

Contemporary Translation in Suprematism

By assistant curator Louise Michelle Reade

“I felt only night within me and it was then that I conceived the new art, which I called Suprematism.”¹

Kazimir Malevich

Simple geometric shapes and an associated spiritual purity and dimension; these factors distinguished a new Russian abstract art movement developed by Kazimir Malevich in 1915. A new meaning was given to the art that seemed, to the viewer, so simple to achieve. A collaboration of fundamental lines or shapes on the canvas may have made some viewers uncomfortable. They would find it difficult to depict the work as a piece of art that had *that* certain something to say. Malevich changed the way in which geometry and a vision could help theoretical thinking and find these abstract paintings so pure and clarified; and thus, the abstract paintings can be understood, by others, than the elite.

Malevich’s painting from 1918 entitled “White on White” consists of, in its simplest form, two white squares. The outer square being the edge of the canvas, and its inner square. In fact, these are entirely distinct squares. They are not the same white, for the tilted interior square attires a cooler white, with a imprecise line that gently separates it from the much warmer white of the outer square. This painting also enables the viewer to reach further steps into other dimensions, seeing that one square is on top, or in front, of the other. The tilt from the smaller square suggests a movement in time, a progression though dimensions.

Although Suprematism seemed to have, at the time, a limited following and impact in Russia, it became a significant influence to that of it’s neighbouring movement in 1917, De Stijl, for whom Piet Mondrian had an important role; and also the artist Wassily Kandinsky, who’s work compiled of vibrant compositions of line and shape, which evoked emotions through dynamic force and rhythm in his paintings.

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Suprematism> (accessed January 2010)

Suprematism also has influences in contemporary art. Peter Halley an artist who's work stretches between the 1980s to the present, simulates a post modern critiquing of such work from Piet Mondrian, that of the work of geometric abstraction and minimalist artist Josef Albers and of sculptor Donald Judd. His paintings of geometric compositions, along with significance of mathematical modelling, finds a trail of a social landscape in a world of geometrical art.

Sculpture, too, has been influenced, as has many other forms of art through the years. Examples of this include the minimalist geometry in Sol Lewitt's "Three Cubes with One Half-Off" (1969) and "Relief No. 12A" (1936) the sculpture with juxtaposed geometric shapes, by César Domela, who in this particular piece, though typical of the De Stijl movement, eliminated vertical or horizontal forms. Donald Judd changed the course of modern sculpture with his minimalist forms. He liked to describe his work as 'the simple expression of complex thought'², creating abstract works that emphasise the purity of colour, form, space and materials.

A near century on, Suprematism still evokes itself in art. There is a development and progression within the uncomplicated geometric shapes and lines that bring meaning into the work. Through a new sense of theoretical thinking we can bring into question how we begin to look at these pieces as a legitimate work of art. As truly abstract painting is being produced, an abstract vocabulary is taking shape, as we realise what it means and where the meaning lies. Suprematism is now contemporarily rendered, but as ever it is significant to the viewer, where geometric dimensions and movement in contemporary art can help us to relate, to understand, to think, and to translate.

² <http://www.tate.org.uk/modern/exhibitions/judd/> (accessed January 2010)

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