Aristotelian *Aisthesis* and the Violence of Suprematism

RYAN DRAKE
Fairfield University

Abstract: Kazimir Malevich's style of Suprematist painting represents the inauguration of nothing less than a new form of culture premised upon a demolition of the Western tradition's reifying habits of objective thought. In ridding his canvases of all objects and mimetic conventions, Malevich sought to reconfigure human perception in such a way as to open consciousness to alternative modes of organization and signification. In this paper, I argue that Malevich's revolutionary aesthetic strategy can be illuminated by a return to the very basis of this tradition, namely by a reconsideration of Aristotle's account in *De Anima* III.2 of the initial possibility of objective perception as such.

The mind has to do violence to itself, has to reverse the direction of the operation by which it habitually thinks, has perpetually to revise, or rather recast, all its categories. . . . [I]n this way it will attain to fluid concepts, capable of following reality in all its sinuosities and of adopting the very inward life of things.
—Henri Bergson[1]

[A] violent change is imminent. I think that freedom can be attained only after our ideas about the organization of solids have been completely smashed.
—Kazimir Malevich[2]

It is difficult to think through the artistic movement that was Suprematism in isolation from the rhetoric of force and destruction that seemed all but woven into the fabric of Malevich's canvases. Each of his paintings, from the 0.10 Exhibition in 1915 onward, was put forward as the site of an "annihilation" that, in his thinking, carries through what the Cubists and Futurists had only gestured toward.[3] The stated aim of his artworks was not simply to crack the hardened

 Epoché, Volume 18, Issue 1 (Fall 2013). ISSN 1085-1968. 49–66
DOI: 10.5840/epoche201318117

shell of the hypostatized object—to set it in motion, to liberate it from any narrative ties or to reveal the various perspectival tensions it contains—but rather to cast it wholly into oblivion. Transmuting Bergson's statement above, Malevich proclaimed: "Only with the disappearance of a habit of mind which sees in pictures little corners of nature, Madonnas and shameless Venuses, shall we witness a work of pure, living art."[4]

In clearing the ground for a fundamentally new mode of creation, for an art that would attain to true vitality and dynamism over calcified depictive forms, Malevich's annihilation of objectiveness in painting was not limited merely to the traditional content of the artwork, organized as it was around "things." What Suprematism had ultimately to destroy was the inertia of an entire tradition of sense-making whose logic, according to Bergson, could accommodate neither motion nor the processes of organic life as these manifested themselves to our perceptive faculties.[5] For Bergson, this tradition could be traced back to the ancient Greeks, to the first philosophers, whose purported failure to grasp movement in its essence inaugurated a general course of thought that would remain closed off from those "fluid concepts" without which the "inward life of things" would remain in obscurity. Malevich's canvases, in this connection, were to be regarded as embodiments of a kindred struggle, seeking to overturn a dominant philosophical comportment to the phenomenal world, yet by painterly—rather than straightforwardly philosophic—means. The disintegration of things enacted on the planar surface was intended to awaken consciousness to new forms of visual dynamism left in their wake, to new material relations and terms of order that would elude the calculative activity of the intellect and thus confront the latter with its own narrow limitations. Suprematism was, in effect, this effort to found a radically new tradition of both perception and thought on the ruins of the old.[6]

The present essay composes an analysis of Suprematism that orients itself from within—and in fact at the beginning of—the very intellectual tradition that Malevich sought to supplant. Given the spirit of Malevich's strictly forward-looking project, such an approach may appear counterintuitive, at the least. Yet included among the lessons derived from philosophical genealogies over the past century is the general awareness that every tradition contains tendencies that run counter to, or even operate outside of, its dominant trends of thought, tendencies that can serve to illuminate concerted attempts to transcend that tradition. To this end, I wish to focus on a specific moment within early Greek thought that first ventures an account of the possibility for the soul's perception of phenomenal objects, namely Aristotle's discussion in *De Anima* of that faculty which he calls the "*koine aisthesis*," or the "common sense." For, despite Bergson's characterization[7] of Aristotle as one of the founding-stones of the Western mode of objective-scientific thinking from which philosophy must free itself, it is, I argue, precisely in Aristotle's examination of objective perception and, more specifically where this account runs up against

the limitations of his conceptual apparatus, that a space for conceiving alternative perceptual possibilities—akin to those indicated by Malevich's canvases—can be discerned. It is with reference to this initial vantage-point, I believe, that we can gain a more nuanced understanding of how Suprematism, by destroying the spell of objective appearance in its artworks, at the same time constitutes a freeing-up of human sensibility to the creation of new relational models of sense.

