Black Square: The Russian Avant-Garde

At the Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0,10 in Petrograd in 1915, Kazimir Severinovich Malevich (1879-1935) presented a set of Suprematist paintings. Among them was a small (80 cm square) canvas showing a black square on a white background. The painting was the final step in the rebellion against representational art: pure form without content. *Black Square* became emblematic of the Russian Avant-Garde, a modernist movement in Russian art, which predated the Russian Revolution, and then enthusiastically celebrated the new world brought forth by that revolution. However, the new politics did not embrace the new art. In the 1920s, the Avant-Garde was criticized as "formalist," and replaced by the more politically amenable art of Socialist Realism.

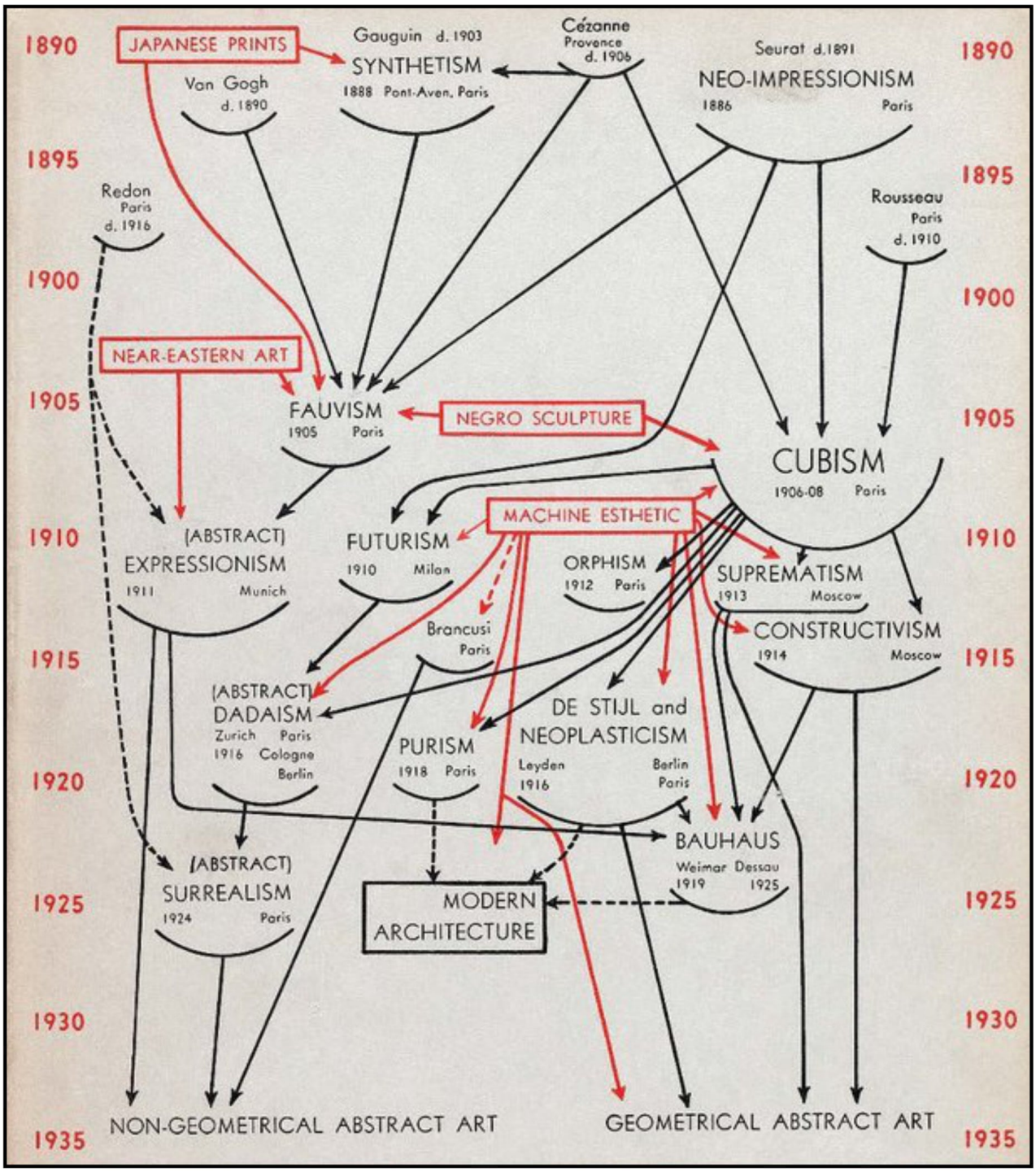
The Modernist Revolution

In the years leading up to the outbreak of World War I, artists turned away from representational art toward abstraction. The most significant of the various movements was Cubism, which began in 1907 with Picasso and Braque. Cubism changed our ideas of perspective: multiple points of view and multiple degrees of focus were presented together. This was soon followed in 1909 by the Futurism of Marinetti and Boccioni. Futurism represented experiences from multiple times simultaneously. The Fauvism of Derain and Matisse began to use of color to portray emotion rather than reality, and the Orphism of Robert and Sonia Delaunay attempted to reach harmony through color independently of form.

