1915

Kazimir Malevich shows his Suprematist canvases at the "0.10" exhibition in Petrograd, thus bringing the Russian Formalist concepts of art and literature into alignment.

1910–1919

When Aleksei Kruchenikh's (1886–1968) *Zaumnaya gniga* appeared in Moscow in 1915, little distinguished its content from that of a dozen previous books of his poems illustrated by one of his avant-garde artist-friends, including Kazimir Malevich and, from 1913, his own wife Olga Rozanova (1886–1918). Although Rozanova was already one of the most inventive participants in the Suprematist movement launched by Malevich in 1915, her illustrations for *Zaumnaya gniga* belonged to an earlier phase of the Russian avant-garde, called "neo-primitivist," during which the idiom of early Cubism was grafted onto the Russian *lubki* (popular broadsides, usually woodprints, whose folkloric tradition goes back to the early seventeenth century).

The title itself, *Zaumnaya gniga*, would not have surprised any follower of Kruchenikh's activity, or that of any other "Cubo-Futurist" poet (as he and his friends called themselves at the time): one could translate it as *Transrational Boog* (*boog*, not *book*—the typo is intended, as the neologism *gniga* is an obvious deformation of *kniga* [book]). In the "transrational" tongue invented by Kruchenikh and his peers, which was aimed at "defying reason" and at freeing the word from the common rules of language, it was indeed appropriate that a boo*k* should become just a boo*g*, a combination of letters whose indeterminate meaning would be the sheer product of associations in the mind of the reader. Kruchenikh's phonetic verses, devoid of any direct connection to a referent ("*Dyr bul shchyl/ubeshchur/skum/vy so bu/ r l ez*"), had been one of the rallying points of the Russian avant-garde ever since he had officially launched the "concept" of *zaum* ("beyond reason") in 1913 (and even before that, in 1912, with the deliberately outrageous publication of *Slap in the Face of Public Taste*, a collective poetic almanac coauthored with David Burliuk, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Velemir Khlebnikov).

Rozanova's illustration for the cover of *Zaumnaya gniga*, however, was not typical in this context (it could easily be mistaken for a product of the not-yet-born Dada): it is a collage consisting of the silhouette of a heart (cut out of red paper) onto which a real button has been glued. Besides those of the artist and her husband, a third name adorns the cover, that of an apprentice *zaum* poet, Alyagrov, who contributed two texts to the volume, his first (and last) publication under this pseudonym.

The fact that Alyagrov was none other than the very young Roman Jakobson, who, fresh out of high school, had just founded the Moscow Linguistic Circle (he was later to become one of the founders of structuralism), may come as a surprise. But even more is in store: even though Jakobson's lifelong passion for language stemmed from his early interest in poetry (notably that of Stéphane Mallarmé, whom he was translating at the age of twelve), his real inspiration had come from painters—and particularly from Malevich, with whom he had planned a trip to Paris just before World War I. The trip was canceled, but weekly visits with Malevich to the Shchukin Collection, host of so many Cubist masterpieces, buttressed Jakobson's firm belief that the relationships between signs are more significant than their potential connection to a referent. It is necessary to underline the nonidentity of the sign and the object, as Jakobson kept repeating all his life, because "without contradiction there is no mobility of concepts, no mobility of signs, and the relationship between concept and sign becomes automatized."

The concepts of Russian Formalism

Along with Opoyaz (the Society of Poetical Language), established in Petrograd in 1916 (of which Jakobson was also a member), the Moscow Linguistic Circle became one of the two birthplaces of the school of literary criticism known as Russian Formalism (the label was coined by enemies, as is often the case: it presupposes a dichotomy between form and content, the very opposition that the Russian Formalists wanted most to annul, as did their fellow *zaum* poets). Right from the start, the issue at stake seems to have been: "What is it that makes a work literary; what is literariness as such?"

