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REVIEW



Between Communism and Abstraction: Kazimir Malevich's *White on White* in America

Allison Leigh

In the spring or summer¹ of 1918, Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935) began a painting which is now most often referred to as the *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (Fig. 1).² Currently housed in the Museum of Modern Art's collection in New York, it is a work that hovers just on the edge of monumentality without quite attaining it. Neither overly large nor altogether precious in scale, the canvas measures a perfect 79.4 × 79.4 centimeters; it is a geometry that feels like a reckoning in person. One is confronted first by this utter squareness; the simplicity of the barren form and the totality of its organizing principle within the four-sided frame. Within those four bounding right angles floats a square form. It is all murky, silvery gray whiteness, vibrating within the expanse of the bordering space. It is a ghostly form, like snow caught just as a shadow passed across it, making it ashen, drained, and bloodless. It is not transparent or pearly though, this white Malevich gives us; it does not have the sheen of ivory or frost. It is instead hoary cream, it has a waxen quality that is somehow both deathly and too alive. That lone square form is total presence in its absolute planarity, it faces us with an austerity that is slightly unsettling. And all around it is more whiteness, but of a different quality. The ground plane is pasty but natural; it lacks the steely ambiguity of the square shape; it is warmer and thicker than the pallid chalkiness of the square floating on its surface.³ Neither white can quite be described as achromatic or colorless though. Both are brought about vigorously; the hand of the artist is where present from the facture's forthright transparency. One can see how Malevich hit the canvas with the loaded brush; the painting is a record of the weight with which he applied each mark, how he created a topography of restless energy.

This is a painting that is notoriously difficult to describe. But it is an important work in the artist's oeuvre. Some have said it represents the very end of painting, the limit

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¹This work was supported by a travel grant awarded by the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette in 2017. I would like to thank the students in my fall 2017 class on Russian art at this university for thinking through the historiography on Malevich with me as well as the staff at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow for allowing me to spend so much time with the Malevich works in their collection. All these experiences proved instrumental to the development of this project.

²As we will see, the dating of these works is somewhat contentious. Both John Milner and Aleksandra Shatskikh, however, claim that the white on white paintings were carried out in 1918. See Milner, *Kazimir Malevich and the Art of Geometry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996), 167 and Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black Square: Malevich and the Origin of Suprematism*, trans. Marian Schwartz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012), note 18,315.

³It should be noted here that the painting is referred to in Russian as "White on White [*Beloe na belom*]" or "White Square on White Ground [*Belyi kvadrat na belom fone*]," the preposition "na" in both cases denoting "on" as opposed to "in." The Russian preposition "v" could be used here without grammatical difficulty, but it consistently does not appear. Thus, my description of the white square floating on the surface of the white background accords with an element lost in translating the work's title into English.

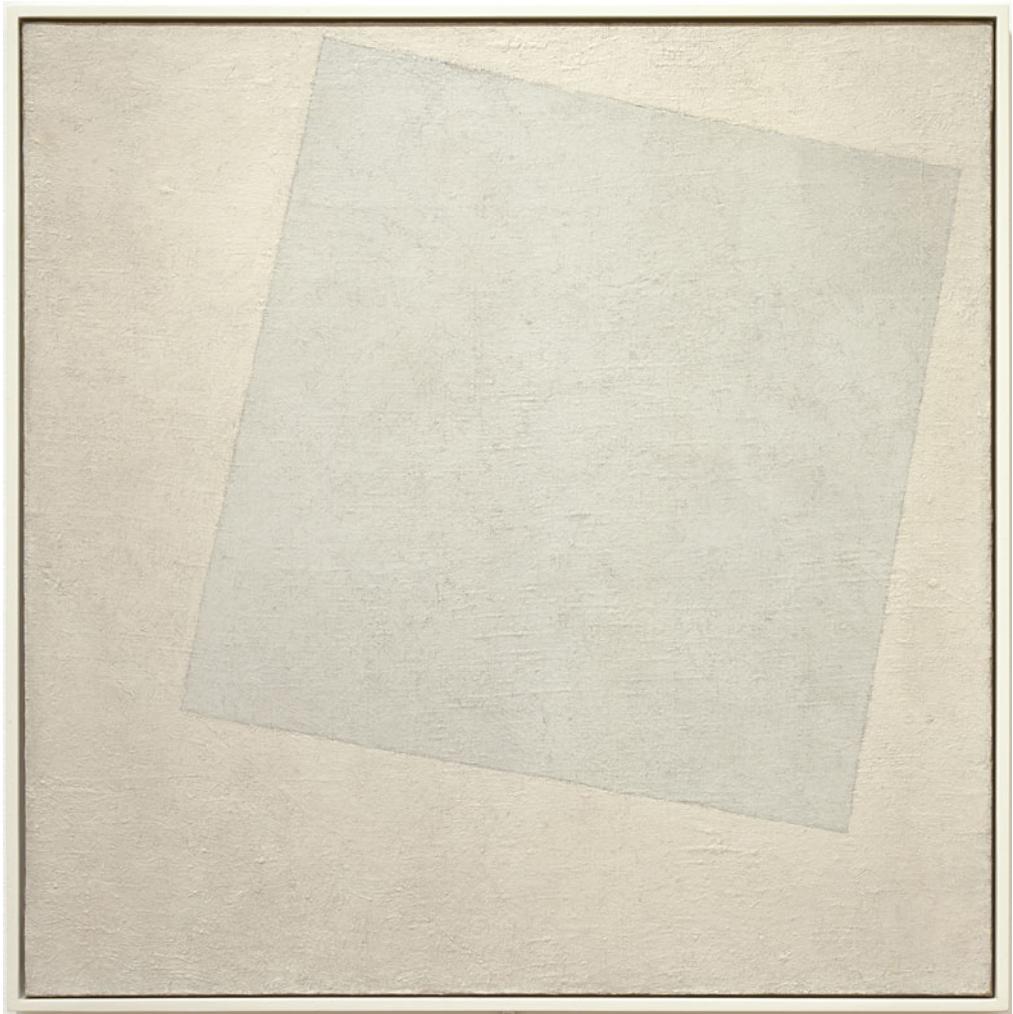


Figure 1. Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918. Oil on canvas, $31 \frac{1}{4} \times 31 \frac{1}{4}$ (79.4 x 79.4 cm). 1935 Acquisition confirmed in 1999 by agreement with the Estate of Kazimir Malevich and made possible with funds from the Mrs. John Hay Whitney Bequest (by exchange). The Museum of Modern Art. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

