

Aleksandra Shatskikh
**Inscribed
Vandalism: *The
Black Square* at
One Hundred**

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In October 1882, the poet Paul Bilhaud (1854–1933) exhibited a painting of a black square entitled *A Battle of Negroes at Night* (*Combat de nègres pendant la nuit*) at the first “Salon of Untethered Art,” of which he himself was the founder, in the Masonic artistic tavern The Black Cat in Paris. In subsequent Salons of Untethered Art – in Russian translation, a synonym for this phrase could be “cheeky art” – at the same venue, his friend and drinking companion, the writer and humorist Alphonse Allais, exhibited a monochrome white picture (1883) and then a red one (1884).

The derivative imitator Allais cut his masterpieces to a pattern invented by Bilhaud: an illustration was created for a rationally composed amusing phrase – the red rectangle was “Tomatoes being harvested by apoplectic cardinals on the shores of the Red Sea,” and the white one was “Anemic girls making their first communion in snowy weather.”¹

Fifteen years later, in 1897, Alphonse Allais published his *April 1 Album*, dedicated to April Fools’ Day, with Paul Ollendorff’s publishing house.² It included seven “magnificent plates” interspersed with texts by the author and publisher; they took the form of monochrome rectangles set in fanciful graphic frames above pompously solemn captions. First came a black rectangle, with a more prolix title than the original: *A Battle of Negroes in a Cave on a Dark Night (a reproduction of a famous picture)*. Allais was obliged to provide the explanation in brackets, since he was not the originator of the jest. Later on, Allais “forgot” about Paul Bilhaud’s authorship (they had quarrelled), and he attributed the creation of *A Battle* to himself; this version has become firmly established in history.

More than a century later, in late 2015, the State Tretyakov Gallery in Russia revealed the results of an expert art-historical and technological analysis performed, using the very latest equipment, on a different painting of a black square. The analysis indicated that Kazimir Malevich’s *The Black Square* (1915) was the third composition to have been painted on this canvas: the first was a Cubo-Futurist work, and its colors were already dry when Malevich set an abstract composition on top of it. It was on this second layer, while it was still wet, that the artist painted *The Black Square*. The new analysis also turned up an inscription on the white margin of the *Square*: “A battle of negroes ... [continuation illegible].” It wasn’t long before the authorship of these words was attributed to Malevich himself.

The revelation of this inscription – and its attribution to Malevich – was one of two highly sensational, high-profile interventions from two “statists of art” in Russia on the hundredth



anniversary year of 1915. I am borrowing this term “statists of art” from Malevich himself: it was how the artist defined people who, being unquestioningly convinced of the correctness of their own pronouncements and holding positions of power, determined “truths in art” according to their own “correct” notions.³

The first of these Russian “pillars of the state” to comment on the anniversary of *The Black Square* was the Patriarch Kirill, who is endowed with supreme “spiritual authority” in present-day Russia, where the current situation is one of the coalescence of the Orthodox Church and the state. The declaration by the paramount pastor of millions of Russians, made in the course of an address to the Episcopal Conference on February 2, 2015, was widely broadcast in the mass media:

I acknowledge the place of Malevich and his *Black Square* in Russian art, because this terrifying, so to speak, black square is a genuine reflection of what was in the soul of this Malevich. And it reflects not only Malevich, it reflects the spirit of the age. And in order to understand what is happening to us, take the Vladimir Icon of the Mother of God and Malevich’s *Black Square*, and you will not need any more scriptures, or treatises, or proofs – you will see what has happened to humankind.

In the context of the speech given by the overlord of the Orthodox Church, it emerges that the soul of “this Malevich” was black and terrifying, and for “us” (read: “the flock of the irreproachably virtuous patriarch”), the only salvation from the baneful scourge symbolized by *The Black Square* is to unite around its complete opposite, the Vladimir Icon of the Mother of God.

Accusations that Malevich and his most important work, *The Black Square*, present us with “pure evil,” “darkness,” and “the devil’s work” are by no means new; they have been constant companions of the picture’s existence since its appearance in 1915. The approach taken by the statists of the Soviet Union was even more thoroughgoing; they quite simply deleted both the picture and the artist’s name from the history of art. In post-Soviet Russia, the statist artist Ilya Glazunov and the writer Tatyana Tolstaya have piled on the black tones in their fulminations against *The Black Square*, and modern Russian realist artists continue to deny the picture any place in art, seeing it as “a trick,” “a stunt,” and “a contemptuous fraud.”