A crucial affinity between the earliest philosophic articulations of objective awareness and the attempt to establish in its stead a consciousness of non-objectivity can be found in their shared orientations; each undertaking marks out its primary terms on the terrain of pre-reflective awareness. For Malevich, an art form that could serve to unseat the predominant convention of thinking in terms of objective presence—that is, those ideas about solids in need of smashing—was one that could not, therefore, operate first and foremost on the level of the intellect. In distinction from Bergson's call for the mind to do violence to itself through the revision of its own concepts, Malevich's works are constructed as direct appeals to the human sensorium; freed of mimetic content, they do not image or refer to worldly beings, nor do they give form to recognizable metaphysical notions.[8] "On the threshold of the twentieth century," writes Malevich, "Art has found itself and become a pure expression of sensation,"[9] and as such, its instances are, as he puts it, "beyond images and ideas."[10] The struggle against those metaphysical prejudices of reflective consciousness that mediate perception to a considerable degree had to come instead from below, as it were, ultimately bringing about a destabilization of the structures of cognition. As Charlotte Douglas makes clear, "By sensation Malevich meant an ultimately material phenomenon but one which is subliminal. That is, an inner physiological sensation which is so slight, so subtle, that it does not reach the threshold of physical consciousness."[11] This point of attack is reflected in Jean-Claude Marcadé's statement that "Suprematist painting is not philosophical painting, for this would situate it in illusionism. Rather it is painting in philosophical action."[12] Such philosophical action was indeed intended to provoke its audience to innovative ideas of order and relation, and furthermore could ostensibly aid in re-conceptualizing the terms of the phenomenal world, but only as the result of subjecting sensibility to qualitatively novel aesthetic forms. "What interests us," Malevich emphasizes, "is changes in the manifestations of the perceptible."[13]

In similar fashion, Aristotle's entire analysis of perception in books Beta and Gamma of *De Anima* locates it within the sphere of pre-cognitive life. It applies to the human qua animal, with barely any reference to that power of *logos* which for him sets human life apart. Operative in this sphere, as Aristotle articulates it, in concert with the individual senses (that is, the specific forms of sensation proper to each sense-organ) is a special kind of awareness according to which complex objects and other unified phenomena of *aisthesis*—among them "motion, rest,

number,"[14] and so on—are made manifest to sense, and which constitutes in and through its unifying activity a simultaneous sense of sensing. In attempting to conceptualize this special awareness that Aristotle there refers to as the common sense (and elsewhere as the "primary sense"[15] or "master sense"[16]), more recent interpreters have been led, mistakenly, to attribute to Aristotle's account an incipient form of reflective self-consciousness along the lines of Descartes's *cogito* or Kant's transcendental unity of apperception.[17] A careful reading of the text, however, shows little evidence for treating the status of *aisthesis* in this intellectualist manner, and, following Aryeh Kosman's corrective[18] to such modern attributive tendencies, the most apt, if nonetheless limited, rendering for the coordinated powers of sensation on Aristotle's understanding I have found would be the term "perceptual awareness."[19] In agreement with Kosman's reading, Klaus Oehler explains: "Perception . . . is an affection of which the perceiver has an awareness; but there is no special seat of the awareness of that affection at some higher level of perceptual activity. . . . [T]he perceptual awareness cannot be located outside the perceiving of what is perceived but is achieved by the sense itself."[20] Thus, where Aristotle is concerned, neither the individual senses nor the *koine aisthesis* that weaves their received correlates together into what we recognize as objects constitutes a form of mental activity; it is rather a function grounded in the sensitivity of the organism itself.

Seen in Aristotelian terms, therefore, the possibility for Suprematism to accomplish its transformative effects depends upon appealing to that level of human awareness set forth in *De Anima* at which individual and common sense are activated, a level distinct from and prior to those powers he attributes to *noiesis*, "that part of the soul by which the soul knows and understands."[21] Yet it is just this characteristic activity of the common sense—that master sense which is simultaneous with the senses proper but is reducible to none, and which, moreover, includes among its affections memory, the faculty of imagination, and as well the awareness of time[22]—that causes a great deal of difficulty for the philosopher, appearing to elude any thorough and complete account that he ventures. For, not only does he appear to equivocate on the status of the common sense in its capacity to perceive that one is perceiving,[23] but in seeking to determine how it is that various sensations are combined into the perception of a single object, Aristotle is forced to attribute to the common sense a unique structure of activity that violates the fundamental principles of potency and act central to his overall metaphysical scheme.[24]