The question was polemical, directed against almost any trend of literary studies at the time: against the Symbolists, for whom the text was a transparent vehicle for a transcendent image; against the positivists and the psychologists, for whom the biography of the writer or his putative intention were the determining factors; and against the sociologists, for whom the truth of a literary text was to be found in the historical context of its formation and the political-ideological content it conveyed. For the Formalists, the literariness of a text was a product of its structure, from the phonetical level to the syntactic, from the microsemantic unit of the word to that of

▲ 1916a, 1920, 1925c

▲ Introduction 3

the plot. The text for them was an organized whole, whose elements and devices had first to be analyzed, almost in a chemical fashion ("isolated and laid bare just as they are in a Cubist painting," as Jakobson wrote) before anything could be said of its signification.

In his "Art as Device" (1917), Viktor Shklovsky, an important member of Opoyaz, formulated one of the first concepts of Formalist literary analysis: *ostranenie*, or "making strange." Long exploited by *zaum* poets, *ostranenie* best marks the early convergence of views between Formalist critics and avant-garde poets and painters, most particularly their common opposition to a conception of language that reduces it to its pure value as instrument: for communication, for narration, for teaching, and so on. It is to be noted that their shared credo yielded unprecedented collaborations: not only were the Formalist critics the strongest defenders of *zaum* poetry, but also both Jakobson and Shklovsky were ardent apologists of Malevich's Suprematism; and if Malevich designed the set and costumes for Kruchenikh's opera *Victory*
▲ *over the Sun*, he also wrote *zaum* poems throughout his life. The real source of this parallel was the belief on the part of painter and critic alike in the power of art to renew perception. For the Formalist critic this meant showing how an author's use of language differs from our ordinary use, how commonsense language is "made strange" within the text; Shklovsky called such a critical move one of laying bare the aesthetic "device." For the painter this meant "de-automatizing" vision so as to confront the viewer with the fact that pictorial signs are not transparent to their referents but have an existence of their own, that they are "palpable," as Jakobson would say.

Malevich's Suprematism: the zero of painting

After a quick-paced autodidact education through all the previous "isms" of modern art—from Symbolism to Impressionism, Post-
• impressionism, Cubism, and Futurism—Malevich attempted to create a *zaum* brand of painting. He first focused on a particular aspect that had been overlooked in the collage aesthetic of Synthetic Cubism, the discrepancy of scale and style it allows. Thus, in *Cow and Violin* (1913), a small and realistic profile of a cow, as if lifted from a children's encyclopedia, is painted over the much larger image of a violin, itself superimposed over a concatenation of geometric color planes. Soon after, Malevich deemed the "transrational" absurdity of these juxtapositions insufficient if he were to attain, in a Formalist fashion, the "pictorial" as such—which he called "the zero of painting."

He ended up his *zaum* phase with two types of experiments (later pursued by his numerous followers) that were destined to push the very notion against which he was struggling—that of the transparency of the pictorial language, essential in any mimetic conception of painting—to its limit. One of these experiments consisted of the simple inscription of a sentence, or a title, in place of the representation of the objects it named. There are several of these nominalist propositions that never went beyond the stage of drawing, such as the notation "Fight on the Boulevard" hastily jotted down and framed on a piece of paper. The second of these last *zaum* attempts consisted in the collage of actual whole objects, such as a thermometer or a postage stamp, transforming the picture itself into an envelope, as in *Warrior of the First Division, Moscow* from 1914 [1]. In both cases (nominalist inscription or readymade objects), the ironical emphasis is on the tautology: the only purely transparent sign is that which refers to itself word for word, object for object. The shirt button in Rozanova's cover for *Zaumnaya gniga* probably refers to Malevich's assemblage, but also to reliefs by Ivan Puni (1892–1956), another of Malevich's followers (for example, *Relief with Plate* of 1919). Puni's painting *Baths* (1915), even combines assemblage and nominalism, being at once the sign-board for a public bathhouse (thus an object) and the inscription of the word "bath."

