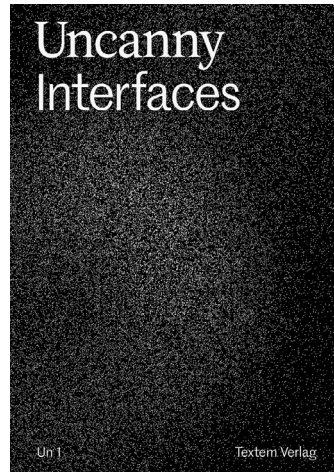


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# Malevich: On the Internet

## Olga Terre

Tenerife 2018

For the thousandth time he types the name that seems no longer his own: “Kazimir Malevich”. The machine spits out the usual line up of results. A selection perfected by years of frantic searching, to match his narcissistic needs: The dispute about the first abstract art - who painted nothing first. How a Swedish woman called Hilma af Klint (1862–1944) should claim that title.<sup>1</sup> The first black square in his Utriusque Cosmi published by Robert Fludd in 1617.<sup>2</sup> All nonsense! As if Hilma’s primordial chaos or Robert’s depiction of the pre-universe had anything to do with him. They had stumbled upon abstraction while trying to picture the intangible beyond the universe. He had searched for this gaping hole within himself. And the pages on the black square in art history that just classified him in the listings. A joke!<sup>3</sup> He enjoyed the ones about him marking the death of painting, even though the art market had taught him differently.<sup>4</sup> Kazimir skips through the articles already memorized, in hope for some new scholar putting in his oar.

A result on page three dates March 2018 and he feels blood flooding his face. With tingling fingers, he taps the link. Frustration draws tears to his eyes. Countless nights spent winding himself in

1 [www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/first-abstract-artist-and-its-not-kandinsky](http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/articles/first-abstract-artist-and-its-not-kandinsky)

2 [www.publicdomainreview.org/2015/04/09/black-on-black/](http://www.publicdomainreview.org/2015/04/09/black-on-black/)

3 [www.radicalart.info/nothing/monochrome/black/index.html](http://www.radicalart.info/nothing/monochrome/black/index.html)

4 [www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-expensive-artworks-sold-2017](http://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-expensive-artworks-sold-2017)

paranoid frustration seem to crawl out of the shadows behind him. The room is sparsely lit by the screen in front of him.

"In 2015, fresh analysis of the celebrated work (which Malevich said signified where 'the true movement of being begins') traced the outlines of abarely visible bigoted quip scrawled by the artist beneath the varnish. The lurking words 'battle of the negroes', too gutless to show their face in full view, are thought to be an allusion to a racist phrase – 'negroes battling at night' – used by a French humorist for an 1897 cartoon of a black square."<sup>5</sup>

He feels as if the silent field, he had cherished as his achievement, is crowding with words. All of a sudden he is not sure anymore if the black is even a square or not sentences, words, letters, all squeezing into the frame, so eager to litter his desert, that they leave no grain of sand in between them. These days even darkness doesn't hold a secret any more. On October 3rd, 2015 the sensation was initially made public by the Tretyakov Gallery, at the Fondation Beyeler in Basel.

Of course, they had immediately connected it to the painting of a black square entitled *A Battle of Negroes at Night* (*combat de nègres pendant la nuit*) exhibited in October 1882 by the poet Paul Bilhaud (1854–1933) at the first "Salon of Untethered Art" and the reproduction by his friend Alphonse Allais published in an Album dedicated to April Fools' Day in 1897. They even mentioned "the imitation of the latest forms of the *Salon des Beaux Arts*—in Larionov's one-day exhibition—where in first place stood the panel *A Battle of Negroes at Night*: a black-ink poster with white spots—the stars and the eyes of the negro fighters."

I. A. Vakarby, a staff member of the Tretyakov Gallery, had described it as a result of Malevich's confusion over creating Black Square, quoting him as saying: "I couldn't sleep or eat; I wanted to understand what I had done." Kazimir had pulled out some parts of his beard, reading Vakarbys statement. The logic imposed to his act of desire to explode conventional logic angered him more than the wildest insults. "... with that disappointing discovery, which succeeded in recontextualizing the work from pioneering masterpiece to appalling misadventure, the inner light of a painting that had, for decades, been the source of meaningful meditation, suddenly went out..." Whereas he had never imagined bodies connected to the words "Battle of Negroes", he now saw them: warrior faces staring calmly at him, covering the square behind.