The problem with which the latter difficulty, in particular, is bound up concerns the question of how it is possible to perceive an object that, by its very nature *as* an object, possesses an array of qualities that are tied to, yet remain distinct from, one another. Such a complex perception, taken in all at once, cannot be carried out by a single individual sense, nor by several, since each, for Aristotle, operates in

isolation from the others and does not of its own accord communicate with them. "[N]either is it possible for separate senses to judge that sweet is different from white, but it is necessary that both be apparent to some one thing—otherwise, even if I perceived one of them and you perceived the other, it could be evident that they were different from each other, but it is necessary that some one thing say they are different."[25] This is the case not only for heterogeneous sensibles (color for vision, sound for hearing, et cetera—Aristotle is fond of using the example of the sweet and the white, for instance[26]), but for homogenous sensibles as well (the manifold colors of a bird or the harmony of instruments in an orchestral piece),[27] and this latter can apply equally for physical objects as well as those that are represented on canvas.

That "some one thing" of which Aristotle speaks is the faculty of *koine aisthesis*, and its role in the perception of objects is clear: to coordinate, simultaneously, the reception of qualities in a thing that impinge upon the individual senses. However, in so doing, in being multiply affected by the proper senses at once, the implication is that the common sense must be capable of a double-movement, according to Aristotle, such that "at one time the same thing be moved in opposite motions, insofar as it is undivided and is considered in an undivided time."[28] This is so precisely because in its activity of coordination, the common sense must both unify *and* differentiate sensible qualities; this differentiation cannot be accomplished in successive moments, since, as he explains: "[j]ust as it is the same thing that says the good and bad are different, so too when it says that the one is different it also says so of the other (and the *when* is not incidental . . .)."[29] As Aristotle observes, the activity of differentiation or discrimination by which any two (or more) qualities can be brought into relation for sensibility necessitates a simultaneous awareness of this difference *within* sensibility; the *koine aisthesis* would have to suffer separate affections in the same instant, be 'moved,' as he puts it, in opposing directions.[30] Yet it appears, therefore, that in any effort to understand the common sense with regard to its discriminating-relating activity one is thereby compelled to do violence to the very idea of that "one thing" that the common sense is said to be. That is to say, there seems to be no place allotted to the special powers of the common sense within the Aristotelian logic of identity. However, the condition for the possibility of perceiving objects as such rests precisely on an impossible movement of this sort.

Nor does Aristotle's proposed explanation for the inherent multiplicity of the common sense—that is nonetheless one—clear away the obvious tension within its very concept. The clarification he offers is that the common sense must thus be "divided in being, but undivided in place and number."[31] What Aristotle appears to have in mind here—and what is as difficult to grasp conceptually as *De Anima*'s statements above—is that in its essence, the common sense remains one while actively preserving contradictories within itself, contradictories that manifest

themselves in separate forms of movement (*kinēsis*). In order to make this puzzling formulation more comprehensible, Aristotle is compelled to resort to a geometrical analogy: that of the point and the line. "[I]nsofar as [the point] is both one and two, in this way it too is divided. So insofar as it is undivided, the thing that distinguishes is one thing and distinguishes things at one time, but insofar as it has it in it to be divided, it uses the same boundary-mark as double at one time. So insofar as it uses a limit as double, and distinguishes two separate things, it acts in a way dividedly, but insofar as it acts by means of one thing, it acts as one at one time."[32]

The point, conceived here in its activity as a limiting force between two segments of a single line, is intended to illustrate the discriminating-unifying function of the common sense. As Heller-Roazen explains, "[i]f taken on its own, [the point] is necessarily one. But as that which marks a boundary (*peras*), it must be two: the double sign of a *terminus ad quem* and a *terminus a quo*, the end of one segment and the inception of another."[33] Yet as is so frequently the case in the Aristotelian corpus, images provided in support of a particular principle or other can in fact be as challenging to decipher as that which they are instituted to clarify. Such is, I believe, the case here.[34] For Aristotle's illustration cannot capture the activity itself of the common sense that is at issue; nor does the *koine aisthesis* introduce any perceptible element into complex perception, as the point—which is intended to signify nothing more than the action of delimiting—does in the case of Aristotle's analogue. To put it otherwise: in attempting to clarify the nature of this unique activity, the philosopher is forced instead to reify it in the form of a static image.[35] As such, despite our phenomenological experience in support of the instantaneous reception of differing qualities, we cannot, as Francisco Gonzalez argues, logically venture to grasp the simultaneity of delimitation essential to Aristotle's illustration of the point in any other way than successively: "If the point can be treated as two, this is only at different times: we take it first as the end of one line and then take it as the beginning of another line."[36] Within the heart of objective perception, then, is to be found—borrowing from the Suprematist vocabulary—a form of pure non-objectivity, of pure relational activity, that cannot be accessed according to the terms that this pure activity, in its result of producing the variegated object for perception, makes possible. It is only in running up against the limits of his objective terminology that Aristotle could first expose the problem of the common sense, a sense which transcends those limits most conspicuously in its delimiting function.

