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Material reenactment: The missing and replaced paintings of Malevich's 1929 retrospective

Marie Gasper-Hulvat*

Abstract

In 1927, Russian avant-garde artist Kazimir Malevich was recalled by Soviet authorities from Berlin, where he had received critical acclaim during a journey abroad. He returned to Moscow, leaving behind in Germany the paintings with which he had travelled. It was a cache that represented his entire painterly career. In 1929, Malevich found himself granted

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a retrospective exhibition at the foremost museum of Russian art in the Soviet capital, the Tretyakov Gallery. With the bulk of the material evidence of his career now missing, the artist responded by producing forty new canvases. In this article, I propose that Malevich's exhibition of 1929 represented an attempt to materially reenact his own career, producing a counterfeit simulation of what might have happened. Furthermore, I explain how an exhibition of his work held in 2000 significantly altered the scholarly discussion of the works displayed in 1929.

Nel 1927, le autorità sovietiche richiamarono l'artista dell'avanguardia russa Kazimir Malevich da Berlino, dove si era recato per un viaggio all'estero e dove aveva ricevuto un'accoglienza critica. Malevich tornò a Mosca lasciando in Germania le opere con le quali aveva viaggiato, una serie che documentava interamente la sua carriera pittorica. Nella capitale sovietica gli fu dedicata, due anni dopo, una mostra retrospettiva, ospitata dal principale museo di arte russa di Mosca, la Galleria Tretyakov. Sebbene buona parte delle prove materiali del suo lavoro fosse andata perduta, l'artista rispose producendo quaranta nuove tele. Scopo di questo articolo è dimostrare come la mostra del 1929 costituisca un tentativo, da parte di Malevich, di ricostruire la sua carriera per produrre una simulazione di quello che avrebbe potuto essere. Inoltre si documenta come una mostra dedicata nel 2000 all'artista ha contribuito all'analisi critica della esposizione del 1929.

1. *Introduction*

In 1929, renowned Russian Modernist Kazimir Malevich faced a sudden, seemingly insurmountable problem. He had petitioned for and been granted a retrospective exhibition to present his career of artistic production¹. It was arranged to take place at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, the preeminent, state-run institution of Russian art in the young Soviet capital. Yet in 1929, Malevich had access to barely a handful of his own works representing the range and substance of his career, due to unforeseen circumstances related to an exhibition held two years earlier. This article will tell the story of Malevich's 1929 exhibition at the Tretyakov in light of two other exhibitions of his work. I will discuss how the circumstances related to the artist's 1927 exhibition determined and facilitated the content of his 1929 exhibition, and furthermore how an exhibition of his work held in 2000 altered the scholarly discussion of the works displayed at the 1929 exhibition. With these exhibitions, we can consider the challenges inherent to studying early-twentieth-century exhibitions through limited archival sources, as opposed to more recent exhibitions with extensive and accessible documentation. We can examine three displays of overlapping material evidence of Malevich's early twentieth-century production, three distinct historical narratives enacted through both images

¹ The petition document is reprinted in Vakar, Mikhienko 2004, vol. I, p. 533.

and texts in varying institutional spaces, and three contradictory trajectories that have divergently defined the story of Malevich's career. I will contend that although most accounts of Malevich's career focus upon his development of the abstract style of Suprematism, these presentations of his work demonstrated various alternate narratives of his career, giving consideration to the substantial development of Malevich's art "after" Suprematism.

Troels Andersen was the first to document the 1927 exhibition in his *catalogue raisonné* of 1970, as part of his extensive work on Malevich with the Stedelijk Museum, which acquired most of the content of that exhibition². Later that decade, Charlotte Douglas made considerable contributions to the scholarly understanding of the ambiguous content displayed in 1929 in her 1978 article, *Malevich's Painting – Some Problems of Chronology*³. However, it was not until 2001 that Irina Vakar would devote sustained attention to the 1929 show in a publication⁴. Her article, as well as an article by Elena Basner shedding further light on the contents of the 1929 exhibition, was published in conjunction with a series of major scholarly conferences surrounding exhibitions at the Russian Museum in Petersburg⁵. One of the displays which prompted these conferences is the third exhibition discussed in this paper, from which was generated a monumental catalogue of all Malevich's works in the Russian Museum collection⁶. This book documented a complete revision of the chronology of Malevich's work, finishing the project that Douglas had begun decades before. Perhaps most significantly for this study, in 2004, Vakar and Tatiana Mikhienko published a two-volume compendium of archival documents related to Malevich's life⁷. Included in these volumes are several previously unpublished documents related to the 1927 and 1929 shows. Nonetheless, a gap in the scholarly literature remains, in that no examination of the relationships of these three exhibitions to each other has been conducted. This article will redress that absence and consider the function of each of these three exhibitions in molding the identity and historical legacy of the artist.

2. 1927: "Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung"

In 1927, Malevich began a European tour in Warsaw, where he spent several weeks before traveling to Berlin (for purposes of clarity, I will refer in this article to the «Berlin exhibition», although the collection of works displayed there

² Andersen 1970.

³ Douglas 1978.

⁴ Vakar 2001.

⁵ Basner 2000.

⁶ Petrova 2000.

⁷ Vakar, Mikhienko 2004.

was largely identical to that displayed in Poland). A pioneering artist who had made some of the first truly abstract paintings in the tradition of Western art, Malevich was welcomed with popular acclaim during his first professional tour abroad⁸. He gave well-attended lectures, banquets were held in his name, and he met with important artists at the Bauhaus including Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Jean Arp, Kurt Schwitters, Naum Gabo, and Hans Richter. Most significantly for our discussion here, at the “Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung” he mounted an exhibit of over fifty paintings⁹.