But rather than the aesthetic disjunctions of collage, it is the large, undivided planes of color that are most striking in Malevich's works such as *Warrior of the First Division, Moscow* or *Composition with Mona Lisa* (1914), in which the only figurative element, a reproduction of Leonardo's painting, is blocked out in red. And it is these color planes that Malevich will "isolate" in giving birth to his own version of abstraction, which he called Suprematism. The founding moment of Suprematism occurred in December 1915, at the "0.10" exhibition in Petrograd (subtitled "The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings," the show owes its name to the fact that its ten participants—including Vladimir

1 • Kazimir Malevich, *Warrior of the First Division, Moscow*, 1914
Oil and collage on canvas, 53.6 × 44.8 (21⅛ × 17⅝)

▲ 1913 • 1912

▲ Tatlin, who showed his first corner counter-relief there—were all seeking to determine the "zero degree," the irreducible core, the essential minimum of painting or of sculpture).

● Thus, almost half a century before Clement Greenberg, Malevich posited that the "zero" condition of painting in the culture of his time is that it is flat and delimited. From this critical reduction there stems Malevich's emphasis on the textural quality of his surfaces, his attention to painterly facture, but also his predilection for the figure of the square, a form long conceived, as its Latin name attests, as the result of one of the simplest geometrical acts of delimitation (*quadrum* means both "square" and "frame"). And from this identification of the figure of the square with the ground of the picture itself—in Malevich's *Black Square*, for example, which hovered over his other works at "0.10," parodying the placement of icons in traditional Russian houses [2]—there developed in ■ Malevich's work the very inquiry into what Michael Fried, writing in 1965 about Frank Stella's black paintings, would call "deductive structure" (in which the internal organization of the picture—the placement and morphology of its figures—is deducted from, and thus an indexical sign of, the shape and proportions of its support). Malevich's 1915 *Black Cross*, his *Four Squares* (one of the first regular grids of twentieth-century art), and many other "noncompositions" presented at "0.10" are indexical paintings; that is, the division of the picture's surface, the marks it received, are not ▲ determined by the artist's "inner life" or mood (as was the case for Kandinsky's abstract paintings), but by the logic of the "zero"—they refer directly to the material ground of the picture itself, which they map.

Making strange with color

Malevich was not a positivist (he always stuck to an antirationalist point of view that brought him, especially in his late, post-revolutionary texts, close to a mystical position). Even in the most "deductive" of his canvases, he always made sure that his squares were slightly skewed so that (by virtue of the *ostranenie*) one would notice their stark simplicity and read them as stubbornly "one" (both unique and whole) rather than identifying them as geometric figures. For what mattered most to him, as he kept repeating, was "intuition."

One of the surest routes to attain this nonverbal, nonarticulate mode of communication in painting was color, the sheer expanse of undivided planes of saturated pigment. Malevich's passion for

