

Past to Present

A Diagnosis of Recent Abstraction

For us painting has become a body in which are laid out for inspection the painter's motives and state.

Kazimir Malevich¹

The I, that expresses itself, is apprehended as an ego; it is a kind of infection in virtue of which it establishes at once a unity with those who are aware of it, a spark that kindles a universal consciousness of self.

G. W. F. Hegel²

The all-purpose picture plane underlying . . . post-Modernist painting has made the course of art once again non-linear and unpredictable . . . It is part of a shakeup which contaminates all purified categories.

Leo Steinberg³

One of the few viewpoints shared by the general public and the art world elite today is skepticism about abstract art.⁴ Those in the know often see abstraction's heyday as past, as a vestige of high modernism. Almost synonymous with painting, it must be "over" in what Arthur Danto denotes famously as our posthistorical art world. In the public sphere, however defined, abstraction has never made sense or been accepted. At one extreme are the controversies over Barnett Newman's *Voice of Fire* (1967), purchased by the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa in 1989 to great public consternation, and what amounted to the trial of abstraction before and after the removal of Richard Serra's 1981 *Tilted Arc's* from its site in Manhattan (Senie). Equally revealing of habitual prejudices is the frequency with which abstract art is the locus of debate, scandal, and outright vandalism. Less vigorous but nonetheless indicative of the resistance to the form is Komar and Melamid's jocular *Most Wanted/Most Unwanted* painting project, in which the latter category is routinely and predictably filled by an abstract work to the extent that this pattern seems normal and receives almost no commentary. I return to the humorous and the disturbing aspects of abstraction's reception: both are important to the narrative I construct. But first a larger question: why would anyone compelled to understand recent visual culture focus on this apparently discredited form? Why, in the face of such resistance, am I undertaking a study of recent abstract art? My overarching

aim is to provide paradigms of abstraction's history since the 1960s that capture what I see as its ongoing innovations and vitality. Abstraction has not proved to be, as W. J. T. Mitchell prematurely forecasted in 1987, "a monument to an era that is passing from living memory into history."⁵ I agree that grand narratives in art history seem to be over, or at least suspended, as Danto (1997), Belting (1987), and Lyotard (1984) have argued. In the case of abstraction, however, it is only the commanding narrative of purity and autonomy that has been opposed and eclipsed successfully. Abstraction remains not only empirically "on the ground" – there have been and continue to be a great numbers of small and large exhibitions of this work – or in retrospective dialogue with its avant-garde roots but also a vital contributor to contemporary art and culture. You might ask what this form can offer if art history's Hegelian paradigm of progress is short-circuited. The story of abstraction's supposed triumph in purity and autonomy in the middle of the 20th century does end, ironically, in the need to see abstraction (as a paradigm of "art") as a thing of the past in a Hegelian manner. Instead, I understand recent abstraction as an inevitably ongoing epidemiological discourse of infection and cure. To oversimplify, abstract art for some time has reacted to purity with impurity; the driving force of this change is a metaphorical practice of biological infection that overturns any claim to aesthetic autonomy. This potent story has its roots in contemporary abstract artists' relationships with their pioneering predecessors in the early and mid-20th century, especially Malevich and Klein. The medical discourses supporting and producing abstraction coalesce into a third alternative to the twin poles of 20th-century purist abstraction, both of which have been by turns ascendant and demonized: the transcendent (seen most clearly in Kandinsky) and the formal (epitomized by Greenberg's theories).⁶ The medical coordinates of abstraction, however we may see them within the history of the genre, do not themselves seek or reach meta status. They were and remain fundamentally material and organic as they spread from aesthetic spawning grounds to include many contemporary social concerns. Beginning with Malevich's pose as an art doctor and continuing through Yves Klein and General Idea, I emphasize the performative and sometimes optimistically pedagogical aspects of abstraction, a symptom that binds the form to contemporary realities. To phrase this point in the terms I established in the final, rather hopeful, chapter of *The Rhetoric of Purity* in 1991, Paul Klee's impure abstraction is a potent model, if not so much as a historical influence, for the regeneration of the form that I will examine. Mine is also a more positive tale than that of the dangerous analogy between progressive art and disease, which found its nadir in the persecution of those who purportedly produced "Entartete Kunst."⁷ Abstraction was central to modernism; it also has a present and a future. The narrative of infection and dissemination that I will trace remains reluctantly tied to the rhetoric of purity but maintains that abstraction should perdure in its pathologies. Aesthetic "cures" are prescribed today, but as critiques and correctives rather than the idealistic social engineering

