Kazimir Malevich’s Black Square (several versions, 1915–25) epitomised the promise of a radical break with the past, a tabula rasa.¹ As an anti-icon, it made space for a new, brighter future for the twentieth century, having supposedly overcome a bygone past. Subsequently the fortunes of the Black Square mirrored those of the early ideas of the revolution. Less than a decade after coming to power, the Bolshevik leadership outlawed the avant-garde in the Soviet Union, but it remained alive abroad thanks to a range of active collectors: in Thessaloniki (Kostaki), in Amsterdam (Khardjiev), in New York, etc. Malevich himself changed direction but presciently got his early work shipped out of Russia in the 1920s.² Fast-forward to the post-Soviet period, and by the time the Olympic Games opened in Sochi in 2014, Malevich was back on the official cultural map of Russia’s heritage, representing the letter ‘M’ in the alphabet of achievements during the opening ceremony choreographed by producer Konstantin Ernst.

¹ The Black Square was exhibited in London at the Royal Academy’s ‘Revolution: Russian Art 1917–1932’ in 2017, in Tate Modern’s ‘Malevich’ exhibition in 2014, and cited in ‘Adventures of the Black Square’ at the Whitechapel Gallery in 2015
² Kostaki’s contribution was celebrated with a dedicated exhibition at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow: Georgi Kostaki: K 100-letiu kollekcionera, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 2014
Had history normalised itself? Not quite.³ In 2015, a team of curators led by New Tretyakov gallery’s Irina Vakar were busy preparing for the centenary of the work. Then came a surprise discovery: X-ray specialists Irina Voronina and Ekaterina Rustamova from the gallery did a routine survey of the earliest version of the Black Square, only to discover a surprising subtext to the painting. The X-ray of the Tretyakov’s version of the Black Square (1915) revealed that in the painting the following text had been painted over in black: ‘Negroes battling in a cave’. The Tretyakov art historians suggested that the source of the reference was probably a 1897 satirical print by the French humorist writer Alphonse Allais.⁴ This featured a black canvas in a baroque frame and was subtitled Combat des nègres dans une cave, pendant la nuit (‘Negroes Fighting in a Cellar at Night’).⁵ Looking at Allais’s other work, his black square fits within a larger context of humour associated with negativity and inversion rather than racial caricature: for example, cartoons of his such as First Communion of Anaemic Young Girls in the Snow (1883), featuring a white canvas, and Funeral March for the Obsequies of a Great Deaf Man (1897), which contains a blank musical score that has been discussed as a precursor to John Cage.

Even though Allais had been a known influence on Malevich prior to this, the finding of this particular reference was an immediate media sensation in Russia and abroad.⁶ The first question it raised was this: could it be that the Black Square started out as a far less serious intervention than Malevich himself subsequently made it out to be? There are also other ramifications of the find. How to make sense of the painting in the new light remains open to interpretation.⁷ Below the black – pitch black, to the eye – what a representational train wreck lies beneath Malevich’s Black Square, the X-ray seems to be asking.

⁵ These findings were shown in the exhibition The Mark of Malevich: Graphics from the State Tretyakov Gallery’s Collection, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 23 October 2015 — 14 February 2016 https://www.russianartandculture.com/exh-the-mark-of-malevich-graphics-from-the-state-tretyakov-galleries-collection-23-october-14-february-2016/
⁷ One example of a recent attempt to integrate it in a narrative of the Russian avantgarde is Lada Panova, Mnimee sirotstvo: Khlebnikov I Kharmus vo kontekste russkogo i evropeiskogo modernisma (HSE, Moscow, 2017). The New Tretyakov gallery itself responded with an exhibition marking the centenary of the Revolution of 1917 as a multi-perspectival event with ambivalent rather than purely emancipatory outcomes. See the catalogue Nekto 1917, T L Karpova, ed, Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, 2017.
‘Previously we thought that this work had been produced spontaneously, but the results of our investigation reveal that the process of its creation was complex and took a long time’, Irina Vakar, the Tretyakov’s chief researcher of the Russian avant-garde, has said. To her, the findings make little difference in terms of the meaning of Malevich’s work. She is actually a little irritated by the interest the X-ray discovery has generated, which points at all the wrong reasons why we should be interested in revisiting this work. Vakar sees it as yet another invitation to consider Malevich’s own thoughts regarding the meaning of his work as constantly shifting and evolving.\(^8\) But other worshippers of Malevich remain paralysed and confused by the findings of the painting’s genesis.\(^9\)