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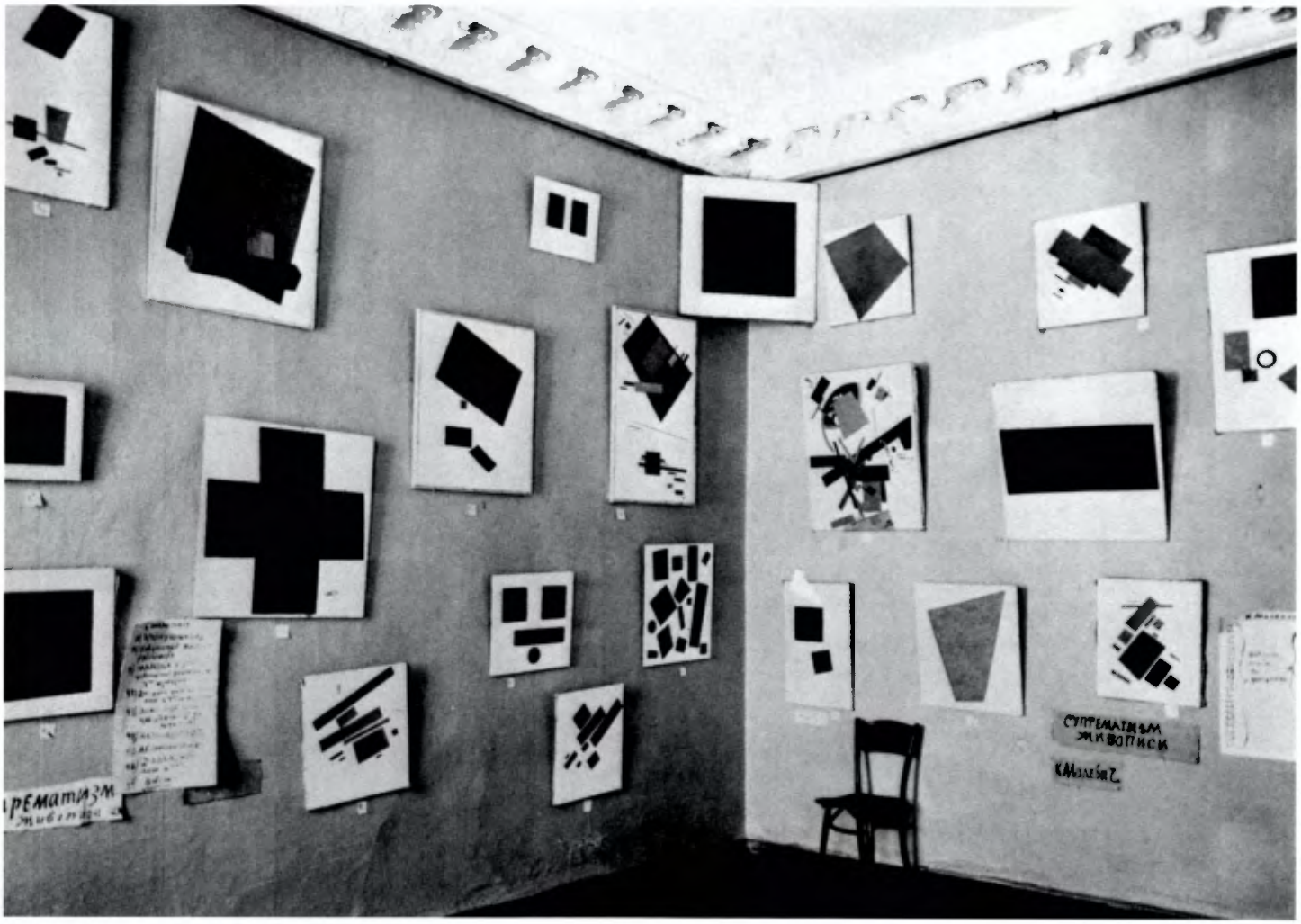


2 • A view of the "0.10" exhibition in Petrograd, 1915
Malevich's *Black Square* can be seen in the corner of the room above his other paintings.

▲ 1914, 1921b ● 1942a, 1960b ■ 1958 ▲ 1908, 1913

color played a major role in his rapid evolution from Cubism to abstraction, as did the works of Matisse, also discovered in the ▲ Shchukin Collection. But despite his enthusiasm for the French master's *ostranenie* tactics of using arbitrary color, Malevich quickly came to the conclusion (via his apprenticeship in the "analytical" mode of thinking pertaining to Cubism) that color would never be "isolated" and perceived as such (that is, it would never reign "supreme") without first being freed from any determination of a subject matter other than its own radiance.

