring of the painting's content. Suprematist revolution is not concerned with the question of style in art, but with art's status in relation to other human activities. At the beginning of the theoretical elaboration of his work, in the 1916 tract *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting*, Malevich asks that "forms must be given life and the right to individual existence."⁷ In the ensuing years, plagued by the war and revolution, this insistence that "a painted surface is a real, living form"⁸ was transformed into the idea of "art as such," a nonutilitarian activity that is directly opposed to the "practical culture" of religion and science and to science's "bizarre logic" of productivity for the sake of more efficient destruction.⁹

If in *Black Square* white appears as a *passé-partout*, this illusion is radically chal-



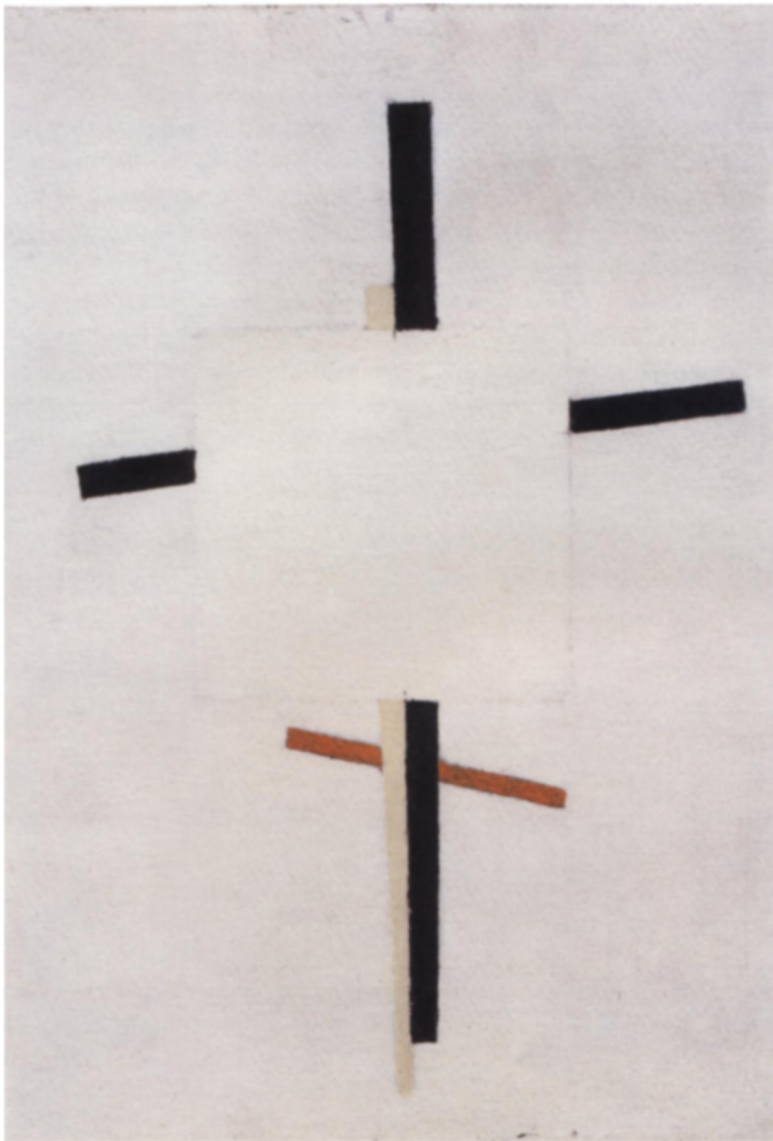
Kazimir Malevich. *Four Squares*, 1915. Oil on canvas. 19¼ x 19¼ in. (48.9 x 48.9 cm). A. N. Radischev State Art Museum, Saratov.

7. Kazimir Malevich, *Essays on Art 1915–1928*, vol. 1, trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin (Copenhagen: Borgen, 1968), 24.

8. *Ibid.*, 33.

9. Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v pyati tomakh*, vol. 3, 72.

Kazimir Malevich. *Suprematism of the Mind (Suprematism of the Spirit)*, 1920. Oil on panel. 21 $\frac{7}{8}$ x 15 $\frac{1}{4}$ in. (50.5 x 38.7 cm). Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam/Instituut Collectie, Rijswijk.



10. Malevich was not isolated in his questioning of the idea of background in painting. This problem was addressed in other corners of the Russian avant-garde. For an excellent, albeit brief, discussion of reversal of planes in the work of Pavel Filonov, see Vladimir Podoroga, "The Eunuch of the Soul: Positions of Reading and the World of Platonov," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 90, no. 2 (Spring 1991).

lenged in the series of monochrome-black Suprematist paintings that ensued after the week of insomnia and starvation: *Plane in Rotation*, *Black Cross*, and *Elongated Plane*. The definite emancipation of white from its supporting role comes in *Four Squares*. Here, the square-shaped canvas is simply checkered into two black and two white sections. The black squares are not surrounded or supported by a white field, but instead placed next to the white squares. By rearranging the

white and black areas in such manner, white emerges from the background to occupy the same status as black. In *Four Squares* there is no distinction between the planes of painting. There is no back- or foreground.¹⁰ With this canvas Malevich firmly establishes the Suprematist space as the flat surface of the painting from which all residue of illusion has been removed. Already in the "colored" period of Suprematism, white becomes fully integrated into the solid surface of the painting. In monochrome-white Suprematism this idea is advanced even further. Instead of the neutral supporter of forms, white becomes an active participant in the continuous foreground of the Suprematist canvas. In the Guggenheim exhibition, this surfacing of the white is very aptly suggested by the positioning of *Suprematism of the Mind (Suprematism of the Spirit)*, in which a white square is inserted in the center of a Suprematist cross, at the very border between polychrome and monochrome-white Suprematism. This slight departure from chronological order has the potential to alter significantly the understanding of *Suprematist Painting (White Planes in Dissolution)*, *Suprematism (Construction in Dissolution)*, and, ultimately, *Suprematism: Female Figure*.