In view of the multivalent and expansive nature of the phenomenon that is known as *The Black Square*, such accusations merely tell us that even now this picture is capable of

provoking a phenomenally lively reaction: *The Black Square* is alive, it continues to live and retains its relevance *a century after it was created* – there is no other example of this kind in the history of world art.

The anniversary year began with the orientational statement from Patriarch Kirill, and towards its end, in October 2015, the State Tretyakov Gallery, the main museum of Russian art, where the “icon of our time” (Malevich’s words) is kept, made its own stunning and sensational pronouncement.

The sensation was initially made public on October 3, 2015 in a talk given by the director of the Tretyakov Gallery, Z. I. Tregulova, at the opening of the exhibition “0.10” at the Beyer Foundation in Basel.⁴ Later, the gallery director held a press conference in Moscow, inviting reporters into the hall where *The Black Square* was hanging. According to Tregulova, the crowd of journalists there was equal only to the number usually seen at one of President Putin’s press conferences.⁵

At the press conference, the results were announced of the new expert art-historical and technological analysis carried out on *The Black Square*.⁶ By virtue of historical circumstance and national mentality, Russians prefer when decisions, conclusions, and politics are “collective”; this testifies to the “objectivity” and “veracity” of what is determined and proclaimed by the collective (commune, committee, party, team, etc.). The conclusions of the new investigations were not announced in the name of the individual researchers, but in the name of the collective of the State Tretyakov Gallery, that is, in the name of “state employees.”⁷ The fact that *The Black Square* of 1915 is overlaid on another picture has been known for a very long time: pinkish-red, yellow, and blue elements are clearly visible through the crack patterns of the picture. An x-ray of the picture that documented the underlying composition was published in 1991.⁸ There was nothing sensational about this – the stunning sensation was provided by something else. In order not to misrepresent in the least the conclusions that were reached by the staff members of the Tretyakov Gallery, I quote at length from I. A. Vakar’s book:

On the white margin of the *Square* the remains of an inscription by the artist were discovered. It could be read as “A battle of negroes,” followed by an indecipherable word (what it is can only be surmised on the basis of the context: in darkness (?) in a cave (?) at night (?).^[9] The inscription, made in pencil on the dry paint, was either lost with the passage of time or erased by the artist. There are two possible explanations

for this phrase. Possibly Malevich knew of the existence of a painting by the famous joker Alphonse Allais (1854–1905), *A Battle of Negroes in a Cave in the Middle of the Night* (1893), which represented a black rectangle, and he was hinting at that work. Or perhaps he recalled an amusing episode that was reported in the newspaper *The Russian Word* (*Russkoe Slovo*) in December, 1911:

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“A one-hour-long exhibition parodying the ‘World of Art’ has been held by young artists from AzhViZ [the Academy of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture].

“In imitation of the latest forms of the ‘Salon des Beaux Arts’ – in Larionov’s one-day exhibition – the young artists organized a ‘one-hour’ exhibition. In first place stood the panel *A Battle of Negroes at Night*: a black-ink poster with white spots – the stars and the eyes of the negro fighters.”^[10]

In either case, Malevich’s first reaction to the birth of his “regal infant” comes as a complete surprise. *After his profound*

deliberations, trials, and searches, the author seems to ask himself: But is it a picture? Can it be taken seriously?

We are used to accepting Malevich with his mysterious *Squares*, prophetic “writings,” and pompous manner of behaving like an individual full of gravity and high pathos. This was the attitude that Malevich used to inspire his students, and in time it was automatically transmitted to historians of art. However, it is somehow forgotten that he possessed a rare sense of humor and loved pranks and jokes; precisely during the Futurist period, and afterwards in the period of Alogism and Februarism, Malevich was completely immersed in a ludic, humorous environment. His fascination with the absurd facilitated his friendship with the poet Kruchenykh; in June and early July, after the *Square* had already been created, the artist wrote a text for the poet’s publication that concluded with the words: “Of course, many people will think that this is absurd, but mistakenly so, one only has to light two matches and put in a wash-basin.”