beyond which the medium can go no further.⁴ However, it is significant for reasons beyond the place it held in the development of the artist's overall system of abstraction. Malevich's *White on White* is meaningful, I will argue, perhaps foremost because of the moment in which it was initially conceived and ultimately made. It was brought about entirely amidst the heat of the Russian Revolution, its restlessness a testament to the unfolding of the communist Bolsheviks' attempt to take control of Russia. It toggles thus between the nothingness of pure formal abstraction and the sheer profundity of its

⁴Larissa A. Zhadova asks: "In what sense could the speculative pictorial and hypothetical representation of the cosmos develop further?" See *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution in Russian Art, 1910-1930*, trans. Alexander Lieven (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1982), 59.

social moment. It is a record, on one hand, of the development of non-figurative painting, but also, and perhaps antithetically, to the political circumstances which surrounded its creation. And it is of further importance in that it was one of the first works by Malevich shown on American soil. In fact, it remained one of just a handful of paintings by the Russian artist that could be seen in the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. It represents, therefore, one of the first contacts with revolutionary Russian art many Americans would have had in these years. Because of these unusual circumstances, it affords a rare opportunity to study perceptions of the Russian Revolution and communism more generally in America before midcentury.

But how did this painting come to be in a major New York collection? And how was it received by the American public after it began being exhibited in 1936? This investigation will explore the associations that accrued to Malevich's art as a result of his works being displayed here. The project is, in this sense, a historiographical one, in that it explores a range of writings—from critical journalism (especially exhibition reviews) to art historical scholarship (such as curatorial catalogs)—to trace the evolution of this work's meaning as it moved from the newly communist USSR to preWorld War II Germany and finally to America. In tracking this movement, it will be possible to trace as well the work's evolving reception as it continually changed cultural contexts. A number of questions will have to be asked in order to flesh out when and to what extent it became associated with communist ideologies in American minds. Of central importance in this regard is when exactly the *White on White* painting was made. Scholars disagree as to when exactly the work was initially conceived and brought about. It may have been one of the first projects Malevich began after the revolutionary events in Petrograd unfolded in 1917 or it may have come slightly later, in the year that followed. And further, Malevich's own politics are of fundamental significance to understanding the work, but scholars have often avoided exploring their role in his Suprematist pieces. Exploring the artist's letters from 1916-1919 will provide insight into his thoughts on the revolution and the implications it had for his art. Several intersecting themes emerge from tracking this one painting's conception, movement, and reception in this way, all of which lend insight into how Malevich's paintings function as profound examples of the socio-aesthetic dimension in the period.

The turn to white: Conception

Of the scholars who choose to weigh in on the origin point for the *White on White* composition, most seem to believe it was painted in 1918. Aleksandra Shatskikh, a leading Malevich specialist, is in this camp; she claimed in a detailed 2012 study of the origins of Suprematism that all five of the known white on white paintings originally materialized in mid-1918 (probably in June).⁵ Some, however, believe the works may have begun earlier, in the fall of 1917. In this group are Timothy James "TJ." Clark, who once stated in print that the white paintings "had [been] done in and around the October Revolution."⁶ Larissa Zhadova also dates the MoMA *White on White* to 1917-1918.⁷

⁵Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 260.

⁶T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 268.

⁷Zhadova, *Suprematism and Revolution*, 58.

The 1970 catalog raisonnée published by the Stedelijk Museum similarly dated two of the paintings from the cluster as originating in 1917, with *White On White* coming in the following year, and the white cross coming latest, not until after 1920. Andrei Nakov's more recent catalog raisonnée from 2002 reorders the overall progression of the five works, designating the *White on White* as coming about in "spring-summer 1918."⁸ The *White Suprematist Cross* it dates again as last in the series (1920-1921), the other three are all simply dated "1918" with no mention of month or season. Sources for definitively dating the inception of these works are scant, and, obviously, opinions differ.

This was a busy time for the artist. Two short years before, in 1915, he had made the initial breakthrough to the abstract style he called Suprematism, painting the *Black Square* and other non-figurative works in the summer of 1915 and exhibiting them in December of that year at the "0,10 (Zero-Ten)" exhibition in Petrograd. Six months later, in July of 1916, Malevich was drafted as a reservist into the army in Smolensk, and began to recognize the need to establish the core tenets of the new artistic movement he called Suprematism.⁹ Undaunted by the prospect of war, his concern was firmly fixed on how fighting would stall his progress in artmaking. He wrote to Mikhail Matiushin in June of 1916:

... dark clouds are approaching my window, but I am making every effort to work by the light of my eyes on our shared task. The fact that I will go to war, that my body will fertilize an arshin of earth, does not throw me into gloom, it is far gloomier to think [...] how many years it will take before we see again the life that existed in the fields of art before the war. The summer will pass and the fall will come and I will have to leave my work and get ready to kill; I am now beginning to worry about my works, what will go where, how to divide them up.¹⁰

These concerns remained with him and when he was granted a brief leave in October of 1916, he managed to publish a book entitled *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism*, with *Black Square* on the cover.

