

90 Kasimir Malevich. White square on a White background.

1917.

Oil on canvas. 78,7 x 78,7 cm.

Modern Arte Museum, New York.

“Comrades, arise; escape the tyranny of things”

K- Malevich

Malevich, with his Suprematism, preached a world without objects (thus showing “the supremacy of pure sentiment or pure perception in pictorial arts”). This work could be interpreted as the material world on the point of completely and forever dissolving in the ether.

After assimilating in a very short time all the figurative styles and after declaring that “all the styles should be burnt as if they were a corpse”, he was hugely interested in the Byzantine Russian tradition of icons. He played in everyway possible with their faces, converting them into black or white ovals (Black head; Religious Form), not without humour as shown in the works titled Pictorial Realism of a boy with his school bag or Pictorial Realism of a countrywoman in two dimensions (also called Red square on a white background).

Standard bearer of the proletariat revolution, he proposed that the worker, new protagonist of History, to be happy and completely achieve his potential, should live within a cube. Considering the architecture which has been built in the industrial peripheries of the large cities, this prophesy seems to have come true. Now, taking into account the workers of today, without class consciousness and with the same material aspirations of any bourgeois, it is clear that if the cube does not have under floor heating, air conditioning and a swimming pool, the author of the idea will have to keep it for himself. As really happened, as on the death of Malevich his friend Sueitin placed the famous white cube decorated with a black square on his tomb.

The eagerness for purity expressed in the aspiration for perfection of the geometric shapes (like reaching a universal language, a type of “Esperanto of shapes”) which characterised a sector of modern art is materialised above all in architecture*. Ledoux, in the first XVIII century Modernity, had condemned the rural guards to live inside an immense, smooth and bare sphere placed like a huge, recently landed UFO, in the middle of the bucolic countryside.

In his important book called Art and Visual perception, Rudolf Arnheim, following the bases of the Gestaltpsychologie, says: “In the earliest stage, the circle serves as a full human figure”. And, according to the very influential theories of Jung, the circle and the square are among the innate or archetypal images of the human consciousness. From what we could conclude that all circular or square shapes which occupy the centre of an image tend to be seen as a face or full figure.

This work, one of the summits of XX century abstraction (modern art never has been nearer to Neo-Platonism), could then perfectly be considered as the most radically minimalist representation of the human being that has ever been made (leaving to one side, of course, the creations of children in their initial stage of “uncontrolled scribble”), and providing in the end a scientific basis to the titles, only in appearance humoristic, which Malevich used to give to his works**. A proof that this appreciation is not a whim is a collage by Kurt Schwitters, made on a

postcard sent to Hannah Höch 8th December, 1923, is a photographic portrait of the bust of the same Schwitters, where the face has been covered by a golden square supported on a vertex (like the one that, covered with eyes, represents the celestial space in one of the miniatures of Hildegard von Bingen which illustrates her visions), hardly letting the hair and upper part of the face be seen, without anything missing. A “Prohibition of the reproduction” which could be appreciated later, in a less radical way, slyer and more humoristic, in Magritte, in the paintings where the human face is substituted by perfectly plausible things such as a bunch of violets, a resplendent light or a juicy, green apple.

Despite the pretension that his paintings had nothing in common with nature, his works based on the square could also be seen as aerial views of the earth (the artist adored planes and had done aerial photography) with its square fields of crops, maybe the archetypically Russian image of the Siberian taiga, under whose white permafrost frozen herds of Woolley Mammoths sleep. A possible connection with the paintings created as a consequence of the Futuristic Aeropainting Manifest by Marinetti has not yet been studied.

On numerous occasions, during a visit to a museum or exhibition of Contemporary art, I have seen how “simple” people, without the necessary preparation to approach such works, make an effort to find the tranquilising figurative features which would allow them to “understand” what they are looking at, trying to decipher the strange relationship between the title and the work in question and making a display of creativity in their descriptions worthy of consideration, in this so human need of the recognisable, which immediately transfers us to the emotive. Or might it not be (if we take as true the story about Picasso which says that, during his happy years in Vallauris, the first person he showed his recently finished paintings to was the cook, enjoying enormously his comments) that the real receivers of Modern Art are precisely these creatures without any academic training, truly “poor in spirit” to who the Kingdom of the Arts is, ultimately the People (the “simple man”, or the “man in the street”, as they have frequently been called, with the identical paternalism)? If this was true, Modern Art would be the greatest educational and redemptive project of all times, a revolution of greater reach than that dreamt of by the Surrealists, the Russian, the Mexican, the Sandinista, the Cuban, the Islamic and all the revolutions together which the XX century has generated***.

* The social and equalitarian Utopia of Constructivism was solidified (as before the ideals of the French Revolutions were) on the American continent, in the New World: in Brasilia (the only modern city in the world to be declared as a World Heritage site, called by André MalruX “the capital of hope”). Only, instead of being for the people, it has been a Utopia for the comfortable middle class bureaucrats who, despite finding themselves in the agora, miss each other, inside their safe automobiles, on the motorways which cross the city. The work of the genial Niemeyer (still in active as an architect at his 102 years) is a type celestial Jerusalem, a true ghost city (modern cities in general develop a character on the fringe architecture instead of thanks to it). Like these Aurobindo type experiments, which in the psychedelic 70’s were also to be constructed in another Promised Land (this time the ancient, mythical India), where followers of the same sect live together protected from the contamination of the exterior world.

** This ambiguity between the figurative and abstract or geometric in the Suprematist works of Malevich, is already found in the XII century art works, with all its imbroglio about the visibility of the invisible. In them, the geometric figures combine with anthropomorphic figures. So, the divine mystery tends to be expressed through simple forms like the square or circle (and in primary colours). Meanwhile what is seen through the senses is represented figuratively, in a way which the ascent from the earth to heaven can be appreciated.

*** When, in reality, Modern art has become disastrous for people. In so much as it is one of the vectors of the gentrification of the cities, an inescapable process in all the cities of any importance which begins with the creation of a brand new Contemporary Art Centre together with a number of Art galleries in a “degraded” but flavoursome neighbourhood, with the consequent increase in rents, and which finishes with the expulsion of its “picturesque” inhabitants, who are substituted by the much more financially solvent and chic, habitual modern fauna. All this despite the pretension of “articulating a genuine popular and critical teaching, equally far from the elitist aristocratism and from the fast food culture for mass consumption”, proposed by some director of Contemporary Art Centre or Cultural manager, where echoes can be heard of this Utopia which for some time has been converted into one of the most profitable assets of the consumer society.

Curiously, despite the term “people” being omnipresent in the historical, political and social discourse of the XIX and XX centuries, as states Michel Wieviorka, it does not figure in the Lalande, a technical and critical dictionary of philosophy, neither in the dictionary of ethic and moral philosophy, published under the direction of Monique Canto-Sperber. Always according to Wieviorka, despite it being a basic element in pre-democracy, after disappearing during the settling of this, the people may easily return to be important in the post democracy.