"Move out of frame",

he wished to whisper, but because he had not spoken for a long time his lips were slightly glued together and his words died in a tired whistle.

"Then why did you invite us to fight?",  
the faces asked.

"Didn't you call us to guard your masterpiece?"

Malevich stared at the screen. The faces sneered.

"Thought you liked bad jokes."

Kazimir couldn't laugh.

"Why did you do it?"

"I didn't..."

"That is a lie."

"...think."

"Thoughtless of you."

"It was the act of erasing them that mattered."

"Your private party?"

"Yes, I celebrated - the victory over objectivity."

Suddenly also Hilma af Klint joins the picture. She eyes him with gentle pity.

"So it was the old pride that came back to light?"

Kazimir feels tired all of the sudden.

"A battle of Nerves."

"You thought the black to beat all colors?"

"I think the black to be all colors."

Hilmar looks sincere but her mouth gives away her mockery.

"Is that why you Nihilists tend to dress in black?"

Kazimir instinctively feels himself drawing away from the screen with his rolling chair. He recalls the words by Yohji Yamamoto and sits up straighter:

"Above all, black says this: I don't bother you – don't bother me."

The warrior squeezes his eyes, still smiling.

"Wouldn't you have liked to burn in a museum?"

Kazimir nods, entranced.

"Well, we can't make the history that is made of us."

Kazimir swiftly closes the page and the faces disappear.

One of the most amusing as benevolent explanations was made by Aleksandra Shatskikh, who presented herself as a world authority on the Russian avant-garde.<sup>6</sup> She explained to the English readers that "in Russian the word 'negro' has never had and does not now have a derogatory and insulting meaning." An excuse to counteract the racist reading of his work, which the Tretyakov Gallery, addressing the audience in Basel, had failed to mention. Aleksandra as well dissented Vakarby with the conviction that the inscription was an act of vandalism. Certain that he, Malevich, would never have scribbled a reference to a predecessor so frivolous in the bottom of the square, she reminds of earlier violation of his work.

Kazimir, in fatigued compulsion taps open the bookmarked page of Arseny Zhilyaev a Russian artist, who restaged the act of vandalism performed on Malevich works with signs of crypto-currency next to an urn with the ashes of his Masterpieces.<sup>7</sup> He is charmed.

Vividly he remembers the day in 1997 when he was told by the

6 [www.e-flux.com/journal/85/155475/inscribed-vandalism-the-black-square-at-one-hundred/](http://www.e-flux.com/journal/85/155475/inscribed-vandalism-the-black-square-at-one-hundred/)

7 [www.arsenyzhilyaev.art/en/moscow-etude](http://www.arsenyzhilyaev.art/en/moscow-etude)

guild that Alexander Brener, a Russian-Jewish performance artist, and a self-described political activist painted a green dollar sign on *The White Cross*. The painting was restored and Brener was sentenced to five months in prison. During the court case he said in his defense: “The cross is a symbol of suffering, the dollar sign a symbol of trade and merchandise ... What I did was not against the painting. I view my act as a dialogue with Malewicz.”<sup>8</sup> Surely a dialogue that Kazimir would have liked to continue back then. But again, he had to remain silent and watch it unfold in other artists’ reactions. It was exhilaratingly addictive despite the suffering it causes him indeed.

To intervene? A mere thought play. In any way he is tied to the Guilds Vow: “Who knows must not reveal the Master to live beyond his death.” He is damned to stay a secret. The part in him that lived to speak, driven by the need to express his conviction to a large audience, yes to the world, has died in the golden cage of life itself. What is the part that continues to live? He suddenly feels convinced that he understands what the soul is, facing its absence in his body. He is the dinosaur in Jurassic Park. A breathing anachronism artificially preserved. If he were to skip his weekly blood transfusion? This bloody stick and poking all the while rejuvenating. But how could he disappoint his old friends and young supporters who had pooled their money and blood, indeed, to keep his “revolutionary mind” tied to matter, to keep its engine running?