Artists and collectors in Russia closely followed these developments in modernism. The cloth merchant Sergei Shchukin and the textile manufacturer Ivan Morozov each put together important and extensive collections of modernist art. Shchukin

opened his home on Sundays to allow the public to view the work of Picasso and Matisse. Artists travelled to France and Italy and brought the ideas of Cubism and Futurism back to Russia. The literary group *Hylaea* founded the Russian Futurist movement in 1912 with a manifesto entitled *A Slap in the Face of Public Taste* (Markov in Ioffe & White, 2012, pp 21-84). They repudiated the art and literature of the past; they celebrated the beauty of speed and machines. Some of the artists of Russian Futurism pushed toward complete abstraction, founding a small movement known as Rayonism, which depicted rays of colored light. T

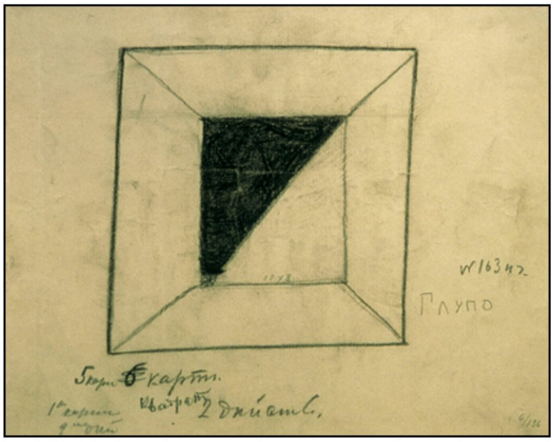
he interactions between the various movements in modern art were represented in a diagram that Alfred Barr used as a cover to his 1935 book *Cubism and Abstract Art*:



Victory over the Sun

In 1913, the Russian Futurists presented an opera in Petrograd entitled *Victory over the Sun*. The libretto was written by Aleksei Kruchonykh, the music was composed by Mikhail Matyushin, and the stage settings and costumes were designed

by Kazimir Malevich. In the opera, the sun, representative of the decadent past, is torn down from the sky to make way for a new world created by man's technological expertise. The following illustration shows Malevich's design for the costumes of the new men of the future, a sketch for the backdrop for Act II, and a poster for a later production of the opera by El Lissitzky. Malevich's sketch of a square partially eclipsed in black is a precursor of his later painting *Black Square*. The Lissitzky poster shows some of the imaginary technology used by the men of the future. The title (Победа над Солнцем, *Pobeda nad Solntsem*) is presented, and the banner reads (in a hybridized language) *All is well that begins well and has not ended.*



Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0,10

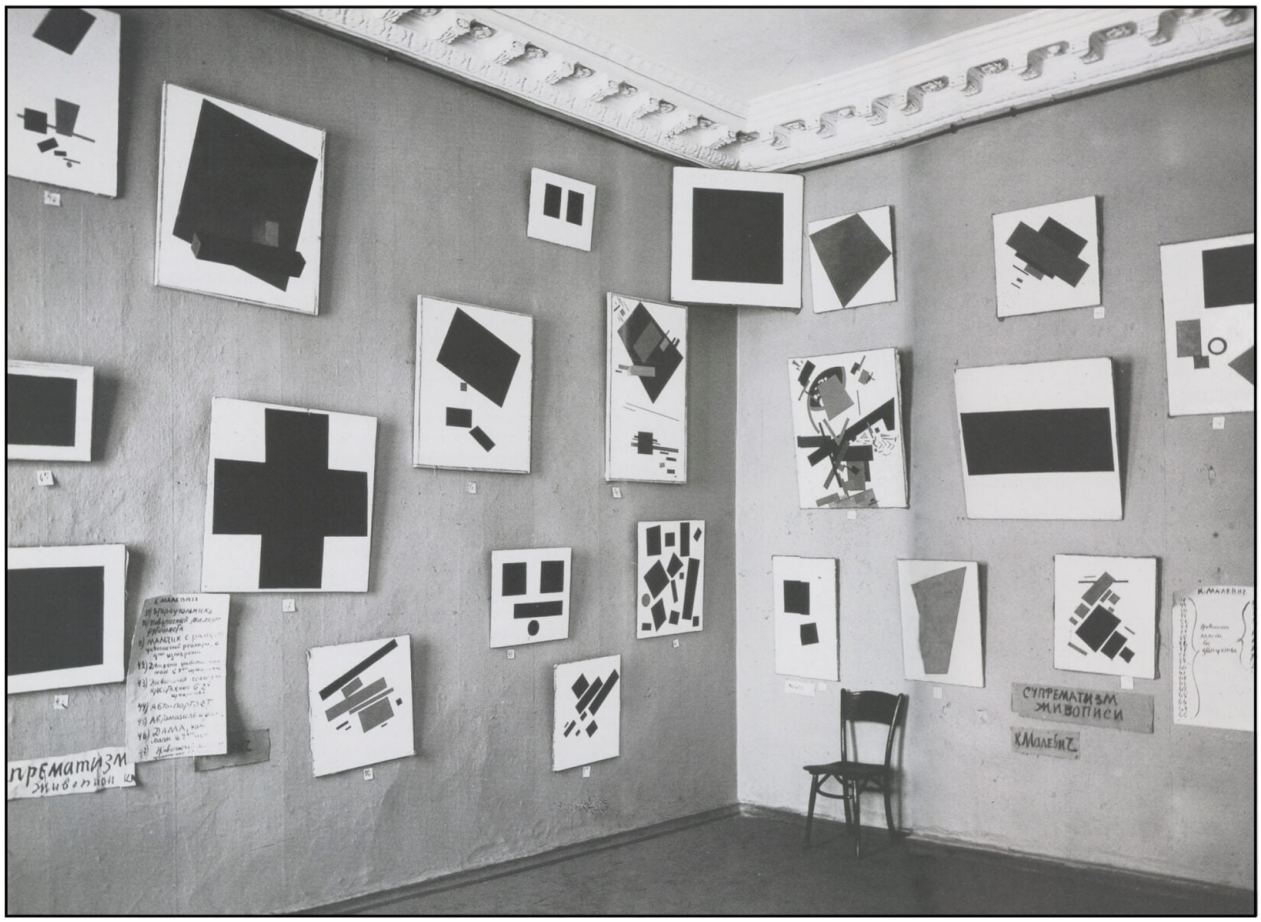
The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0,10 opened in Petrograd on December 17, 2015. As its title proclaimed, the exhibition was designed to mark the end of all representational art, even that of Futurism. The meaning of the numbers "zero-ten" has never been clear (Shatskikh, 2012, pp 101-102). "Zero" likely represented the end of everything and perhaps "ten" indicated the number of artists scheduled for the exhibition, although 14 artists were ultimately included in the catalogue. Together with the exhibition, Malevich published *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Painterly Realism* (Bowlt, 1976, pp 116-135). Like all of Malevich's writings, the thoughts tend more to ecstasy than logic:

I have transformed myself *in the zero of form* and have fished myself out of the *rubbishy slough of academic art*. I have destroyed the ring of the horizon and got out of the circle of objects, the horizon ring that has imprisoned the artist and the forms of nature. This accursed ring, by continually revealing novelty after novelty, leads the artist away from the *aim of destruction*.

