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# Paradoxy in Kasimir Malevic: The Revolutionary Supreme Traditional Stance

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Article Info	Abstract
Received: 11/03/2022 Accepted: 19/09/2022	Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935), the modern era Russian artist, brought up the abstract art movement, called suprematism by him, at the beginning of the 20th century (about 1910s). He is a well-known representative of abstract art in the context of suprematism in the modern era. Malevich reduces painting to geometric forms with suprematism. By doing so, the artist purifies
Keywords	the painting from all nature and elements. The artist wanted to carry out the painting art to the zero point with his geometry-based suprematist works, and with this idea, he objected to the
Kasimir Malevich, Paradox, Suprematism, Stereometry, Pure Art, Abstract Art	mimetic painting tradition in Europe. However, Malevich's suprematist art thought would not last long; later, he left his suprematism idea and returned to all traditional art and aesthetic values that he had criticized before the 1930s. Actually, it was not an inconsistency. It was a renunciation of revolutionary and innovative things. In a way, because of the Russian Revolutions, which took place in his era, the art policies of the state and the audiences in his society motivated him to return to figurative painting again. From another point of view, Malevich gave up the non- figurative painting in the suprematist approach for the sake of his nostalgia because of his past of art education and returned to figurative painting. Therefore, there is a paradoxical situation in Malevich's example.

# **1. METHOD**

In this research, the paintings of Russian artist Kasimir Malevich made in different periods were scanned using the descriptive method. The findings obtained within the scope of the research were re-evaluated in the context of non-figurative and figurative art within the artist's periods.

# 2. INTRODUCTION

Beginning to make itself felt since the end of the nineteenth century, modernism moves around rationalist, progressive, pragmatist and innovative ideas. While these thoughts determine the orientation of all political, economic, cultural and social dynamics after the beginning of the twentieth century, these trends also affect modern art movements. So much so that the twentieth century art of the Modern Period was influenced by the industrial revolution, social revolutions and wars. In this process, the basic aesthetic values and theories of art are reviewed by art theorists and artists. Aesthetic theories based on mimetic understanding in art begin to build their place over the concept of 'difference'. Anti-mimetic (anti-imitation) arguments emerge against an aesthetic phenomenon in which approaches such as art imitating nature and imitating it are defended. In this new paradigm, the concept of 'difference' particularly emerges. The Russian artist of the Modern Period, Kasimir Malevich (1878-1935), pioneered new aesthetic proposals away from nature, figures, objects and associations with his art. Malevich uses the English-origin 'supreme' (supreme, highest) concept for his own art, and aims to be supreme in the context of reaching the 'high, the highest' by purifying and purifying the visual elements that represent nature in his painting.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many European artists, not just Malevich, questioned the ties of art to tradition. As a result of this questioning, it is opposed to the instrumentalization of art for the sake of

a representative quality. The modernist artists of this period offer an art proposal that does not depend on the imitation of nature and objects. Ultimately, it is ensured that art tends towards non-figurative or abstract art. Kasimir Malevich is also a pioneer in the transition from figurative art to non-figurative art. While making figurative paintings, Malevich, with his revolutionary character, tries to question the aesthetic values of art and to reduce art to a pure, geometric form.

Undoubtedly, 'the 1905 Revolution' and 'The October Revolution of 1917', the political movements of the Tsarist Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century, had many effects in determining the direction of Russian modern art. Before the 1905 revolution, both social and political crises occurred in Russia, and all these unresolved problems forced the administration to a radical reformation. According to Perrie, the important common features of countries such as England, America, France and Russia are that their management approaches are based on producing reform mechanisms. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the failure to implement the reforms made by Russia and the inadequacy of the expected reforms caused crises in the administration. Perrie sees this administrative crisis as one of the main causes of these Russian revolutions. Therefore, this situation incites dissidents and intellectual traditionalists against the government. (Perrie, 2003: p. 197). The loss of the importance of the Russian Tsarist State with the 1905 Revolution, while making the workers have a say in the political field, made Bolsheviks and socialists a threat to the power. This situation is almost like a precursor to the October Revolution of 1917. With the October Revolution, Socialists and Bolsheviks allied themselves to the government. The newly formed government acted with the aim of collectivizing capital, land and industry." (Tilly, 2005: pp. 238-243).