Indeed, it was Bergson's conviction that objective thinking, taking the static presence of things as the *sine qua non* of its investigations into the generative machinations of sense, could only obscure the latter, and furthermore impede our understanding of motion as such. "Instead of attaching ourselves to the inner becoming of things, we place ourselves outside them in order to recompose their becoming artificially . . . the mind, never able to satisfy itself and never finding

where to rest, persuades itself, no doubt, that it imitates by its instability the very movement of the real."[37] Yet it is, I believe, in locating the mysterious double-movement that characterizes the common sense as itself the first principle of metaphysics that it is possible to distance ourselves from what Bergson refers to as the intellect's artificial and external bearing, and thus to approach the non-objective worldview opened up by Malevich through his painterly works.

To be sure, Aristotle does not probe the elusive workings of the *koine aisthesis* with the intention of revealing hitherto unconceived alternatives to everyday perception. Rather, he presupposes the reality of the perceived object along with its qualities and sets himself to explicating, via the common sense, how it is that we do perceive the various qualities in their unity as they reside in the object. Nevertheless, given the preceding discussion, the Suprematist project can be seen as a form of painterly inquiry that takes up the thread of Aristotle's brief and aporetic analysis of this most basic order of experience in order to develop it in new directions. For Malevich, this meant painting in such a way as to set dynamism to work on the canvas, while at the same time refusing to let any objects intrude into the frame; the unity and wholeness that characterizes the object, that marks the finished product of Aristotle's *koine aisthesis*, had to be suspended, and in this suspension there were to be glimpsed other forms of motion. It was, in fact, as if Suprematism took as its task a holding-open of the relational activity of the common sense, lingering within its movement while indefinitely deferring that moment in which sensible qualities would be concentrated into a final, completed unity. For, taking up a Bergsonian insight, Malevich posits that "objects embody a mass of moments in time"[38] whose aspects for painting "have become more important than [the object's] essence and meaning."[39] Such hidden moments are of a piece with those moments concealed within the double-movement of the *koine aisthesis* upon which the "undivided time,"[40] the time of the "now" wherein for Aristotle the object is perceived, rests. This concealed time of mutual delimitation and relation is, as Heller-Roazen notes, "a duration that remains unnamed in the *De Anima* and its commentaries but not unmarked. . . . It is another time; to the degree to which time cannot admit of varieties of itself, it may well be something other than any time at all."[41] It is this fugitive "other time" of the common sense and of non-objectivity that the Suprematist canvas seeks to bring about, a time of pure dynamic sensation.[42] In this connection Malevich writes, "It is . . . possible that the new suprematist solution will lead us to new systems going beyond the confusion of objectivity to a purely energetic force of movement."[43]

By carrying out this program, Malevich saw that the implications for painting and for the correlates of sensation were bound together. In releasing painting from its "slavery to the objective image,"[44] and hence from that mode of imitative reproduction that always carries along with it ideological attachments, he was at the same time bringing the inherent independence of visual elements to realiza-

tion: "Color and texture in painting are ends in themselves. They are the essence of painting but this essence has always been destroyed by the subject."[45] This is to say that the actual elements of painting could now be seen for themselves; color, line, relief, and their interrelations emerged to become the real content of the work, or as Charles Altieri expresses it, these form "a domain where manner is inseparable from matter."[46] For the faculty of vision, this means that its proper correlate of color, and in fact color in its variety, was set free from its teleological translation into a mere property of a given object.[47] The eye could seek its satisfactions wholly within in its own element, open to the life of this or that shade.