Ambitious further plans were made to publish a journal called *Supremas*, but this failed to come to fruition.¹¹ Malevich's energy and excitement seem mixed with larger concerns during his leave. He wrote, again to Matiushin, in mid-October: "Now that I'm back from the front, every day I'm becoming more and more of a different person. [But.] it is very painful for me to see that the will, the will of a whole big nation has been broken up into tiny pieces, paralyzed and asleep."¹² The following year he managed to show a large collection of Suprematist paintings in Moscow and this seemed to ignite a new found excitement in the artist. He wrote of how hectic things had become in early September of 1917, a little over a month before the October revolution would ignite on the streets of Petrograd:

I have a lot of work now, I have been chosen as the chairman of the Arts Division of the Moscow Soviet of Soldiers' Deputies. I'm also serving in the 56th Infantry Reserve Regiment, I have to work for the good of society. [...] I've come up with a whole series of

⁸Andréi Nakov, *Kazimir Malewicz* (Paris: Adam Biro, 2002), 282.

⁹Charlotte Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1994), 24; Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 150.

¹⁰K. S. Malevich to Mikhail Matiushin, 23 June 1916, Kuntsevo, in Irina A. Vakar and Tatiana N. Mikhienko, *Kazimir Malevich: Letters, Documents, Memoirs, Criticism* (London: Tate Publishing, 2015), 1:91.

¹¹Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 150-2.

¹²K. S. Malevich to Mikhail Matiushin, Mid-October 1916, Moscow, in Vakar and Mikhienko, *Malevich: Letters*, 1:97.

projects, namely to set up the 1st Moscow People's Academy of Arts, my idea has been received joyfully. [...] Altogether it's interesting work.¹³

He continues to be concerned about his art's part in all this though. In this same letter from September, Malevich turns to larger concerns about the role of art in society in this heated political environment: "What awaits us and what awaits our Art? Where will it go and what will the new Nation ask of it and of the artist. What will the new sowers say, and what say the new reapers."¹⁴ He does not seem to have conceived of the white on white paintings by this moment though. They would only begin appearing in public in 1919. But he might have begun work on them the year before amidst this hubbub of activity. During the October Revolution he was selected to be the commissar for the protection of churches and artworks in the Kremlin, and early in 1918 he was elected a member of the Moscow division of the Visual Arts Section of the Commissariat of Public Education (Narkompros).¹⁵ In March and April of 1918, he wrote articles for the daily newspaper *Anarchy* [*Anarkhiya*] and throughout the remaining months of that year he accepted various posts, including membership in the Committee for Artistic Organization, affiliation in the International Bureau, and as a teacher in the Free State Workshops.¹⁶

He complained in a letter from April of this year that "there's not enough time" and that he was going "to try and be in Moscow less frequently."¹⁷ This letter also contains mention of a new conception of color that was occurring in the artist's mind, and may provide a clue to when the white on white paintings were in development. He writes: "Now something very special about color is becoming manifest; perhaps a frightening schism will occur in colors, maybe a new facet will be laid."¹⁸ Two months later, a review he wrote for *Anarchy* contained his first formulation in a published essay regarding the Suprematist principle of the construction of planes "free from the correlation of both color and form."¹⁹ It seems safe to surmise that by the time of these writings, Malevich had painted at least one white on white work. The artist's activities and movements throughout 1918 are shrouded in mystery though. We only have one more surviving letter from that year, a brief note to Alexander Rodchenko perhaps from Moscow in the spring. We know that Malevich moved to Petrograd in 1918, but no further letters survive. He sends one more from Moscow in April or May, where he had returned to coordinate two exhibitions of his works, both of which would include, for the first time, finally, the white on white paintings.²⁰

¹³K. S. Malevich to Mikhail Matiushin, 8 September 1917, Nemchinov Post, in Vakar and Mikhienko, *Malevich: Letters*, 1:106.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich*, 24.

¹⁶Troels Andersen, *Malevich, Catalogue raisonné of the Berlin Exhibition 1927, Including the Collection in the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam* (Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1970), 11.

¹⁷K. S. Malevich to Mikhail Gershenzon, 6 [19 new style] April 1918, Moscow, in Vakar and Mikhienko, *Malevich: Letters*, 1: 109.

¹⁸K. S. Malevich to Mikhail Gershenzon, 6 [19 new style] April 1918, Moscow, in Vakar and Mikhienko, *Malevich: Letters*, 1: 110.

¹⁹See the review in *Anarchy* from 20 June 1918 (SS-1,117-23) quoted in Vakar and Mikhienko, *Malevich: Letters*, 1: 110.

²⁰Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich*, 44.

Malevich's politics: White in the time of red

Four white on white paintings appeared in April and May of 1919 at the “Tenth State Exhibition ‘Non-Objective Art and Suprematism’” in Moscow and then again in Malevich’s first one-man show.²¹ The latter exhibition was scheduled to open in November of 1919, but ultimately was delayed until March of 1920 due to the shortage of fuel during that harsh winter.²² Photographs of the exhibition show at least two of the surviving white paintings identifiably, one of which is the *White on White* now in New York. These documentary photographs tell us that the painting was definitively completed sometime before the Moscow shows opened in 1919/1920, though when Malevich actually executed them amidst his war service, the tumult of February and October, and his growing responsibilities to War Communism remains unclear.