In Alogism, Malevich made active use of the word, including it in his drawings – let us recall the previously mentioned black and white sketch for *Victory over the Sun*: “Stupid.” Sometimes the image disappeared completely, giving way to a framed text (“A Fight on the Avenue,” “A Village”). There are also non-representational drawings (including some with squares) accompanied by inscriptions.

Thus the genesis of the *Square* becomes clearer – this anti-picture turns out to be closely connected with the preceding stage of the artist’s creative evolution. But the essential novelty of *The Black Square* went beyond its inherited features, and Malevich could not fail to understand that. If he himself removed the inscription from the *Square*, it was no accident: in Suprematism the word is banished from the picture surface. An inscription on the front of a picture is impermissible here, as are the date, letters and numbers typical of Cubo-Futurism.

Thus we can draw the conclusion that Malevich needed time to realize the scale of his discovery. In two letters in June, the realization has already taken place – Malevich formulates the most important thing that constitutes the meaning and significance of his picture ... And what is more, “material is building up” for his future brochure *From Cubism to Suprematism* (which, according to the author’s date, was completed in June).¹¹

In this extensive passage on the appearance of the “anti-picture” that is Malevich’s major work and his understanding of it, every point is worthy of comment: here we have an eminent art historian, who has devoted many years to researching Malevich’s art, vividly demonstrating her understanding of both the artist’s personality and his discoveries.

Vakar emphasizes that she is offering her own “authorial version” of the inscription. At the end of the book, in the Appendix, the collective of the State Tretyakov Gallery offers its own interpretation in the form of an unqualified assertion:

In one of the margins a partially lost inscription by the artist was discovered. It had been written in black pencil on the already dry layer of white paint and consists of several words.

Separate letters can be read visually. When letters were reconstructed from their fragments using a binocular microscope, the first two words were read as “B[a] tle ne [r?v?].”^[12] As a result of visual comparison of the letters in the inscription that had been discovered with the artist’s inscriptions on genuine pictures by Malevich in the collection of the Tretyakov Gallery, we [the collective of the Tretyakov Gallery] came to the conclusion that it was made by the artist’s own hand. The position of the inscription that was discovered makes it possible to suppose that this margin is the lower section of the picture, and this position of *The Black Square* is the one that the artist intended.”¹³

During a discussion in New York that followed my question about whether the Tretyakov researchers had consulted graphologists, Vakar replied that their opinions never coincided – which meant that the collective had not availed itself of graphological analysis. But let me emphasize that, even if the museum workers had resorted to it, no conscientious graphology expert would have undertaken to state dogmatically that the inscription that had been discovered, with a limited number of casually jotted-down letters, belonged to “the artist’s hand” – the amount of material is insufficient for any proper conclusion.

The research collective established that the pencil inscription had been made on a dry surface. Vakar and the group of technologists that she headed completely failed to pose the question of how long is required for a *double layer* of paint to dry out. Let me clarify that the drying of a single layer of paint is a rather lengthy process, especially when it is applied with a textured effect – *The Black Square* is painted with a textured surface – and a double layer of paint requires an even longer period of time. One reason that the upper layer of the picture cracked is that the drying of the lower and upper images lasted not just weeks, but years.

After having painted *The Black Square*, Malevich – in Vakar’s judgement – did not understand what had happened: “The sense of puzzlement immediately experienced by anyone who encounters the *Square* was probably first experienced by the artist,” writes the researcher.¹⁴ The avant-garde artist remained in this state of “puzzlement” for the prolonged period of time required for the painting to dry. And only after the surface was firm, and did not cave in under the pencil, did he, “wondering whether this is a picture,” write the phrase,

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having either “recalled” a work by the Frenchman Alphonse Allais, *A Battle of Negroes in a Cave at Night*, or “responded” to a jolly parody by students at the Moscow Academy of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture, who copied a prank played by Parisians – let me note that in this case he would have had to “recall” a newspaper article from almost four years earlier, since the “black-ink poster” existed for only one hour.

The researcher unhesitatingly positions *The Black Square* in this sequence of “humorous jokes,” since both she and her collective are absolutely convinced that Malevich is the author of the inscription “A battle of negroes ...” on the front of the picture. And since the words run along the left side of the white margin below the black square, the Tretyakov researchers confidently establish the “correct” orientation in the sense of top and bottom, basing their opinion on the “authorial” location of the phrase.