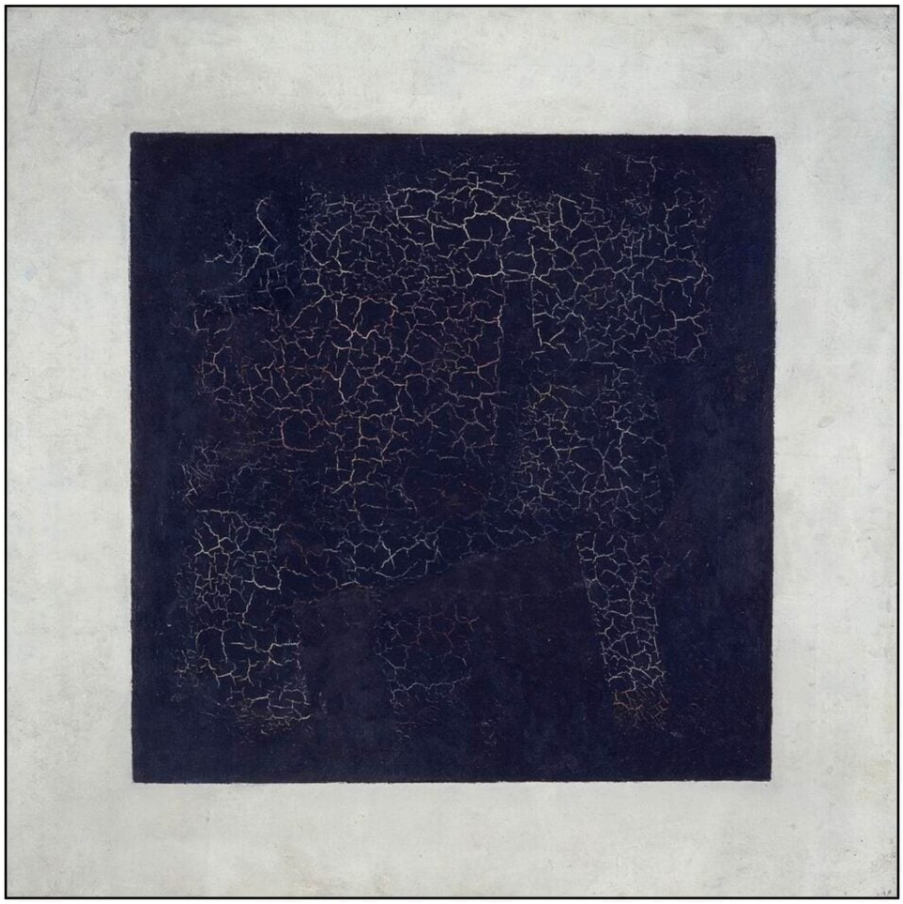
Only dull and impotent artists veil their work with *sincerity*. Art requires *truth,* not sincerity. *Objects have vanished like smoke; to attain the new artistic culture*, art advances toward creation as an end in itself and toward domination over the forms of nature.

Malevich's Suprematist paintings were displayed in one of the rooms of the exhibition. In these paintings, simple shapes float in a white space, seeking out equilibrium and sometimes moving in front of each other. The painting entitled *Black Square* was mounted high in the corner of the room, in the position where one might display a religious icon: The

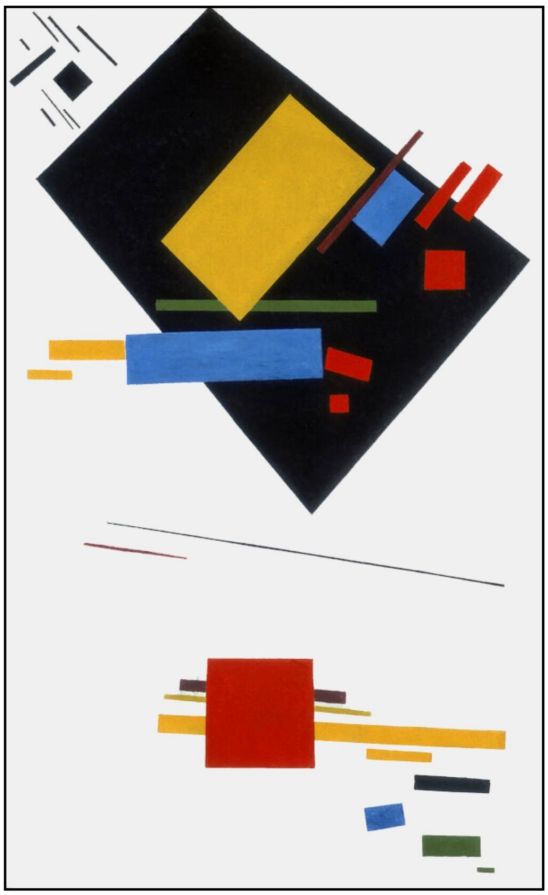
following illustration shows a photograph of the original exhibition and a replica of the room (missing the chair and the labels) put together by the Chinese-American artist John Diao in 1985:


супрематизм
живописи
К.Малевич

The original *Black Square* has not aged well: the black paint has crackled significantly and the white paint is scuffed and dirty. Visual and radiographic examination shows that the square was painted over other shapes, as though Malevich had come to a sudden realization that even those simple shapes should be eclipsed:



The following illustration shows two of Malevich’s more complex *Suprematisms*, the left one having been part of the 1915 exhibition and the right one dating 2016.