It needs to be further emphasized that these were extremely difficult months. Lacking a Moscow apartment, Malevich was forced to live at his dacha in the outlying village of Nem- chinovka with no firewood or electricity for much of 1919. Life in the city itself was extremely difficult, inflation made prices for everyday items rise by the hour, and there was little heat, paper, or transportation to be found anywhere in the city.²³ Malevich describes his escape from the city in a letter from Vitebsk in November of 1919:

If you only knew what a route we had to travel. We rode three days and nights to Smolensk [*illegible*], travelling at a speed of 5 to 12 versts [5.3 to 12.8 km] an hour; the train cars were full, so we had to crawl with kind permission over bent backs, we gathered firewood for the steam- engine, we spent the night in Smolensk, in the inspection yard, and so on. You really have to have energy to endure this horror.²⁴

Malevich scarcely refers to the revolutionary events taking place around him in letters from this period. However, it must have been a time of tremendous sacrifice and suffering. A letter he wrote in December of 1919 describes the lines that formed for bread in the city beginning at five o’clock. Inflation had caused prices to skyrocket to the point that it cost “1000 or 1200 rubles for two loaves of bread.”²⁵ A little over a month before, Malevich had noted that bread cost 50 rubles.²⁶ It seems impossible to argue that the artist was not touched by the turbulence of War Communism in this moment. Nonetheless, opinions differ as to how invested in communist ideology the artist was in these years.

Several scholars have attempted to parse out Malevich’s politics at the time. Charlotte Douglas, another leading Malevich specialist, describes him as “generally delighted by the overthrow of the tsarist government,” stating that he had, in these years, “democratic and Socialist views” and was strongly opposed to World War I.²⁷ Zhadova

²¹Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 260, 264, and note 18, 315. Malevich’s one-man show was held as the “Sixteenth State Exhibition ‘Kazimir Malevich: His Journey from Impressionism to Suprematism [*Ego put’ ot impressionizma k suprematizmu*]’.”

²²By March of 1920, Malevich had already several months earlier departed to Vitebsk. See Shatskikh, *Black Square*, 266-7.

²³Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich*, 28.

²⁴K. S. Malevich to Mikhail Gershenzon, 7 November 1919, Vitebsk, in Vakar and Mikhienko, *Malevich: Letters*, 1: 111-12.

²⁵K. S. Malevich to Maria Gershenzon, 28 December 1919, Vitebsk, in Vakar and Mikhienko, *Malevich: Letters*, 1:121.

²⁶K. S. Malevich to Mikhail Gershenzon, 7 November 1919, Vitebsk, in Vakar and Mikhienko, *Malevich: Letters*, 1: 111-12.

²⁷Douglas, *Kazimir Malevich*, 24.

describes him as “actively involved in the social developments of that period” immediately following the October Revolution²⁸ and Leah Dickerman once hinted at *White on White*’s relation to the politics of its time in calling it: “part of an effort to create a new visual language for a new world.”²⁹ Christina Lodder too describes the white paintings as related to the politics of the time in which they were created: “The aspiration to recreate the world with the aid of suprematism was in part a response to the new political structure and its imperatives, but also to the utopian euphoria of the early revolutionary years.”³⁰

However, all of these scholars are careful to point out that Malevich’s politics and his paintings should be kept separate at least to some extent. Works like *White on White* may have been a revolutionary gesture embroiled in the heat of change which characterized their time, but more than anything they were revolutionary in the purely aesthetic sense. Boris Groys devoted a short, recent essay to the subject, ultimately describing Malevich’s works as fascinatingly ambivalent—they are certainly revolutionary, he says, but not “critical” in terms of mobilizing the masses to play a role in the revolution.³¹ T.J. Clark also recognized the thorny nature of reconstructing the artist’s politics in his complicated, but nonetheless wildly insightful chapter on El Lissitzky and Malevich in the larger context of modernism. Using excerpts of the artist’s writings, he describes the problem as one in which: “... Malevich thought, in a social space beyond ‘difference and advantage,’ where ‘everything is now the same.’ This is very far from being a Marxist view of a possible future, but it was aided and abetted, I feel, by a certain kind of Bolshevik utopianism which was rampant in 1920.”³²

Malevich did seem to have some sense of the iconic nature of what he was creating in terms of the parallel between his reduction to the barest of geometrical forms and the wiping away of centuries of Tsarist rule. He hinted at his sense of the ‘Suprematist forms’ relation to his time in a letter to Alexander Benois from 1916, in which he described the square as the “single bare and frameless icon of our time.”³³ But he was certainly not an artist in the revolutionary sense we have come to associate with Jacques-Louis David, or Gustave Courbet for that matter.

From Petrograd to New York

So how, then, did *White on White* come to be in New York? The story of the painting’s movement is actually what has been most worked out in scholarship on the painting. Malevich took *White on White* along with approximately seventy other works from Leningrad to Berlin in 1927, where it was displayed at the “Große Berliner Ausstellung”

²⁸Zhadova, *Malevich: Suprematism and Revolution*, 7.

²⁹Leah Dickerman audio on MoMA website. <https://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/371/5899> (accessed October 2, 2016).

³⁰Christina Lodder, “Malevich as Exhibition Maker,” in *Malevich*, edited by Achim Borchardt-Hume (London: Tate Publishing, 2014), 97.

³¹Groys, “Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich,” *E-FLUX Journal* 47 (2013), no page number. He focuses in particular on the *Black Square*, likening it to: “an open window through which the revolutionary spirits of radical destruction could enter the space of culture and reduce it to ashes [...] For Malevich, there [was] no difference between future and past— there [were] ruins in every direction.”

³²Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 259.

³³Charlotte Douglas, “Suprematism: The Sensible Dimension,” *The Russian Review* 34, no. 3 (1975), 280.

in May through September of that year. It was to be the only time he traveled out of Russia.³⁴ He left the works in the care of a Berlin architect named Hugo Häring when he was forced to return to Leningrad shortly after the opening for reasons still unknown. In 1929, the director of the Hannover Landesmuseum, Alexander Dorner (1893-1957), asked Häring if he could review the crate of Malevich's works. It was sent in May of 1930, where it remained.³⁵ Malevich ultimately never returned to Germany to collect the works; he died of cancer in Leningrad in 1935. Dorner had begun exhibiting select pictures from the crate throughout the early 1930s; and he continued to do so even as the Nazis came to power and displays of such "degenerate" art became increasingly dangerous.