Malevich's exploration of the properties of white is not limited to canvas. Undoubtedly, the notion of whiteness is one of the strongest currents that ties together his painting and writing. This pronounced linguistic tendency extends to all of Malevich's

Suprematism. We can even assert that there are two sides to Suprematism, verbal and visual, and they together form a unique philosophical-artistic system of thought. The relation between Suprematism of word and Suprematism of image is still insufficiently explored. In his catalogue essay "Malevich, Painting, and Writing: On the Development of a Suprematist Philosophy," Jean-Claude Marcadé points to the genealogy of Malevich's recognition of "the importance of white," which he traces back to the leader of the Italian Futurists, Filippo

Tommaso Marinetti, and to the bard of the French Symbolists, Stéphane Mallarmé." Proposing such a lineage is daring, considering Malevich's close ties with the leading poets of Russian Futurism and the high level of autonomy achieved by the symbolist poets of the Russian "Silver Age."¹² Marcadé draws a thick white line across the literary map of the European continent. The real challenge of this proposition is that it forms something of a photographic negative. For, after all, here we are dealing with writing, with tracings of black on white.

In his essay "Marinetti et Malévitch," Marcadé points to the prominence of the imagery of black and white and light and darkness in Marinetti's early Futurist documents, providing an example from the pamphlet *Let's Murder the Moonshine*: "We teach the plunge into shadowy death under the white, staring eye of the Ideal."¹³ The plunge, the black death, and the white ideal would be mere exaggerations of the Futurist pompous rhetoric were it not for the "Mallarméan legacy" that Marcadé perceptively recognizes in them. All of these elements are already present in Mallarmé's last complete poem, "Dice Thrown Never Will Annul Chance": the poem's narrative is centered on the "master" hesitating to roll dice with the same hand with which he once navigated a ship. Here, however, the fateful plunge is presented in a different form. And it is the form, the layout of the text and the use of typography, that becomes as evocative as the words themselves. Mallarmé juxtaposes the obscure narrative of the poem with the drama of the actual writing:

solitary distraught feather

unless a midnight toque encounters or grazes it
and immobilizes
on the crumpled velvet by a somber guffaw
this rigid whiteness
ridiculous
in opposition to the sky
too much so
not to mark
in the slightest detail
whoever
bitter prince of the reef
wears it as an heroic headdress
irresistible but contained
by his small virile reason
in a lighting flash¹⁴

11. Jean-Claude Marcadé, "Malevich, Painting, and Writing: On the Development of Suprematist Philosophy," in *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism*, ed. Matthew Drutt (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, 2003), 38.

12. For their rejection of Marinetti, see Vladimir Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), chap. 4.

13. Jean-Claude Marcadé, "Marinetti et Malévitch," in *Présence de F. T. Marinetti* (Paris: L'Age d'homme, 1976), 261. Marinetti, Filippo Tommaso, *Let's Murder the Moonshine: Selected Writings*, trans. R. W. Flint and Arthur A. Coppotelli (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1991), 54.

14. Stéphane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, trans. Henry Weinfield (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 136.

The "distraught feather" is both the feather that falls softly through the empty space and the poet's quill that rhythmically taps and scratches on the page. The "rigid whiteness" belongs both to the sea that reflects an empty sky and to the blankness of the page between the words penned in black ink. In her excellent essay "The Poetics of 'Black on White': Stéphane Mallarmé's *Un Coup de dés*," Kathleen Staudt observes that in Mallarmé's poem "the materiality of the text"

seems “more immediate than the events of the narrative,” so much so that this very materiality invades the process of the production of meaning. Mallarmé makes silence speak and blank page signify. His *mise en page*, as Staudt contends, “allows us to see the whiteness of the page ‘swallowing up’ the text’s effort to explain the master’s gesture, just as the sea will swallow the ship after the dice are rolled.”¹⁵ The stillness of the sea surface after the catastrophe parallels the emptiness of the white page at the end of the poem. If there is a “Mallarméan legacy,” it is the one that pursues the limit of language, searching for the point at which the last drop of ink sinks into the whiteness of the page.

It is precisely this limit that Dora Vallier finds in Malevich’s *White Square*, when she writes that “by abstraction he had touched the limit allowed by painting. He had made it visible. His white painting overhangs the precipice where painting ceases to exist.”¹⁶ Suggesting an analogy between language and painting,¹⁷ Vallier goes on to propose the possibility of a painterly ineffable: “To Malevich the obstacle is nothing less than the ineffable, the inexpressible—in short, the irreducible kernel of art, the ‘nothing’ which engenders the all.”¹⁸ White, according to Marcadé and Vallier, represents the very limit of the expressible, the silence beyond language and blankness beyond image. Beyond and behind. It never ceases to figure as a background and support. Furthermore, both Marcadé and Vallier seem to suggest that poetry somehow precedes painting, whereas in Malevich’s case everything suggests the opposite order of things.