Among the artists presenting at the 1915 exhibition was Lyubov Popova (1889-1924). She had been painting in a Cubist style, but after the exhibition moved to more complete abstraction. The following is her *Painterly Architectonic* (1918) and *Spatial Force Construction* (1920);

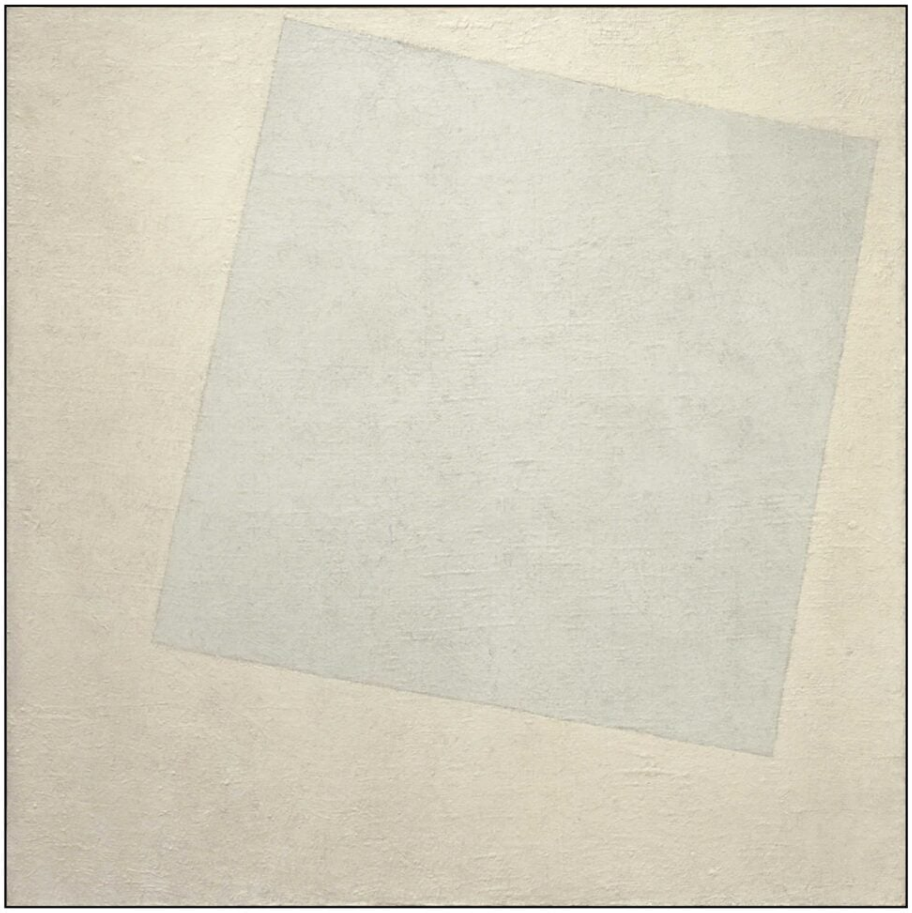
Another artist in the exhibition was Vladimir Tatlin (1885-1953; Baier, 2012). He had denied the need for painting of any kind. Instead, he put together assemblages of materials or “counter-reliefs,” one of which is shown in the following illustration (left). He founded a movement called Constructivism, which used the new technology and materials to build things that could be used rather than admired (Lodder in Ioffe & White, pp 227-249). In 1919, he designed a spiral tower to commemorate the Third International. This was to have been made of steel and glass and to have reached a height of over 400 m. It was never constructed. The illustration (below, right) shows a model from 1920.

The Russian Revolution

Deaths in battle and shortages of food during the first years of World War I precipitated widespread unrest in Russian society. In March 1917, Tsar Nicholas II was forced to resign. The provisional government was then itself overthrown by Vladimir Lenin and the Bolsheviks in November 1917. Russia then entered into a prolonged Civil War fought mainly between the Communist Red Army and the White Army composed of those loyal to the Russian Empire. To prevent any hope that the Tsar be reinstated, Nicholas II and his family were murdered in July 1918. The Civil War finally ended in 1922 with the establishment of the Soviet Union. During the war and for many years afterward, the country was wracked by widespread famine, as communism imposed its principles upon the economy. After Lenin died in 1924, Josef Stalin became the leader of the Soviet Union.

The Suprematists and the Constructivists enthusiastically assisted in the birth of the new society, founding schools to teach arts and crafts to the workers. Malevich continued to produce his Suprematist paintings. One important painting – *White on White* (1918) – seemed to celebrate the revolution.

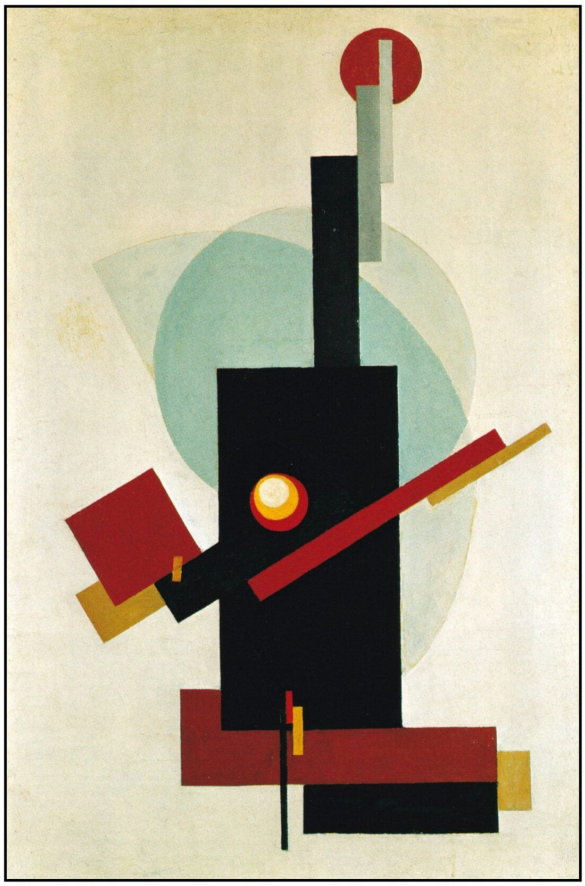
The principles of the past have been swept away, leaving an almost empty canvas though which we can just discern the future.