**Dina Gusjenova (DG):** What did the *Black Square* mean to you previously?

**Khadija von Zinnenburg Carroll (KvZC):** Modernism’s promise was ‘I’m glad I’m not like you. I can go further and further into the wilderness; because it’s only there that transformation can take place. My Black Square is a bare and frameless icon for our times. Arise, Comrades, and free yourselves from the tyranny of objects.’ Thus Malevich addresses his critics and positions his black geometries. The anthropologist described the coming of darkness in the sky, as a writing experiment to test thick description, just as the painter might paint a room of objects in the dark and find that black is indeed a colour.\(^10\)

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\(^8\) Dina Gusejnova, interview with Irina Vakar, 20 April 2017


**DG:** And now, what changes for you after the X-ray? This must resonate with your own research, since you have used X-rays as a method for a critique of colonialism in art history as a discipline.

**KvZC:** I do have a thing for X-rays of paintings, that peeling back the skin of the perfected body to find another, hidden picture below. Addition and accrual of meanings is where art history spins out of control, and can turn into a politically mobilised form. Modernist art for art’s sake resists such instrumentalisation; it claims to be above the propaganda, as W E B Du Bois, for example, postulates.

I am stunned by the inscription, the need to explain the void, the necessity of the caption. What blow that deals the promise of Modernism’s pretensions to natural signs. Then there is also the aspect of darkness, the gloaming range of darkness that, as painters, can include all the colours, or indeed can even be observed, as Levi-Strauss did in *Tristes Tropiques*, in the remains of the day. What now of all the odes that followed, like El Lissitzky’s ‘A.[rt] and Pangeometry’ essay from 1925?

*Et sic in infinitum* (and like this to infinity) is written on all four sides of a black square in Robert Fludd’s 1617 *Utriusque cosmi maioris scilicet et minoris metaphysica, physica atque technica historia* (The Metaphysical, Physical, and Technical History of the Two Worlds, Namely the Greater and the Lesser). We all wanted to believe, it seems, that the Black Square was Modernism’s version; that Modernism had invented the beginning of the universe, represented as an elegant nothingness, a no-colour, a Nietzschean void.
But it was not wordless, and it was not in the beginning that there was a word. Instead it was the silencing of that word. And, yes, we knew that is what was happening.

DG: What, then, has been particularly unsettling about this X-ray find for ‘western’ scholars? Does the chief priest of Suprematism now appear to be a crypto-white supremacist?

KvZC: Hannah Black’s theorisation of the Black Square X-ray as convolution of ‘Fractal Freedoms’ is tangled in the equation of paradoxes created by race and racial abstraction.11 This X-ray spins the reception of Malevich 180 degrees – and then what happens to censorship, and all the black squares that have proliferated on pages blocking other texts that intentionally are blacked out so as not to be read? Malevich is even more of a precursor to the contemporary aesthetics of redaction than we thought. There was a necessity to the redactions that those of us working in a highly censored environment had to use on the artistic research material we gathered. So, for example, in Bordered Lives I used redaction in its variety of forms – black square, pixels, blurs – in order to refer directly to the censorship that was imposed on the immigration detention archive.12

So being black is not being the void, being black is not only being not-colour, it is a more complex negativity. It is being ‘Negro’, it is being a joke, it is being in a cave.

DG: The fundamental issue, to me, is that someone like Allais could get away with making what he thought of as a little joke, about Negroes in a cave being black, because his audience consisted essentially of white Europeans like himself. But our expectations of more ‘serious’ modernists are higher, and their own imagined audience was larger. We demand them to be emancipators, to work on progress in thinking. After all, it is only another decade or so until the demands of Du Bois for a ‘Negro art’, when he called for culture to help humanity to transcend what he called the ‘color line’, but also, to gain ‘the right of black folk to love and enjoy’ art, if necessary, through propaganda.13 Like Du Bois, we expect Malevich to be both serious and on the right side of history.

This is why the discovery threatens to undermine the supposed sanctity of modernism itself. And yet, it is perhaps also an opportunity to develop a more critical understanding of many modernists’ own posturing in history.