There is a text in Malevich’s manuscript archive that could easily fit Marcadé’s and Vallier’s schema of the painterly-linguistic ineffable. It is a short, undated statement, somewhere between an aphorism and a poem, penned at the top of a blank notebook page. It reads:

the end of music
silence¹⁹

The main body of Malevich’s writing, however, is not nearly as cryptic and sparse. Between 1913 and 1919, that is, in the extremely fruitful period of his close association with the Russian avant-garde groups that eventually resulted in the emergence of Suprematism, Malevich wrote poetry and manifesto-like prose. He composed his central theoretical statement, the massive manuscript *Suprematism: World as Nonobjectivity or Eternal Rest*, in a single creative outburst during his short sojourn in Vitebsk (1919–22). On the one hand, his departure from Moscow to the provincial town that became one of the most vibrant artistic centers in the young Soviet republic came shortly after his passage through the final, white phase of painterly Suprematism. On the other hand, the duties at the teaching post he took at the Vitebsk School of Art, together with the genuine enthusiasm of his students at the Unovis studio, incited him to engage in rigorous theoretical elaboration of nonobjectivity. In the article “On Pure Act,” published in the spring of 1920 in the sole issue of Unovis’s *Almanach*, Malevich announced his departure from painting into the sphere of pure thought. He wrote that the “destruction of the object” in painting reveals the “idea of pure creation” that is deeply embedded in art. Consequently, the “painter turns to the pure act.”²⁰ The assertion Malevich made later that same year in the pamphlet *Suprematism: 34 Drawings* that “it seems that one cannot attain with the brush what can be attained with a pen” is not a confession of painter’s disbelief in the expressive

15. Kathleen Henderson Staudt, “The Poetics of ‘Black on White’: Stéphane Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés*,” in *Ineffability: Naming the Unnamable from Dante to Beckett*, ed. Peter S. Hawkins and Anne Holland Schotter (New York: AMS Press, 1984), 156.

16. Dora Vallier, *Abstract Art*, trans. Jonathan Griffin (New York: Orion Press, 1970), 135; italics in the original.

17. Vallier elaborates this analogy in her essay “Malevitch et le modèle linguistique en peinture,” *Critique* 334 (Paris, March 1975): 284–96. This argument for the structural analogy between language and painting is based on the premise that color, not form, is the main producer of meaning. Relying on optics and perception, Vallier establishes a parallel between vowels in language and pure colors in painting. In this schema, black and white (and gray as their admixture) correspond to consonants. From this argument it is easy to extrapolate that white and black as “noncolors” mark the limits of visual language.

18. Vallier, *Abstract Art*, 139.

19. Kazimir Malevich, *Poeziya* (Moscow, Russia: Epifania, 2001), 113.

20. Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 82.

possibilities of the visual arts, but a profession of a deep conviction in the power of thought.²¹ If the “pure act” is thought, then *White Square* is not the limit of the expressible, but the threshold of thinking. The ease with which Malevich moves between painting and writing comes from his rigorous pursuit of the idea of nonobjectivity. *Black Square*, *White Square*, and the blank canvas are not different kinds of the painterly ineffable; they are concepts before anything else. What they revealed to Malevich is the limitlessness of thought and the supreme autonomy of the “pure act” from all means of expression.

In *Suprematism: World as Nonobjectivity or Eternal Rest* Malevich focuses on the notion of nonobjectivity as the “absence of difference.”²² Simply put, the Suprematist “annihilation of the object” does not result in a universal nothingness, but in an all-encompassing unity. Malevich’s “nothing” is the nothing of fullness, not of emptiness. It is very much in line with the Platonic idea from *Parmenides* that “the one is all things, and also nothing, both in relation to itself and to other things.”²³ In Malevich’s system, white stands for the absolute unity and fullness of nonobjectivity. He elaborates on that idea in his Vitebsk manuscript:

I approach nonobjectivity as monochrome-white Suprematism by replacing the goal of objective goods with nonobjectivity. No one will find in it a compensation—not a giving God, nor prayers, nor objects, nor master, nor servant—all that for which society now lives. From nonobjective Suprematism are eliminated “how to serve,” “how to pray,” “how to build,” “what to achieve” of objective goods. They are not to be found there, and as they appeared they will disappear, and disappear they can, since in essence they are not of natural being. . . . I speak of monochrome-white Suprematism and further develop my thought. Under monochrome-white Suprematism I understand the new nonobjective action of man outside any culture, outside of the boundaries of practical or any other tasks or achievements, found outside all laws of movement.”²⁴

Clearly, Malevich de-aestheticizes color and transforms it into a pure theoretical concept. He does that by all means necessary: not stopping at his own, often penetrating ideas, he incorporates into his writing fragments of thinly disguised philosophical systems, engages in laconic interpretations of artistic styles, develops grand metaphors, plays with neologisms, comments on the politics of the day, and prophesizes. His students and associates from Vitebsk remember him referring to *Black Square* as a “holy infant, who came into the God’s world to save it from painting.”²⁵ If *Black Square* is a holy infant, then the *White Square* is the harbinger of the monochrome-white Suprematist world that “thinks the pure man, or an entire humanity in pursuit of that system. Each such man will be called white as a pure sense.”²⁶ Black and white squares are not geometrical symbols for the body, but complex intersections of the conceptual and the concrete that support and feed off each other. For Malevich, there is not an aspect of the painting that is conceptually insignificant. In that sense, it is interesting that *Black Square* and *Female Figure*, as the opening and closing statements of the Guggenheim exhibition, thematize the idea of the ground. The cracking and splintering surface of the 1915 *Black Square* reveals the fragments of an earlier painting that was painted over: indeed, it is the end of (a) painting. Malevich

21. Malevich, *Essays on Art 1915–1928*, 127.

22. Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v pyati tomakh*, vol. 3, 81.