Vakar drew her information about the creation and existence of the work *A Battle of Negroes in a Cave at Night* from the internet, most probably from Wikipedia. Phillip Denis Cate, a historian and connoisseur of the culture of Parisian bohemian taverns, artistic cabarets, and *cafés chantants*, has explained the history of *A Battle* far more precisely, providing us with additional, important details of its biography.¹⁵ When they declared the inscription on *The Black*

Square to be “authorial,” neither Vakar nor the collective as a whole felt even a shadow of doubt that Malevich could have thought of his *Black Square* as a banal illustration and written a title explaining its subject in the white margin below the black “illustration.” This was precisely the approach taken by Paul Bilhaud and then Alphonse Allais: an “illustration” and its humorous title. Allais replicated Paul Bilhaud’s discovery, and the jokers at the Moscow Academy of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture replicated the replication – permit me to note in passing that witticisms are only authentic when fresh; afterwards they become plagiarism and cliché.

Let me emphasize once again that “illustrations” with “negroes,” “cardinals,” and “anemic girls,” and others of the same ilk, were published as a collection by Alphonse Allais in 1897 in Paris. If the Tretyakov researchers had dug a bit deeper, they would have been wary of tracing the genesis of *The Black Square* back to a set of April Fools’ Day jokes.

But then, that is not necessarily the case – in her book, the leader of the collective speculates that *The Black Square* could have been given the title *A Battle of Negroes* owing to Malevich’s character as a lover of “a ludic, humorous environment.” In other words, according to Vakar, Malevich could quite easily



have supported the rambunctious celebration of April Fools' Day. As an illustrative example of the avant-garde artist's jolly disposition, she adduces the celebrated concluding passage of his text in the book *The Secret Vices of Academics*.¹⁶ And here I would like to pose a rhetorical question to the researcher: Does she really not see any difference between the clichéd jokes of fun-loving bohemian café society and the aesthetic of Alogism and the absurd?

Amusement was the primary and supremely important *raison d'être* of the works of the wisecracking wits and jolly blades whose playgrounds were the *café chantants*, cabarets, artistic taverns, basements, and humorous journals of Paris – those true procreators of mass culture, with its fundamental basis of entertainment with a view to commercial returns. No one (except perhaps Pavel Filonov) was further from amusing bohemian culture than Kazimir Malevich, for all his attachment to “a ludic, humorous environment.”

In connection with the birth of *The Black Square*, Vakar cannot avoid mentioning events for which there is documentary confirmation – on June 9, 2015, Malevich sends a letter, old style, to Matiushin that includes propositions of amazing insight in relation to future metamorphoses of *The Black Square*.¹⁷ However, with quite extraordinary flippancy, the researcher

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ignores the astonishing inconsistency between these prophetic propositions and her own assertions that Malevich “failed to understand” a picture in which, as she envisages things, for a long time – all the time that the picture took to dry – he saw *A Battle of Negroes*.

As an art historian who has spent many years studying Malevich's life and work, I am well aware that the artist had a sense of humor, and sometimes he could be a jolly, even resourcefully jolly, character (I have written repeatedly and in detail about his relations with the “Oberiuty” writers¹⁸); however, I would like to emphasize here that he never borrowed other people's stale “humorous jokes,” that is, he was not the banal plagiarist and platitudinous individual that he appears to be, as presented by the statist museum workers in the role of the author of the inscription *A Battle of Negroes*. The journalists who heard the sensational announcements at the press conference drew direct and precise conclusions. I cite the headlines of reports, articles, and comments: “Original Title Discovered Below the Picture *Black Square*,” “A Century-Long Joke,” “*The Black Square* Was Hanging Upside-Down the Whole Time,” “A Remake of an Old Joke about Negroes,” “*The Black Square* could be an exquisite act of plagiarism,” and so on.¹⁹

When Z. I. Tregulova, the director of the



Tretyakov Gallery, addressed the foreign audience at the opening of the exhibition in Basel, she did not explain to them that in Russian the word “negro” has never had and does not now have a derogatory and insulting meaning; in the West, the conclusions drawn from the sensational “authorial” inscription followed immediately. On the basis of Tregulova’s talk in Switzerland and the press conference in Moscow, the European and American mass media and online publications erupted in indignant responses and comments about “racist jokes” and “racist conceptual utterances.”²⁰ Placing its complete confidence in the Russian researchers, the Western public saw Malevich as an individual with racist views.

