

Malevich and the River of Being Conversation with Boris Groys*

Since his *The Total Art of Stalinism* (1988), Malevich proves to be a constant point of reference in Boris Groys’ thinking. In *Under suspicion* (2000), the avant-garde artist is investigated in his claim to configure the visual world of his own present. In *Politik der Unsterblichkeit* (2002), he serves as an example of the exorbitant claim of immortality to be made to life, through the production of a work that is meant to be a fixed point in the becoming. In *Going Public* (2010), the references to Malevich suggest that contemporary art should be analyzed from the perspective of the producer of art, who, precisely in this way, becomes the producer of a public self, or again as an example of the production of weak images, within the reach of a population of artists and not mere spectators. In *Art Power* (2012), Malevich’s aesthetics is a privileged site of inquiry about the relations between artistic tradition and reality, between the preservation of the past and the production of the new. At last, the article “Becoming Revolutionary: On Kazimir Malevich” (2013) explores the relationship between artistic gesture and political gesture in Malevich’s work, as well as its aporetic character – profoundly destructive, nihilistic, and at the same time creative and revolutionary – which allows him to pose as “the strongest possible medicine against any kind of compassion or nostalgia”.

K: Relying on the writing in which Malevich relegates the necessity of color to the past (“As I saw it, the revolution had no color. Color belongs to the past. [...] Anarchy is black in color; [...] a single dark ray swallowed up all colors and placed everything beyond all difference and privilege. Everything is now identical”), Timothy Clark wrote about the “profound contempt [...] for mere difference, for mere signification”, as an attitude aimed at seeking absolute freedom only by passing through emptiness and the absence of objects (the black square, the white abyss...), through “radical rupture with every natural and narrative form”. A radical rupture with regard to narrative forms sedimented in history and consigned

* Boris Groys was interviewed by Stéphane Hervé and Marco Tabacchini.

to their state of incompleteness. It is important to point out how this yearning for annihilation is not contained only to the limited space of the painting but embraces ever broader coordinates until it crosses the boundaries of time: in *Art Power*, taking up a text by Malevich devoted to the question of museum (1919), you show how the deposition of the museum institution signals a more “radical ecstatic suppression of the past”. What conception of the past emerges from such a proposal? And, more generally, what relationship does the experience of the past have with what Malevich called “the task of destruction”? Doesn’t the *Black Square*, while being the negation of all past, also contain all the “ashes” of the past, to use your expression?

Boris Groys: Malevich was a prolific writer. His writings almost always had a goal to legitimize his own artistic practice. And his argumentation was almost always historical and, more specifically, art historical. He describes his own art practice as a reaction to the processes that took place in the modernity. Most importantly: growth of the cities and gradual disappearance of the countryside. The grey, rectangular architecture of the cities begins to dominate our visual experience. The green world of nature recedes, becomes insignificant. Malevich does not celebrate this change. One should not forget: his paintings before and after the *Black Square* mostly represent peasants. But on the early paintings the peasants look similar to machines. And on the late paintings from the 1920s the peasants look like ghosts from the other world. The body turns into a machine or become a specter. In other words, the human bodies – and, for that matter, the whole nature – go through the moment of death and then reappear being totally transformed, transfigured. One should not forget that the *Black Square* was exhibited by Malevich in the context of the exhibition “0.10” (Petrograd. 1915). The title referred to the 10 artists who went through the point of zero – actually, the point of death.

And here the main point: Malevich never proclaimed the achievement of nothingness, point zero or death to be his artistic goal (as Marinetti did among others). In all his writings Malevich rejects any kind of activism, any form of aggression and demonstrates his contempt to any artistic programs, including the Constructivist program. His attitude is consequentially passive. He speaks time and again about laziness as the best mode of human existence. Malevich sees that the old world collapses and disappears – and accepts its disappearance because he sees the attempts to save this old world as historically doomed. In no way Malevich “seeks the absolute freedom” in this or that. Rather, Malevich believes that we all are carried by a flow of energy, this flow permanently transforms the world and the only thing that artist can do is to register and manifest these transformations.