To give a sense of context, the “Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung” was a monumental installation of over a thousand works in seventeen rooms at the Landesausstellungsgebäude near the Lehrter Bahnhof (Berlin Central Station). Contemporary German artists, mostly from Berlin, showcased their work, with most represented by only one or two pieces. Of all the artists on display, the only name that most art historians today might recognize is that of Käthe Kollwitz; of the many now well-known artists with whom Malevich associated in Germany, none participated.

That Malevich was able to obtain his own room in this exposition seems to have been quite a coup. There were only two special exhibitions (*sonderausstellung*) in the entire show: one on architecture and Malevich’s. In the printed catalogue, all artists were listed by name, location, and title of work(s)¹⁰. Images of a few select works followed this listing. Malevich’s *sonderausstellung* and the one on architecture were the only two subjects to which any extended textual commentary was devoted. The impression given from the catalogue is that the organizers wanted to highlight Malevich’s contribution. It is also clear that the show itself was a largely local affair, with Malevich being the only international artist and the only artist of his renown and Modernist pedigree to have participated.

The cache of works exhibited in 1927 included paintings that Malevich had kept for his personal collection for a decade or longer. Hardly contemporary or newly-created work, unlike most of the other objects on display at the “Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung”, what Malevich exhibited dated from approximately 1910 to 1922. This era represented a series of complicated moments in twentieth-century Russian history; Malevich’s career had thus far coincided with multiple eras of political and social upheaval, from the aftermath of the 1905 Revolution through the First World War, the 1917 October Revolution, and the ensuing five-year-long Russian Civil War.

⁸ Malevich had already achieved quite a bit of fame in the West. His arrival in Berlin was heralded in the April 10, 1927 edition of *Berliner Borsen-Courier*, *Bilder-Courier* with the publication of a portrait photograph and announcement of his intentions to mount a retrospective exhibition of his career of work. Reprinted in Vakar, Mikhienko 2004, vol. I, p. 353.

⁹ Andersen 1970, p. 12.

¹⁰ *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung* 1927.

Malevich's first advances into the Russian art world began in joint exhibitions and public debates with artists such as Natalia Goncharova, Mikhail Larionov, and Vladimir Tatlin from 1910 to 1915. In 1915, at the now infamous 0,10 exhibition, he first displayed paintings in his signature style, Suprematism, a non-objective approach to art which represented one of the first attainments of pure abstraction in Modern painting. Following the 1917 October Revolution, he served on leading commissions and institutions for the establishment of Communist arts programs. During the early Soviet era, Malevich's prolific personal artistic production waned as he was drawn toward teaching and administrative tasks. Nevertheless, he generated new works through the early 1920s, but few took the form of painting. With a focus on practical and production art pervading the Soviet art world, he designed a porcelain tea set and produced three-dimensional plaster constructions ("architectons") modeled on Suprematist principles.

Malevich largely abandoned painting around 1922. Yet despite this fact, most of the work exhibited in Berlin in 1927 consisted of paintings, the sum of which collectively demonstrated a progression of formal experimentation. This progression concluded with the discovery of pure painterly abstraction, or, as Malevich termed it, non-objectivity. With a gradually intensifying focus upon the formal properties of art, this group of works manifested an overarching career trajectory leading to the rejection of representation. The paintings progressed from neo-primitive works such as *Peasant Women at Church* from 1911 to Cézanne- and Leger-esque cubo-futurist compositions such as *Taking in the Rye* and *The Woodcutter* from 1912, to increasingly fragmented compositions such as *Peasant Woman with Buckets* from 1912 and fully-fledged cubist paintings such as *Head of a Peasant Girl* from 1912-13. This was followed by alogical juxtapositions of fish, swords, and Cyrillic characters such as 1914's *Englishman in Moscow*. The culmination was purely abstract Suprematist paintings: primary vocabulary of the Black Square, Circle, and Cross; multicolored conglomerations of carefully balanced geometric forms such as Suprematism: *Aeroplane Flying* from 1915; and ultimately the white-on-white compositions such as *Suprematism* from 1918. This trajectory prioritized the surface of the canvas or wooden panel and the material role of paint upon it, progressing from the conventionalized forms of neo-primitive compositions to the brush strokes and faintly drawn lines of the white-on-white works.

Documentation for Malevich's 1927 exhibition consists of several photographs of gallery installations, the five brief paragraphs included in the "Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung" catalogue, and reviews in the local press¹¹. Additionally, while in Berlin, Malevich arranged for the Bauhaus to publish a treatise entitled *The Non-Objective World*, which he had drafted several

¹¹ Kállai 1927.

years prior¹². In the photographs from Berlin (fig. 1, 2), we can follow the trajectory of Malevich's career from left to right along the exhibition walls. There is a deliberate order to the placement of the paintings, and it implies a chronological progression of styles. Malevich's treatise supports this trajectory as well, although through its juxtaposition and sequencing of images more so than through its text. The "Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung" catalogue and a review by Ernst Kállai reinforce this sense of development, emphasizing Malevich's interest «first in Impressionism and later through Cézannism to Futurism and Cubism»¹³, and then to «complete» the story, when «plane is superimposed on plane, first varied and multicolored, and, *in the end*, simply white on white [...] animated only by texture»¹⁴. Here, Kállai tracks Malevich's style through a series of stages, culminating in abstraction.