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seen in the days of De Stijl. To understand the range of its tenses and tensions, we can begin with the relationship of current abstract art to modernism in the visual arts.

Modernism is characterized in part by those theories and practices that define art as autonomous. Though some speculate that Luther's iconoclasm was the beginning of its history, an essential separation and specialization of disciplines and artistic media that subtends media and disciplinary autonomy was critical to the Enlightenment and to Kant in particular.⁸ The rhetoric of purity served as a motivation and justification for many of the priorities of early 20th-century modernism, particularly in the visual arts, including the high value placed on aesthetic autonomy. As a goal and a working ethos, it was fundamental to the central pioneers of abstract painting (e.g., Mondrian, Kandinsky, Kupka, and Malevich; Cheetham 1991a, 1992); it enjoyed wide dissemination, through both institutional teaching – as in Malevich's case – and by example. The purist tradition reached its apex half a century ago in the United States with high modernist abstraction and in the late Clement Greenberg's formalist art criticism, which was quintessentially purist in its attempt to delimit the proper jurisdiction of painting and other art forms and in its proclamation of abstraction's centrality in this quest.⁹ The case with purity is directly analogous to that of autonomy as a goal. Did abstract art ever achieve either state? No. Did it want to? Yes – passionately. In concert with the progenitors of abstract painting, Greenberg looked to a philosopher to legitimate his claims. Where Mondrian and Kandinsky depended on Hegel, for example, and on the Neoplatonics, Greenberg famously invoked Kant – a boundary surveyor par excellence – as his champion. I will have several occasions to insist that he did so in a remarkably Hegelian manner, seeing a Kantian, modern self-criticism as necessary in the evolution of art.¹⁰

Only recently have we been able to make sense of abstraction in the visual arts outside the chronological and theoretical strictures of modernism. Autonomy and purity as principles of art making, critical evaluation, and historical organization have been challenged successfully in recent decades, not least by a self-conscious tradition of abstraction that was once held to be the epitome of an independent, self-critical modernism. As Briony Fer has rightly insisted (1997, 4) and as a deconstructive reading of early abstraction reveals, elements that work against the hegemony of purity were part of the inception of the discourse and have since gained credence in the work of prominent practitioners such as Gerhard Richter. Although some recent abstraction works consciously with the originary priorities of purity and essence, whether material, formal, or transcendental, I examine some of those strains that resist the paradigm of autonomy and those that do not include the pole of impurity in only a dialectical manner. As I have argued elsewhere, Mondrian and Kandinsky framed abstraction initially in terms of a transcendental purity reflected in a strict formality of means (Cheetham, 1991a). Although they were not absolute purists, there was in the 1930s and

