

SUPREMATISM

Aaron Scharf

Suprematism is not so much a movement in art as it is an attitude of mind which seems to reflect the ambivalence of contemporary existence. It was almost a one-man performance. Kasimir Malevich (1878–1935) was its guiding spirit. It appeared about 1913 in Russia. To express 'the metallic culture of our time' was Malevich's intention; not by imitation, but by creation. Malevich disdained the traditional iconography of representational art. His elemental forms were designed both to break the artist's conditioned responses to his environment and to create new realities 'no less significant than the realities of nature herself'.

Malevich's geometry was founded on the straight line, the supremely elemental form which symbolized man's ascendancy over the chaos of nature. The square, never to be found in nature, was the basic suprematist element: the fecundater of all other suprematist forms. The square was a repudiation of the world of appearances, and of past art. In 1915, along with other such fundamentalist canvases, his painting of a black square on a white ground was first exhibited in Petrograd, then the capital of Russia. But it was not merely a square and Malevich was annoyed with the intransigence of critics who failed to grasp the true nature of that almighty form. Empty? It was not an empty square, he insisted. It was full of the absence of any object; it was pregnant with meaning.

Furthermore, it is not in the paintings but in the small drawings of suprematist elements, made by Malevich between 1913 and 1917, that reside the more subtle implications of Suprematism [illustration 65]. Not black, but grey, they were carefully and deliberately shaded in with a pencil. The square and its permutations: the cross, the rectangle, were meant to show the signs of the hand – an assertion of the human agency – and this is central to the philosophy of Suprematism. But although the geometric forms were intended to convey the supremacy of mind over matter, it was also essential that they demonstrate another quality. Why have I blackened my

square with a pencil? asked Malevich. 'Because that is the humblest act the human sensibility can perform.'

Of what significance, then, are the empty white fields in which suprematist forms hover? [illustration 66]. They represent the illimitable reaches of outer space; more so, of inner space. The blue of the sky, the blue of tradition, that coloured canopy blinding his view to infinity had, Malevich believed, to be torn apart. 'I have broken the blue boundary of colour limits,' he proclaimed. 'I have emerged into white. Beside me, comrade pilots, swim in this infinity. I have established the semaphore of Suprematism. Swim! The free white sea, infinity, lies before you.' This cosmic transcendentalism echoes the metaphysical lingo of Wassily Kandinsky and the theosophical speculations of the legendary Madame Blavatzky whose germinal spirits loom large behind Malevich.

Art, Malevich believed, was meant to be useless. It should never seek to satisfy material needs. The artist must maintain his spiritual independence in order to create. And though, like many of his fellow artists in Russia, Malevich welcomed the 1917 Revolution, he never subscribed to the belief that art should serve a utilitarian purpose, geared to the machine and to social and political ideologies. He opposed the artist's subservience to the State as much as he rejected the obedience to natural appearances. The artist must be free. The State, he protested, creates a structure of reality which becomes the consciousness of the masses. Thus, the consciousness of the individual is shaped by those who support the organism of the State. Rejecting any kind of propagandist art, he maintained that those who succumb to this regimenting power, are called loyal supporters of the State. Those who retain their individuality, their subjective consciousness, are looked upon with suspicion and treated as dangerous.

He repudiated any marriage of convenience between the artist and the engineer. That idea, which had taken root in Europe in the first two decades of this century, was greatly enhanced by the exigencies of the Russian Revolution. Artists and scientists, he insisted, create in totally different ways. And while truly creative works are timeless, the inventions of science and technology are transitory. If Socialism, he warned, relies on the infallibility of science and

technology, a great disappointment is in store for it. Works of art are manifestations of the subconscious mind (or superconscious as he called it) and that mind is more infallible than the conscious. Notwithstanding the explicit expression of these views, Malevich continued to work and teach in Russia, though with dwindling importance, until his death in 1935 when he was buried in a coffin which he had covered with suprematist forms.

In the light of Malevich's declarations it is evident that not only did Suprematism reflect the material essence of the man-made world, but it also communicated a yearning for the inexplicable mystery of the universe. Though reduced to simple geometric forms, Malevich's compositions sometimes appear to be almost literal references to real objects: aeroplanes in flight, architectural clusters as though seen from above. In works like *Suprematist composition expressing the feeling of wireless telegraphy* (1915) the dots and dashes of the international code are employed directly. On to the *tabula rasa* he places forms which communicate feelings about the universe and about space: impressions of sounds, *Composition of combined suprematist elements expressing the sensation of metallic sounds* (1915), of magnetic attraction, of mystic wills and mystic waves, *Suprematist composition conveying the feeling of a mystic 'wave' from outer space* (1917).

His most notorious painting, *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (c. 1918), a tilted white square on a white background, has been interpreted in many ways [illustration 67]. We do not really know what it was Malevich intended to represent. But in the context of his other work and considering his own statements, it is not too audacious to assume that it was meant to convey something like the final emancipation: a state of nirvana, the ultimate statement of suprematist consciousness. The square (man's will, man perhaps?) sheds its materiality and merges with infinity. A faint vestige of its presence (of his presence) is all that remains.

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DE STIJL

The Evolution and Dissolution of Neoplasticism: 1917–31

Kenneth Frampton

'Art is only a substitute while the beauty of life is still deficient. It will disappear in proportion, as life gains in equilibrium.'

Piet Mondrian

The De Stijl or Neoplastic movement which lasted as an active force for barely fourteen years, from 1917 to 1931, may be essentially characterized in the work of three men, the painters Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg and the architect Gerrit Rietveld. The other seven members of the original, rather nebulous group of nine formed under Van Doesburg's leadership in 1917 and 1918, that is the artists, Van der Leek, Vantongerloo and Huszar and the architects, Oud, Wils and Van't Hoff, and the poet Kok are all to be seen in retrospect as catalytic but relatively marginal figures, who although they played essential roles, did not in fact produce works, either actual or theoretical, which were eventually to become central to the mature style of the movement. It was, in any event, initially a loose union which was bonded together formally by the mutual appearance of most of these artists as signatories of the first De Stijl manifesto published under Van Doesburg's editorship, in the first issue (of the second year) of the De Stijl magazine that appeared in November 1918. This group was in a constant state of flux and at least one foundation member Bart van der Leek¹ was to disassociate himself from it within a year of its foundation and others such as Rietveld were recruited in the subsequent years as replacements.

The De Stijl movement came into being as the conflation of two related modes of thought. These were, firstly the Neo-Platonic philosophy of the mathematician Dr Schoenmaekers who published in Bussum, in 1915 and 1916 respectively, his influential works entitled *The New Image of the World* (*Het nieuwe Wereldbeeld*) and *The Principles of Plastic Mathematics* (*Beeldende Wiskunde*) and