Concerning the orgiastic frenzy that took place on the hundredth anniversary of *The Black Square* after the discovery of the sensational inscription “A Battle of Negroes ...,” I wish to affirm with absolute conviction that Kazimir Malevich had nothing at all to do with it – the Russian avant-garde artist’s most important picture was vandalized by some “jolly and quick-witted” individual, who left a graffito on it. There have always been, always are, and always will be people who wish to debunk, unmask, and “smack down” *The Black Square*. Some vulgar humorist managed to leave his mark and perpetrate an outrage against the abhorrent “anti-picture.”

The State Tretyakov Gallery was clearly in too much of a rush to present a sensation on the hundredth anniversary year, and therefore the question of how *The Black Square* hung at Malevich’s first individual exhibition²¹ or what position it occupied in the Moscow Museum of Artistic Culture was not a matter of consideration for them. In the name of fairness, let me say that the answer cannot be found anyway, but in the name of the same fairness, let me emphasize that in those years it was not at all difficult to gain access to the painting. When the Tretyakov researchers discovered an inscription made on a dry layer of paint, they should have borne that in mind.

The researchers also failed to consider the question of whether there were any instances of inscriptions being made on the front of pictures, but not made by Malevich. I would like to inform the reader that there were such instances. It is well known that the inscription on *Composition with the Mona Lisa* (1915) raised and continues to raise the question of whether it was made by Malevich himself. However, it is more important that there was an inscription in pencil on the front of the transrational (*zaum*) picture *Reservist of the First Division*, which is now in MoMA, New York. The inscription was discovered in 1991 in the US during technological investigations in the course of a conference

devoted to Malevich.²² The inscription was unambiguously derisive in nature and it was written by a hand that was not Malevich’s.²³

The Tretyakov team also remained unaware of the vandalization of a work by V. E. Tatlin, which occurred in early 1915 and was reported in the press. On January 26, 1915, the Moscow newspaper *The Evening News* (*Vechernie izvestiya*) carried an unsigned article entitled “Picture defaced at exhibition,” which described an incident from two weeks earlier: “Someone inscribed the word ‘madman’ on Tatlin’s picture *Boyar*. It was not established who made the inscription, and when Tatlin called in the police to draw up a report, the inscription had disappeared. It emerged that the supervisor of the exhibition, Mr. Kreitor, had removed the inscription with an eraser.”²⁴

I wish to stress the significance of this occurrence: some individual acting the hooligan sneakily wrote a “witty” graffito on the picture, committing an act of vandalism that was officially recorded in a newspaper. The outraged Tatlin submitted a complaint to a magistrate of the peace; since the inscription had already been erased, the artist decided not to sue the supervisor of the exhibition and the case was dropped on the joint request of both parties.²⁵

Instances of the aggressive vandalization of works of art have occurred over the decades and the centuries; there is the well-known case of the 1997 defacement of one of Malevich’s pictures at the Stedelijk Museum by an “action artist” hungry for fame.[footnote However, the culprit, Mr. A. Brener, proved to have calculated correctly: his name will go down in history, although only in the small-print notes to the biography of Malevich’s picture *White Cross on a White Background*. The mischievous “action artist” spent a long time planning his only “creative achievement,” thoroughly studying the prison terms for vandalism in the US and Holland; in America he would have faced decades of imprisonment, so he chose Holland, knowing that there he would be given less than a year for an “artistic gesture.” The desecrator and vandal walked free after seven months.] A highly sensational case occurred in 2015, when insulting inscriptions were written on a sculpture by Anish Kapoor that was exhibited at Versailles.

However, no one has ever attributed “jolly” or pejorative graffiti to the artist who made the work involved – vandalization is just that, the desecration of an artist’s work, a bellicose critic’s intrusion into the artist’s creation.