1940s, in France especially, a strongly negative reaction within abstract painting to the limitations of their work (Guilbaut, 1990). A second wave of purism in abstraction took hold mainly in the United States at midcentury in the work of Newman, Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, and especially post painterly abstraction. The containment or isolation of pure abstraction against the encroachments of “theatricality” in the mid-20th century was in retrospect, I believe, a relatively short-lived if central episode in the history of abstraction, not to mention art since the early 1960s. The counterhistory that I am proposing – and there are others¹¹ – reaches back to Malevich especially. At midcentury, it accentuates alternatives to the second wave of purism, especially Klein’s. The practice of impure abstraction also includes Rauschenberg’s monochromes of the early 1950s, Fontana, Manzoni, the Zero Group, and others who contributed to what I will claim is a “social” view of nonrepresentational art. Though there are of course prominent exceptions – Bridget Riley, Agnes Martin, and Joseph Marioni come to mind¹² – since the “new abstraction” of the 1980s, most artists who allow their work to be called abstract explicitly disavow autonomy or purity as a means or goal. I consider these and other artists, issues, and works pertaining to recent abstract art under three broad chapter headings: the monochrome, the mirror, and abstraction as infection and cure. My arguments are built on paradigms. Though I discuss a large number of artists and works, many in both categories will be overlooked by design but also no doubt through ignorance. But first I need to establish the heritage and import of a rubric that is especially useful for an understanding of its initial and recent manifestations. This paradigm sees abstraction as an “infection” and “pure” only as the medicinal grade of the antidote. Malevich’s remarkable theory of the “additional element” is its foundation. It will find its way into unexpected contexts throughout abstraction’s history since ca. 1960.

I. Testing Positive

Malevich’s participation in the rhetoric of purity is clear. “Our world of art has become new, non-objective, pure,” he wrote in “From Cubism & Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting.”¹³ The Suprematist abstractions of ca. 1914–1918 were correspondingly simple in form and colour. Equally important to the argument I propose here is Malevich’s habitual coupling of references to purity with a particular genealogy of artistic movements and artists. Thus the title of this essay maps the changes he wants to theorize: from Cubism and through Futurism in its Russian manifestations we come to the purity of Suprematism. John Hatch demonstrates that Malevich saw his Suprematist compositions as a narrative, almost as a drama that began with the black square and ended with images in which the form shaded off into the nonobjectivity of “zaum” space.¹⁴ The completion of this cycle figured significantly – though not to the exclusion of personal and political upheavals – in Malevich’s nearly complete abstinence from art making between ca. 1918 and 1928. Like many other abstractionists of his

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generation, he frequently saw the ultimate purity of art in its self-transcendence. Purity in art and the purification of the artist were for Malevich essentials to be taught in the young Soviet society. Reacting against the pragmatism of constructivist art in the new communist schools, he developed an organic theory of art that linked the often philosophical and mystical rhetoric of purity with metaphors of the body, infection, evolution, and parentage.¹⁵ “Professional artistic technological education,” he wrote in 1921, “will not produce anything until the spirit of the Communist society becomes organically linked with the artist” (III, 86–7). Uncontextualized, this statement remains obscure (like so many by Malevich). But it is one of numerous applications of his notion of the “additional element”¹⁶ in art, that germ that insinuates itself into artistic practices and determines their morphology. Malevich’s difficult but seminal thoughts in “An Introduction to the Theory of the Additional Element in Painting” fundamentally reverse his transcendent impulses and provide an alternative narrative for his work and the future course of abstraction. His vitalist theory of abstraction as disease overturns the rhetoric of purity. Malevich was future oriented – if not exactly utopian – which partly explains his passion for teaching young Soviet artists. He called for new, Suprematist forms in art because the teacher and his or her art must have something new and significant to donate – like a gene – to the future. His “scientific” approach was to isolate in past and present art the “supplementary” or “additional” element. Malevich’s notion of the additional element thus offers nothing less than a capacious and responsive interpretive matrix through which to understand change in art, both before and after his own contributions. It drives and exemplifies the purposeful integration of abstraction with surrounding aesthetic and social discourses; in other words, its struggle “against autonomy.” In taking his theory of the additional element more seriously than is usually the case and looking at it in greater detail, I elaborate its historical efficacy and offer it as a supplement to other paradigmatic ways that we think about the advent and ongoing life of abstract art.

