

Malevich: Unconditional Revolution

Malevich stands as the crossroads of great aesthetic and political tensions capable of stimulating the most essential framework of what we deem to be the destituent power. For this reason, we believe that his story goes far beyond a canonical biographical, historical and artistic dimension, without, however, suffocating it. To this extent, he embodies a destituent conceptual figure first of all because, by exhausting with his painting any form of representation down to the ground zero of the vision, he perceives the fulfilment/end of every work as a revolutionary programme.

Through his artistic production (whether written or imagined) Malevich never failed to engage in dialogue with the October Revolution as an attempt to open up an absolutely empty space in history, purifying the new world of all past cultural traditions. As Boris Groys notes, Suprematism thinks that the Communist Party cannot take this programme to the extreme.

As El Lissitzky, Malevich intervenes in art and society. They believe that their work can make a *tabula rasa* and also change the daily habits of ordinary citizens (Malevich’s 1919 text entitled *On the Museum*, which proposes to destroy all the cultural heritage of the past, is impressive). Suprematism conceives the task of revolution as the dissolution of everything (hence, the profound difference with constructivism). Malevich’s radical rejection of all forms of the past, his radical “barbarism”, in Benjamin’s terms, explodes before the October Revolution. The Ukrainian-Polish-Russian (then simply ‘Soviet’) artist with the Great War fine-tunes his fundamental aesthetic tension: when facing the carnage, there is nothing to be seen because we should only see what we cannot see: the unimaginable. The carnage of war gives a steer in Malevich’s pictorial work, imposing a form of pure and radical desertion on his artistic gesture: it is here that the vision of a void emerges.

With the work *the Black square on white ground* (1915), we are faced with a gesture that rejects any distance and dualism between reality and its narrative. No image to be seen is recognisable. No transcendent duplicity of the image. Rather, pure objectivity as a form of absolute realism against all aesthetic realism. Along this direction, the painter’s parable appears parallel to that of the rising Soviet cinema, which chose the same anti-realist vocation for itself, at least until the mid-1930s: a vocation made up of a specific use of montage, understood not as a tool for constructing narratives, but as a technique through which the revolutionary experience can be put into form.

There is more to it: the extreme version of his masterpiece *White Square on a White Background* (1918), presents an even more rarefied and diaphanous tension than the forms exhibited previously, exposing the idea of a pure event through the dismissal of painting because painting in Malevich dares to display its end.

With Malevich, the artist's action is emancipated from its typical reproductive or figurative movement to become an unconditioned gesture free of any reference. Absolute forms seem to populate the paintings of Malevich and his pupils, as well as two-dimensional hyperspaces in which the colour, the workmanship and the material have a value in themselves. It looks as if they testify to the opening up of another form of thinking, dreaming and living, definitively freed from the determinations of symbolism and representation. And this happens beyond all logic, foundation and capital that provokes and feeds them. That is why the revolution in the image of the world that Malevich brings back to the canvas, to the point of its collapse, also expresses the truth of every revolution: its nihilism. It is in the "nihilist blackness" (Alain Badiou) that Malevich's painting meets the deepest aspiration of social and political revolution. Moreover, Malevich's extreme gesture of letting painting end in painting (with the religious culture of the icon ending with it as well), almost as if he wished to bid farewell to an entire cultural universe, is accompanied by a subtle and radical theoretical reflection in which, at the beginning of the 1920s, the revolutionary cruciality of a destitute existence is affirmed. We talk about the issue of inactivity as the "actual truth of man" (conceived by Malevich in a short 1921 text that significantly and dangerously distances itself from the cult of work), a figure also concealed by those traditions that while attempting to redeem the man, in reality, capture him in the tyranny of value, working and opera, thus disavowing the destitute trait of any existence.