

Kazimir Malevich, the Supplanter

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ABSTRACT

In the '20s, Kazimir Malevich produced a series of plaster sculptures that he referred to as 'architectons,' which, this article argues, are not merely the architectural research of the Russian artist on the transfer from the bi-dimensionality of painting to the three-dimensionality of space. Such models belong to a rather more profound revolutionary meaning, that of the destruction of the existing society through the destruction of its architecture. In order to do that, Malevich uses the abstraction of suprematist non-objectivity to absorb the symbolic load of previous images by means of a radical strategy of appropriation based on concrete operations of 'locating' his work. Malevich, the supplanter, does not design forms but rather appropriates, through them, the place of others.

Kazimir Malevich's Black Square should not be considered in a conceptual, pictorial or geometrical sense only, either as a window towards the desert of non-objectivity or as an attempt to destruct or reduce all concrete contents. Its relationship with the past and its rejection to all figuration incorporated

quite a radical operation – that we could call of location – when in the 'Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10', presented in Petrograd (now Saint Petersburg) on December 19th to January 17th, 1916, he put it in the so-called 'red corner', or 'icon corner', a place traditionally reserved for religious symbols, usually an image of the Virgin and Baby Jesus (Figure 1). With this, Malevich carried out an act of misappropriation by means of which he could destroy the images of previous icons and, at the same time, reassert the most profound meaning of this sacred corner, appropriating it. It could be said that Malevich usurps when he violently takes over somebody else's place. But he is not the only one.

Every foreigner travelling by train from Moscow to Saint Petersburg can experience the strange and disconcerting feeling of leaving from a station to arrive, after several hours of travel, to exactly the same building, as if the architecture were symmetrically mirrored through an imaginary line located at some point between the cities (Figure 2). The two buildings are almost identical inside, as only minor differences distinguish stations Moskovsky, in San Petersburgo, from Leningradsky, in Moscow; some materials, the colours, the texture of the ceilings and, above all, the fact that in the centre of the space in Moskovsky is the monumental bust of Peter the Great while in Leningradsky, this has been balanced by the monumental head of Lenin. The stations, far from being singular or unique objects, have been conceived to form a kind of collective

that allowed the Russian Revolution to match Lenin to the Tsar, founder of the city named after him. Separated by almost 200 years, dissimilar leaders are put on the same level as they have been placed on equivalent spaces.

This operation, architectural and aesthetic in character, banal at times, is determined by political ends. And it seems to have been taken from the Hegelian dialectics, where the dispute between two opposed propositions (thesis and antithesis) is solved through their unification on a higher level (on which the symmetry of the two stations is built). It should not be a surprise that this was transformed by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in the dialectical materialism through its central law where every conflict is solved by the eventual unity of opposites. In this logic, the 'enemies', or simply, the 'others' (either Peter the Great of the religious images placed in the 'icon corner') must not be excluded. On the contrary, they must be acknowledged and then internalised in order to surpass them. This acknowledgement, this control of previous icons, "must be real and material" (Groys, 2009: 35), for instance, the effective installation of Lenin's bust in Leningradsky or the supplantation of the Black Square by its superposition in the traditional sense of the sacred corner. Thus, by adopting this place in the corner, Malevich decided actively to absorb its entire symbolic load, at the same time that the square itself emptied it. Laura González has summarised this problem from the concept of 'absorption', understood like "the destruction of an idea from the inside" (González, 2016: 1).

The operating sense – or we could say the projective sense – of this usurpation is as radical as it is elegant, as it does not require the physical destruction of the object it wants (which is by definition inaccessible). What it does is rather create a double that allows resignifying the enemy absorbing it and surpassing it in order to replace it. This sense of effective and normal duplication agrees with the idea of the 'double' and the 'ominous,' as it was described by Otto Rank and Sigmund Freud, referring to the *doppelgänger*, concept originally coined by Jean Paul in his novel *Siebenkäs* (1796), which combines the German nouns *Doppel* (double) and *Gänger* (walker or traveller, the one who moves about). In Freudian terms, what Malevich does create is a double – the Black Square in the icon corner – destined to destroy the apparent unity and singularity of the object it wants to trap: a subject that, on the one hand, threatens with the destruction of tradition and, on the other, appropriates it, providing the means to protect it against extinction; thus, connecting the fear of death (of the painting in this case) with the narcissistic attitude of remaining young forever.