Like a Suprematist Morelli, Malevich sought the material symptoms of style and change in painting. As director of the State Institute of Artistic Culture in Leningrad from 1924 and as a teacher in what he titled its Department of Bacteriology of Art,¹⁷ Malevich and his associates pursued his research on the sanctioned scientific model. Its collaborators, a formal report states, are “working on the problem of isolating from the whole historical material provided by the spatial arts the successive fundamental systems of painting” (Zhadova, 1982, 318). More specifically, he and his colleagues evolved a practice of aesthetic treatment in which he would administer “doses” of Suprematism, for example, to those students requiring it. The school, Malevich said in a submission to “The Work Plan of the Department of the Painterly Culture for 1926–1927,” “considers all painters as medicine considers the sick. . . . The Department of Painting of GINKhUK finds that various kinds of illnesses exist in the field of arts, too, that artists also can be

classified according to various kinds of these wonderful illnesses or states, thanks to which an artist's organism produces one or another form of behaviour, what we call art or artistic culture. According to their form of behaviour, artists can be classified as naturalists, realists, geometricians, romantics, lyrical, mystics, metaphysicians, etc. and prescribed treatment according to the diagnosis."¹⁸ A decade after the advent of Suprematism, then, Malevich developed an elaborate bacteriological model to explain and affect change in art and as a conveyance for the future deployment of his own work. "To explore the nature of an artist currently is the most important task," Malevich said. "That was the basis of his school," remembered K. I. Rozhdestvensky, one of the students. "The first phase of his pedagogy was a purification from all the influences. The task was to achieve a pure painterly culture and to bring into it additional elements. At that time it was important, since we had very many influences from all sides" (Demosfenova, 1998, 13). His theory of the additional element was based in part on his own familial experience with tuberculosis and explicitly on the research of Dr. Robert Koch (1843–1910), the Nobel Prize winner who in 1882 isolated the bacillus of the "white death" that had caused such widespread suffering and mortality and who established the then-revolutionary "germ theory" of disease transmission.¹⁹ Koch was also an innovator in photomicroscopy, whose, magnified images Malevich's drawings on charts one through five most resemble. The medical context of infection was on the artist's mind for the rest of his life. In a late autobiographical sketch, for example, Malevich recalled that his first brushes "came from the pharmacy, where they were used for painting the throats of children who had diphtheria" (Zhadova, 291). It was one of Koch's pupils who, using his methods, discovered the bacterium responsible for this disease. On his teaching rounds, Malevich wore a white lab coat, calling himself the doctor and his students patients. He sought earnestly to present "the science of 'artistic culture'" (147)²⁰ in a form sufficiently rigorous to be accepted in the new Soviet Union. The derivation from medicine and the biological effect of Malevich's additional element are clear:

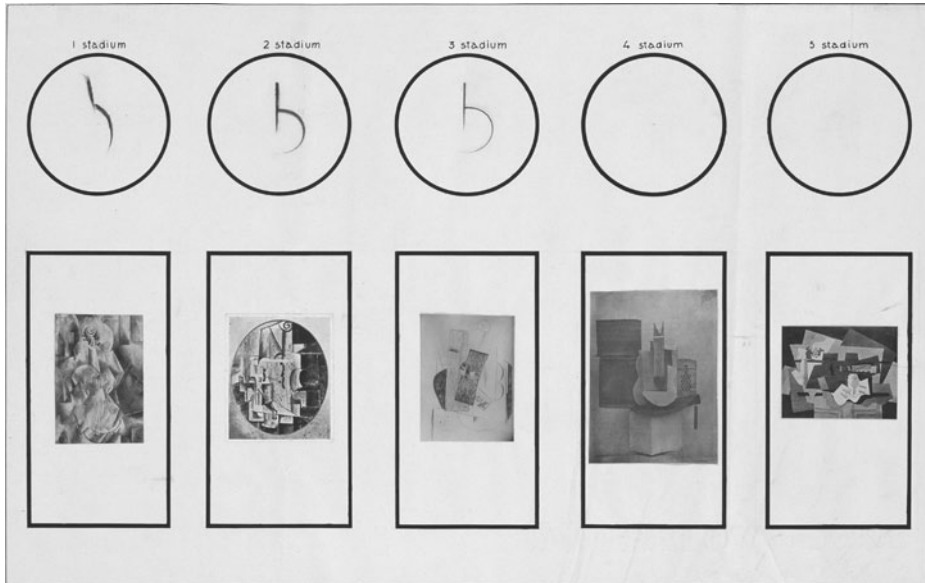
In medicine, a man's condition is explained by the addition, or appearance in the organism, of some extraneous element which changes his behaviour. (III, 148) In a blood or sputum test, additional elements are found which have some influence on the established normal functioning of the organism . . . I should like to clarify which additional elements have managed to creep into the organism of the painter and changed his behaviour. (III, 148)