Malevich's time in Berlin inspired what in retrospect were quite grandiose visions; in a May 7th letter from Berlin, he commented, «fame is pouring down like rain and the sluices are open»¹⁵. Following the conclusion of his works being shown in Berlin, the artist envisioned the display of his paintings in various other European cities on a grand tour to bring his work the international recognition it deserved¹⁶. However, just one month into the anticipated five-month-long duration of the «Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung», Malevich was recalled to the Soviet Union. He received a letter at the end of May 1927 which requested his return to Russia¹⁷. Malevich immediately returned to his home in Leningrad, leaving his paintings hanging on the walls of the Landesausstellungsgebäude and his Bauhaus text still waiting for publication.

Many of the works left by Malevich in Berlin did not survive the Second World War. Nonetheless, thirty-six found their way to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam¹⁸. And a few paintings brought to the US prior to the war were acquired by museums in New York¹⁹. This extant sampling of Malevich's Berlin exhibition, along with the Bauhaus text, established Malevich's reputation in Western art history. Museum of Modern Art curator Alfred Barr helped to further this reputation with his inclusion of Suprematism in the 1936 catalogue for the monumental "Cubism and Abstract Art" exhibition. Barr defined Malevich as «a pioneer, a theorist and an artist [who] influenced not only a large following in Russia but also [...] the course of abstract art in Central Europe»²⁰. Barr proclaimed that Malevich stood «at the heart of the movement which

¹² Malevich 1927; Malevich 1959.

¹³ *Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung* 1927, p. 107.

¹⁴ Kállai 1927. My italics.

¹⁵ Vakar, Mikhienko 2004, vol. I, p. 189.

¹⁶ Douglas 1994, p. 46.

¹⁷ Vakar, Mikhienko 2004, vol. II, p. 374; Douglas 1994, p. 34.

¹⁸ Andersen 1970.

¹⁹ Bois 2011.

²⁰ Please, add bibliographic citation

swept westward from Russia after the [First World] War»²¹ and transformed European art as a whole. Barr's curatorial efforts helped to establish Malevich's place in a patrilineage, the descendants of which would produce new forms of geometrical abstraction in the Western art world of the 1930s.

Building on narratives such as Barr's, the teleological, Modernist progression of Malevich's career towards the ultimate achievement of abstraction, as fostered by Malevich's own self-fashioning at the 1927 Berlin exhibition, would remain undisputed through the 1970s. It would still generally be accepted as an adequate appraisal of the artist's contribution to the history of art well through the 1990s. For example, John Golding, in his 1997 *A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C.*, spent the first seventeen pages of his nineteen-page talk charting the trajectory Malevich took towards the invention and exploration of Suprematism, hardly departing from the narrative established some seventy years earlier²². This narrative had as much to do with what followed after Malevich as it did with what Malevich himself produced. Within art historical literature through most of the twentieth century, Malevich played the role of one of abstract art's forefathers. This focus was conditioned by a culture enamored of abstraction, whether in the form of Abstract Expressionism, Minimalism, or otherwise, as the ultimate manifestation of Modernist purity. This focus was also facilitated by the content of the 1927 Berlin exhibition.

This narrative posited Suprematism as Malevich's ultimate artistic achievement, and, as a consequence, many scholars presumed that Malevich's career had abruptly ended following Suprematism's dizzying heights. For example, Herbert Read, referring to Malevich and many of his avant-garde compatriots during the 1920s, contended that, «like Malevich, they retired into obscurity and poverty»²³. Read even implies that Malevich's story ended with Lenin's 1924 death, which is highly ironic, given the fact that Malevich's 1927 exhibition provided all of the material evidence upon which Read based his extensive discussion of Malevich and Suprematism.

Former Russian avant-garde artist and emigrated Naum Gabo expressed a similar summation of Malevich's career: «Malevich was totally deprived of every possibility to teach, even in the provinces. He came to Europe about 1926 [sic] [...] On returning to Russia soon after he died, completely rejected by the Government as well as by his fellow artists then in power»²⁴. While Gabo's statement is certainly tinged with the bitterness of an embattled émigré, his assessment of Malevich's situation substantially simplifies the historical record; Malevich continued teaching after he returned from Germany, retaining

²¹ Barr 1966, 1936, p. 126.

²² Golding 1997, pp. 47-80.

²³ Read 1959, p. 210.

²⁴ Gabo 1957, p. 159.

employment at an arts institute in Kiev through at least 1931. Moreover, Malevich's story did not end with his 1927 exhibition. He survived eight years following his journey abroad, and, for reasons directly related to that journey, he returned shortly thereafter to his brushes and easel.

3. 1929: *Tretiakov Gallery*

In February of 1929, Malevich gained approval to mount his Moscow-based retrospective at the Tretiakov Gallery. A few pieces dating from 1912 to 1916 would be loaned to the 1929 retrospective from the Russian Museum in Leningrad²⁵. Nonetheless, to fill out the show, Malevich faced a conundrum of how to present a set of artworks that could narrate the story of his career when most of the extant examples of that career remained in a distant land. However, the fact that so much of his work was indeed completely inaccessible created an extraordinary opportunity for Malevich to exploit. If little evidence of his career could be seen within Russia, he might simply retell, or at least substantially manipulate, the story of that career itself.

Three primary sources of archival information about this so-called retrospective remain: lists of paintings, a brief pamphlet-catalogue, and published reviews. First, two archived lists allow one to make relatively solid conjectures for most of what was displayed in 1929. Their information corroborates each other's sufficiently that both can be deemed reliable. One is a packing list (deed of receipt) in the archives of the Tretiakov Gallery²⁶. It details the forty-nine paintings transported in October of 1929 from the Russian Museum in Leningrad to the Tretiakov Gallery in Moscow in anticipation of the retrospective in November. Although the Russian Museum did not then officially own most of the works detailed in this list, the paintings were transported under the care of the state-run museums in a shipment which included works by other artists not destined for this particular exhibition.