23. Plato, *The Republic and Other Works*, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 415.

24. Malevich, *Sobranie sochinenii v pyati tomakh*, vol. 3, 179.

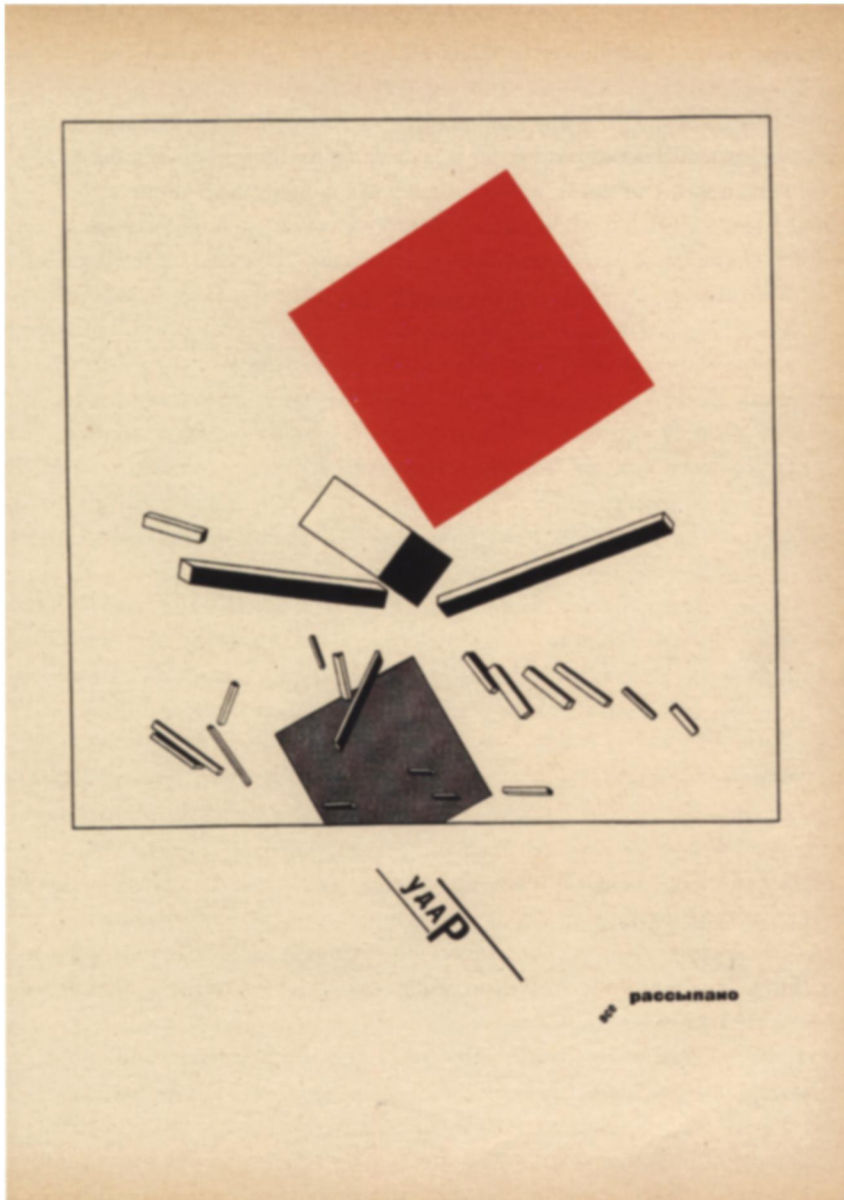
25. Shatskikh, *Vitebsk*, 66.

26. *Ibid.*, 243.

27. For visible-luminescence photography of this painting, see *Malevich at the Russian Museum*, 336. The two white figures are discernable in the reproduction supplied in the Guggenheim exhibition catalogue and even more so in *Kazimir Malevich: Zhivopis, Teoriya*, ed. A. Shatskikh and A. Sarabyanov (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1993), 124–25, figs. 88–89.

28. Sophie Lissitsky-Küppers, *El Lissitsky: Life, Letters, Texts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), 80–91.

backdated *Female Figure* to 1915, and there also he covered two out of three figures with the coat of white paint. They are clearly visible to the naked eye, without the help of cracks or visible-luminescence photography.²⁷ It is one of the best examples of Malevich's white painting and an attempt to bring together the Suprematist concept of white into figurative painting. Furthermore, it can be seen as a testimony of Malevich's discovery of limitlessness within the canvas. What, then, happens on its outer limits?



El Lissitzky. *Suprematist Tale of Two Squares*: "Crash—and Everything Flies Apart." Published in Berlin, 1922.
© 2004 Artists Rights Society (ARS),
New York/VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn.