Putting the Black Square in the icon corner is not, however, the only place where Malevich formalises this type of operation (Figure 3). In 1924 he made a famous photomontage (the only one known he ever made) where he usurped the image of the most emblematic skyscrapers of the New York of the first decades of the 20th Century (14 Wall Street, Trinity Building, Equitable Building, Banker Trust Tower and Trinity Church), replacing them with his Suprematist Architecton A11 – in the classification done by Troels Andersen (1970). This photomontage of A11, in an axonometric version and vertically shifted, was then published in the

Praesens 1 journal in Warsaw, in 1926. Moreover, as González (2016) describes, he repeated the operation that same year in his public exhibition of architectons, where he turned the drawing of his Future Planits for Leningrad. The Pilot's House (1924) into a large hanging tapestry that he placed at the end of the hall in the GINKhUK (Figure 4). Although the origin of these hanging tapestries is less transcendental than the meaning of the icon corner, Malevich seems once again to be subverting the eminently ornamental character of the tradition of hanging expensive rugs on the walls, to replace their arabesque patterns with the feeling of suprematist non-objectivity.

In fact, it is in his architectons (the series of plaster models that Malevich produced in the '20s as a research on the architectural potential of suprematism) where we observe the last will of the supplanter when he claims for himself nothing less than the word 'architecture'. Because, actually, it is not only about Malevich's architectural research or the transfer from the bidimensionality of painting to the three-dimensionality of space. Having already successfully destroyed painting by means of the Black Square, the artist decided on the next objective to absorb architecture 'from the inside' through these models in order to surpass architecture without "any sentimental attachment to the culture of the past" (Groys, 2014: 36). In its deepest revolutionary meaning, namely the destruction of the existing society through the destruction of its paintings and its architecture, these strategies of duplication and location started from very concrete operations. The architectons, in this sense, show the radical acceptance of this destructive desire from which to create a timeless architecture. In fact, these do not offer a new (more or less abstract) way

to stabilize an avant-garde image in the context of permanent historical transformations. On the contrary, what they do is to provide an image of the same process of destruction they refer to. This explains why, at the level of their design strategies, architects do not define closed or finished forms, but only 'states', objects open to "disfiguration, dissolution and disappearance in the flow of material forces and uncontrollable material processes" (Groys, 2014: 39). Malevich, the supplanter, accepts this historical violence, appropriating it. And, in fact, he does not design forms, he rather 'locates' himself through them, usurping spaces and using somebody else's place.

There is no evidence, then, that architectons have ever been transported as whole models (at least in the completeness shown in their photographs). On the contrary, literature agrees that they were transported in a state of dissolution, distorted, reduced to nothing more than a pile of relatively prismatic elements, which in each public appearance (either at exhibitions or to be photographed) had to be re-assembled. They were not finite or stable objects, but 'states', susceptible to disappearing and reappearing according to a certain undeclared grouping plan (or perhaps guided, precisely, by the photographic record of their previous appearances). Strictly speaking they are not objects but assemblages defined by formal operations where the only thing at stake is the plastic feeling produced by such operations. In other words, there is not a form in a stable sense, but just the unstable image of objects inevitably condemned to their prompt dissolution.

This is evident in the study of the Alpha Architecton – A1 in the classification prepared by Troels Andersen (1970) – done by Harold Rojas, who has

identified three main stages of this accumulation of prismatic volumes, which are differentiated by the number of units that conform them and by the relationships of size that Rojas has called “thresholds of ornamentation” (2016: 3) (Figures 5, 6 and 7). In his study, Rojas states that Alpha stage 1 (1920-1923) has 91 elements; stage 2 (1923-1924) has 75; and stage 3 (called ‘Form D’) has 40 elements only (it should be mentioned that Malevich’s *Tektonik*, the famous reference to Alpha Architecton made by Zaha Hadid in 1976-77, does not correspond to any of the stages assembled by Malevich and recorded in the literature about the Russian artist). This divergence in the number of prismatic units may be related with the threshold of ornamentation, in which the biggest elements are ruled by proportional laws which, after a certain threshold, stop being effective for smaller elements. The balance of elements of bigger mass is of a static character, while the balance of the smaller units is visual, defining the notion of ‘suprematist ornamentation’. What would be at play between stages 1 and 3 (the last one with less than half the number of elements of the first one) is a discussion – or a tension – between formative and ornamental elements. At this level of non-objectivity, these stages are the result of the accumulation – due to gravity – of dispersed elements that are attracted to each other and placed on one another. With very limited exceptions, Alpha elements (whether 91, 75 or 40) were not joined together, they just leant against each other (a condition extended also to the other architectons). Because of this, gravity is the agglutinative element and the architectons are the manifestation of the balance between elements. This is the radical sense of Malevich’s project: metrics of element composition, axes, symmetries and

asymmetries to reduce architecture to nothing but basic compositive operations, notions of ornamentation, of hierarchies and static as well as visual balances, replacing preconceived images of architectural tradition. In the words of Malevich himself, “architectons are just compositions of stereometric figures that transmit plastic sensations only” (as cited in Mikhienko, 2003: 80). These sensations might be, for instance, “the feeling of ecstasy or dynamism, and the diffusion or concentration of weight” (Mikhienko, 2003: 81). This tension between sensations and operations is evident in the description provided by Malevich in 1927 in his ‘Script for an Artistic-Scientific Film’, where he explains that the movement of the square becomes a circle, which in turn moves towards the borders of the frame, producing a dynamic sensation which then disintegrates when it is subdivided into four squares (two black ones and two white ones) that become independent until they evolve in the form of a cross, which then develops under dynamic conditions.... (Malevich, 2002). This same movement of the Black Square creates architectons, this time by means of an operation of extrusion and their transformation into parallelepipeds of various masses.