Questioning the relations between revolution and art on the subject of revolutions affecting Russian modern art, Lunacharsky says: "If revolution can give spirit to art, it can be the mouth of revolution in art." On the other hand, he states that the revolution needs art, that the revolution will turn art into a weapon, and that the revolution must give a lot to the artists. (Lunacharsky, 2004: pp. 41-43). In Russia, revolutionaries fight with social life, and Russian artists fight with judgments of taste. While Vladimir Mayakovsky, as a poet, undertakes the spokesperson of the revolution with his poems in the field of literature, a group of Russian artists inspired by Italian futurism in the field of painting give this movement a revolutionary character. In this period, with the 'October Revolution of 1917', Russian futurism moved away from the Italian line and formed the left side of art.

The First World War, which started in 1914, is recorded as a tough test that affected all modern art circles. The futurists condemn the war by criticizing those who defend it, and become the first to strike, using all the weapons of art. Before the end of World War I, the 'October Revolution of 1917' took place in Russia. This revolution divided the futurists in Russia into rightist and leftist. While the rightist futurists became the echo of democratic cuteness; leftist futurists are called 'Art Bolsheviks'. Then futurism becomes the left side of art. (Batur, 2002: p. 162). According to Lunacharsky, there were two phenomena after the revolution. The first phenomenon was that the broad masses of people educated by the revolution demand from art a social content with clearly realistic expressions. However, leftist artists primarily move away from the language of social realism by making allusions and styling with a formalist attitude. The other was a change in the direction of revolution among realist artists. (Lunacharsky, 2004: p. 139). However, for Russian art to take a step towards a new understanding, the government must first protect the old art. At the same time, the state will actively support any innovation that will be beneficial to the masses of the people. (Lunacharsky, 2004: p. 45). In this revolutionary process, Malevich rejects tradition and draws a revolutionary direction in art with a revolutionary attitude: "We want to shape ourselves into a new pattern, a plan, a system; We want to build it in such a way that all the values of nature merge with the human and create an image that has one everything." (Maleviç, 2011: p. 327).

As can be seen, Russian revolutions shaped the art of Malevich, who was on the path of the 'Black Square'. In Russia, After these revolutions at the beginning of the 20th century, social structures and regulations were also implemented. The effect of these revolutions in Russia continued until the 1930s and brought

new structuring in Russian art. Therefore, Russian art in this process takes on a constructivist structure in accordance with the abstract tendency. The art policy of the Russian administration, which has undergone a radical change in the social field, is primarily to preserve the traditional. Malevich, on the other hand, states that by instrumentalizing the traditional for the sake of pure form, traditional Russian art has left its place to the new form language. Artist; "Today, while revolutionary perfection brings in a new, youthful world of forms as the body of being, reactionary elements dig up the remnants of past perfection and show them to the masses. These are not cited as examples of ancient life for understanding the evolution of form." (Malevic, 2011: p. 328), he states that traditional art is a stage for the perfect form.

There are no traces of any traditional art and mimetic understanding in Malevich's artistic understanding, which emerged at a time when the Russian revolutions were made and the effects of Italian futurism were felt in Russian art, and he does not evoke any nature, object or figure. Malevich's revolution in art was not limited to Russia, but his influence spread all over the world. He carried the painting to a point he called 'zero form' and this phenomenon brought the 'end of art' discourse with it in the West. Malevich did not accept even the slightest association of nature, object and figure, let alone the data. Therefore, the artist suggested and practiced to exclude everything that is copy, imitation, representation from the picture.

# 3. PURIFICATION, CONTENTLESSNESS AND NOTHINGNESS IN MALEVICH

Russian artist Malevich wants to bring the formal appearance of his paintings to a pure state. The basis of this thought is the understanding of form, purified from everything. While the artist sees the painting as a very simple geometric element, the basis of this thought is the desire to draw the painting to the zero point. In Malevich, the zero point of the painting is explained with the meaning of the concept of 'suprema' in English, 'highest, highest, peak'. According to the artist, suprematic reality gains formal existence with basic geometric forms such as square, triangle, circle on a surface. With his suprematic thought in question, Malevich reflects both geometric forms and abstract art as the 'highest' and purest, purest, purest, most purified, and most reduced art.

The concept that Malevich calls suprematism has no connection with nature, object and figure. It is also completely free from traditional painting elements. Suprematism only includes geometric forms and moves from geometric abstraction. This understanding divides the objects in nature into parts, and these parts are reconstructed in a geometrical order and turn into a work. (Image- 1). In this respect, Suprematism differs from the Cubism art movement. The basic idea in cubism is based on the principle of reflecting objects in nature on a plane from different angles. In Suprematism, on the other hand, only geometric forms are brought together with the constructivist method. (Eczacıbaşı, 1997: p. 1449). Suprematism is based on basic geometric forms such as circle, square, rectangle, triangle. However, cubism tries to reduce the object to a superficial dimension by including the idea of volume, starting from the shape of the object or starting from a basic form.