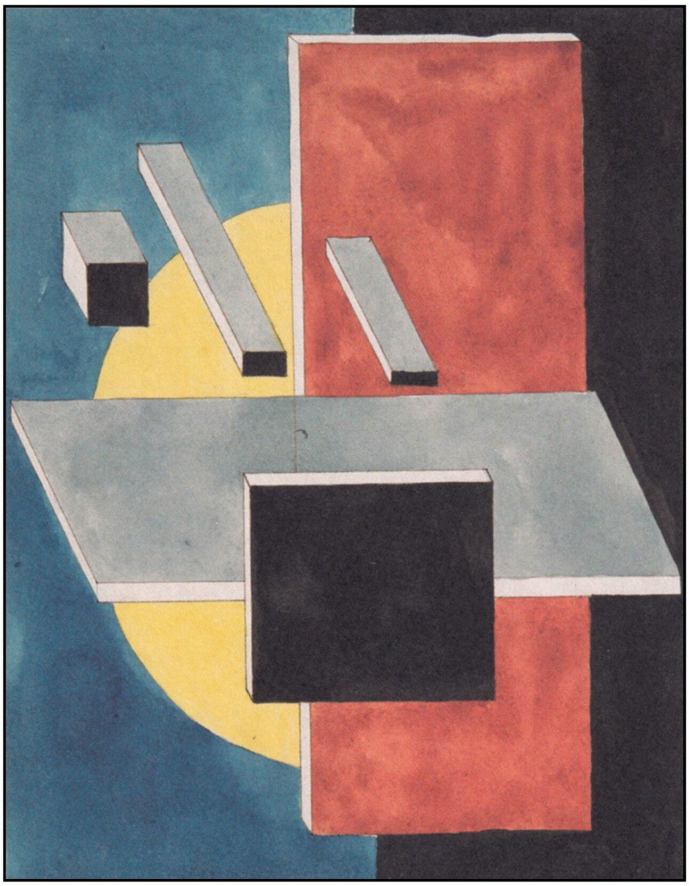


Other Malevich paintings from the early years after the revolution tended toward the mystical. The following illustration shows *Eight Red Rectangles*, one of the paintings from the 1915 exhibition, and *Mystic Suprematism* from 1920. Though Malevich had rejected his Catholic upbringing, the idea that one might approach the divine through art persisted (Mashek, 2023). The term “Suprematism” contains within itself the idea of some ultimate power that the artist is attempting to perceive.

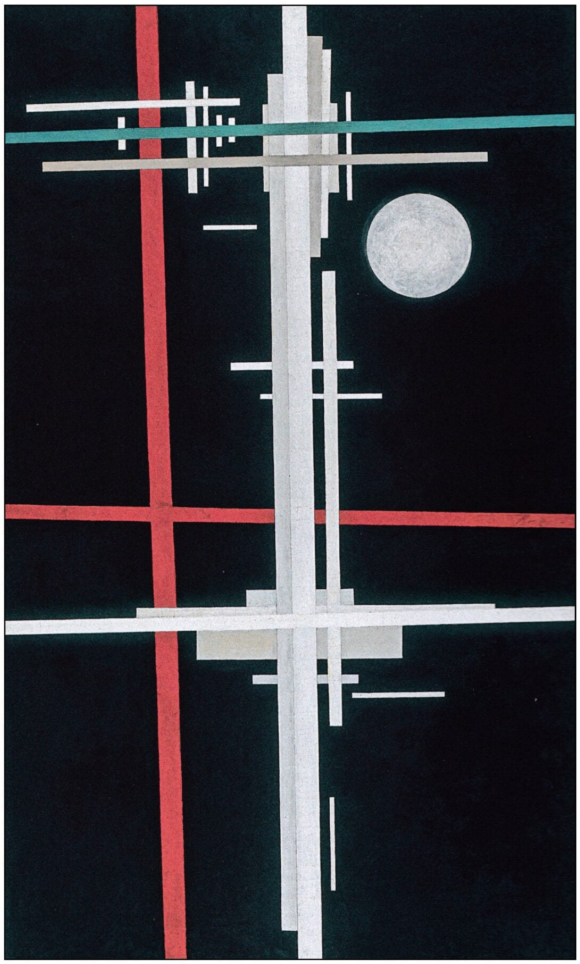
UNOVIS

In 1919 Malevich joined the School of Art in Vitebsk, a small town in the western region of the Russian Empire (now Byelorus), and a significant center of Jewish culture. In 1920, Malevich succeeded Marc Chagall as the artistic director of the school, and gathered around him a group of artists that called themselves UNOVIS: ***U****tverditeli* ***Nov****ogo* ***Is****kusstva* or “Champions of the New Art” (Lampe, 2012; Scheijen, 2024, pp 237 248)). The following illustration shows work by two of Malevich’s students: Georgii Riazhsky (1920) and David Yakerson (1920)