The other list is entitled *Kazimir Malevich Exhibition* and is also part of the Tretiakov Gallery archives. Irina Vakar has argued that this list was produced in anticipation of a full catalogue that was never published²⁷. This potential catalogue document also lists forty-nine paintings. Many of the titles listed firmly correspond to items recorded on the packing list, although the two lists maintain no correspondence in terms of how the objects were ordered.

Next, while no full catalogue was published for the show, a short pamphlet-catalogue was hurriedly written. This document, authored by Tretiakov curator

²⁵ Vakar, Mikhienko 2004, vol. I, pp. 535-537.

²⁶ Petrova 2000, pp. 398-399.

²⁷ Vakar 2001, p. 124.

Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov, mentions only a handful of Malevich's works on exhibit²⁸. It can therefore be used as confirmation of the presence of at least a few specific works and, in one case, as visual confirmation, due to the image of *Haymaking* which is reprinted on the opening page of the booklet. This text places these works within a contextually conditioned narrative that reflects the official reception of Malevich's retrospective.

Last, three reviews of the show were published. These all appeared in Ukrainian in 1930 when the set of paintings travelled to the Kiev Picture Gallery for a short two-week stint before authorities closed down the exhibition and confiscated its contents²⁹. These reviews also provide valuable information to researchers. Several additional works are confirmed to have been present either through visual reproduction or by name. The reviews provide further evidence regarding the reception of the retrospective.

Based on these documents, we can conclude that when Malevich's retrospective opened in November of 1929, approximately fifty-three works of art were displayed – forty-nine paintings along with several architectural sculptures from his Soviet-era teaching career. In what follows, I will account for all of these forty-nine paintings. First, we must consider the question of when they were painted. Forty had been created in the previous eighteen months. The nine others dated from between 1913 and 1924.

The earliest came from Malevich's 1913 cubist and alogical periods. These were also the earliest Malevich works owned by the Russian Museum and any other arts institution in Moscow or Leningrad at the time. Three works represented Malevich's stylistic progression through cubism and alogism in 1913: *Perfected Portrait of Ivan Kliun* and *Cow and Violin*, both from the Russian Museum prior to the retrospective, and *Portrait of Matiushin*, loaned by the avant-garde painter and composer Mikhail Matiushin himself.

More significantly, in 1929, Malevich displayed no other works which might have reflected with historical accuracy his pre-1913 artistic production. In other words, he worked with the public evidence of his career. His retrospective did not contradict the documentation of his career already available at that moment within the collections of the state-run museums in Leningrad and Moscow. Nonetheless, these circumstances allowed him to replace the missing paintings from prior to 1913 with works that fictionally represented his pre-1913 career. This deceitful act was enabled by his abandonment of almost all evidence to the contrary back in Germany.

With his 1929 retrospective, Malevich would make a substantially revised case about his early artistic origins. He knew perfectly well what he had produced in his early, pre-cubo-futurist (i.e. pre-1913) career. He likely even possessed a few pieces dating from 1906-1908, works that would enter the

²⁸ Fedorov-Davydov 1929.

²⁹ Yefimovich 1930, pp. 548-551; Yefimovich 28 May 1930; Anonymous 1930, p. 225.

Russian Museum as remnants of his estate following his death. The absence of such works facilitated the production of an historically-inflected, fictional visual story of his career from the hindsight of 1929.

This leaves us to consider the forty works painted in the year and a half prior to the opening. Amongst these, twelve are particularly responsible for this historical inflection. These were re-creations of works that Malevich had painted in 1911-1913. The 1911-1913 canvases were not displayed in 1929, but paintings that look very similar to them were. This included reproductions of three objects that had been left in Berlin: *Orthodox* (1912), *Orthodox (Portrait of Ivan Kliun)* (1913), and *Woman Reaper* (1912). In 1928-1929, three corresponding works unmistakably replicate these three inaccessible works from 1911-1913, albeit with notable stylistic divergences. At least another nine works reprised or reproduced the compositions of additional authentically-early works that were unavailable for exhibition, either having been lost or stashed away in provincial museums.

I have now accounted for twenty-one of the forty-nine paintings displayed at the Tretyakov: nine authentically-early works, and an additional twelve that reprised or reproduced compositions from authentically-early works. The remaining twenty-eight paintings on display constituted entirely new compositions, styles, and motifs that most likely did not function as replacements for previously created, missing paintings. Such works, variously titled *Spring* (fig. 3), *Female Torso*, *Three Girls*, *Blue Portrait* (fig. 4), and so forth, hung on the Tretyakov's walls interspersed, presumably, with both the loaned works that were accurate evidence from Malevich's early career, as well as with the duplicate paintings that repeated and revived works that remained in Berlin and elsewhere. This combination of works with varying degrees of authentic provenance within a retrospective program lent an air of historical credence to the purportedly career-spanning nature of the exhibit as a whole, for any viewers who might have been vaguely familiar with Malevich's work from the pre-Revolutionary era.

No photographs of the 1929 installation remain, and perhaps none were even taken, making it impossible to determine in what configurations these variously new, old, and copied paintings were hung. This is unfortunately and frustratingly a lost source of potentially enlightening information about the artist's curatorial choices, given Malevich's programmatic organization of his 1927 exhibition.