Regarding the differences between Suprematism and Cubism, Malevich states the following: "Although the elimination of the object is obvious, painting in Cubism reaches the extreme limit of painting; Behind this limit, contentlessness (objectlessness) begins. Suprematism arose neither from Cubism nor from Futurism; It was born neither from the West nor from the East. For without content is nothingness, and without content does not come from anything else. Suprema is rather the experience of pure contentlessness" (cited in Tunalı, 1996: p. 183). According to Sorguer, Malevich wants to reduce all forms, all pictures to zero, and to create a picture that does not represent objects and is only himself (Giderer, 2003: p. 117).

The purification of painting from nature and the teachings of the Western art tradition and all other interests means zero point. In this context, the zero point can also be called purism. Purification is the abstraction of nature, object, figure, form, meaning and content in art. In this respect, art will move away from nature, objects and appearances, and will reach a metaphysical and spatial world, that is, suprema beyond the

physical and spatial world perceived by the senses. The zero point is the top, the highest, the summit, the pinnacle for Malevich. For Suprematism, the objective representation of the visible world is meaningless; The concepts of the conscious mind have no value. The basic dynamic of Suprematism is emotion. Thus, art reaches non-figurative representation, that is, suprematism. He reaches the desert where nothing can be perceived but emotion. In order to reach the pure feeling, Malevich leaves aside the concepts and images that determine the objective ideal structure of life and art. (Antmen, 2013: p. 90).



Figure 1. Kasimir Malevich, Nature. (Malevic, 2003: p. 15).

Malevich's suprematism is against the pragmatist approach of constructivism and aims at an art without objects. Accompanied by purist feelings, the artist expresses suprematism as "I just felt the night inside me and that was the art that was created, I called it suprematism". (Malevic, 2003: p. 7-8). In another source, Malevich says: "I envision the universe of invisible and inexhaustible forms, an infinite universe takes place in the invisible to me" (Act. Batur, 2002: p. 196).

The Russian artist of the Modern Period, Kasimir Malevich, created a distinctive abstract painting movement in the 1910s. This art movement is of a stereometric nature. In Malevich's stereometric understanding, painting is seen as an architectural structure. (Image-2). With the vertical-horizontal, object-space approach in stereometry, architecture exists as a constructivist fiction. In this context, Malevich's paintings appear in geometric forms such as squares, triangles and circles, which are the first form of existence. This suprematic expression is formally purified. In the paintings of the artist, not only the form but also the color has been purified. According to Nakov (2000: p. 183), three main colors, namely yellow, red and blue, are used among the basic forms in Malevich's works. Color is in the image's existence order. Color loses its sensory quality and becomes a form element. Therefore, the painting becomes a pure being that comes into existence with lines and pure colors.

In traditionalist representational art, which takes nature as a model, the work consists of a dual structure as form and content. The form is the perceived external reality of the work of art; content, on the other hand, is thought of as the message that tries to convey the perceived external reality of the form in the artwork. In a Suprematic painting, however, there is no understanding of form depending on externally perceived reality and there is no content that this form evokes in the visible sense. However, one can speak of a content in the sense of 'without content'. Malevich explains contentlessness as 'nothingness'. It ignores tradition and culture and is against a semantic formation based on tradition. Malevich's nothingness is a nothingness

freed from limited forms and cultural catastrophe; According to him, truth is in contentlessness and in nothingness. (Tunalı, 1996: p. 190).



Figure 2. Kasimir Malevich, Black Trapezoid and Red Square, 61x101 cm., 1915.

Contentlessness precedes suppression in Malevich's art. This state of contentlessness can be achieved by artistically moving away from the world of objects and separating from the sensible. According to Tunalı, the artist leaves practical realism and starts to tend towards contentlessness. Malevich calls man's seeing things as real as practical realism. Practical realism, on the other hand, was divided into religion, science and art, each of which always contradicted the other, according to him. Because each one wants to be accepted individually. The separation of religion, science and art would have created something out of nothing. Contentlessness is nothingness, and as nothingness it is equality without content. Equality without content, which Malevich calls 'White Equality'. This is suprematism. Because 'White Equality' contains the essence of human beings. This essence is unique and must be understood as the essence of being. (Tunalı, 1996: pp. 180-190).