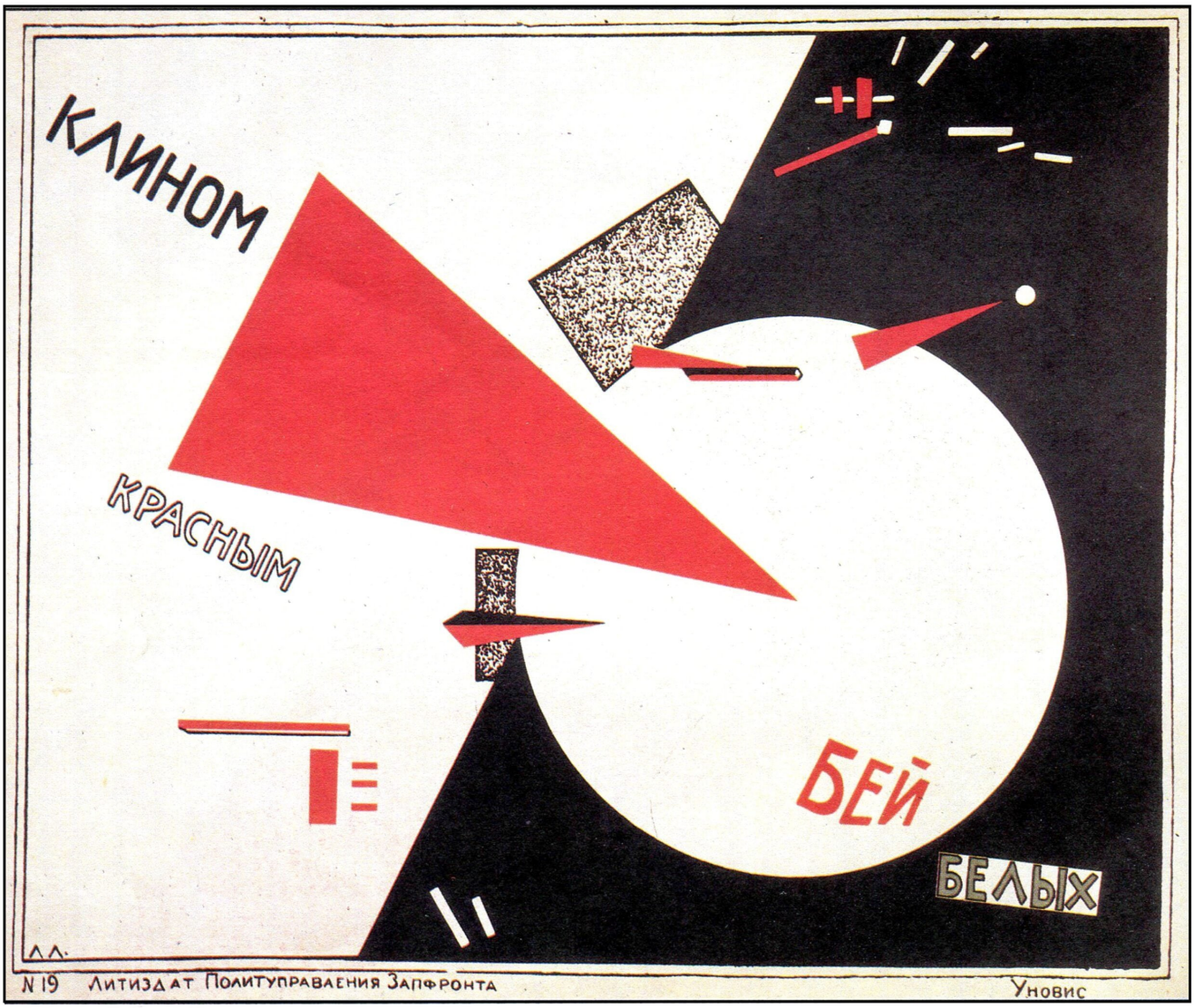




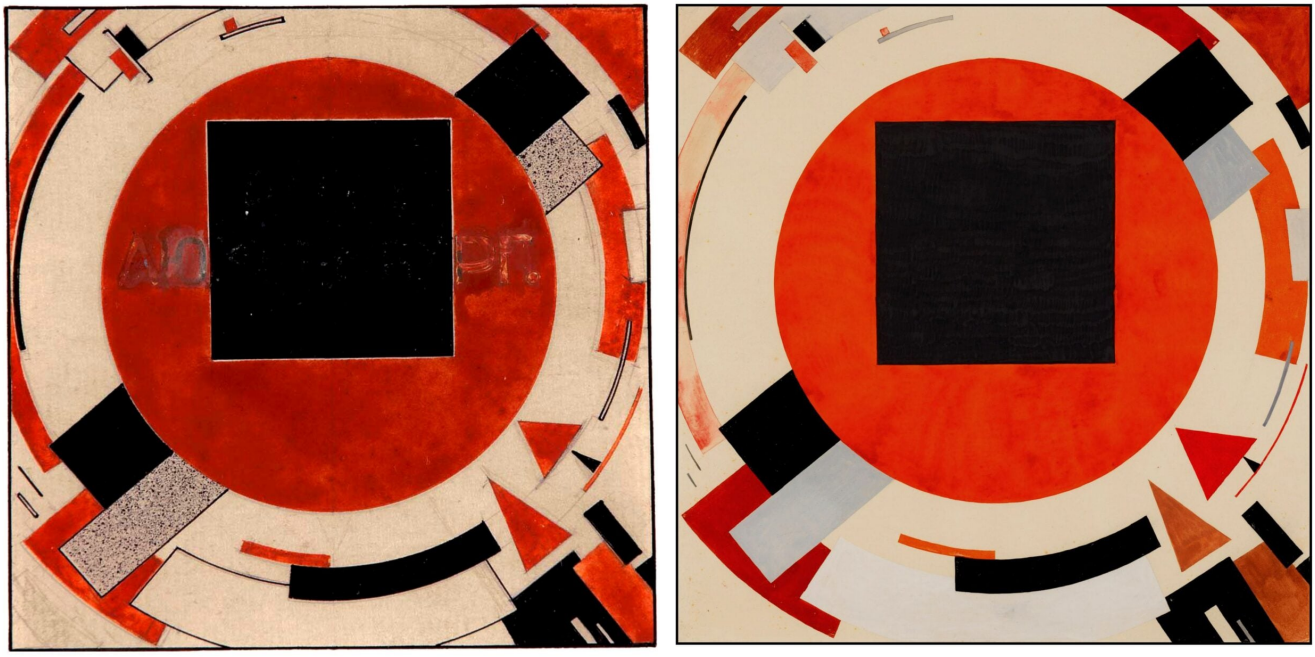
Two other students were Kliment Redko (1921) and Ilya Chashnik (1923):