In the case of the notorious sensation that occurred in 1915 over the phrase “A battle of negroes ...” on *The Black Square*, a unique situation has come about: the Tretyakov Gallery’s researchers have lent their support to the

fabricator of a jeering inscription and officially decreed that it was made by Malevich's own hand; that is, they have authoritatively incorporated it into *The Black Square*.

To my mind, this act constitutes the repeated vandalization of the Russian avant-garde artist's most important picture, this time by the "statists" of the State Tretyakov Gallery.

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Translated from the Russian by Andrew Bromfield.
All film stills from *Immortality and Resurrection For All!* (2017)
by Anton Vidokle. Video 34'. Courtesy of the artist.

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1
Phillip Dennis Cate, "The Spirit of Montmartre," in *The Spirit of Montmartre: Cabarets, Humor and the Avant-Garde, 1975–1905*, eds. Phillip Dennis Cate and Mary Shaw (New Brunswick, NJ: State University of New Jersey Rutgers, 1996), 29–31.

2
Alphonse Allais, *Album Primo-Avrilesque* (Paris: Paul Ollendorff, éditeur, 1897). For color reproductions, see *The Spirit of Montmartre*, color plates on 8–9.

3
Kazimir Malevich, "To State Bureaucrats of Art" ("Gosudarstvennikam ot iskusstva"), *Anarchy (Anarkhiya)* 53 (1918). Republished in Kazimir Malevich, *Collected Works in Five Volumes (Sobranie sochinenii v pyati tomakh)*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Gileia, 1995), 75–87.

4
For Z. I. Tregulova's talk, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5WCw4SBNQo&feature=youtu.be>.

5
The press conference was convened on November 18, 2015 and was run by Tregulova, along with the gallery's senior research associate, I. A. Vakar, and a member of the department of scientific analysis, E. A. Voronina.

6
The investigation was performed by staff of the Tretyakov Gallery, under the leadership of I. A. Vakar, an art historian who has devoted many years to studying Malevich's art. The team included members of the department of scientific analysis: Y. A. Voronina, I. A. Kasatkina, Ye. A. Liubavskaya, A. A. Mareev, and I. V. Rustamova.

7
The new discoveries that were outlined at the headline-making press conference were described in greater detail in I. A. Vakar's book *The Black Square*, published by the Tretyakov Gallery to mark the picture's hundredth anniversary. I shall base my subsequent comments in this article on the text of that book, oral presentations made by representatives of the gallery in October and November 2015, and the paper given by I. A. Vakar at the Malevich Society conference "100 Years of Suprematism," held at the Harriman Institute in New York on December 11–12, 2015, together with the discussion that developed after it.

8
M. Vikturina and A. Lukanova, "A Study of Technique: Ten Paintings by Malevich in the Tretyakov Gallery," in *Kazimir Malevich, 1878–1935* (Los Angeles: Hammer Museum of Art, 1990), 195.

9
Vakar's note, number 54, to this phrase: "Here I offer my own authorial interpretation, a different reading is given in the Appendix."

10
Note 55 in Vakar's text gives the following reference: "Artistic Parodies" ("Khiudozhestvennye parodii").

11
I. A. Vakar, *Kazimir Malevich: The Black Square* (Moscow: The State Tretyakov Gallery, 2015), 24–25. All emphasis added.

12
This is a failure of attention on the part of the authors or the editor – in this reading the inscription looks like "A Battle of nerves": no comment is made here on the divergence from Vakar's account. (Translator's note: There is, of course, only partial correspondence between the putative Russian letters and the English rendition here – not to mention the fact that Russian has no articles.)

13
Ye. A. Voronina and I. V. Rustamova, "Results of a technological investigation of *The Black Suprematist Square* by K. S. Malevich," in Vakar, *Kazimir Malevich: The Black Square*, 57.

14
Vakar, *Kazimir Malevich: The Black Square*, 24.

15
Cate, "The Spirit of Montmartre," in *The Spirit of Montmartre*.

16
A. Kruchenykh, I. Kliun, and K. Malevich, *The Secret Vices of Academics (Tainye poroki akademikov)* (Moscow, 1915). Republished in Malevich, *Collected Works in Five Volumes*, vol. 1.