KvZC: Adrienne Edwards, the curator of the ‘Blackness in Abstraction’ exhibition at Pace Gallery in New York in 2016 writes about how, in response to the demands placed on black artists for social content in their art, she put forward ‘rather … a dematerialization of the object’ works where ‘there is an absence of the black subject, who nevertheless impels the works. This

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absence can be thought of as a reflection of the limitations of black representation in visual art. Edwards speaks to the politics of the colour Black, of seeing blackness, of designating blackness. I have not even begun here to deal with the wealth of literature on blackness as is collected together in part in Fred Moten’s ‘The Case of Blackness’, in which he moves from Fanon through the psychopathology of ‘death-driven nonbeing’. It was not my purpose here to tackle states of being black. You may complain that the Black Square’s censorious stain remains.

I think that the pointed racism that interferes with the pure Modernism Malevich has enjoyed until now makes the Black Square all the more appropriate as an art historical reference for contemporary redaction art. The image of black squares that stretch into long rectangles on redacted documents and photographs have caught the attention of several artists that work with classified material. The X-ray shifts Malevich from censor of the Madonna to a representative of dominant hegemonic power – Brussels’s disparagement of its colonial subjects – rather than the abstract void we thought it was. The void is covering multicolour power regimes, perhaps always.

But let’s come back to this issue of language, of being pure and untitled, of that artistic conceit that the colour field speaks for itself. I can only speculate why Malevich blacked out his figurative painting of black bodies in a cave and what he felt he had done. Retrospectively, history, in its bumbling, crazy manner, took the black square as icon, pitted it against the Madonna, made it ultimate. But actually it is just a poor figurative painting that an artist has blacked-out. Probably out of sheer shame at having made such a derivative pun, such a sad attempt to represent the

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Other. Black-out of frustration and shame. But who knows, these are not really the drivers of the Modern genius, one who so stridently defends his position as Suprematist.

**DG:** Actually, I think the reaction to the X-ray reveals more about the public’s associations with the avant-garde than about the painting or its author. In the Soviet Union, thinking about the avant-garde had always been more ambivalent than in the West, and not just because it was shunned by the party officials in the late 1920s. Even among critical Soviet art historians, the view of the avant-garde remained more nuanced. In the wake of the Thaw era, which saw a brief loosening of state control over art and culture, the art historian Igor Golomstock and the philosopher Alexander Piatigorsky co-wrote a book called *Psychopathology of the Avantgarde*, using Malevich as a case study.16 Their aim was to show how a true artist is consumed by the contradictions of the revolutionary impulse and its realisation. Malevich’s path took him from the radical *Black Square* to the neo-classical, stark portraits of the Stalin era. The book was never published; both authors were forced to emigrate in the early 1970s and never returned to work on Malevich. But Golomstock’s ideas on the avant-garde remained influential among Russian-speaking art historians — not least due to his continued influence through conversations and informal encounters.17

**KvZC:** The right questions are not being asked of this X-ray. The doctors are not in disarray the way they should be when such an art historical zombie appears. It is not ‘is this a greater masterpiece because it is racist’, as one comment on *The Guardian* website says (the only comment that mentions race), and it is not a joke, and it’s not about copying only.18 All the rhetoric of his Suprematist movement that was born with the *Black Square* obscures his process and intent. Likely Malevich wasn’t afflicted by guilt for misrepresentation of both infinity and the African, but, rather, feared he had painted a mediocre, derivative picture. Much great art comes from failure, the failures of mediocrities. That’s because the canonical designation of ‘great art’ is in itself a mediocre failure.

**DG:** Let’s agree that the *Black Square* and its X-rayed past are another reminder that art is a social process, not a series of statements.

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16 Igor Golomstock passed away in London on 12 July 2017; these notes on the unpublished manuscript are based on a copy seen at Golomstock’s home and on conversations with him before his death.


18 ‘Ah, so it’s not just a black square. It’s a racist black square. Does this make it more or less of a ‘masterpiece’?’ Cicadidae, commenting on ‘Russia discovers two secret paintings under avant-garde masterpiece’, *The Guardian*, 13 November 2015 16:55 (none of the online comments pick up on this) [https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/13/russia-malevich-black-square-hidden-paintings](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/nov/13/russia-malevich-black-square-hidden-paintings)
This conversation began with a live discussion at the Royal Academy in London in 2015, the year of the 100th anniversary of Malevich’s *Black Square*.

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