Nonetheless, we can make some notable conclusions regarding how Malevich might have hung the works, if they had been displayed in a stylistic progression similar to 1927. In the two lists, the reviews, and the short pamphlet-catalogue, as well as on the backs of many of the paintings, we find dates that might provide clues for a chronological progression. However, for the works newly created for the show, these dates bear no resemblance whatsoever to the actual dates of creation. Instead of 1928 or 1929, for example, we find dates such

as 1903, 1905, or 1908. The discrepancies in how Malevich dated his own works is well known. However, the extent and implications of his extensive antedating have yet to be fully explored in art-historical research.

Not all of the paintings are dated, nor do all of the lists' items or objects mentioned in printed texts possess dates. And the dates inscribed on the paintings frequently do not correspond to the dates listed elsewhere for the same works. In fact, in my research I have found that of the forty-one works with dates listed in multiple documents, only eleven maintain consistency across the board (in other words, thirty have multiple dates in multiple documents)³⁰. Of those eleven consistently-dated works, five are paintings that were truly painted before 1927. Their recurrently assigned dates are nonetheless uniformly false and do not represent the accurate dates for these works despite their consistency. For example, the 1913 *Perfected Portrait of Ivan Kliun* bears an artist-inscribed date on the back of the canvas of 1911, and the potential catalogue document also lists its date as 1911.

That the documents maintain consensus about some of the earlier works is less surprising, for it is possible that a coherent story had developed for each of these works about its chronological origins. This is almost certainly the case for three of the five (*Black Cross*, *Black Circle*, and *Black Square*), which were consistently given the date of 1913 despite the fact that they were painted in 1923-4 based on 1915 prototypes. Why the remaining six, which were all works from 1928-9, maintained consistent dating across documents while other paintings from 1928-9 had widely diverging dates appears to be entirely accidental.

It all seems a bit disorderly, as if sometimes the writers of the documents were taking dates from other sources, and sometimes they were just making general conjectures about the dates of works. The dates in Malevich's own hand are frequently slapdash themselves. The form of dates on the backs of the paintings are far from uniform: some list specific years, some list a range of years (1909-1910, 1906, 1905), some are described as a "motif" of a certain year (perhaps with the implication that the painting was a later return to that motif), some list a date and a location (1910, Moscow, or "motif 1909, Moscow period"); two give dates from the 1900s as well as dates from the late 1910s, and another two give early 1900s dates as well as dates of 1928 or 1929. In two cases, the date on the reverse has been crossed out and replaced with a different date; one can find this on the backs of *Three Girls* (~~1909~~ 1910-1911) and *Female Portrait* ("motif 1909", crossed out and corrected in red with 1919).

Most of the dates written on the paintings' reverse sides, on the lists, and in the published texts precede the dates of the paintings left in Berlin; so, for

³⁰ Although it is relatively certain that forty paintings were displayed, their identities are not all certain. In particular, there is an irreconcilable discrepancy between the two lists, with two distinctively different entries for the fortieth painting, hence the discussion of forty-one works.

example, while the pieces in Berlin dated from no earlier than 1910, and mostly from 1912 and after, their counterparts that were exhibited in Moscow bore dates such as 1908 and 1909. This is particularly notable with the cases of the duplicated works, whose 1929 exhibition counterparts are consistently dated three to four years prior to the original paintings' creation. We have no way of knowing whether or not these paintings were displayed with labels that indicated any date whatsoever. However, we do have the previously-mentioned pamphlet catalogue, which explicitly situates several of these works from 1928-9 within a pre-Revolutionary narrative of Malevich's career. By placing Malevich's works within the approximate chronological progression indicated by the dates inscribed on the reverse of some paintings and in the various accompanying lists, Fedorov-Davydov indicated that from an institutional point of view, Malevich's misleading dates were taken at face value. For example, Fedorov-Davydov implies that the works, *Woman Reapers* and *Harvesting*, were created between 1908 and 1910³¹; Malevich's inscribed dates for these two works were 1905 and 1909, respectively.

Making the decision to antedate new works and to exhibit freshly-painted works under the rubric of a retrospective posed a certain amount of risk, for it represented a deliberately misleading choice if not an outright lie. However, in an era prior to rapid transmission of visual information, a good chance existed that no one might detect Malevich's ruse. Even if they did, it remained even less likely that they would choose to publicly contradict his retold narrative. Persons who were visually familiar with the works left in Germany and the career trajectory those paintings demonstrated had likely themselves been artists, patrons, or active audience members of the former avant-garde. As such, they would have been strongly motivated in the late 1920s to disassociate their previous attachments to the increasingly disparaged pre-Revolutionary Modernist movement and the despised "Formalism" associated with it.

For former students and avant-garde compatriots, publicly questioning the material painted reenactment of Malevich's career would only have drawn attention to one's familiarity with his work and problematic theories. Malevich's former students recognized what their mentor was doing (although not necessarily prior to the mounting of the Tretyakov retrospective), yet chose to keep publicly quiet about the problematic affair. For example, El Lissitzky wrote to his wife, Sophie Kuppers, on 19 July 1930, claiming that Malevich was trying to «fool» his viewers with his antedating³². Yet even this private correspondence was conducted well after Malevich's retrospective had closed, indicating perhaps that even those closest to Malevich were not attuned to his ruse in the midst of the public reception of his career.

³¹ Fedorov-Davydov 1929, pp. 5-6.

³² Vakar, Mikhienko 2004, vol. 2, p. 218.

As for museum and state authorities unfamiliar with the artist's career, contradicting Malevich's reconstructed narrative would have required research into pre-Revolutionary archives – time-consuming if not exceedingly difficult research which they would have had little motivation to pursue. Taking the artist at his word regarding his own career was a reasonable curatorial choice, and moreover, there existed complex ideological pretexts³³ which encouraged anyone who might have doubted Malevich's veracity to turn a blind eye to the matter.