K: You mention the astonishing treatise “Sloth - the Real Truth of Humanity” that Malevich wrote in 1921. In this text, the artist presents laziness as the utopian, but unconscious promise of the continuous perfecting of the economy as well as the soul, which the powers try to conceal. At the same time, precisely by asserting that laziness is the real truth of human condition, he seems to renounce any action, any perfection. You seem to say that laziness is a way of tuning into the flow of material forces. How does laziness translate into artistic practice? Doesn’t it also have a political significance for Malevich?

B. G.: For Malevich the laziness is the essence of artistic practice. He believes that one has to make an effort if one tries to keep the past from destruction through the flow of material forces or to subject this flow to a plan, to impose a certain form on the future. But if one remains in the contemporaneity – between past and future – one can relax and swim easily with the flow. This easy movement is art.

K: The *Black Square*, you argue in “Becoming Revolutionary”, ends up embodying, in its properly revolutionary radicality, the dismissal of all culture of nostalgia and a curious celebration of destruction as a vital and creative principle. One sometimes has the impression, observing and reading Malevich, of being confronted with a destructive obstinacy that does not merely annihilate the existing, nor does it retreat merely into inoperativeness, thereby leaving the field of artistic production: here the artistic gesture exposes the very destruction that animates it. Precisely you affirm, in this regard, that the persistence of the image of destruction – the reduction of the work to such an image without past, without narrative, without referent – is the constitutive figure of Malevichian poetics. But, to describe this reduction, which could be also thought of as an “anticipation” of perfection, you paradoxically evoke a “dialectical imperfection”? Could you come back to this notion of imperfection, which seems to be at the same time, in a contradictory way, a stopping of the flow of progress but also a way of adopting the destructive material flow?

B.G.: Malevich does not see the flow of Cosmic energy as the flow of progress. The word progress implies a certain teleology: the progress is always a movement to a certain goal. But Malevich denies that the movement of Cosmic energy has such a goal. He explicitly writes about it in his treatise “God is not Cast Down” (1919). We are not moving on the way toward perfection – and that means also that imperfection cannot stop our movement. The Cosmic energy has no origin and no goal. In this sense all the historical moments are equal – because their distance from the beginning and the end remains the same. Malevich does not want to destroy anything – but he also does not want to save anything from destruction because he believes that such an attempt is futile. Malevich is not destructive – he is fatalistic.

K: The *Black Square*, by being an “image of destruction”, develops a paradoxical temporality: it tends to anticipate nothingness, or else to make the original nothingness reappear, that is its utopian dimension (to put an end to the history of perfection), but you seem to suggest that the end of history is above all a repeated action of destruction. The *Black Square* gives an image of destruction, *hic et nunc*, but this *hic et nunc* is never over, there is like an iterability of destruction. A certain history of Art has made of it an archive, proper to a historical moment, but at the same time, makes of it an end. A non-empirical end, since there was painting afterwards, even with Malevich, but a meta-historical end, which is repeated in the contemplation of the painting, but also in its resumption by other painters, which condemns all later painting to confront its own absence of foundation. In this sense, can we say that the *Black Square* escapes from the cultural economy of “the New” and the transvaluation that is consubstantial to it?

B.G.: The *Black Square* shows us the finiteness of art history as history of pictorial forms. One cannot go beyond *Black Square* because *Black Square* is a reduction of every possible image to the combination of its surface and its frame (the same can be said about TV image, film image etc.). So: art is finite as the human life is finite. Not accidentally, Malevich wanted that *Black Square* would be put above his dead body after his death, on his coffin and his grave (all of that was done). Modernity made many things finite. Malevich made art finite. But being finite does not mean lacking variations. The human life is finite but also able to variations.

However, more importantly: in my book “On the New” I attempt to show that the new is never “totally new” but always only relatively new. We can speak about the new only in relationship to our archives of the old. But our institutional archives of the old never include “the totality of the old”. That means precisely that the new is always possible – what is old for one archive can be new to another archive.