He owes them. His life. And a report. He had kept silent for too long and his last deliveries had caused some frustration, he can feel. It came masked as worry but through the reassuring words of his donors trickled disappointment. They hoped that moving him to this sunburnt island would revive his spirits. And of course, even more importantly they hoped for his brilliance to flare up. The time has come; things looked ugly enough and they expect a word of unwavering force and utopian glamour.

But his vernal curiosity to beat the pulse of time had died, despite the youthful blood pumping in his veins. He had anticipated the globe to open up and he had conjured the signifiers of the “new”: science, technology, invention, and speed. The internet was not a museum, it kept his work alive, ever changing, never fully arriving. The movement which our eyes cannot catch although it can be felt. Kazimir sits completely still to perceive the dynamic movement. It is this screen that keeps him alive. This light that keeps him awake.

There are many insects that keep him company. Since they had moved him to the countryside. The bugs had come for the light of his device. And also, now they are swirling in a symphony around him. He likes how that reminds him of older times when there were more insects, even in the cities. Black letters on white light catch his thoughts in their track:

“...but it is a painting from a subsequent generation of artists, Russian Suprematist Kazimir Malevich’s Black Square (1915) – often credited with being among the

first abstract works ever painted – that reveals just how easily the color can curdle from soulful luminosity into something rather shadier.”

### A Night of the Living Dead.

The bargain—to move Kazimir out of hell in exchange for Michelangelo—had obviously failed.<sup>9</sup> In February 2015, Patriarch Krill, the head of the Russian Orthodox Church had deplored that “precisely because it is dreadful, the black square reflects perfectly what was going on inside this Malevich’s soul. And it’s not just Malevich—it reflects the essence of the entire era.”<sup>10</sup> Tatyana Tolstaya had wittingly taken up the satanic reading of his work in a fictional comment of an expert of a contemporary arts fund in Russia lamenting over post-square art.<sup>11</sup>

“A ‘post-Square’ artist, an artist who has prayed to the Square, who has peeked inside the black hole without recoiling in horror, doesn’t believe the muses and the angels; he has his own black angels, with short metallic wings—pragmatic and smug beings who know the value of earthly glory and how to capture its most dense and multilayered sections. Craft is unnecessary, what you need is a brain; inspiration is unnecessary, what’s needed is calculation. People love innovation, you need to come up with something new; people love to fume, you need to give them something to fume about; people are indifferent, you need to shock them: shove something smelly in their face, something offensive, something repugnant. If you strike a person’s back with a stick, they’ll turn around; that’s when you spit in their face and then, obviously, charge them for it—otherwise, it’s not art. If this person starts yelling in indignation, you must call them an idiot and explain to them that art now consists solely of the message that art is dead—repeat after me: dead, dead, dead. (...) Life is death; death is here; death is immediate.”

Ah, the grave! Looking at his own grave, this marvelous staging of death had given him solace in the darkest days of his extended existence. He hurriedly searches for “Malevich deathbed” to extinguish the BBC logo sneering at him. Grainy black and white images arrange themselves in the screen, easing his agitation. Out of the grey composition the green stems of lilies jump to his eyes. Green of real lilies next to a mock version of himself, lying in repose. An image of a mixed media installation from 2003 entitled *Corpse of Art*. It was a well-meant praise by a hand full of men who called themselves the IRWIN group, founded in Ljubljana in the 80s and

9 [www.artmoscow.wordpress.com/2013/09/19/bribing-the-demons](http://www.artmoscow.wordpress.com/2013/09/19/bribing-the-demons)

10 [www.meduza.io/en/shapito/2015/02/05/russian-patriarch-weighs-in-on-contemporary-art-laments-malevich-s-empty-soul](http://www.meduza.io/en/shapito/2015/02/05/russian-patriarch-weighs-in-on-contemporary-art-laments-malevich-s-empty-soul)

11 [www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-square](http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-square)

committed to the so-called 'retro-principle'. He remembers the horrible nightmares after first seeing the piece online: stuck at Madame Tussauds, lying in the open casket, embalmed in wax with sunken eyes closed but internally wide awake. He couldn't move but had to hear all comments of the passing crowds, mostly joking about the moustache of Salvador Dali who apparently was positioned next to him.