The painterly study is similar to a bacteriological analysis clarifying the cause of sickness . . . Koch found in the sickness of the lungs a bacillum which is called the tubercular bacillum of Koch. (III, 167)

To the analytical and pedagogical end of studying "all deviations in painting just as one studies disease in medicine" (III, 171), Malevich required that each student submit a still-life sample for diagnosis and potential treatment. His terminology

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1. Kazimir Malevich, *Analytical Chart*, ca. 1925. Cut-and-pasted papers, pencil, and pen-and-ink on paper. 21 5/8 × 31" (55.0 × 78.6 cm). Acquisition confirmed in 1999 by agreement with the Estate of Kazimir Malevich and made possible with funds from the Mrs. John Hay Whitney Bequest (by exchange). 821.1935. The Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY, U.S.A. Photo Credit: Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA/Art Resource, NY.

is consistently medical; art is understood in terms of diagnosis, incubation, inoculation, and resistance. In one case, for example, Malevich affected what we might now term a genetic modification of artistic predilections. He reports that a student's "nervous system was tuned in accordance with the Cubist law . . . there were instances of an attraction towards the Suprematist straight line, but here I counteracted the development of this attraction by all available means . . . I strove to keep the painter in the pure culture of the Cubist additional element which was developing in him. I isolated him from Futurism and Suprematism . . . As soon as I removed the painterly isolation, his nervous system immediately began to feed on the new additional element, and on the negative of the Cubist system a new form or element was fixed" (179). He describes with pleasure how he performed such "experiments" on those students who were "under the influence of an additional element in a culture of painting," and, critical for my analysis here, he emphasizes that "[I] have reached a result in a positive sense" (172). Malevich prescribed various homeopathic additional elements in different dosages.²¹ The straight line of Suprematism was his strongest corrective. His assistants duly recorded these findings on charts.²² In one example,²³ the progressive changes from Cézanne through Cubism to Suprematism are schematized in circles that mirror the isolating confines of a Petri dish²⁴ in which different "cultures" may be grown, studied, and purified (Fig. 1).