Alfred H. Barr (1902-1981), founding director of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), was invited to the Hannover Museum in 1935 and wrote later in his life that he had been "overjoyed" when Dorner showed him the Malevich crate.³⁶ He bought two paintings and two drawings on the spot, wrapping two of them in his umbrella and hiding the others in his briefcase to evade detection by the Nazis.³⁷ But *White on White* was not one of these four smuggled out of Hitler's Germany. That work was mailed to Holland by Dorner under engineering drawings, along with approximately sixteen additional works.³⁸ They arrived safely and were forwarded to New York from there, where they were earmarked as loans for the exhibition Barr was organizing on "Cubism and Abstract Art" in the spring of 1936.³⁹ Dorner himself resigned from the Hannover Museum that same year. After his resignation in 1937, some 270 pieces from the museum were sold at the degenerate art auctions in Munich.⁴⁰ By then Malevich's works were already safely in New York, where they remained on extended loan to MoMA until 1963, when they were acquired into the collection after a settlement was reached with the artist's heirs.

From the "Hell of Capitalism" to the "Paradise of Communism": The early reception

In a 2011 essay for the exhibition catalog which accompanied the exhibition *Malevich and the American Legacy* at the Gagosian Gallery in New York, Yve-Alain Bois pointed out that "the history of Malevich's reception in the United States is still to be written."⁴¹ This is true. The exhibition, as promising as its title seemed for fleshing out Malevich's reception in the United States, was primarily concerned with exploring the formal influence the Russian painter had on later American artists like Donald Judd, Sol Lewitt, and Richard Serra. Equally promising was the conference presentation made by James Lawrence at the "Rethinking Malevich" conference held in New York in 2004. Lawrence

³⁴Ines Katenhusen, "A Crate in the Basement: On the Works of Kazimir Malevich Loaned to the Hannover Museum," in *Museums and Restitution: New Practices, New Approaches*, edited by Louise Tythacott and Kostas Arvanitis (London: Ashgate, 2014), 152.

³⁵Katenhusen, "A Crate in the Basement," 154.

³⁶Letter from Alfred H. Barr to Max Bill, 19 December 1952, quoted in Katenhusen, "A Crate in the Basement," 157.

³⁷Samuel Cauman, *The Living Museum: Experiences of an Art Historian and Museum Director—Alexander Dorner* (New York: New York University Press, 1958), 119.

³⁸Cauman, *The Living Museum*, 119.

³⁹Katenhusen, "A Crate in the Basement," 157.

⁴⁰Cauman, *The Living Museum*, 119.

⁴¹Bois, "The Availability of Malevich," in *Malevich and the American Legacy* (New York: Prestel Publishing, 2011), 21.

initially traced the role that Alfred H. Barr had in shaping Malevich's reception in America, illuminating how "Suprematism became a semiotic orphan, waiting to be adopted."⁴² But he turned away from further investigation into understandings of Malevich's work beyond Barr to instead explore how American artists such as Barnett Newman and Donald Judd grappled with Malevich's legacy in the 1950s-1960s. To my knowledge, no reception history of the specific works Barr brought to MoMA exists for the years immediately surrounding 1936. Thus what follows is a preliminary attempt at recreating the early evolution of American perceptions about Malevich and their relationship to communist ideologies.

The first mention of Malevich in print on American soil seems actually to have occurred before Barr's exhibition including the works. In 1922, Louis Lozowick (1892-1973), a Ukrainian painter and printmaker who studied at the Kiev Art Institute before moving to New Jersey in 1906, wrote a short essay for *Broom*, an arts magazine that had begun publication the year before.⁴³ Titled "The New Russian Poetry," it contained the first reference to Malevich I have found in an American publication. The essay begins, rather enchantingly: "Had your international affiliation or personal curiosity led you to the new Jerusalem of Communist Russia in the busy lecture season of 1918..." and goes on to elaborate lines of text from several Russian poets, including Blok and Mayakovsky. He describes the schools then emerging in post-revolutionary Russia, namely, the Proletarian poets versus the Symbolists and Imaginists, and: "at the other end - on the left - are the Suprematists who seek the 'Zero point of art.'" including, he says, "Malyevitch" whom he cites by name. He further describes art and poetry's relationship with the politics of the day: "Russian society [.] is passing from the Hell of Capitalism through the Purgatory of Proletarian Dictatorship to the Paradise of Communism. To each stage corresponds a different form of art."⁴⁴

Lozowick was himself a left-wing political activist who often portrayed workers in a sympathetic manner in his art. He was at one point employed by the Works Progress Administration and had traveled widely throughout the 1920s, seeing firsthand the avant-garde developments in cities like Paris, Berlin, and Moscow.⁴⁵ In 1925, Lozowick would again write about Malevich in a small history of recent Russian painting. Entitled *Modern Russian Art*, the slim fifty-six-page work contained plates reproducing works by Malevich, probably the first to ever appear in print on American soil. It is worth quoting from this little volume at length as it contains the first sustained analysis of Malevich's work and served as America's initial introduction to the Russian avant-garde movements of Suprematism and Constructivism. It may, in fact, have been what introduced Barr to specific artists within the movement.

Lozowick describes Malevich (this time spelled "Malevitch" in the text) as "the founder, leader, and theorist of the movement" of Suprematism, citing two of his published works, "From Cézanne to Suprematism" and "New System in Art," as examples of

⁴²Lawrence, "False Positives: Malevich, MoMA and Minimalism," in *Rethinking Malevich: Proceedings of a Conference in Celebration of the 125th Anniversary of Kazimir Malevich's Birth*, edited by Charlotte Douglas and Christina Lodder (London: Pindar Press, 2006), 302.

⁴³Will Gillham, ed. *An American Collection: Works from the Amon Carter Museum* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2001), 210.

⁴⁴Lozowick, "The New Russian Poetry," *Broom* (February 1922), 311.

⁴⁵Gillham, *An American Collection*, 210.