The Edge

Often, in the work of the disciples, the master's ideas are disclosed with superior clarity. Using the benefit of the second remove, I would like to see what El Lissitzky and Daniil Kharmis have to say about Malevich. Although Lissitzky was a junior instructor at the Vitebsk Art School, he, like many young apprentices, fell under the spell of Malevich's Suprematist teachings. His enthusiasm for Suprematism did not recede after he left Vitebsk. During his stay in Berlin in 1922 he published a booklet entitled *Suprematist Tale of Two Squares*, which he conceived two years earlier, during his affiliation with Malevich's Unovis. In ten plates with sparse Suprematist designs and very little text, Lissitzky manages to relate a story that retains the basic elements of a conventional narrative. The first and only Suprematist tale for children speaks of a red square and a black square that approach the planet Earth, on which rages a "black storm"; they hit the earth, everything falls apart, and out of this catastrophe emerges a new order: red is established over black.²⁸ The basic features of the "Suprematist tale" are easily discernable. First, Lissitzky casts the square,

that fundamental Suprematist form, as the story's protagonist. To carry the narrative, the Suprematist hero, originally empty of sense, is gradually charged with semantic content to the point of becoming a quasi-linguistic sign. Second, the narrative structure is achieved through precise sequencing of images. As in his poster *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1919), Lissitzky organizes nonfigurative

forms into a diagram of conflict and the ultimate victory of an ideologically charged “red.” Whereas the poster captures only the moment of collision, in the tale it evolves into an entire narrative. Finally, in the tale there is a clear distinction between center and periphery: The two squares are projectiles that fly through space and strike their target with great accuracy. This strong presence of the goal gives the entire narrative a sense of purpose and orientation. Furthermore, once the earthly “black storm” has been hit and destroyed, a new order emerges in which, foreshadowing the heroic pattern of social realism, the red square stands on the shoulders of the black one.

The second example comes from the pen of Daniil Ivanovich Kharms, the founding member of the Leningrad avant-garde group OBERIU (Association for Real Art), which in December of 1927 approached Malevich, then the head of the Institute of Artistic Culture, to propose the collaboration between the OBERIU and Malevich’s studio. Shortly thereafter, the institute was closed down, Kharms was arrested and exiled, and the OBERIU ceased its activities. In Kharms’s manuscript archive there is a short tract entitled *A Treatise More or Less According to a Synopsis by Emerson* [sic]. The tract is about the ordering of things and, more precisely, the nature of connections between the members of a series. The first section of the tract, “On Gifts,” opens with the assertion that there are “perfect” and “imperfect” gifts. The example of the latter class would be an object for everyday use, such as an inkwell. The former class is quite extraordinary, and the example devised by Kharms strongly resembles Malevich’s Suprematist forms: “a stick, for instance, to the end of which has been attached a wooden sphere and to the other end a wooden cube. Such a stick can be held in the hand or, if one puts it down, then it doesn’t matter at all where. Such a stick has no use for anything else.”²⁹ In the second section, “The Correct Way of Surrounding Oneself with Objects,” Kharms explains his reasoning behind the classification of perfect and imperfect gifts. Essentially, the perfection of an object (“gift”) is the function of its utility: it is not inherent in the object, but emerges from relations that the object establishes with other objects and persons. Kharms imagines a naked man who decides to move into a new apartment: “If he starts with a chair then he’ll need a desk to go with the chair, and a lamp for the desk, then a bed, a blanket, bed sheets, a chest of drawers, underclothes, clothes, a wardrobe, then a room in which to put it all, etc.”³⁰ This is an incorrect way of surrounding oneself with objects because “one object clings to another.” The perfect gift disrupts the chain of utility. The main characteristic of perfect gifts is that they establish disjunctive series.

There is a curious reverse proportionality between El Lissitzky and Daniil Kharms. On the one hand, the book for children *Suprematist Tale of Two Squares* can be seen as an exception in Lissitzky’s main body of work in architecture, design, typography, and photography. On the other hand, if we take into consideration that Kharms made a (meager) living as a children’s writer, then his “mature” writings are anomalous. On the one hand, in Lissitzky’s tale textuality has been imposed upon a nonverbal content; on the other hand, while being a piece of writing, Kharms’s tract argues against the basic laws of textuality.³¹ Whereas Lissitzky invests the Suprematist square with meaning and utilitarian purpose, meaninglessness and uselessness are the key properties of the Kharmsonian disjunctive series. Whereas Lissitzky sacrifices the Suprematist idea of groundlessness to

29. Daniil Kharms, “Traktat bolee ili menee po konspektu Emersena,” in *Sborische družei ostavlenikh sudboyu*, vol. 2, ed. Vladimir Sazhin (St. Petersburg, Russia: Akademicheskaya, 1998), 406–08. English trans. Matvei Yankelevich in *Emergency Gazette* 14 (March 30, 2000), 2. 30. *Ibid.*

31. The complementarity does not end here: Lissitzky used a pseudonymous first name, while Kharms used a pseudonymous second name; Lissitzky was associated with Malevich in the early 1920s, Kharms in the late 1920s.

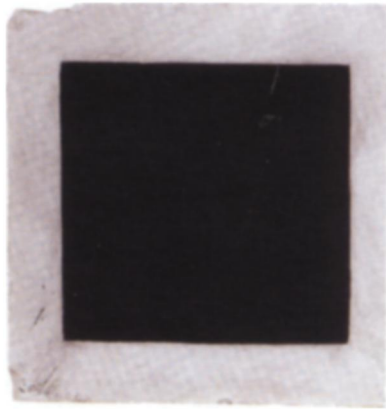
the propagandistic effectiveness of the “Suprematist tale,” Kharms in effect elaborates on it: a perfect gift is an absolutely autonomous object, a thing as such, and in its own thingness it neither receives nor provides ground or support. The Kharmsian disjunctive series, in which every member is both a source and an end, rests on the Suprematist idea of disorientation, which Lissitsky radically abolishes by devising a teleological narrative. Lissitsky strips the Suprematist forms of indeterminacy; Kharms transfers it to everyday objects. Lissitsky left the Vitebsk Art School as early as 1920, in great part because of his disagreements with Malevich; Kharms parted from Malevich as he was lying in state by reciting his poem “On Kazimir Malevich’s Death.”