In this sense, it was the square —and not the cube— the element in charge of transferring architecture to non-objectivity. In the series of architectons there are practically no perfect cubes. In other words, the pictorial bidimensionality of the square is the one that regulates the architecton and, in order to emphasise this, the law of extrusion becomes fundamental. Architectons are not made of a variety of cubes, but of squares and their extrusions. Therefore, the models are composed of prismatic elements that

correspond, in variable proportions, to sections of volumes extruded from squares (black) of various sizes. This distinction can be appreciated at conceptual as well as at plastic level. In Paulina Bitrán’s observation (2016), the cubes are unnecessary. It is the eye the one that rectifies.


The appropriation of the ‘red corner’, by replacing the icon with the Black Square, does not reveal the square so much, or the elimination of the icon, but it emphasises and makes the corner appear in all its magnitude. Likewise, the appropriation of architecture by architectons does not search for something other than to make appear the relations, the basic compositive operations, the metrics of composition that persist in spite of the constant process of formal and material dissolution of architecture. Not just Alpha, but all the other architectons are essentially groupings that are not distinguished by their form but by the project operations that define them, being very different from one another. For example, Cristóbal Ugarte shows us how *Future Planits for Earth’s Dwellers*, of 1924 – N^o 84 in Andersen’s classification (1970) –, is the only one whose symmetry axis acts on the wide side, which makes it more static compositively (Figure 8). This would also indicate that it is the only one that is still, that is stuck to the ground. On the other hand, Francisca Cortínez explains how *Dinamyc Suprematist Architecton – A6* in Andersen’s classification (1970) – and the *Modern Buildings*. Suprematism of 1923-24 – N^o 85 in Andersen’s classification (1970) – exacerbate the sense of longitudinality of volumes, extrusion, dynamism and movement, and in the case of the second, it also does it through the longitudinal arrangement of two parallel bodies (Figure 9); or like the *Suprematist Architecton – A15* in

Andersen's classification (1970) –, despite risking the apparently antithetical plastic concepts of the dissolution plan and the suprematist straight line, turns out to be, in the words of Micaela Costa (2016), an anomalous architecton introducing series of volumes at regular intervals (Figure 10). In the end, architectons are differentiated among themselves, mainly because each one has its own gravity centre.

This process of differentiation seems to prefigure the argument that Gilles Deleuze established almost fifty years later in *Difference and Repetition* (1968), where, reviewing the traditional understanding of the relationships between identity and difference, he rejects the notion of difference as a derivation of the identity of an object to propose, on the contrary, that all identity is an effect of the difference or, in other words, that the identity of an object (architectonic in this case) is not logical or metaphysically prior to the multiplicity of its possible variations. This debate, central in the reception of Deleuze in the architecture of the late 20th Century (from Gregg Lynn to Bernard Cache), shows in Malevich the will – undeclared – of 'reversing Platonism' (Deleuze, 1966), since usurpation as an appropriation technique does not merely look for diversions of some stable archetype, but the destruction of every archetype through its absorption.

In Chile, the local translation of suprematist non-objectivity contained in Malevich's architectons is visible in the 'non-geometric' and 'non-perspective' loads attributed to the 'forms of absence' as developed in the *Capilla de Pajaritos* (1953) by Alberto Cruz (Cruz, 1971). It is not by chance – like an architecton bonsai (Figure 11) – that it was formed of seven cubes of different sizes. And, if the seven cubes of *Pajaritos* are

quite far from the 40 that define, for instance, the Alpha Architecton in its simplest stage, or the 91 that define it in the most complex one, the biggest difference between Cruz and Malevich is not in the number of volumes that form the projects but in the quantity of compositive relationships contained in each of them. Guillermo Jullian de la Fuente, a student of Cruz in Valparaíso, also re-conceptualised the 'absent form' in the 'neutral form' to say that objects do not matter, only relationships (personal communication, September 1, 1999).

But, by not declaring their admiration for Malevich, Cruz and Jullian lost the opportunity of supplanting him, of taking his place, presenting themselves as his doubles, defying and ultimately absorbing him altogether. They did not understand the radicalism of the project. They did not know how to introduce an 'additional element', a bacteria, or a bacillus with which to infect the Russian, with which to "produce effective changes in his organism" (Malevich, 2007: 40). On the contrary, they remained on the level of stabilisation of the abstraction of the image, sanctifying and miniaturizing an archetype without understanding the great game of the impostor, in destabilizing every sacred image, in producing the image of destruction of every architectural image. 

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