How literally and how seriously should we take Malevich's unusual and radical theory of the additional element? T. J. Clark counsels that he and even Malevich's students would "soon nod off over [Malevich's] endless wall charts and additional elements. . . . What mattered [instead] was the madness lurking behind the platitudes about Cubism – what mattered were the circumstances in the streets, the soldiers in the streets, the news from Ukraine . . . In a word, what mattered was modernism" (1999, 286–87). I agree that what mattered was modernism. I argue, however, that the theory of the additional element was as genial as it was "mad" and that it derived precisely from and was intimately part of those only apparently extraaesthetic conditions that were in the streets, especially tuberculosis. Instead of nodding off, I propose that we look anew at Malevich's theory of the additional element, and, as a paradigm of its reception and the vitality of abstraction in our own time, at contemporary artist Taras Polataiko's use of his countryman's ideas and images.²⁵ Because the additional element was explicitly modeled on the behaviour of the tubercular bacillus, abstraction was construed by Malevich as a "disease" and put to work as both poison and cure in the Platonic and Derridean senses of the "pharmakon" (Cheetham, 1991a, 2001). His theory of infection is decidedly and surprisingly positive, both in its inception in artistic, theoretical, and pedagogical practices and in its recent reception via the metaphors and realities of viral transmission.²⁶ The notion of art itself as an organism that he – ultimately through the discovery and dissemination of the specific added elements of Suprematism – could treat beneficially was entirely affirmative. Even though for him tuberculosis was a tragic reality (he contracted it as a child; his second wife, Sofia Rafalovich, died from the disease in 1925; his friend El Lissitzky was afflicted), a much-publicized killer in the young Soviet Union, it was also a powerful metaphor for the evolution of painting and ultimately a transformative principle that gave art its social promise. His prescribed additional element was a "forming" – not a formal – agent (II, 8, 38). It was that which caused, and through which we can trace, change. This homeopathic, optimistic vision of abstract art stands in contrast to the usual connection between art and pathology in which modern art – and historically, abstraction as its epitome – is seen as a blight to be expunged, as a "degenerate" enemy. "Criticism has attempted to reduce all new forms of art to a whole series of diseases: rickets, psychic sickness, degenerate types, the mentally retarded, epileptics, lots, etc.," Malevich wrote disapprovingly (III, 168).²⁷ Demonstrating the extent to which he construed his culture in terms of the insinuation of a "bacterium" into the system, he commented with irony on how "society and enlightenment take all measures to disinfect the High Schools from the infiltration of the Futuristic germ" (III, 170). For him the public was by definition unwilling and unable to accept anything new. He proudly adopted the mantle of physician but never hoped that the infectious agents in art would be eradicated: "Here there is an analogy with the Peoples Committee for Health," he wrote in opposition to practices of isolation. This body takes "all measures to

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annihilate all possible bacilli, by isolating the healthy from the sick, . . . so that the organism will not be derealized, [so that] that they will not infect the organism. . . . But despite all these hygienic conditions in medicine and in art, there is no possibility of being isolated from additional elements [because] such isolation would mean isolation from being" (III, 170). Disease keeps abstraction alive.²⁸