One of Malevich’s colleagues in Vitebsk was El Lissitzky (1890-1941), who produced propaganda posters supporting the new Red Army. The poster urges the “Red wedge” (Клином красным, *Klinom krasnym*) to “beat the whites” (бей белых, *bey belykh*):



El Lissitzky produced many Suprematist paintings that he called *prouns*. The word is likely a contraction of Pro-Unovis (Clark,1999, p 231). Probably his most famous *proun* is that painted as a memorial for Rosa Luxemburg, the communist revolutionary who participated in the failed Spartacist uprising in Berlin in 1919, and was summarily executed thereafter by the German military. In the original *proun* (left below, 1920) a black square, perhaps signifying death, obscures the faded name Rosa Luxemburg written in Cyrillic (Роза Люксембург) on a red circle that probably represents the communist revolution. A later version of the *proun* (1924, right) no longer showed Luxemburg's name and used the more generic title *Project for Progress*.

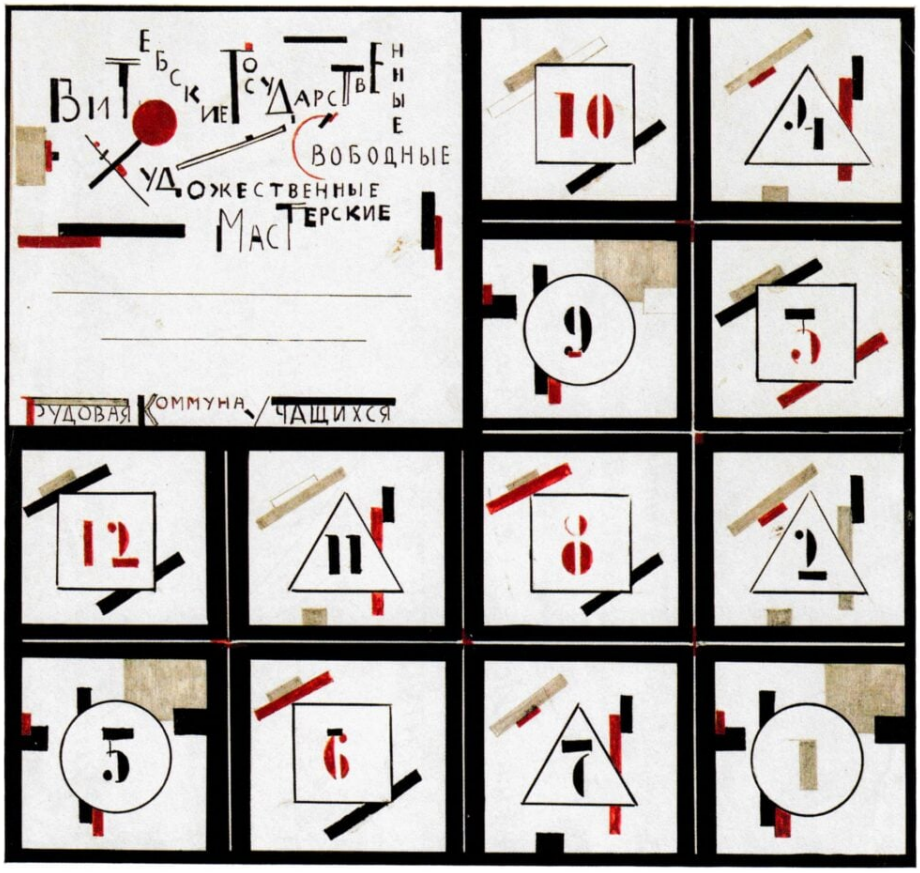


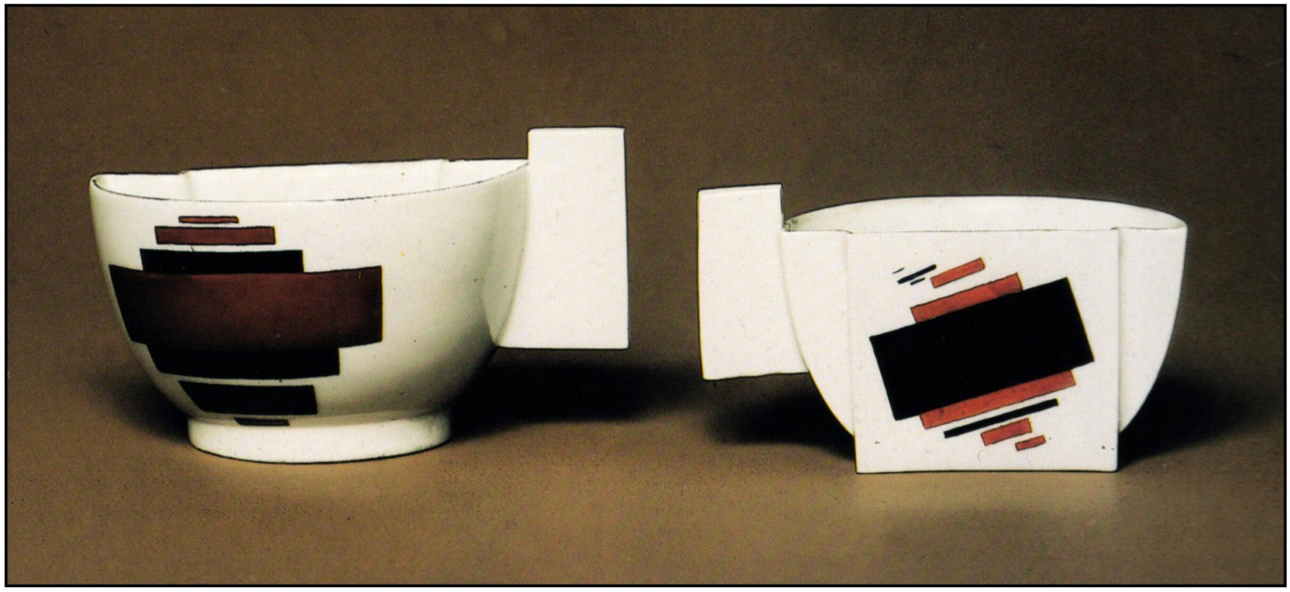
The following are comments by T. J. Clark (1999, p 251)

