

On March 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014 a rather neutrally worded note was posted in a chat room for museum archivists by a mid-level technician at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow. The writer simply noted that during a scheduled preservation check of Malevich's *Black Square*, it was registered that the "square-shaped black area of the oil paint layer has descended approx. 3.7 mm down on the surface of the canvas." A follow-up post one week later mentioned that a similar shift had been detected in several of El Lissitzky's lithographs in the museum's archive.

These observations were largely ignored at first, even within the insular community of professional archivists, and were not reported at all in the general media. However, in the following months similar isolated incidents were shared between peers, which in subsequent months and years eventually swelled to a drastically increasing number of reports describing uncanny and inexplicable changes occurring in famous avant-garde art pieces in museum and private collections around the world.

In hindsight, it is surprising how little initial attention these astonishing changes received internationally – until late February, 2022, when dramatic and clearly documentable transformations in

Malevich's and Lissitzky's works were also observed in the collections of the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and the Guggenheim in New York, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and other major Western museums and collections: In every case, the geometric forms in the artworks had gradually somehow been sliding down to the bottom edge of the picture as if someone had switched off the anti-gravity force that had been put in place to create the utopian weightlessness of the ground-breaking avant-garde fantasy of 100 years earlier.

Understandably, the first questions raised by both the professional art sector and the public at large, sought to challenge the authenticity of the works themselves. The dominant opinion initially voiced by art historians and restoration experts was that the art world was the victim (and also perpetrator) of an unprecedented scam committed on an international scale, with the probable involvement of top-level museum administrators. What other conclusion could there be? Surely it would hardly be possible for outsiders to replace the originals with cynically and blatantly recomposed forgeries – and in any case, to what purpose? However, rigorous chemical tests of the canvases, along with spectral and x-ray analyses of the works, attested to their irrefutable historical authenticity.

This left the museum experts with no other option but to recognise the highly abnormal changes in the paint layers as an – at least temporarily – inexplicable anomaly. They could offer little more than to cautiously express a few hypotheses, referring, for instance, to the poor quality of the materials used by the early avant-gardists, pointing out a certain lacunae in the intersection of material studies and modern art history.



*The first change noticed was the fallen square in Malevich's Black Square. The staff of the Tretyakov Gallery was mystified by this change, as was the rest of the art world.*

Meanwhile, comments and opinions from specialized fields beyond art history and conservation were not long in coming. Prominent contemporary art theorists and cultural critics freely presented their insights and conjectures – bringing the social and political to the fore, and emphasizing the connection between the historical and the contemporary. British art critic and theorist John Roberts commented, “After over a hundred years, the revolutionary impulse of Malevich’s radical abstraction is still telling us that in the time of war, revolution is the only solution,” continuing, “This is why the collapsed Malevich abstractions are not only reminiscent of the ruins of bombed Ukrainian cities, but also clearly hint at future revolutionary barricades on the streets of Moscow.” Somewhat similarly, art critic and theorist Rosalind Krauss came to the conclusion that “even though we must now sternly re-evaluate our relationship to the Cubo-Futurists and Suprematists, it is clear Malevich’s – and especially Lissitzky’s – works remain a vital and important example of the possibilities of art in the face of political and social upheaval. Now that the structure of the work has changed, a new opportunity to critique the surface of the painted picture has made itself apparent.”



*International media covered the story, which attracted widespread interest globally.*

Because the changes received widespread international media attention, it did not take long for philosophers and leading social theorists to also offer their rich, multifaceted analyses of this art world bombshell event. For example, ecofeminist theorist Donna Haraway, combining the technological and the artistic, stated confidently that “the Suprematists believed it was the duty of the artist to reveal the fundamental principles of the universe through their work, and with this assertion in mind it becomes clear that, with regard to the sudden changes in the geometrical shapes of the work of, first Malevich, and then others, we must move beyond the outdated notion of the self as a fixed and bounded entity, and embrace the inherently fluid nature of reality. Only then can we truly

thrive in the emerging age of ever-accelerating technological advancement."

On the other hand, philosopher Timothy Morton interpreted the changes in the works as reflecting the crises caused and experienced by humans to understand better what it means that these cultural objects so dear to us have experienced a radical and unaccountable change.", adding that, "We must understand that this change is – just as the advent of the Anthropocene was – a crisis of consciousness. We must reject the idea of the individual as an autonomous and separate entity and recognize the fundamental interconnectedness of all beings. Only by embracing a more holistic way of thinking can we hope to heal the damage we have done and create a truly sustainable future". The comments of these writers, hailed as some of the most important thinkers of our time by the contemporary art world, underlined the significance of these bizarre events.



*An apparent movement in the basic structure of the work ignited fierce discussion in the field of art history, and also in other theoretico-philosophical discourses. Photographs: installation views of Malevich's 1915 paintings at K21, Düsseldorf, in 2012 and 2022.*

Despite some essential differences in these various thinkers interpretations of this quasi-Hegelian 'end of art', all the experts agreed with the observation that it was not by chance that this clearly catastrophic art world event which obviously related to the current collapse of 'stability' in post-communist Europe, had started from Malevich's pieces. A Kyiv-born, ethnically Polish genius prophet of the XX-century avant-garde, Malevich's art and writings were initially ridiculed and rejected by the Russian Imperial cultural elite (centered on Alexandre Benois and the imperial classicist group World of Art), then banned and removed from public view by Stalinists, and finally culturally appropriated as a part of the 'great Russian cultural heritage' in Post-Soviet crypto-fascist Russia.

These paradigm-shifting events of course also became fodder for conversation in society more generally, well beyond the rarefied air of social theorists and art historians. As Lissitzky and Malevich are regarded as groundbreaking avant-gardists, it was thus no surprise that not only the art world had something to say about this odd happening. The art-going public flocked to museums to view the changed works for themselves. Since it was theorized widely in public discourse that these events had a strong connection with the contemporary world, these extraordinary events caused strange, often quite anxious reactions amongst the general public.



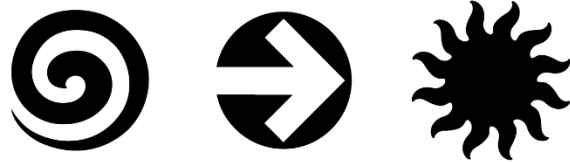
*The 'collapsed' works did not go unnoticed by the public: people would, for example, pray and cry before the works, trying to understand how – and why – this had happened.*



Because of the many dimensions involved in the seeming collapse in the societal order, the works have become an important point of focus in the global current discourse. Relatedly, it is important to remember the intrinsic strangeness of this series of related events in which elements within artworks collapse, thus representing an active and direct relationship between the collapsed art pieces and the more generalized hovering threat of collapsing and broken social stability. With all this in mind, the current exhibition displays the key artifacts – even icons – of this mysterious development, presenting the famous art pieces tragically transformed, alongside the documentary photographs disclosing how this process began, and continues to mirror our more generally changing world.

This exhibition, through a careful examination of these works, also aims to contribute insights on how the process is most probably going to end. It is hoped the installation may also shed a helpful light on how this now internationally famous phenomenon can have a significant impact on our contemporary world – especially in relation to historical art pieces. The exhibition offers a vital examination point from which to assess one of the most bizarre incidents of our complex and anxious times.

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