So, what do we learn from the disciples? First, that the Suprematist forms do not tolerate the constraints of textual structural features, such as linearity, syntax, or semantics. Second, that while Suprematism is inseparable from spatiality, its proper space is not the illusionist space of the painting, but the concrete space that surrounds it. Finally, that it is precisely because of his insistence on “art as such” that Malevich had to renegotiate and redefine the relation between the painting and the environment that surrounds it. The region of this intense negotiation is the painting’s border. Close scrutiny of the extant photographic documentation of Malevich’s works from the period 1915–35 reveals an intriguing and largely neglected fact: Suprematist canvases are left unframed. This absence of frames from Suprematist paintings is hardly accidental. It can be traced from Malevich’s first public display of Suprematist works in the 1915 show *o. 10 Last Futurist Exhibition*, to his solo exhibitions in Berlin (1927) and Moscow (1929), to the paintings around his deathbed in his Leningrad apartment (1935). In the first of these exhibitions, *Black Square*, famously positioned in the corner of the gallery room, seems to lack even the thin molding that borders the same composition hung above the dead painter’s head twenty years later. Molding, customarily used to distribute pressure on the canvas equally and prevent it from tearing, is the only frame that can be found on Suprematist works during Malevich’s lifetime. Interestingly, while his backdated “post-Impressionist” works feature often elaborate frames, the Suprematist paintings, presumably from the same period, remain bare and frameless. The question of the frame is certainly not extra-aesthetic or extraphilosophical when it comes to Malevich’s Suprematism.³²

Meyer Schapiro suggests in his essay “On Some Problems in the Semiotics of Visual Art” that the frame that completely surrounds an image (“a homogeneous enclosure like a city wall”) appears relatively recently in the history of art, and with the emergence of perspective painting in the Renaissance it changes from an external border to a windowlike “framing and focusing device placed between the observer and the image.”³³ The frame has the effect of quotation marks: it hints that the image does not fully belong to the place it occupies. The skilled hand of an artist and the mathematically precise laws of perspective have transported the image from elsewhere, and it is to that nonexistent elsewhere that the image properly belongs. The picture is floated by the frame. This homelessness is the price the picture has to pay for its own coherence. As long as the image represents an illusory but coherent elsewhere, the painting’s actual surroundings remain irrelevant. However, the frame does more than equip the painting with a “framing and focusing device.” It furnishes the picture with a

32. The fate of paintings becomes much more observable in exhibitions than in catalogues. So at the Guggenheim we find that the painting *Pictorial Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions, Called Red Square* is placed in a thick black frame, which is no less constraining than Lissitsky’s narrative.

33. Meyer Schapiro, *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society; Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 7.



Kazimir Malevich. *Black Square*, 1923–30.
Oil on plaster. 14⁷/₁₆ x 14⁷/₁₆ x 3⁵/₈ in.
(36.7 x 36.7 x 9.2 cm). Musée national
d'art moderne, Centre Georges
Pompidou, Paris.

permanent and ambulatory milieu. As the painting's environment in its own right, the frame always threatens to declare independence and secede from the painting it is supposed to guard. The result is not an empty frame, but the baroque frame full of itself: an elaborate, wide, ornamental frame, exaggerated to such an extent that its former host becomes no more than one of its details, albeit positioned in the privileged, central position. Or, conversely, the painting is deprived of the convenience of its traveling companion and is exposed to milieux of all sorts. Schapiro rightly points to the "frameless modern picture" as the prime example of this juxtaposition of painting with its environment: "If the painting once receded within the framed space, the canvas now stands out from the wall as an object in its own right, with a tangibly painted surface, whether of abstract themes or with a representation that is predominantly flat and shows the activity of the artist in the pronounced lines and strokes or the high arbitrariness of the selected forms and colors."³⁴

Indeed, Malevich was not the only modernist painter who exhibited frameless pictures. What sets him apart, however, are the purposiveness and selectiveness with which he leaves certain of his works unframed, as well as the relation between that absence and the painting's content (or lack thereof). In order to address the framelessness of Suprematist paintings, we can start from Schapiro's provisory list from the fragment we just read. First, Malevich's canvases indeed "stand out from the wall," and the paramount significance of that standing will become clear shortly. As far as the second point goes, there is a great difference between Malevich's nonobjectivity and other modernist "abstract themes." Even though he had learned a great deal from Cubism, Malevich is not stopping at the intervention in the painterly space. Unlike Vasily Kandinsky and Piet Mondrian, he is not trying to capture the essence of the object or its inner vibration. He never referred to his paintings as abstract, but instead as "nonobjective." Furthermore, both "traces of the artist's activity" and the "arbitrariness of forms and colors" are far from being the decisive properties of the stark and impersonal minimalism of Suprematist paintings. Malevich saw *Black Square* as the simplest possible declaration of nonobjectivity. The first nonobjective painting is not only without objects: it is also without objective. There is nothing in that picture. It is a tabula rasa. That can be said in the following way as well: everything is outside that picture. *Black Square* and *White Square*, those paradigmatic statements of Suprematism, have no inside. By being pure lack, these frameless pictures are themselves like frames. What Malevich discovered upon completing his first Suprematist painting is that nonobjectivity is uncontainable. The tabula rasa has indeed turned the tables. It made obvious that the frame does not protect the painting from its milieu, but the other way around. By framing the picture in, the world frames itself out.