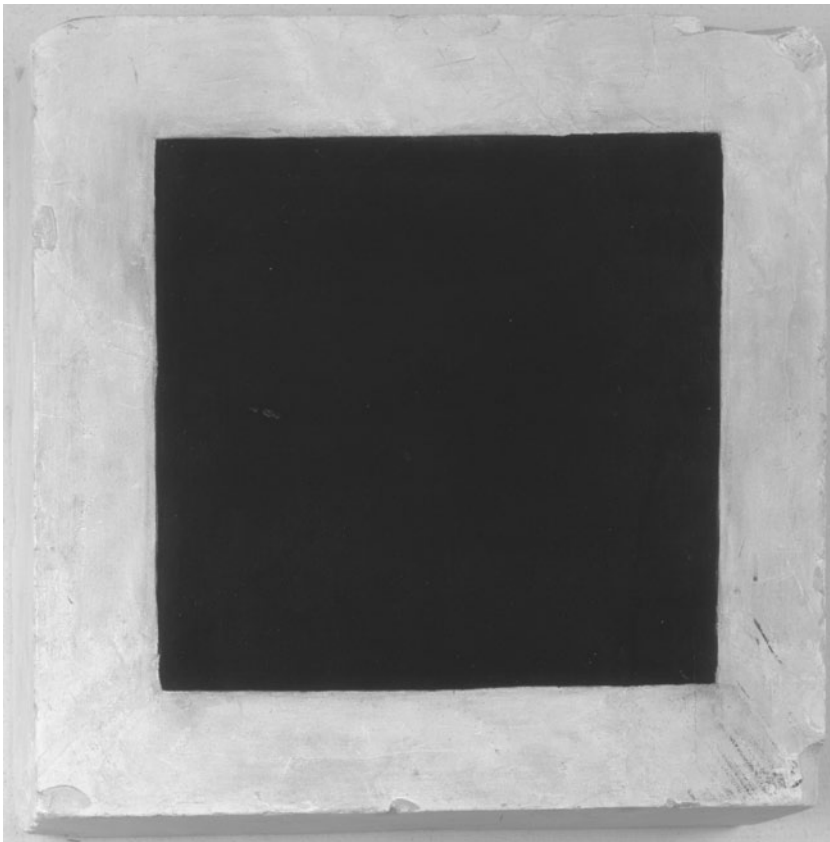
One key to understanding the positive spin of Malevich's theory of infection is his theory of analogy, critical when we ask if illness here is "merely" a metaphor (an issue to which I will return). Early on in the tract on the additional element that formed the first part of *The World as Non-Objectivity*, he states that "in order to verify and classify the norms it is necessary to use the method of comparative analogy, by means of which we can find that point of relations [through] which we will be able to measure all the rest. . . . If we discover a certain behaviour to have no analogy, then we would not know if it is normal or not normal" (III, 150). Malevich makes it clear that the curative effects of the additional element are beneficial *because* it is an analogy. It is a constructive force first in the "isolated" realm of art, though art and the artist can try to reform society at large. Through the metaphors of disease, Malevich showed how the body of art perpetually renews itself. Personally – and despite the changes that his art underwent – Malevich remained a Suprematist in this sense. After his death in May 1935, he lay in state beneath a black Suprematist square. He wore the Suprematist colours: a white shirt, black trousers, and red shoes. He was displayed and then buried in a Suprematist coffin, and his grave was marked by a white cube on which floated a black square, designed and built by his student N. Suetin. The gravesite and its Suprematist headstone were destroyed in WWII, but the effects of his work were only sleeping. In 1919, the Russian poet Victor Shklovsky wrote that "the Suprematists did for art what chemistry has done for medicine: they isolated the active factor in the remedies" (Zhadova, 1982, 46). The prescribed remedies "can be of a Suprematist spatial [the straight line] or plane structure, which can be divided into dynamic Suprematism and non-objective, architectural statics according to the additional element of the square" (III, 188, italics removed). The effect of the additional element depends on reception – infection – rather than diagnosis. As suggested in this passage, the monochrome, especially the black square, emerged as the predominant, though not exclusive additional element that Malevich launched into the future. Monochromes were his "zero" of form, the material link to nonobjectivity, that with which he started after starting over with Suprematism. The black square was his first and last monochrome (Fig. 2). One version was placed prominently high up in a corner, iconlike, in the 0.10 exhibition of 1915 (though there were others in this show, all investigating the theme of "zero," presented by ten artists); an example appeared almost as his signature on the cover of the lithograph pamphlets *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism. A New Painterly Realism* of 1916 and *Suprematism. 34 Drawings of 1920*; the form centred his didactic charts in 1927; two others were exhibited as

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

2. Kazimir Malevich, *Black Square*, ca. 1923–1930. 36.7 × 36.7 cm. Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France. Photo: Jacques Faujour. Photo Credit: CNAC/MNAM/Dist. Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY.

late as 1932–1933 in Leningrad (Crone & Moos, 1991, 205). Diagrams for the film he planned to make with Hans Richter while in Germany begin with a black square that then morphs into other monochromes or shapes. If realized, the film would have enacted the dynamism found in his earlier *Suprematism*. *34 Drawings* and that Malevich felt all important art required. In the film, he envisioned this process in a time frame much faster than that available with students in his art laboratories. Using the language of the additional element, he describes how “the black surface keeps moving and becomes an independent basic element, which engenders a whole system of new relationships” (Malevich, 2002, 55). Although for Malevich stasis – the naturalization of additional elements – is the natural end of any system, change is a higher value and can only come about through the initial disruption initiated by the “compelling, evolving element.” As he diagnosed the art of the recent past and the present, Malevich drew on a traveling pharmacy of aesthetic remedies that, as we have seen, reached back to Cézannism, Cubism, and of course Suprematism. The supplemental factor