17
Vakar deliberately highlights the two letters written by Malevich and sent in June 1915 to Matiushin in Petrograd: "The letters repeat the same content; although this is standard practice in wartime, in this case the repetition appears strange, since drawings were included with one of the letters. But with which one? Shatskikh believes it was with the first letter, which is unlikely (in that case Malevich would not have used the phrase: 'I have sent you the drawings.')." It was the letter sent on the ninth that included the drawings. Note 37 to these phrases in Vakar's book reads: "Shatskikh's assumption that the second letter contains permission for publication does not stand up to scrutiny: in those times copyright was by no means strictly observed, as is testified, in particular, by the publishing practice of D. D. Burliuk, who printed the works of a number of authors (for instance, Kandinsky) without

even informing them." Vakar, *Kazimir Malevich: The Black Square*, 17. Permit me to point out that these statements by Vakar are incorrect. Matiushin believed – that is, he knew – that the drawings were sent with the first letter; he made a note on the envelope with a stamp from June 9, 1915: "Malevich's sketches for the Opera Victory over the Sun." (Shatskikh did not "assume," but followed his indication.) As for copyright being, in Vakar's opinion, "by no means strictly" observed "in those times," the example adduced repudiates her claim: Burliuk could only publish the works of Kandinsky if they had been sent and provided to him by the inhabitant of Munich, who by this very act authorized their publication. However, the inclusion of Kandinsky in the team of leftist artists in the leaflet "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" – without his being informed that his name had been used – provoked an indignant response and crushing rebuff from Kandinsky, who broke off all relations with the shameless David Burliuk. But in the circle of Matiushin, Kruchenykh, and Malevich, copyright was in fact strictly observed: in May 1915 the transrational poet sent Matiushin repeated permission for the publication of the text of his libretto for *Victory over the Sun*, since he feared that the first letter had been lost. It is hard to understand why Vakar chooses not to take this circumstance into account, since it is hard to accept the idea that she is unaware of it, as these letters by Kruchenykh have been repeatedly published.

18
Aleksandra Shatskikh, "Kazimir Malevich in Poetry," in K. Malevich Poetry, ed. Aleksandra Shatskikh (Moscow: Epifaniya, 2000), 9–61; Aleksandra Shatskikh, "Kazimir Malevich: The Will to Literature" ("Kazimir Malevich: volya k slovesnosti"), in Malevich, *Collected Work in Five Volumes*, vol. 5, 26–27.

19
See, e.g., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FFgAkG6r7Y> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZPSA5geOJ4>.

20
In internet search engines, a new chain of links appeared in which the key words were: "Malevich," "Black Square," and "racist joke." The reaction of journalists and commentators can be defined in a single word: shock. From among the batch of publications I can name: Anna Khachiyan, "Racist conceptual joke discovered in Malevich's Black Square," *Hope&Fears*, November 12, 2015 <http://www.hopesandfears.com/hopes/culture/art/216825-malevich-black-square-racist>; and Carey Dunne, "Art Historians Find Racist Joke Hidden Under Malevich's 'Black Square,'" *Hyperallergic*, November 13, 2015 <https://hyperallergic.com/253361/art-historian-finds-racist-joke-hidden-under-malevich-black-square/>. The authors of publications and commentaries, who at times say things that are very unjust about the Suprematist artist and his work, are absolutely certain that "a racist joke about negroes" was written by Malevich, since, after all, this was announced by the artist's own compatriots, the collective of the State Tretyakov Gallery, Russia's main museum of national art.

21
Malevich's first one-man exhibition was prepared by him in person just before he left for Vitebsk. The exhibition remained in K. I. Mikhailova's large salon from the end of October 1919, but the salon was closed because there was no firewood for heating; it only opened on March 25, 1920, and then closed in the summer, but not before June.

22
The conference was held while the exhibition "Kazimir Malevich 1878–1935" was running at the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

23
Communicated by Troels Andersen, a participant in the consultations between experts at this conference, in a telephone conversation with the author in October 2015. The experts instructed the inscription to be removed as not having been written by the artist's own hand.

24
Cited in A. Krusanov, *The Russian Avant-Garde (Russkii avangard)*, vol. 1, book 2 (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2010), 494.

25
Ibid.

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e-flux journal #85 — october 2017 Aleksandra Shatskikh
Inscribed Vandalism: The Black Square at One Hundred