The notion of lack I just invoked comes from the arsenal of deconstruction. Jacques Derrida is at his best in his meditations on margins, on blanks, on that which is purely supplemental and therefore indispensable: on writing, on receptacle, and, of course, on frame. Writing in the double margin—metaphorically, of Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment* and, literally, of his own work in which marginal blankness is made to penetrate the text (and the other way around)—slowly and deliberately he nails one point after another: that "*parergon* stands out [*se détache*] both from the *ergon* (the work) and the milieu," that it is "only added

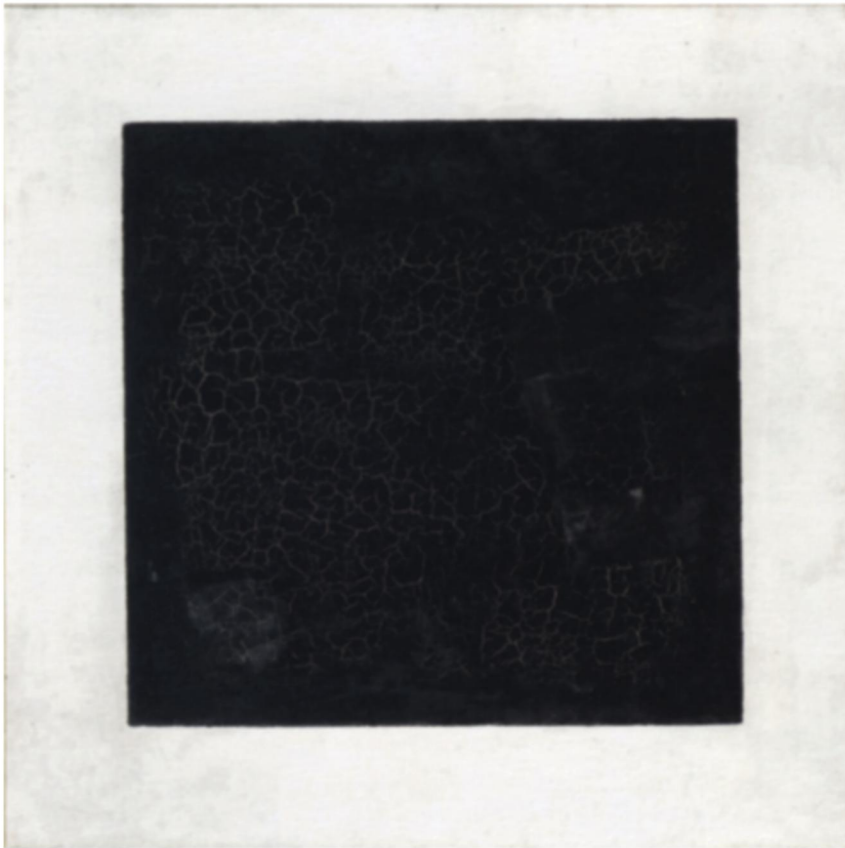
34. Ibid., 8.

on by virtue of an internal lack in the system to which it is added"; further, he calls attention to materiality of *parerga*, to their thickness, color, and the very stuff of their making.³⁵ However, of special interest for us is the notion of lack as it appears in his exploration of Kant's ideas of natural and made objects. There are two kinds of uselessness: that of a natural thing, a flower cut off from the plant, and the artificial object, a gadget, that is damaged and therefore cut off from its

purpose. These are two different kinds of cut: "the gadget remains incomplete because a concept can fill it up. This tulip is complete from the first because the concept cannot fill it in."³⁶ The central import of that which Kharms called "the perfect gift" is in the notion of the pure cut, which Derrida identifies with the lack of negativity, therefore signification, therefore "concept" or meaning, and, ultimately, sense. Derrida cuts off his reading with a series of disturbing questions: "How could productions of art appear to us as finalities without end? As nonsignifying? Cut off from their goal?"³⁷

An abstract painting can sustain the frame; a nonobjective painting, not. As in the perspectival painting, so in abstract, frame designates an opening, a space of signification. The erasure of the frame, the pure cut, is a closure of space and a foreclosure of meaning. Unlike his contemporaries who were also investigating the non-metaphorical limits of art, Malevich

did not rely on the readymade or on chance procedures. In comparison with them, he appears as an epistemologist of the canvas. In his primary Suprematist research, he insists on a certain purity of painterly materials: oil on canvas, rarely on board, pencil on paper, lithography. The most significant departure from this painterly orthodoxy is his shift from canvas to blocks made of plaster or wood. His *Black Square* in oil on plaster is a tectonic painting. It is a plateau that protrudes from the wall. In it, the frame has been reversed into a cut. In that way, Malevich redefines the relation between the space of the painting and the surrounding space. Instead of a quasi-linguistic juxtaposition established by the figure of difference (*parergon* that is neither the *ergon* nor milieu), he introduces a disjunctive series that progresses in all directions. The cut, the razor-thin line that stands where the thick frame once was, does not separate the inside from the outside but opens up the interior of the painting. The cut is an opening, a passage, a connection. At the same time, it encloses and defines. If we return to deconstruction's armory, we will find another powerful tool: the hinge as that which