K: A further mainstay of the “nihilist” reading of Malevich is the one interested in finding, in his activity, something like a “fierce reductive spirit”, according to Renato Barilli’s expression, that is, an intransigent will of imposition and selection, according to the belief that simplification of the visible can lead to an enrichment of the work. However, if in the eyes of the Italian critic such a reductive spirit soon collimates with a regressive movement towards geometric rigour, in *Under suspicions* Malevich’s gesture is rather described in a progressive way, as a leap forward, that is, as the continuation of that “radical removal of every external, mimetic or thematic element” that already constituted the leading figure of the Cubist position. However, if the latter continued to maintain a relationship, singular and privileged with its referent (with external reality, whether analytically dissected or synthetically recomposed), for Malevich

it is rather necessary “to find in this way something not further reducible, extraspatial, extratemporal and extrahistorical, on which one can cling”. In association with the earlier Cubist paintings, the *Black Square* (1915) would therefore bring to completion, beyond it, the work of destroying the conventional surface of the picture inaugurated by Cubism: what it now offers to the gaze is a picture that eschews any process and any claim to recognition and legibility, “a picture in the state of exception” (*Ausnahmezustand*). Now, right from the choice to resort to a term of Schmittian memory, your text highlights the deep connection between aesthetics, sincerity and violence inherent in such an operation, common to all avant-garde positions: a certain employment of violence seems to be at work where the artist is driven by the claim to expose what you point to as the inner and hidden dimension of the medial, that is, where medial sincerity is found extorted in the procedure that exposes it exceptionally: the search for the “zero of forms” as Malevich puts it, for a “transtemporal art” then, would be the search for an immediacy alien to conventions and traditions. Only in this direction can the artist achieve “the absolutely new, and at the same time the eternal, the true”. All this raises several series of questions: First, are Suprematist paintings “windows” to nothingness, or does it presuppose an agency proper to painting, to a (destituent) power that would go beyond the framework of the cultural economy, the transvaluation of pictorial signifiers, and have an effect on the viewer? Malevich mentions several times the effect of his geometrical *Supremus* on the subconscious, and you write in *The Total Art of Stalinism* that the Suprematist artist thought himself capable of technically governing the unconscious. Against individualistic interpretations aimed at considering the avant-garde to be a mere expression of private strategies of self-realization, this position would, on the contrary, recognize the political significance of the artistic gesture, aimed first and foremost at reconfiguring the entire present visual world in order to then be able to govern the gaze of the eventual viewers: the avant-garde artist would therefore pursue what he calls “the power to administer the ‘gaze’ of the whole of humanity, that is, of the entire mass of those who usually observe his paintings”. Is there not a break with the idea of contemplation in favour of a performative action of painting?

B.G.: The *Black Square* is a manifestation of the Cosmic energy that destroys old things and creates new things. Malevich is not a nihilist. He is similar to Heidegger in believing in the power of Being that reveals itself to the artist. But this revelation, as also in Heidegger, happens as emergence of Nothingness, as experience of the “clearance of Being”. In Heideggerian terms one can speak about the Black Square as such a “clearing of Being”.

K: The reduction raises ineluctably the question of the *arke* or the original laws, one of the essential issues of the modernism. What to think of the question of the law in Malevich's practice while he does not cease repeating the absence of foundation of the world, the inexistence of the values, the principles?

B.G.: There is a foundation – but that foundation consists not of values and principles. It is, rather, a flow of energies and forces. Like the carrier of the Internet texts and images is the electric flow. There is the foundation – but it is not solid. It is a river of Being.

K: It may seem paradoxical to think together the absolutely New and the transhistorical, the truth? If the “zero” can mean a new beginning (as El Lissitzky affirms), it does not seem that the non-objective can be in accord with this idea of a renaissance. And yet, there is the Unovis experiment in Vitebsk, whose purpose according to the first almanac would be “a new city, a new music, a new theater – all the utilitarian things of the new life must be created by this army. Nothing old – neither the forms nor the life”. An astonishing experiment, which is similar to the constructivist project in this statement, but which differs strongly in the way it is implemented (only by the preservation of the pictorial surface, unframed, enlarged to the whole of the existing). Is it a question of inventing the decor of a new living environment or of denying the existing? Do destruction and imperfection also have their place in Vitebsk?

B.G.: Unovis is, in Russian, an abbreviation of “Utverzhdenie Novogo v Iskusstve” – “Establishing of the New in Art”. This establishment of the new is, of course, a new beginning after the zero-point of the *Black Square*. However, unlike the Constructivists Malevich and his followers did not believe that the art of the future should become utilitarian. Malevich criticized this view because he believed that art should manifest its time but not serve its time.