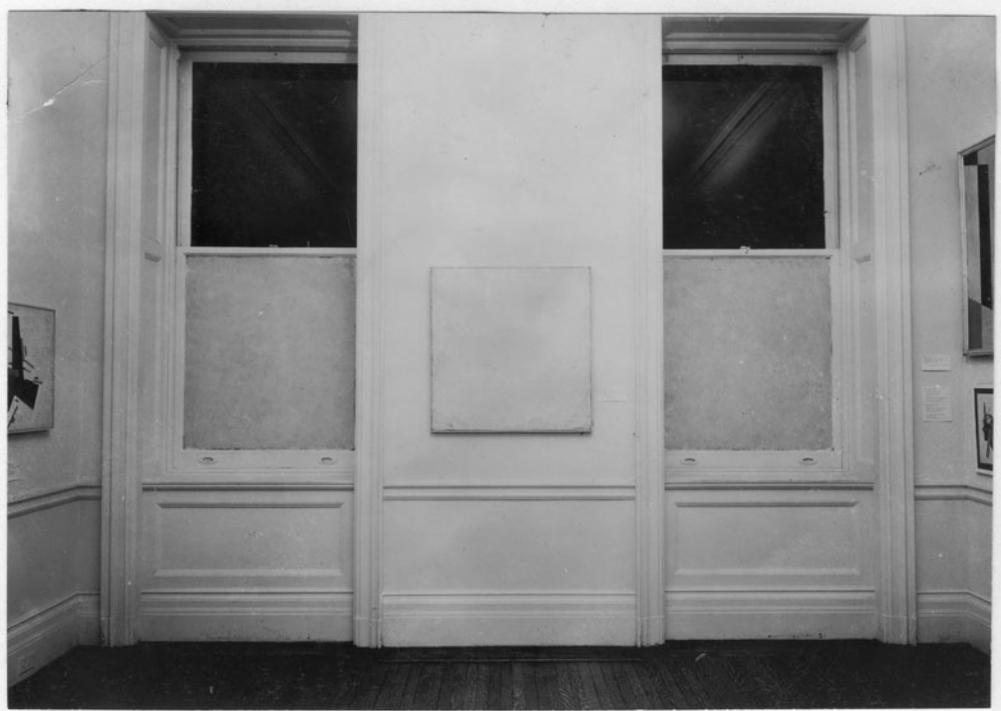


Figure 2. Installation view of the exhibition “Cubism and Abstract Art.” March 2, 1936 through April 19, 1936. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Malevich’s Suprematist Composition: White on White is pictured on the center wall. Photographic Archive. Photographer: Beaumont Newhall. The Museum of Modern Art. Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.

theorizations that “bordered dangerously on mysticism.”⁴⁶ Lozowick, then describes in brief the process of elimination that characterized the Suprematist approach to form and color. He mentions the *White on White* painting in particular, as an example of works within the movement becoming “more and more simple.” But he then shifts to describing the significance of all this:

... every artist must be a craftsman; let him learn to cover a flat surface with the same ability that a house or sign painter does and he may then be qualified for earnest work. [...] It is the passage leading from art to production. Art should merge with life. Autonomous art has no longer any important function to perform. But the artist has. He should devote his organizing, creative faculties to the productive industrial processes and thus abandon his parasitic existence.⁴⁷

This is not unbiased rhetoric to be sure. It shows, on one hand, how much Lozowick was in tune with the turn art was taking in the aftermath of the civil war. By 1925, artists indeed were being called upon to forswear their former “parasitic existence” and turn their efforts to productive labor. It is part of the reason Malevich took his works to Berlin two years later. And probably why he left them there. But Lozowick’s

⁴⁶Lozowick, *Modern Russian Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Societe Anonyme, 1925), 23-4.

⁴⁷Lozowick, *Modern Russian Art*, 24.

emphasis on the artist as “craftsman,” as needing to perform “earnest work,” also speaks to the rhetoric associated with the communist revolution in Russia. The introduction to art from the newly formed USSR that Lozowick gives his American readers is invaded by socialist ideology. In fact, he mentions communism specifically on the very first page of the text itself. He does not remain neutral to the presence of these specific politics in the art because the art itself, as far as he is concerned, is already plagued by it. The importance of this document is profound in the association it makes between communist ideals and formal aspects in this early moment.

Alas, Lozowick’s essay remained an isolated incident in American art writing. It would be another ten years before Malevich’s works appeared in print again. But then a spate of reproductions and mentions occurred in 1936, first in March, in a New York Times article reviewing Barr’s recently opened exhibition on *Cubism and Abstract Art*. The show included *White on White*; documentary photographs of the exhibition show it prominently displayed on a wall by itself between two windows (Fig. 2). This first review, written by Edward Alden Jewell, did not discuss Malevich’s work specifically, but it reproduced one work by the artist and it mentioned Suprematism as a movement among “many ‘isms’” contained in the show. While the review is overall positive, Jewell at one point states that: “With a few exceptions [...] everything in this exhibition [...] must be classified as decorative.”⁴⁸ Not exactly a winning start, but it shows a shift away from politics and toward pure formal analysis that had occurred since Lozowick first introduced American readers to Malevich.