Perhaps most importantly, the chronology established by means of the inaccurate dates creates a very different pictorial narrative of Malevich's career than the narrative established through the paintings exhibited in Berlin two years earlier. In fact, the picture of history which the 1929 exhibition created largely contradicts the narrative created by the works left in Europe. Instead of a progression through formal concerns culminating in abstraction, the set of works displayed in 1929 present an eclectic array of approaches to artistic questions. These works range from geometric color-blocked figures on striped backgrounds to Impressionistic, daubed-paint compositions (such as *Spring*), from half-length portraits (such as *Blue Portrait*) to scenes of bathers in wooded settings; they draw upon a wide range of stylistic and compositional influences derived from the previous sixty years of Modern art. With the antedating, Malevich's eclectic approaches to artistic questions seem to contemporaneously align the artist with a variety of his Western European counterparts, and to whose work he may have been even more thoroughly exposed during his time in Berlin. One can identify resemblances between works in the 1929 exhibition and the paintings of artists as varied as Renoir, Cézanne, Van Gogh, Matisse, de Chirico, and Modigliani³⁴.

Thus it is my contention that with the 1929 exhibition, Malevich established for himself a new, distinctly Soviet narrative for his career, though now drawing from earlier Modernist styles. This was in contrast to the more cosmopolitan, European-oriented narrative of his Berlin exhibition. He calculatedly employed works that he had created between 1913 and 1924 which were owned by state institutions as anchors to the past. He supplemented these anchors with replicas of works which were left in Berlin, held in provincial Russian museums, or lost. He then made a spectacular leap from reality and historical accuracy into a manufactured pseudo-reality that took full advantage of the fact that a gaping chasm of evidence existed within Russian museum collections for his career

³³ For more on these ideological pretexts, see Chlenova 2010, pp. 200-88; Gasper-Hulvat 2012, pp. 49-83.

³⁴ Elena Basner has researched Malevich's adoption of the styles of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist painters; Basner 2000, pp. 70-3. Charlotte Douglas has drawn substantial connections between Malevich's later oeuvre and the work of De Chirico; Douglas 2007, pp. 254-93. The resemblance to Modigliani in Malevich's work (particularly *Blue Portrait*) has yet to be investigated in published research.

prior to 1913. He filled this chasm with newly-painted works, antedated to legitimate their place in a retrospective exhibition. These works constituted pseudo-historical evidence of the career of an artist who, from his earliest moments of placing paint on panel, was a ground breaker in developing stylistic advancements. These were advancements that other European artists well-known in 1929 Soviet art circles would concurrently or later develop.

Whereas Suprematism functioned as the culminating achievement of Malevich's 1927 Berlin exhibition, in 1929 at the Tretiakov it played a relatively minor role as one of many different styles in which the artist had dabbled. Only seven paintings displayed in 1929 represented non-objective, Suprematist abstractions. In other words, over four-fifths of the paintings on display in 1929 were figurative. By contrast, about half of the works exhibited in Berlin were non-objective compositions. Moreover, the 1929 Tretiakov retrospective positioned Suprematism as one of many innovative stylistic developments that Malevich made either in concert with or prior to his European contemporaries. Malevich's 1929 show served the purpose of visually re-inscribing the artist's professional narrative. The falsified dates on his paintings (and other documents that accompanied the exhibition), in addition to the stylistic approaches of the works, all constituted critical components to his argument.

4. 2000: *Russian Museum*

It was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that Western scholars became aware of the existence of most of the paintings installed in 1929. In 1978, Charlotte Douglas proved dates based on stylistic and compositional analysis for many of the paintings in Malevich's oeuvre whose origins had remained thus far unclear, ascribing them all to the late 1920s³⁵. Douglas' inquiry focused primarily upon the inaccurate dates of those paintings which present between one and three primary figures composed of geometric forms, suspended against a background characterized by a stark break in coloration along a centrally-located horizon line, such as *Haymaking* (1928-9), *Girls in a Field* (1928-9), or *Peasants* (1928-9). While Douglas' research certainly transformed the conversation about Malevich's work following his return from Berlin, it only began to scratch the surface of the revisions to Malevich's chronology that would be forthcoming.

For a large number of the paintings displayed in 1929 and held in the storage rooms at the Russian Museum, the inscribed dates remained largely undisputed through the 1990s. Although these works became known in the West after the fall of the Soviet Union, they did not inspire a significant revision in the narrative

³⁵ Douglas 1978.

of Malevich's career. The narrative trajectory that had been established through the 1927 Berlin exhibition persevered. With the increase in academic freedom afforded during the late Soviet era, Russian scholars, rather than addressing the problematic case of these late figurative works, tended to focus their efforts on Malevich's abstract work, in an effort to rehabilitate the name of one of Russia's greatest artists³⁶. In the West, the paintings that Douglas revealed as post-1927 works were tacked on as a final postscript, but, otherwise, most publications simply amended the rest of the rediscovered Russian Museum works into the standing narrative with their given dates taken at face value. Such sources presented the antedated compositions as immature work in Malevich's development as a pioneering abstract artist, much as Malevich had intended when he wrote their false dates³⁷. Although one could no longer deny the existence of a post-Berlin career for Malevich following Douglas' revelation, certain prominent Western scholars and critics nevertheless dismissed this later body of work as artistically negligible, representing a capitulation to Soviet authoritarianism³⁸.