K: In your theses you show well how such a quest brings with it a “claim to exclusivity” such that it devalues further discourse considered subjective or individual, “thus often operating in an intolerant and even despotic manner”. It would be, in other words, the resort to violence on the part of the artist, ready to wrest the picture from the flow of the world of images in order to better purify it from them. It would seem here that the artist ends up in direct competition – or sometimes in direct association – with the same power of the state or other political institutions. Elsewhere, In *Art Power*, you argue that avant-garde art “did not confront the public for what it was, spoke instead to a new humanity as it should be or at least could. For avant-garde art needed a new and different humanity”.

B.G.: We have heard already many times that “the medium is the message”. That means: all the private messages only conceal the true message – the message of the medium. Now, the avant-garde artist wants to become a messenger of the medium. As such his or her message becomes a total message. The Malevich’s Suprematism means the dominance of the painting over everything painted. What is the *Black Square*? It is not merely a painting but a transcendental painting –representing the medium of painting as such. Or, better, the medium of every possible image. And at the same time *Black Square* is a mere painting that hangs besides other paintings in a museum or gallery. It is this ambivalence of the black square that produces problems that are similar to the philosophical problems that emerge when the philosophers formulate sentences about the language – and, thus, use the same language that they want to describe.

K.: Is the artist’s gesture supported by a desire for authority while he is addressing a new humanity ? by a charge of violence? And again: is it possible to do violence, from the very beginning to this new humanity not yet given but already desired?

B.G.: Every philosopher and artist hope that the future mankind will be able to distinguish between the ordinary and the transcendental uses of the medium. Of course, this hope remains never realized. Instead, the transcendental becomes interpreted as an ordinary – as a mere image like every other image. This interpretation is an act of violence because it denies the transcendental character of the work. But it is violence applied by the public against the work – and not the other way around.

K.: I would like to come back to the idea of passivity that you mentioned earlier and that I find absolutely exciting. By evoking this passivity, you deconstruct the image of the avant-garde artist as a conqueror or builder, which Malevich sometimes seems to convey. Moreover, Malevich denies the artist the exercise of a creative and free subjectivity, in that he is moved by what you call the “the flow of material forces”. At the same time, the artist is not a prophet, even if he also adopts sometimes this posture: he does not give to see the invisible but, as a profoundly materialist, he manifests only the process of destruction inherent in the world of the matter. Doesn’t this passivity that you mention involve a profound destitution of the figure of the artist?

B.G.: I do not think so. The material flow does not only destroy the old forms but also engenders the new forms. In his text about the “additional element in painting” Malevich writes that the artist becomes infected by the new forms as one becomes infected by different new bacilli. And he writes further that his Suprematism is infected by the straight line that looks precisely like a bacillus of tuberculosis. Now,

when the artists are infected by a new form – become ill from a new bacillus – they should not try to recover, to return to the old, good healthy art but, instead, to cultivate their new illness. The art history is the history of illnesses – the individual illnesses and the collective epidemics.

K: Lastly, always about this suggestive idea of passivity. At the beginning of your article "Becoming revolutionary", you ask the recurrent question of the possible relation between art and political revolution. But, this idea of passivity seems to disqualify this possibility. In fact, it would seem that, according to your conclusion, revolutionary art and political revolution are expressions in different fields of the destructive course of the "universal material flow" and this is their only relation. Can't we say then that Malevich's art is unpolitical, not by taking refuge in a utopian and ideal abstraction, but by withdrawing its foundations from any political configuration?

B.G.: Of course, Malevich is highly political. All his life he was struggling on two fronts: against the lovers of the past who were not ready to accept the new art as sick, decadent and nihilist – and against the adepts of the utilitarian art who tried to integrate art into the process of construction of the new world according to a certain preconceived socio-technological plan – a plan that, after all, was also formulated in the past.

There is this old politico-theological problem: if there is a world process that permanently and inescapably changes the world then why should an individual intervene? If I am Christian, then why should I intervene – if God already has a plan of universal change and this plan will be realized anyway? Or if I am a Hegelian or Marxist then why should I intervene – if the world History moves according to its own logic and will lead the mankind to a certain goal independently of my efforts? Now we know that it was Christians and Marxists who were historically and, especially, politically more active than anybody else. So why? Because they believed to have History on their side.

Malevich did not believe in the Christian or Marxist versions of history. But he believed to have the material flow of the world on his side – against everybody who wanted to turn this flow back or to stop it by building this or that political utopia. And to have the world process on one's side is a pretty strong political position.