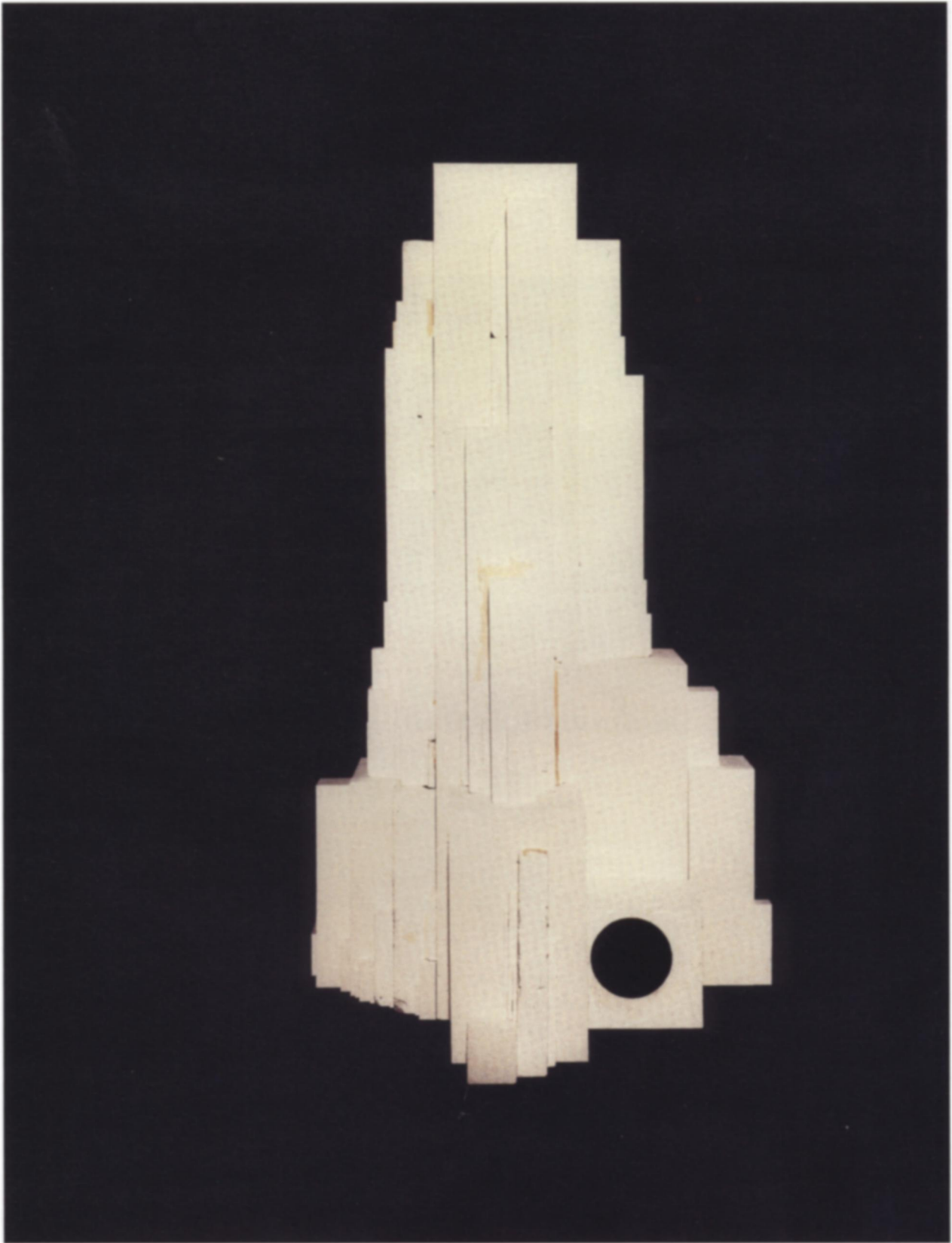


Kazimir Malevich. *Black Square*, 1915. Oil on canvas. 31¼ x 31¼ in. (79.5 x 79.5 cm). State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

35. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 6, 57, 61, and passim.

36. *Ibid.*, 94.

37. *Ibid.*, 96.



Kazimir Malevich. *Gota*, 1923, reconstructed 1989. Plaster. 33½ x 18⅞ x 22⅞ in. (85 x 47.9 x 58.1 cm). Musée national d'art moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris.

inside from the outside but opens up the interior of the painting. The cut is an opening, a passage, a connection. At the same time, it encloses and defines. If we return to deconstruction's armory, we will find another powerful tool: the hinge as that which separates and joins at the same time, and as such is related to spacing which "is always the unperceived, the nonpresent, and the nonconscious. As such, if one can still use that expression in a nonphenomenological way. . ."³⁸ One would hope that, indeed, one can still with great effort look past the thick framing and talk about art as such in Malevich's sense. *Black Square* hinges on the gallery wall. In his maximalist way, Malevich makes the entire universe hinge on it.

The abolition of frame results in the proliferation of edges. From *Black Square* in oil on plaster there is but one short step to Malevich's *architectons*, such as *Gota*. Considered in relation to the Suprematist painting that precedes it, an *architecton* is not a three-dimensional object that closes upon itself, that conceals an interior and gathers around a center of gravity, but instead it opens up through its edges. It is all edge, the space in continuous unfolding. A frameless Suprematist canvas and an *architecton* are not aesthetic objects but points of great conceptual density. If Malevich's ultimate disregard of the boundaries between different species of thought removes the possibility of any "painterly ineffable" from his works, then it also removes the sublime that always lurks behind the edges of geometrical abstract paintings. For one thing, consider the relative unimportance of the size of Malevich's works. For another, the category of the sublime went out the window of Malevich's studio together with the category of the beautiful (was he mourning beauty in the weeklong deprivation of food, drink, and sleep?). Finally, for him infinity is not an effect produced by the optical device of the interrupted grid.³⁹ His paintings cannot be filled up by any concept, including the concept of infinity. For Malevich, infinity is the endless unfolding of edges that proceeds right here, in front of you, in anything conceived as a finality without end, or as an *architecton*, or as a perfect gift.

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38. Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 68; italics in the original.

39. See Rosalind Krauss's essay "Grids," in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1986).