This initial article was followed a month later by the publication in April of Barr’s exhibition catalog, the cover of which posits a timeline for the development of abstract movements which has become infamous. Seven of Malevich’s works are reproduced within it, and Barr carries out the first sustained discussion of the painter’s works in the context of the communist revolution:

In Moscow after the Revolution, the Russian Futurists, Suprematists and Constructivists who had been artistically revolutionary under the Czar came into their own. For three years they dominated the artistic life of the larger cities, taught in the art academies, designed posters, floats in parades, statues to Marxian heroes and gigantic Cubistic facades to screen the Winter Palace during mass celebrations. Malevich’s *White on white* of 1918 (Fig. 115) might have counted as a tabula rasa upon which to build a new art for a new order, but it was as unintelligible to the proletariat as his earlier Suprematist pictures had been to the bourgeoisie.⁴⁹

Barr eloquently handled the problem of situating *White on White* in terms of Bolshevik politics in 1936. This analysis demonstrates the perception, at least among certain art experts at the time, that Malevich’s paintings had to be understood as both a part of the revolutionary politics of the moment they were made, but also separate, “unintelligible,” ahead, or outside of the circumstances of their making.⁵⁰

⁴⁸Edward Alden Jewell, “Shock Troops in Review: Museum of Modern Art Opens a Pageant of the Cubists and Abstractionists,” *New York Times*, March 8, 1936.

⁴⁹*Cubism and Abstract Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1936), 16.

⁵⁰Further references to the artist are scattered throughout Barr’s book, and there is a sustained discussion of Malevich for two pages in a section devoted entirely to Suprematism. A bibliography at the end of the catalog also contains mention of Lozowick’s *Modern Russian Painters*, which, again, seems to have been where Barr first encountered the Russian abstractionist. Lozowick is also mentioned in the acknowledgements section where he is thanked for his “assistance in assembling the exhibition.” See *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 7.

Mention of Malevich crops up again in the November/December 1936 issue of *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art*, in an article devoted to “Dada.” Reference to him this time returns his work to the realm of the “decorative,” but he is mentioned as part of a group of artists who: “had established the principle that the artist must take an active part in politics,” which, unfortunately the author tells us, “resulted in a decorative art of limited interest.”⁵¹ Then there is a brief discussion of Malevich in a July 1937 article in the *New York Times Magazine* on the debate surrounding abstraction as a whole. He is brought up in a caption reproducing a Piet Mondrian painting and described as a representative of Suprematism, a movement of “‘pure’ abstraction.”⁵² Malevich’s association with Mondrian continues, however, in the next piece of writing to mention the artist, but not until some five years later. In an article on Mondrian for the Autumn 1943 issue of *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, the American art critic Charmion Wiegand described Malevich as one of the pioneers of the three abstract movements that arose out of Cubism, but she characterizes him as someone: “too far ahead of the primitive traditions from whence he derived, to attain complete fruition in his work, which was followed by a complete reaction to academic formulas in the U.S.S.R., where unknown and forgotten he died in 1935.”⁵³

That is everything on the artist in American publications for the first decade after Malevich’s works arrived in the United States. A couple of articles mention the artist again in 1947, but for the most part, only in passing.⁵⁴ Only one of the pieces from this year is perhaps significant for the insight it lends into a shift that had occurred in the reception of Malevich’s works. An article entitled “The Questioning Public” appeared in *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* in the autumn of 1947 and it contains one brief mention of Malevich and the *White on White* painting specifically. The essay is posited as a sort of training guide for MoMA docents, giving them advice on how to handle situations with different kinds of museum visitors, from tourists to weekend groups and young children. It begins by describing the role of the docent as an intermediary between the art and the public:

The visitor wants to understand the artist’s intention and increase his own appreciation of the collection. In this situation, the docent acts as catalyst. His job is to convert casual interest into knowledge and, by enabling the visitor to discover and enrich his own feelings, to promote a sympathetic response to the efforts of both the artist and the Museum.⁵⁵

The essay then shifts to problems that may arise in front of works by specific artists:

Before an exhibition of old masters, there would exist no problem of defending paintings to hostile or skeptical audiences. [...] old masters do not challenge a viewpoint as sharply as a Miro, a Klee or a Mondrian. [...] Another gallery for challenging stereotype habits of

⁵¹Georges Hugnet and Margaret Scolari, “Dada,” *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 4, no. 2/3 (1936): 6.

⁵²Edward Alden Jewell, “Abstraction: A Debate Rages,” *New York Times Magazine*, July 18, 1937, 10-11.

⁵³Charmion Wiegand, “The Meaning of Mondrian,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 2, no. 8 (1943): 63.

⁵⁴See Edward Alden Jewell, “Academy by Itself: Second Half of Annual Devoted to Work by Members—Diverse Modernism,” *New York Times*, March 23, 1947 and Katharine E. Gilbert, “Art between the Distinct Idea and the Obscure Soul,” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 6, no. 1 (1947): 21 -6.

⁵⁵Ruth Olson, Dorothy E. G. Seckler and Abraham L. Chanin, “The Questioning Public,” *The Bulletin of the Museum of Modern Art* 15, no. 1 (1947): 3.

seeing is the room displaying Kandinsky, Mondrian, Malevich and Miro. Here an opportunity exists to explain fundamental innovations in the bulk of contemporary art.⁵⁶

Even just this brief mention tells us that audiences had begun to respond to Malevich (and other abstractionists like him) with hostility. But not because of his association with the U.S.S.R. Instead, Malevich has become just one part of the American public's general skepticism about purely formal innovations in painting. It was not Malevich's "communism" that Americans did not like, it was just that they did not like (or understand) his paintings.

There is one more level to all this though. And it shows how much the tide had shifted to predominantly aesthetic responses to the artist's work. A shred of association with communism still remained, however, no matter how much writers and viewers wanted to assess the Russian artist in exclusively formal terms. The advice for docents grappling with these issues continues:

Asked for preliminary questions, the group stares at the pictures, a few smile, and they wait timidly for someone to speak. One person may begin by inquiring, "Why is it beautiful?" This is usually followed by a barrage of questions: "Why do artists paint like that?" "Why do they give paintings specific titles when they are so abstract?" "Is it permanent art or just a studio experiment?" "What is non-objective art?" "What is there to look at anyway?" One person even asked, "But isn't it un-American?"