Time to install googlevich.com  
"Experience the censored Malevich internet at home! The Firefox add-on Googlevich offers the internet user to surf the web as if they were surfing in a suprematistic kind of way. Take a suprematistic virtual trip to the Black Square and experience the Malevich Black Square Censorship at home! It's open source, free and easy!"

The joke curved his lips into a desperate smile. Restless he checks in on Calvin. The boy had been one of the most pleasant appearances of the last years. Balm to his tormented soul. The favorite on Calvin's channel: "10 hours and 1 second of pure black screen",<sup>12</sup> just received 4.313.926 views. He browses the comments:

琥珀, 1 week ago: Am I the only one using this as a mirror?

Stephen Scholes, 2 month ago: "Its great my daughter thinks tv is broken"

SimplySara25, 2 month ago: "Now my screen is clean, thank u"

Erny Kwame, 2 month ago: "Did you know your heart adapts with the music you listen to?"

Eli Kustar, 2 month ago: "this deep yo"

Napoleon Bonaparte, 2 month ago: "do this on a VR"

ScottyBoy Productions, 2 month ago: "This is the best vid ever!"

Dragon City Gaming, 2 month ago: "my dad said 1 video before bed soooo..... why not this???" ( ͡° ͜ʖ ͡° )

9\_KING\_3, 3 month ago: "oh its very funny"

New Brunswick Ball, 3 month ago: "I laughed so hard at 5:43:12."

Ultimate BaconGamer, 3 month ago:

“the darkness... it is memorizing...”

Panda Bearvor, 3 month ago: “This is kinda boring to watch but it feels like something interesting is going to happen”

Führer des Benutzers, 3 month ago: “Modern Art in a nutshell.”

A harsh giggle escapes his lungs and dies quickly.

Rodolfo de Matos, 3 month ago: “thats how everything was before big bang. thanks.”

Diaa Yassin, 3 month ago: “black videos matter!”  
F1reGamer, 3 month ago: “I’m crying.”

Ezekiel lammarino, 3 month ago: “Doctor: You have exactly 10 hours and one second to live. Me:”

Gald, 3 month ago: “WHY???”

The Capriono’s, 3 month ago: “holy shit! at 5:32:56 i saw a man masterbating!!”

Sprite, 3 month ago: “swedish winter be like 6:09:90”

Overlord Aowes, 3 month ago: “Alot of people got depressed”

Who is fluffy?, 3 month ago: “Amazing! This is life changing.”

NougatEgg, 3 month ago: “watched all of it..”

Sam Iannuzzi, 5 month ago: “I can’t stand this, I cried at 4:58:42 that part was very hard to watch, I love this please make more!”

ErwinSchrodinger64, 7 month ago: “I will never turn off my computer again.”

Jack The Rippe, 8 month ago: “Make a part 2”

wite face, 11 month ago (edited): “A day in the life of Helen Keller”

EpicFutureHouse, 1year ago: “SO NICE! 1000 TIMES



## BETTER THAN BEAUTY VIDEOS OF SOME GERMAN YOUTUBERS!"

that guy, 1 year ago: "I reported it so YouTube would have to watch it all"

He marvels at the way, how the solid liquid crystals that blocked the light in a black LCD seemed to resemble how Schopenhauer viewed black as the physiological state of "retinal inactivity." The eye without sight – inside of the machine. Satisfied he leans back in his office chair. The moment his back rests into the leather padding a guilty pain flashes through his stretched spine. This is not enough.

His next transfusion is scheduled in two days and he will not be able to look the donor into the eye if there is not something he can offer in return. They still want another revolution. His stomach rebels. The word sickens him. Something unexpected. With his feet he gives the chair a spin. The smooth rotation transforms the screen into comet tails. He closes his eyes.