# 4. REJECTION OF TRADITION AND SUPREMATIC PAINTINGS IN MALEVICH

Malevich uses geometric shapes in his suprematic paintings, which he made in the 190s, rejecting the traditional and mimetic understanding, and he calls the paintings he created with these forms "Zero Form". The suprematic works designed by the artist as pure form are non-figurative; that is, it is described as figureless.

Malevich paints the painting 'Black Square on White' (Image-3) in 1913. This is the artist's first suprematic painting experience. This work, which is the first product of Suprematism, is 106.2x106.5 cm and was worked as an oil painting on canvas. In the work, there is a black square form on white, equidistant from all the edges. The Black Square is the expression of an abstract entity. When we look at the work, it is impossible to perceive the existence of something else. (Act. Tunalı, 1996: p. 186). The artist explains 'Black Square' by saying that in my desperate effort to free art from the burden of the objective world, I took refuge in the form of 'square'. The black square escapes from sensory reality, all kinds of

representation, imitation and mimetic approaches, towards the abstract; that is, it turns to the essence of being. According to Sorguer (2003: 188), the black square cannot be expressed with an image that is seen and belongs to the substance. By reducing the three-dimensional volume to a surface, it expresses a pure form and square. So the square is filled with the absence of any object.



Figure 3. Kasimir Malevich, Black Square on White, 1913. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

According to İpşiroğlu, Malevich's work does not tell anything. It is a purified form by staying away from black square objects and all their feelings and associations. Thus, Malevich believes that the world of objects should perish into nothingness. 'Zero-Form' is seen as the harbinger of a new era in which people's greed for property will disappear, and will bring happiness to people beyond all kinds of interests and selfishness. This era Malevich calls the era of 'Suprematism-The Objectless World'. In the world without objects, man will be in nothingness, and nothingness is liberation from the yoke of objects. (İpşiroğlu, 1993: p. 58-60). (Act. Batur, 2002: p. 196) Malevich's suprematic paintings say that contentlessness is the essence of nature, life and existence.

Another work of Malevich called 'Süprema' (Visual - 4) is made in accordance with the geometric understanding. The painting consists of geometric shapes such as triangles, rectangles, circles, semicircles and cross-sections of diagonal lines that intersect on the horizontal and vertical axes on a white plane. The artist uses color quite simply and sparingly in this painting. Color is not an essential plastic value; because the artist tries to keep the painting away from all associations. Therefore, color serves a conceptual expression rather than a volumetric expression. Color mediates the same purpose not only in the painting that Malevich named Süprema, but also in all the paintings he made with a suprematic approach. In this respect, we cannot see color as a light-shadow, volume, movement, rhythm and compositional element that reflects the characteristics of the object; color takes place as a balance element in the artist's paintings.



Figure 4. Kasimir Malevich, Suprema, 1916. (Croneand Moos, 1991: p. 13).

In the artist's work called 'Suprematic Composition' (Visual - 5), color fills an area limited by geometric shapes. In his Suprematic Composition, the artist again adhered to the geometric and stereometric understanding on a white background. Compositional balance is provided by both the form and the distribution of colors. The picture consists of diagonal and vertical rectangles and a yellow circle slightly below the centre. Color and form are used with their most basic qualities in Malevich's suprematic paintings. In his other suprematic paintings, geometric shapes and colors are formed with compositions in different combinations. Therefore, the artist has been away from all nature associations in his suprematic paintings.



Figure 5. Kasimir Malevich, Suprematic Composition, 1915.

# 5. THE MALEVICH PARADOX OR BACK TO TRADITION

Malevich, who cared about non-figurative art in the first years of the twentieth century and structured his art according to this understanding, returned to figurative painting in the 1930s. The first question that comes to our mind about Malevich's return to the figure is why the artist has returned to this understanding. Could it be the art strategy of the Russian state during and after the revolution? Is the reason for this turn due to the pressure on artists as a result of the politicization of culture? Similar questions like this one can be listed. However, the return of an artist who said that during the war and between the two revolutions, art broke all ties with tradition and who put forward a suprematic understanding that he calls zero form, in short, Malevich, who exhibited a revolutionary attitude with all his demeanor, is quite sad and thought-provoking. Because, as in other modern movements, the artist stands with a new argument and a revolutionary attitude.