Another may ask, pointing to Malevich's *White on White*, "Suppose I could imitate this exactly; why couldn't my picture hang in the Museum also?" This question is invaluable because it leads to an explanation of the gaps between creativity, pioneering and imitation; to a realization that the distortions are not primarily wilful [sic], wayward or the result of poor daubers shrieking for attention by painting "differently."⁵⁷

"But isn't it un-American?" It is easy to miss this one question in the onslaught of queries the hypothetical public demands answers for.

Of the eight questions packed into this one section, seven deal purely with formal issues. The public wants to understand elements all centering around aesthetic issues: this kind of art's beauty, its abstraction, its permanence, its non-objectivity, its emptiness, its skilllessness. Yet tucked in there is the one concern about its potential un-American-ness. And then the work immediately pointed to is Malevich's *White on White*. This concern would grow in the following decade. Charges that modern abstract art was inherently communist would reach a near fever pitch by the mid-1950s.⁵⁸ But for the first decade that works by Malevich were exhibited, they seem to have been primarily received and discussed in terms of the aesthetic issues they presented.

Conclusion: The gray line between communism and abstraction

The earliest perceptions of Malevich in America circulate around two formal poles—on one hand he is seen as a pure abstractionist, someone whose work was related to Mondrian's at a deep level. At the other end of the spectrum was the notion that

⁵⁶Ibid., 5.

⁵⁷Ibid.

⁵⁸Even Alfred Barr felt the need to weigh in on these invectives - see his "Is Modern Art Communist?" *New York Times*, December 14, 1952.

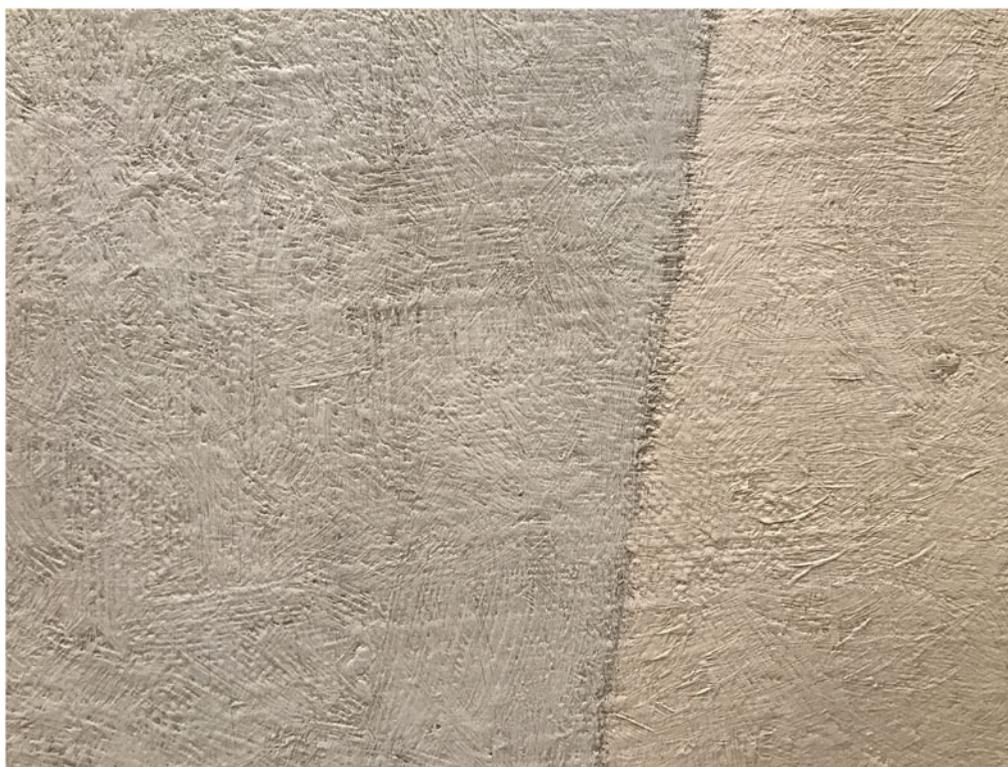


Figure 3. Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (detail), 1918. Oil on canvas, $31 \frac{1}{4} \times 31 \frac{1}{4}$ (79.4 \times 79.4 cm). The Museum of Modern Art. Photograph by the author.

Malevich was merely a “decorative” painter, albeit one active from an avant-garde standpoint. Overall, authors up to midcentury were primarily concerned with making qualitative parallels to other artists, unpacking the problematic nature of abstraction as a whole, and with trying to understand how the works’ revolutionary context affected their initial making.

Perhaps in the end, the making and early American reception of *White on White* is best understood as akin to the duality of the painting itself. As was evident from the biographical data, the painting grew out of ambivalence. Whether it was made in 1917 or the year after, it was a work that arose from a space of pure formal innovation; it was created as though somehow immune to the revolution and civil war violently erupting around it. But it was a canvas that was also deeply embroiled in the momentum of its utopian moment; it is irresponsible to interpret the work outside of a reckoning with the turbulence and suffering going on around it.

And the same dyadic incongruity is present in the painting itself. It is both utterly present, all material actuality, the warp and weft of the canvas blanketed with brushstrokes, but it is also sheer evanescence; it is always threatening to retreat into nothingness. *White on white* it is called. And it is that. But the title suppresses something that is just barely perceptible in person—a thin gray line that separates the two from each other (Fig. 3). The white square swimming in the limitless abyss is bounded by a sinewy charcoal contour. It is the firmest sign of the artist’s hand, his presence forever in the

painting, at the site of its revolutionary making. That line takes us forever back to 1917 and to the questions asked in that moment: “What will the new Nation ask of Art and of the artist?” The man who asked such questions is long gone. The line is all that remains of him. *White on White* is therefore an object utterly outside of time, free of it in a way that we will never be. It promises instead the infinity of a space beyond human fear or perception, a universe of colorless neutrality, beyond politics or aesthetics. At least initially then, instead of red, there was only the boundlessness of white.

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