

The black square as a representation of the divine feeling and death.

The black square is a re-occurring symbol in art and religion. The color black throughout (art) history and in various religions is a symbol of (in)finity, death. The square is a geometrical shape which re-occurs throughout history as a symbol in depictions of various religions, primitive cultures and paganism.

In this essay I will review three works of different artists over the past decade and describe how the representation of the black square is used as a portrayal of death and the search for a pure divine feeling.

Black square Malevich 1915

At the last futurist exhibition of paintings 0.10 in Petrograd in December 1915 to January 1916 among other early Suprematist paintings Malevich presented the painting Black Square. Malevich himself regarded his minimalistic geometrical forms as the secular equivalents of Russian icons, a form of painting which aspires to present the divine as pure or unmediated reality.¹ Therefore the Black Square was placed in what is called the *red/beautiful corner* in Russian Orthodox tradition; the place of the main icon in a house.² Black Square is since 0.10 the most discussed artwork of this exhibition.³

In his text "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: the new realism in painting", written in 1915.

In his text "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: the new Realism in Painting", written in 1915 Malevich writes that to achieve an absolute creation an artist must free all art from vulgar subject matter and teach his consciousness to see everything in nature not as real forms and objects, but as material. In order to achieve an absolute creation, a form which is unconscious, without response and will reveal intuition, the artist must strip his artwork from the impression of the wholeness of objects.

The academic form of painting where the artist bases his forms on the forms of nature, uses figuration, a depiction of the realistic world, is a sign of a primitive artist.⁴

In his text Malevich tears down Futurism and Cubism as primitive art forms because of the figuration derived from impressions from nature. With his text he seems to imply that a more primitive art has to die in order for a new art, Suprematism, to be born. Malevich is ordering the artist to release himself from depicting real forms. In order to transcend to a higher plane of art, which propagates a pure and divine feeling, the artist must kill the prevailing thought about how to produce art.⁵

When Malevich writes how he feels that he has transformed himself into the zero of form it is as though he talks about the death of his former self and rebirth of a new.

*"I have transformed myself in the zero of form and dragged myself out of the rubbish filled pool of academic art"*⁶

Malevich saw color and texture in painting as ends in themselves. The essence of painting. This essence was always destroyed by the subject.⁷ Thus Malevich searches for a liberating non-objectivity where nothing is real except feeling. He searches for the divine, non-objective pure feeling which is not disturbed by forms from nature or color.⁸ He saw the square not as a subconscious form. But as the creation of intuitive reason.

Later in his treatise “The Non-Objective world” He defined this feeling more:

“The Suprematist Square and the forms proceeding out of it can be likened to the primitive marks (symbols) of aboriginal man which represented, in their combination, *not ornament, but a feeling of rhythm*. Suprematism did not bring into being a new world of feeling but, rather, an altogether new and direct form of representation of the world of feeling.”⁹

With stating this it seems that Malevich feeling has a clear connection to that of a spiritual experience. Where the directness of the rhythm and the ritual are creating an experience.

Cube Venice 2005, Gregor Schneider

After a two year period of research on the cube, which was initially inspired by the Muslim religion of Schneiders friend and collaborator the Tunesian engineer Helmi Ben Boubaker Helal. Cube Venice 2005 commissioned by curator Rosa Martinez for the 2005 Biennale was censored by city authorities of Venice because it might have provoked or offended Muslims. ¹⁰

Fascinated by the power the Muslim religion gives Helmi Ben Boubaker Helal and the Kaaba, a cuboid building at the centre of the Islams most holy mosque, of which the inside is not documented. Initially the idea was to reconstruct the Kaaba to scale in Germany, but to avoid offence Gregor Shneider planned to build an abstract cube. ¹¹

Gregor schneider says that his aim with the cube was not to provoke. The cube would have been an approximation towards an unfamiliar space. He was interested in the interrelation of unfamiliar and isolated spaces.

*“Die kaaba ist eines der unfassbarsten, geheimnisvollsten ind schonnsten gebaude der welt. Sie ist ein aus stein gemauerten raum und steht unverruckbar da. Kein mensch wird jemals in der lage sein. Dieses hieligtum zu transportieren.”*¹²

The cube would have been about a dialogue between religions. It would have been an autonomous sculpture, the form material sight and function would have been different to that of the Kaaba in Mekka. The cube would have been an opportunity for Christians to see a structure inspired by a site which they are not able to visit. ¹³

The censorship of the cube was due to fear of harming religious feelings of the Islamic community and fear that it might make Venice vulnerable to terrorist attacks. ¹⁴ In Schneiders eyes the censorship was based on a misinterpretation of the cube and was a closing of an opportunity to talk about religion. ¹⁵

The censorship of the Cube amounted a media revolt. The main topic of the discussion was if the censorship based on political grounds was justified. Instead of being an opportunity for people to talk about religion and politics in a time where Muslim religion was difficult to discuss because the ongoing Iraq war, the black cube became a symbol of censorship. A symbol for the censorship that was executed and the fear of raising political discussion. A symbol for depriving an artist to execute an idea. It is the symbol for the death of an opportunity to open up a discussion..

Triptych May-June 1973, Francis Bacon

Triptych May-June 1973 is a work which is one out of a series of three triptychs, also known as “The Black Triptychs” painted by Francis Bacon between 1972 and 1974. The triptychs are painted around the suicide of former lover and model George Dyer

which happened on the eve of Bacons retrospective at Paris's Grand Palais on 24 October 1971.¹⁶

In each of the three panels of Bacons *Triptych May-June 1973* we see George Dyer on the other side of a doorway immersed in black. The tone of Dyers skin, his posture, his contorted body all seem to imply that George Dyer is in the moment of dying.

The black rectangle surrounding him is the symbol for the tragedy which has taken place, it is the representation of Dyers death. In the middle panel of the triptych there is a shadow on the ground seeping out of the black. Death in this panel is no longer on the other side but here and now. *May-June 1973* is the last of the Black Triptychs it is as though this triptych is a metaphor for Bacons realization of George Dyers death.

The period of time in which Bacon painted the black triptych series was a period of time in which Bacon was confronted with death, with "losing your friends". In this time he stated "and all the people I've loved are dead".¹⁷

Francis Bacons aimed to paint portraits of his subjects in an un-illustrational way.¹⁸ He wanted to create a visual shock. He believed that due to the physical sense of painting the first mark made had a vitality. Therefore Bacon never made sketches, he didn't try to imitate the real world.¹⁹ In his eyes translating involved a loss of terms of the original meaning.²⁰

Bacon searches for a releasing of form which is more close to depiction of a person a pure feeling. More poignant than an illustration because it has a life completely of it's own and therefore transfers the essence of the image more poignantly. "You want to open so many levels of feeling. Cut down to the most elementary state."²¹

Conclusion

All three artist search for (depicting) a pure divine feeling through minimalising their subject to the essence, either through technique, material or through abstraction. The black square is a symbol for death in different representations. Malevichs Black Square is a symbol for dying and rebirth, there is the actual representation of death in Bacons Triptych and Schneider's Black cube has become a symbol for censorship, the death of the opportunity for opening up discussion.

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