As the slight breeze caresses his face, an image comes to his mind: A shouting man in a black suit stands in a bright white room, raising a gun into the air. In the background, another man lies lifeless on the floor. With a few clicks he retrieves the image of Mevlüt Mert Altıntaş, after shooting Russian ambassador Andrey Karlov at an art gallery in Ankara. He thinks of his time at Leningrad Academy, when he recommended the students that they should work at the Hermitage and study the artistic structures of the old masters. Study very closely their brushstrokes and try to copy a small piece of canvas, just one square inch. Wistfully, he zooms into the black suit of the dead ambassador and takes a screenshot:

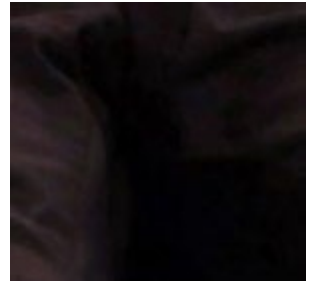


Fig.: Copyright Burhan Ozbilici, 2017

The sound of it disappearing in the trash pleases him slightly. Art does not need him anymore and maybe never did? Icons where a form of conversation. Even philosophy can't cure his doubt anymore. This new Speculative Realism! To surrender to nature is passive and will result in death. That bargain be damned! He begins to type up an excuse:

"Dear Donors.

Over a decade has passed since I hung the square up in a corner. With all my being I aimed to draw a sign that was atemporal, transhistorical. I created an icon that still circulates today. Beyond its own decay. It resists the destructiveness of progress. But how can I endure it still?

Thanks to you, my heart beats to the rhythm of perpetual change. But my thoughts that you cherish must transcend.

I am merely a brain in front of a white light (the unnamable). This 'window to the world'. Cerebral celebration disconnected from its vital source. The feet are forgotten.

We will only speak about all this in the future as a history. This cerebral machine knows me already better than myself.

We are what we are learning.

I should already have grown a cancer

If not to care about oneself is depression. Then self-love should cause paranoia. That is how the light has blinded us"

Suddenly, he feels his feet. Or rather their absence. Fresh blood stuck in ancient veins results in a numb sensation. When he stretches his legs under the table they start to tingle unbearably. Through the glass table top he watches his feet drawing circles. He should go for a walk. When he lifts himself out of the chair his legs give in. He got up too early. He realizes too late to catch himself and in a rather elegant bow drops to his knees. In the reflex to hold onto something, his right arm had grabbed the charging cable of his laptop that is now lying next to him like an open book on its front. For an instant, he is aware of the painterly arrangement he and that tossed bible are creating, before the pain in his knees kicks in and blows the Christian metaphor out of his head. Rolled on his side, holding his knees he waits for his feet to come back to life.

He had not paid much attention to the cabins interior before: White walls, with sparse but deliberate decoration: A black and white picture of the UNOWIS secret guild who started the whole drama, a cracked painting of a sugar root, a clock, and the coffin was there. They had thought it a joke to transform it into a coffee table flanking a Coen de Vries couch (he never used)... And on it a black dog lies curled up but with his head raised, staring at him.

The poodle! He blinks, and the couch is empty. The clock gives a stuttering laugh with the beat of each second. Stop! He crawls to

the door. His long arm reaches the handle, tears it open and sun floods the room, drawing a golden rectangle in dusty air. With closed eyes he stretches his face towards the light. It reflects bright on his white skin. The warmth melts his waxy grimace into a grin. Oh sun!

He opens his eyes and lets them glide over the black silhouettes that frame the horizon in the distance, stubborn heaps of frozen lava, which only reluctantly give ways into the wind and waters. Blackened tree trunks next to his cabin carry lush pine greens. The forest had learned how to withstand the repeating contractions of the earth puking burning stone. We get used to everything. Unmoving, he sits in the frame of his door and watches the sun sinking into the sea. On his curved back the black WSI textile shimmers. Life will go on and the dream will glide into darkness, like memory and on the black stone a large insect will bathe in the sun and be eaten by a passing one. He turns his back on the night sky. The room lies now in complete darkness. Scanning the floor with his hands, he searches for the laptop, feels its cool back and slides it on his lap. He strokes it, but it does not respond. The fall must have broken it.

Kazimir is staring at the black screen. All his obsessions fold into this black square mischievously reflecting his starlit face. The strongest possible medicine against any kind of compassion or nostalgia. The image that survives destruction is the image of destruction.