> I shall treat the elements in the gouache as fourfold. There is a red circle and a black square “on top” of it. There is a universe of smaller, more random Suprematist elements at the picture’s edges, most of the elements being segments of circles as if answering the shape of the central red planet. And then, written into the square and the circle – seemingly half-inscribed into them, but with color seeping back into the lines of lettering – the words ROSA LUXEMBURG, in formal script, complete with period. The effect, as I say, is simple. The symbolism is more or less transparent. Red = wor1d = revolution. Black = death = matter = nothing. (The last two terms in the series would have had, for someone under Malevich’s influence in 1920, a strong positive valency.) The arrows and aeroliths are the various forces, some of them maybe still hostile, about to be brought into the orbit of world revolution. None of this is exactly disturbed by the final inscription of Rosa Luxemburg’s name, but I do think that the presence of writing energizes and complicates the picture’s whole economy.

UNOVIS also attempted to provide art for the everyday life of

the revolution. The following illustrations show a ration card designed by Aleksandr Tseitlin in 1920, and a set of cups designed by Malevich and produced in 1923:





Kandinsky

In 1913 and 1914 Wassily Kandinsky (1866-1944), a Russian painter and theorist working in Munich produced some completely abstract paintings. In 1914 he was commissioned to paint four panels for Edwin Campbell, the founder of Chevrolet Motors, to adorn the entrance foyer of his Park Avenue apartment (Roethel & Benjamin, 1979, pp 112-115). World War I delayed the transfer of the paintings to New York and they were later moved to Campbell's house in Palm Beach. Following his divorce, the paintings were sold off for a pittance, but ultimately made their way to the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Two of the panels are shown below. They are completely free of any real-world representation. If anything, they appear as music transposed into line and color.

When World War I broke out, Kandinsky returned to Russia, leaving his long-term partner Gabriele Münter, and settling back into his family home in Moscow. He exhibited his paintings together with Malevich, Popova and others, and in early 1917 married Nina von Andreevskaia. After the Russian Revolution he participated in the newly formed NKP (People's Commissariat for Enlightenment), and later taught at the Institute of Artistic Culture (INKhUK), founded in 1920. However, he never felt comfortable in the new Communist Society and in 1922, he moved back to Germany to join the newly formed Bauhaus in Weimar (Poling, 1983).

Kandinsky and the Suprematists represented two extremes in abstraction: the ecstatic and the austere. However, Kandinsky was clearly affected by the work of Malevich and his colleagues. His paintings became more restrained and he began to use simple geometric shapes. The following illustrations show *Multicolored Circle* (1921) from his time in Moscow, and *Yellow, Red and Blue* (1925) one of the masterpieces from his Bauhaus years. The left side of the latter could pass for a Suprematist painting (cf the Riazhsky painting previously illustrated).

AKhRR

Russian abstract art soon elicited a backlash. In 1922, a group of disaffected artists, among them Yevgeny Katsman, Alexander Grigoriev and Sergey Malyutin, formed the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (*Assotsiatsia khudozhnikov revolutsionnoi Rossii*, AKhRR; Scheijen, 2024, pp 323-343). They proposed that artists should support the revolution with art that the people could easily understand. The following is from their manifesto (Bowlt, 1976, p 266):

> The Great October Revolution, in liberating the creative forces of the people, has aroused the consciousness of the masses and the artists-the spokesmen of the people's spiritual life.
>
> Our civic duty before mankind is to set down, artistically and documentarily, the revolutionary impulse of this great moment of history.
>
> We will depict the present day: the life of the Red Army,

> the workers, the peasants, the revolutionaries, and the heroes of labor.
>
> We will provide a true picture of events and not abstract concoctions discrediting our Revolution in the face of the international proletariat.

In 1924 Lenin died and Stalin took over the leadership of the Soviet Union. He sided with the AKhRR and abstract art fell completely out of favor. Socialist Realism became the art of the people (Groys in Ioffe & White, 2012, pp 250-276; Bown et al, 2012; Glomshtok, 2011). Abstract art was considered meaningless "formalism."

Farewell to an Era

The Russian Avant-Garde did not last long: a mere ten years occurred between the foundation of Russian Futurism and the fall from grace of Suprematism and Constructionism. Nevertheless, it was a decade of intense creativity wherein artists explored the limits of their art. One must recognize that they tried to bring about a revolution in our ideas of aesthetics. Boris Groys (in Ioffe& White, 2012, p 252) remarks that the Russian Avant-Garde

> is often regarded in an aestheticized, purely formal, stylistic light, although such a view is opposed to the objectives of the Russian avant-garde, which sought to overcome the traditional contemplative attitude toward art. While today, the works of the Russian avant-garde hang in museums and are sold in galleries like any other works of art, one should not forget that Russian avant-garde artists strove to destroy the museum, to wipe it out as a social institution, ensuring the idea of art as the "individual" or "hand-made" production by an artist of objects of aesthetic contemplation which are then consumed by the spectator. As they understood it, the artists of the Russian avant-garde

> were producing not objects of aesthetic consumption but projects or models for a total restructuring of the world on new principles, to be implemented by collective actions and social practice in which the difference between consumer and producer, artist and spectator, work of art and object of utility, and so on, disappeared.

Though they failed in their goal of destroying the museum, they did bring to us new ways of viewing that which cannot be represented (Golding, 2000). Abstraction continued and we can see the influence of the Russian Avant-Garde in the Abstract Expressionism of the mid 20th Century. Kandinsky led toward Pollock and Malevich toward Rothko. Mark Rothko (1903-1970) was born in the Russian Empire but came as a child to the United States. His *No. 1 White and Red* (1962) uses a similar palette to Malevich and tries in its simplicity to understand the mystery of experience:

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