And this desire to explore "color" as such, to expose the "zero" of color, also led Malevich to take leave of the deductive structure. For next to the *Black Square* or the *Red Square* [3], which was exhibited under the ironic, *zaum* title of *Peasant Woman: Suprematism* (it is now subtitled *Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions*), one could see many pictures on the walls of "0.10" in which rectangles of all sizes and of various colors floated on a white background. For a brief period, these paintings led to what Malevich would later call "aerial suprematism," works he would himself severely criticize for their return to illusionism and their quite direct allusion to a cosmic imagery as though one were viewing Earth from outer space [4].

• It was the sixties American artist Donald Judd, one of the harshest critics of illusionism in painting, and always ready to point out how much of it still remained in the works of the pioneers of abstraction and their followers of the twenties and thirties, who was the first to reinscribe these agitated paintings into the theoretical framework of the Formalist (*ostranenie*) logic. Reviewing a Malevich retrospective exhibition in 1974, Judd noted that in these canvases colors do not "combine; they can only make a set of three or any two in the way that three bricks make a set." Those sets, writes Judd, "are not harmonic, do not make a further overall color or tone." In other words, the color relationships are not compositional. The allusion to bricks, to the "one thing next to the other" of Minimalism, is very much to the point. But colors are not random either: they assert their independence from the whole via their fragmentary groupings into clusters, preventing any perceptual organization of the shapes into a gestaltist order (and allowing for clashing, almost "kitsch" juxtapositions, such as red and pink).

3 • Kazimir Malevich, *Red Square (Painterly Realism of a Peasant Woman in Two Dimensions)*, 1915
Oil on canvas, 53 × 53 (20⅞ × 20⅞)

4 • Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Construction*, 1915–16
Oil on canvas, 88 × 70 (34⅝ × 27⅝)

After zero ...

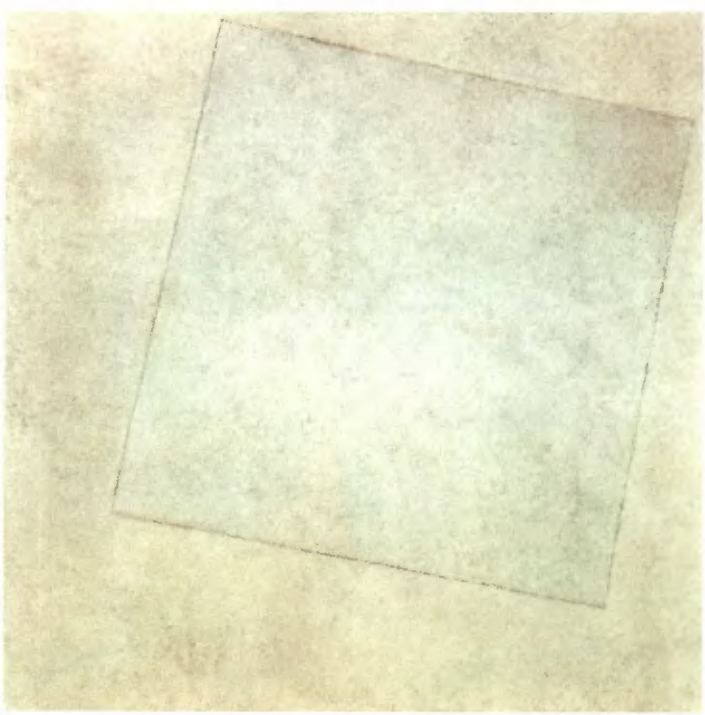
By 1917–18, as the ideological directions of the October Revolution were making increasing demands on the artists of the Russian avant-garde—the only artistic group to have given it support from the start—Malevich found it increasingly difficult to justify his pictorial activity ideologically. His own political inclinations, close to anarchism, which he saw as perfectly congruent with his aesthetics, were not of great help after the Bolsheviks' repression of an anarchist revolt at Kronstadt in 1918. His momentary farewell to painting constitutes one of the borderline experiences of twentieth-century art, the moment when the "zero" is almost tangible—there, on the canvas. The works in question are several pictures in which a

"white" form (slightly off-white, to be more precise) glides, at the threshold of visibility, on the white expanse of the canvas [5]. Displaying almost nothing but the smallest differentiation of tone, and the sensual marks of the brush-stroke, sometimes these "white-on-white" pictures were even exhibited on a white ceiling, thus emphasizing their own potential dissolution, as white squares themselves, into the architectural space.