In the 1910s, Malevich overlooked the entire cultural past, disregarding the old, classic and tradition, and established the Suprematism art movement. Moreover, he gave the name zero form to the paintings he made in this process. However, whatever happened, we see that the artist turned to figurative art with a sudden maneuver in the 1930s. Perhaps the art policy of Soviet Russia at that time was effective among the reasons for this situation. In 1932, the Soviet Central Committee dissolved all artist groups and established the Union of Soviet Artists. In the same year, the celebration exhibition supported by the Russian state in Moscow and Leningrad included both the "Social Realistic Art" section and the "Degenerated Art" section, which included futurist, suprematist and constructivist works. At the first congress of the Union of Soviet Writers convened in 1934, artists were informed that Socialist realism was the only allowed movement. In 1927, neither Malevich's nor Tatlin's paintings were included in the exhibition celebrating the 10th anniversary of Soviet art in Moscow. (Lynton, 151). It seems that the Soviet Central Committee had an influence on Malevich's return to figurative painting. The art strategy of the Soviet state politicized culture, and in this context, the inclusion of art in a single language and form also affected Malevich's art.



Figure 6. Kasimir Malevich, Portrait Study, Oil on Canvas, 1933.

The Russian people after the revolutions demanded social content from the artists. When evaluated in the context of the pragmatist approach of art on behalf of the society and the emerging new phenomena, Malevich's suprematic paintings could not find a response in social life. The fact that the suprematic paintings, which lack a social content, do not comply with the art strategy of the state in a certain direction

can also be considered among the reasons for the artist's return to the figure. The state's art policy may be effective, or the society in which art emerges may have different and national expectations from art; However, at this point, of course, the consistency and determination of the artist is important. Otherwise, if we acted according to expectations, art probably wouldn't be at the level it is today. Malevich has already broken these expectations. That's why the black square appeared. However, the artist returned to the figure he was against. (Image-6; Visual-7).



Figure 7. Kasimir Malevich, Portrait of Mrs. Malevich, Oil on Canvas, 1934.

Therefore, Malevich's return to a figure in the 1930s is not an acceptable situation for the artist's own artistic identity process. Because the dedication of an artist who came to the fore with his revolutionary artist personality, rejected the tradition and humiliated the classical, to the object and the figure is astonishing. However, in this period, the artist may have thought of making nostalgia after the last point of the painting, returning to his memories. So much so that while very few sources include Malevich's figurative paintings, it is seen that few art historians or critics talk about these paintings. This reveals that art has situations such as an ideological structuring or cultural coding.

# **5. CONCLUSION**

In this research, the different periods of the Russian painter Kazimir Malevich, one of the leading representatives of the Modern Period abstract art movement, are brought to the agenda. Malevich is an artist who was exposed to both the new principles of Modernism and Russia's innovative revolutions in the early twentieth century. The artist must have received art education based on painting and architecture; The revolutions made in Russia in 1905 and 1917 and the emergence of futurist and constructivist artistic understandings that developed within Modernism at that time are the forces affecting his art. However, the fact that Malevich was brought up with a classical and mimetic art education is another dimension of the event.

Malevich exhibits a revolutionary stance in art with suprema. He characterizes the Russian artistic tradition and cultural accumulation as utilitarian, instead establishing his own aesthetic values with pure geometrical form. It is seen that this attitude of the artist coincides with the revolutionary character of the Russian social structure of the period. It is noteworthy that successive revolutions took place in Russia in the first quarter of the 20th century and Russian artists were the spokespersons of this revolution. Malevich reflected the revolutionary life of the society he lived in to his art. As a result, it is seen that Malevich's Suprematic, figureless paintings were not long-lasting, and he returned to figure in the 1930s. In the background of this return of the artist, there is the traditional art education and the art and cultural policy or ideology of the Russian state.

Marxism, Positivism, Modernism, Industrial Revolution, Russian Revolutions, Futurism, Constructivism, wars and social events etc. It is not possible for Malevich, who lives in these environments, to remain indifferent to his environment. His art education processes, the intellectual developments around him and the political demands of the geography he lived reveal his art. Malevich's suprematism is the result of such an environment. With his suprematic paintings, the artist tries to refer to his own architectural and pictorial foundations, on the one hand, to the innovative and futurist views desired by the Russian revolutions, and to the intellectual art developments that developed around him, on the other. In other words, Malevich will include both the innovative architecture desired by the revolutions and the non-figurative forms desired by the intellectual art environment in his art. All these processes reflect the suprematic period of Malevich. However, over time, political, geographical, economic and subjective changes, flashbacks, advances or paradoxes can be seen in Malevich's works, as in some artists. Such a paradox emerges in Kasimir Malevich's art, especially after the 1930s. The artist goes back to his mimetic-based paintings, ignoring all modernist, futurist, constructivist and suprematic principles. This situation should be read as the situation of an artist who does what he wants or is exposed to things he does not want.

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