In the year 2000, the Russian Museum presented Malevich's works for the first time with what are now accepted as their definitive dates. This exhibition and its accompanying catalogue represented the culmination of years of research into Malevich's dating practices³⁹. Most of the paintings displayed in 2000 were last shown publicly in 1929. This 2000 exhibition presented the first comprehensive survey of Malevich's late-career work, resituating those works which had previously been ascribed to his early career. It also presented for the first time a comprehensive and accurate narration of Malevich's early career. The 1927 and 1929 exhibitions had displayed paintings from no earlier than 1910 and 1913, respectively, despite what any of the associated documents or labels may have claimed to the contrary. The 2000 installation, on the other hand, displayed works spanning the full gamut of Malevich's career, from 1906-08 Symbolist works all the way through his last paintings from 1934. This was not the first exhibition in recent years to display several of the 1906-08 paintings, as they had previously appeared in a 1988-89 show which traveled between Leningrad, Moscow, and Amsterdam⁴⁰. However, it was only in the context of setting the record straight in 2000 that an accurate picture of Malevich's early career began to emerge, uncorrupted by the artist's own late-life construction

³⁶ Zhadova 1982.

³⁷ *Malevich: Artist and Theoretician* 1990; Papadakis 1989; Fauchereau 1993; Milner 1996.

³⁸ Hilton Kramer in a 1990 review declared that Malevich betrayed «his own artistic ideals» in creating a painting such as *Women Reapers*, which «represent[s] an abject surrender to Stalin's newly proclaimed doctrine of Socialist Realism [...] its very subject matter – those well-fed peasant women harvesting the grain in what looks like a pastoral idyll – is the most cynical propaganda». Kramer 2006, pp. 29-33.

³⁹ Petrova 2000.

⁴⁰ *Kazimir Malevich 1878-1935* 1988.

of sufficiently believable untruths about the dates of his paintings. The Russian Museum in 2000 was first to explore accurately the full range of Malevich's life story as an artist.

This show prompted the publication of two major texts: a comprehensive catalogue of Malevich's works held by the Russian Museum and a collection of scholarly articles that resulted from major conferences of international scholars held in conjunction with the work's display⁴¹. This collection of essays paints a broad and varied picture of Malevich's context and life, drawing upon the knowledge of a wide range of experts in Russian avant-garde studies. Moreover, the catalogue itself represents the result of years of collaboration to determine the most accurate chronology of the artist's work. Its conclusions are based on extensive and detailed research from viewpoints that included technical art historical processes, comparison of archived official documents and exhibition records, as well as the connoisseurship of renowned Malevich scholars⁴².

The newly-accepted dates derived from this research create yet again a new picture of Malevich's artistic career. The narrative established by the 2000 exhibition contradicts the narrative created in 1929 by declaring the dates for many of the works to be much later than was presented in 1929. The 2000 show also tells a story that challenges the career history established through the set of works displayed in 1927. The new narrative amends the Berlin set with works that were created after any sort of teleological progression towards abstraction had already concluded. The paintings displayed in 2000 represented artistic production that progressed through and followed after the development of pure non-objective painting. This set of works demonstrated a trajectory that moved beyond the abandonment of representative forms, beyond the epitome achieved by Malevich in the account which is still told in art history courses today⁴³.

The 2000 exhibition changed the scholarly perspective on Malevich's career as a whole. By considering Malevich's post-1927 artistic production as art worth studying in its own right, the curators at the Russian Museum did not diminish the artist's prominent contribution to the history of abstract art. Rather, they legitimated and historically grounded a set of works which broadened our understanding of Malevich's career significantly. With the 2000 exhibition, the conversation about Malevich as an artist became one about a much more adventurous and prolific figure than had previously dominated the discussion.

⁴¹ Petrova 2000; Basner 2000.

⁴² Scholars involved included Vakar, Douglas, Basner, and Shatskikh, as well as Svetlana Rimskaya-Korsakova, Yevgeny Kovtun, and Jean-Claude Marcadé. Cfr. Petrova 2000, p. 11.

⁴³ For example, Stokstad 2011 (an American art history survey textbook), p. 522, reads: Malevich «emerged as the leading figure of the Moscow avant-garde, and he is recognized as the first Modern artist to produce a truly nonrepresentational work of art [...]». While there is mention of the unenviable fate of the avant-garde in the Stalinist era, there is no discussion of Malevich's own work as he himself progressed through that troubled era. Camilla Gray's canonical text that is frequently still used as the textbook for college courses on the Russian avant-garde does not even include Malevich's later work, as it exceeds the chronological parameters of her study. Gray 1986.

The curatorial decisions that formed the 2000 display of his work built upon art historical discourses from the late twentieth century that disrupt the Modernist model of teleological stylistic development. Instead of employing stylistic analysis to determine a progressive chronology, curators at the Russian Museum used historical evidence from corroborating primary source documents and technological research analyzing the materials of paintings to arrive at new conclusions regarding the chronology of these works of art. With the fall of the Soviet Union a decade prior, the curators and conservators at the Russian Museum were able to finally unearth these paintings and documents which had long been sequestered from public view under Communist arts policies.

However, even with this exhibition, the issue of chronological stylistic progression still holds significant weight in how these paintings are analyzed. For example, the subtitle of Elena Basner's essay in the accompanying catalogue, *Malevich's Paintings in the Collection of the Russian Museum (The Matter of the Artist's Creative Evolution)*, reveals an underlying analytical approach that significantly resembles the attempts that Malevich himself made to tell the story of his career in 1927 and 1929⁴⁴. Although Postmodern, pluralistic approaches to analyzing art are reflected in the diversity of methodologies applied to these objects, the urge to identify a development to deduce a coherent progression of artistic styles nonetheless prevails.