Malevich was enlisted in several cultural and agitprop tasks after the Revolution (from planning new museum collections to designing posters), but his most sustained activity was as a pedagogue. In 1919, having dislodged Chagall as head of the Popular Art Institute in Vitebsk, and having secured the help of the much ▲ younger El Lissitzky (1890–1941), he founded the Unovis school (the Russian acronym for "Affirmers of the New Art"). The pictorial production of his pupils, most of them in their teens, was derivative at best. How odd it is to imagine the unheated Unovis classrooms full of paintings of bouncing red squares, in the midst of a huge economic crisis, civil war, and famine! But it was there that Malevich began to develop, with his students, his conception of architecture, which he would actively pursue at the Institute for the Study of the Culture of Contemporary Art of Leningrad (or Ginkhuk), of which he was appointed director in 1922. As there was no question of actual building, architecture was approached as a language, much as Malevich had analyzed the constituents of painting: What would be the zero in architecture? Where would architecture go if it were devoid of function? The results of his inquiry, models of ideal cities and dwellings called *arkhitektoniki*, with their multiplication of cantilevers and their questioning of the classical opposition of post and lintel, were to have an immediate impact on the emerging International Style in architecture and town-planning (particularly after their publication, through El Lissitzky, in several European publications in the mid-twenties).

While abstract painting, *zaum* poetry, and Formalist criticism, now deemed bourgeois and elitist, increasingly became the target of ▲ political censorship in Soviet Russia, architectural research, even as utopian as that of Malevich and his followers, remained relatively free. But soon after the death of Lenin (in 1924) cultural repression began to close down on all spheres of cultural activity, and even Malevich's *arkhitektoniki* had to pay tribute to the heroic, neoclassical proportions demanded by Stalin's watchdogs. Malevich, still teaching (to a thinning student body) and devoting vast energy to writing (most of it unpublished at that time), started painting again in the late twenties. But because abstraction was now almost a political crime, he became engaged in the very strange activity of running through his own pictorial evolution in reverse, going back not only to Cubo-Futurism but also as far as Impressionism, yet consistently antedating this belated production as if it were from his youth. This manifest fraud, puzzling to the historians, is in keeping with the ● modernist creed of his quest for the zero: like Mondrian, Malevich thought that each art had to define its own essence by eliminating those conventions deemed unnecessary and, in this evolutionary march, each work of art was to be a step beyond the preceding one—which means that each was assigned a proper date on this progression. A flashback is always possible within this logic, but it would have been morally wrong to present something which could (and should) have been done in 1912 as dating from 1928. (Similarly, when around 1920 Mondrian was forced to paint flowers for economic reasons, he made sure to adorn these "commercial" works with his signature of around the turn of the century.)

The last works by Malevich, however, from the early thirties, are not antedated. Crude pastiches of Renaissance portraits in harsh colors, but often bearing a tiny Suprematist emblem (the geometric ornaments of a belt or a hat), these paintings are replete with irony. Unlike, say, a de Chirico, Malevich is not welcoming ■ here the "return to order." But condemned to figuration and to a mimetic conception of painting against which he had fought all his life, he is "making strange" the very practice of portraiture by giving a sense of the historical distance denied by his censors between the epoch of genuine portrait-making and his own. YAB



5 • Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Painting (White on White)*, 1918
Oil on canvas, 79.3 × 79.3 (31 × 31)

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▲ 1926, 1928a, 1928b ▲ 1934a ● 1913, 1917a, 1944a ■ 1909, 1919, 1924