5. Conclusion

Each of these exhibitions put forth a narration of Malevich's career that was inherently inflected by cultural contexts and audiences. The 1927 "Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung" exhibition and its legacy in the hands of Western art historians and curators reflected a prolonged interest in the formal properties of art and the extent to which such properties could be exploited. The 1929 Tretiakov exhibition provided a glimpse into the complex politics and personal motivations of artists and curators within the early Stalinist era. And with a variety of scholars contributing both expertise and essays to the 2000 exhibition, its catalogue, and the accompanying collection of articles, the material evidence displayed at the Russian Museum was contextualized in a plurality of approaches, representing various complementary attempts to articulate narratives summarizing Malevich's career.

Yet juxtaposing these three exhibitions allows us to reject the notion of any sort of definitive assessment or representation of Malevich's career. By exploring how each retrospective exhibition and its legacy, whether from 1927, 1929, or 2000, was a product of contemporary cultural paradigms, I have illustrated

⁴⁴ Petrova 2000, pp. 15-27.

how the retrospective exhibition was an act of history making itself, akin to any other historical narration. The pretext of a retrospective, focusing upon a single artist, nevertheless fails to produce an integral subject except through excision and even deceit; the artist himself remains an historical construct, both in his own and others' hands. By selecting what objects to display, choosing what "facts" to communicate about those objects, and highlighting specific aspects of those objects through interpretive readings, Malevich and those who curated his work established visual and textual narratives that would serve as foundations for art historical research long into the future.

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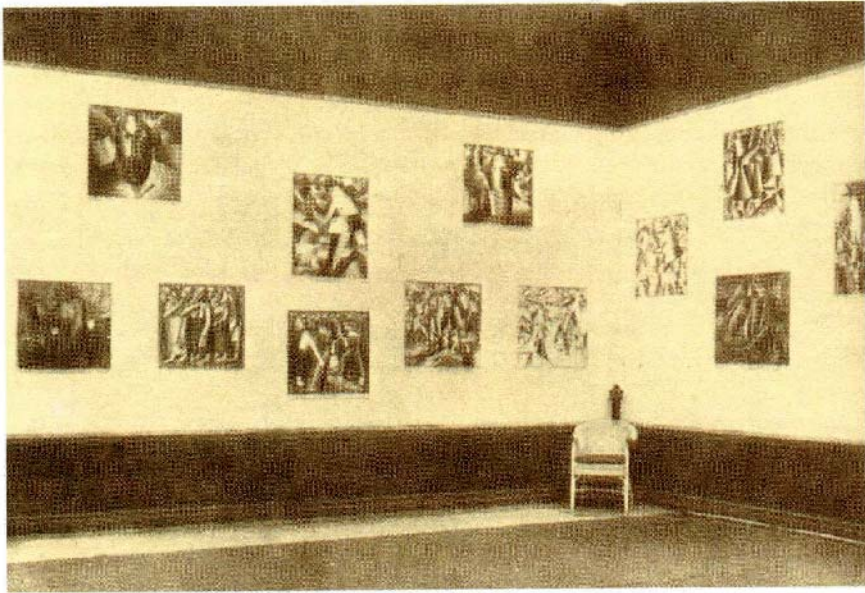
Appendix

Fig. 1. Kazimir Malevich exhibition, “Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung”, 1927, Stedelijk Museum

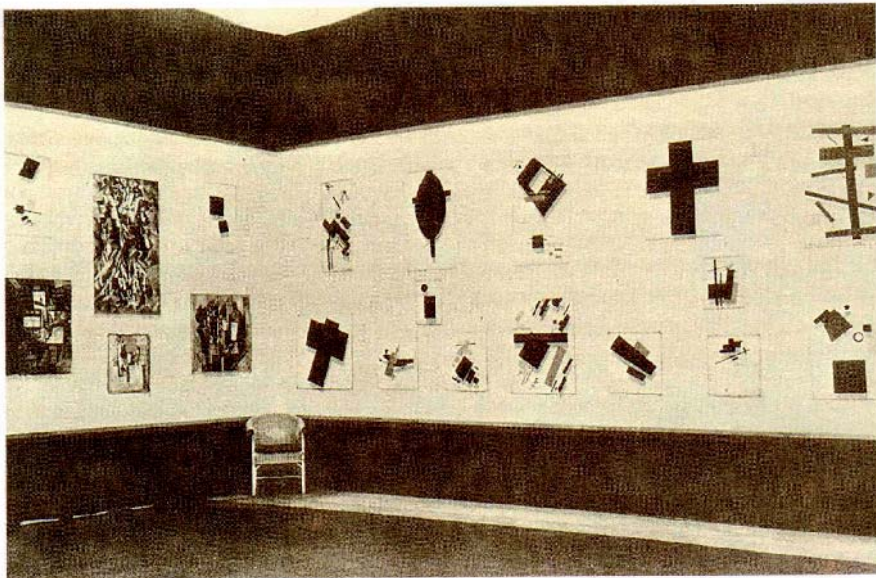


Fig. 2. Kazimir Malevich exhibition, “Grosse Berliner Kunstausstellung”, 1927, Stedelijk Museum



Fig. 3. Kazimir Malevich, *Spring*, 1928-1929, oil on canvas, 53 x 66 cm, Russian Museum, Petersburg



Fig. 4. Kazimir Malevich, *Blue Portrait*, 1929, oil on canvas, 46.5 x 34.5 cm, Russian Museum, Petersburg

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