Admittedly, it may sound strange to speak of the "life" of color, yet this is one of Suprematism's most forceful devices: laying open that peculiar moment in which the time of color manifests itself through color's unstable character. "That is," T. J. Clark writes, "the moment when the sensation of color reveals its true phenomenological character. . . . And color in [Malevich's] view was the aspect of our everyday experience that already (commonsensically) eluded our best efforts to reify it. Ordinary language already admitted as much. It knew that no color is ever quite 'local.'"[48] In order to make good Bergson's insistence that "every quality is change,"[49] Malevich had to evince this truth by relieving the elements of painting—and color especially—of their status *as* qualities by doing away entirely with the object-quality dichotomy. Hence, the otherworldly[50] appearance of his paintings: freed from any shadow of resemblance and from the stabilizing gravity that congeals the perceptible into any recognizable order, he demonstrates the independence of color taken for itself. "Color in its basic state," he writes, "is autonomous; that is, each ray has its own energy and characteristics."[51] In this sense, the setting-free of color into its own sphere of influence could be seen at the same time as an attempt to liberate human consciousness from the hypostatizing tendencies of objective thought. "Pure feeling" and the "pure essence of painting"[52] converge for Malevich in the dynamics of "pure color"[53] played out on the surface plane.

It is not, however, only in these analogues of the senses proper, in Aristotle's language, that Malevich seeks to revitalize our perceptual capacities. His paintings bear most upon the possibilities retained in the common sense in the features of his painterly composition, in the new ontology presented therein, where the dynamics of color are realized most powerfully. Here color and line in his canvases are treated as "component elements that [are] essential as painterly contrasts,"[54] and as such invite that relating-discriminating work of the common sense while simultaneously resisting its drive toward completeness and full synthetic unity. What Malevich refers to as "painterly contrasts" involves the field of tensions that becomes manifest through the color-relations of these elements and their placement with respect to one another. Deprived of any recognizable center and of any grounding coordinates, the elements within his paintings appear to reveal

themselves as somewhere between hovering and scattering, supporting and repelling—and in some cases, between emerging and receding—yet in a somewhere that is also emphatically nowhere.[55] Constructed thus, his works both gesture to the comforting logic that would relieve this anxious interplay and at the same time reject it. "What is special about Malevich," Clark writes, "… is the willingness to pursue a stacking and balancing of elements which could at any point have settled into an order that looked precious, or obvious, or arch, or over-calculated; and yet in practice to have exactly this kind of ordering hum with the metaphor of infinity. It is the conjuring of escape, abyss, elevation, excitation, non-existence out of these too-well-behaved materials that is the Malevich effect."[56]

It is what I have described above as a "field of tensions," and, I believe, what Clark has in mind by a "hum of ordering" that brings us back to the limiting function of Aristotle's common sense. In a Suprematist painting the relating-discriminating action of the *koine aisthesis* comes to appearance precisely as a struggle, *as tension*, wherein each component element of the picture exhibits its singular characteristics—that is, performs its independence—only on condition of differing from its counterparts and thus resisting their orbits. Presence, however provisionally this term may be applied to a Malevich canvas, frequently arises therefore as the result of difference, of a specific kind of non-being by which his painterly elements are defined. As such, Malevich's compositions enact a series of relations that constitute not only the limits of each dynamic element, but also thereby constitute that tension of contrasts which itself becomes an element within the overall composition, unseen but not unfelt in its delimiting power.[57] Thus, painterly relations for Malevich are not, strictly speaking, what takes place between elements on the canvas, but, as Altieri puts it, "the shapes [of a Malevich construction] work *as* relationships, and the relationships open metaphoric extensions that do not displace but pervade the material elements."[58] Ideally, caught within this ungrounded dynamic of tension within the painting—a dynamic that nonetheless reveals its own intimations of order—the *koine aisthesis* does not so much fail to realize its accustomed activity in tracing out objective wholeness as rather open itself to unforeseen modes of relationality. First and foremost, for Malevich, this demands attuning one's perceptive faculties to "the spirit of non-objective sensation which pervades everything."[59]

In an effort to win a measure of concreteness for these claims, let us consider Malevich's *Suprematist Painting 17* (Figure 1), which I take to be an exemplary instance of a certain alternative relationality among Suprematist elements.[60] We note, to begin with, that its overall composition is subject to a series of declarations that turn back upon themselves and collapse in the absence of stable visual coordinates. That is, in the search for a grounding axis with respect to which its elements can be synthesized, the pale grey circle at center-right emerges as an obvious initial candidate. Yet its near-weightlessness, the softness of its edges, in

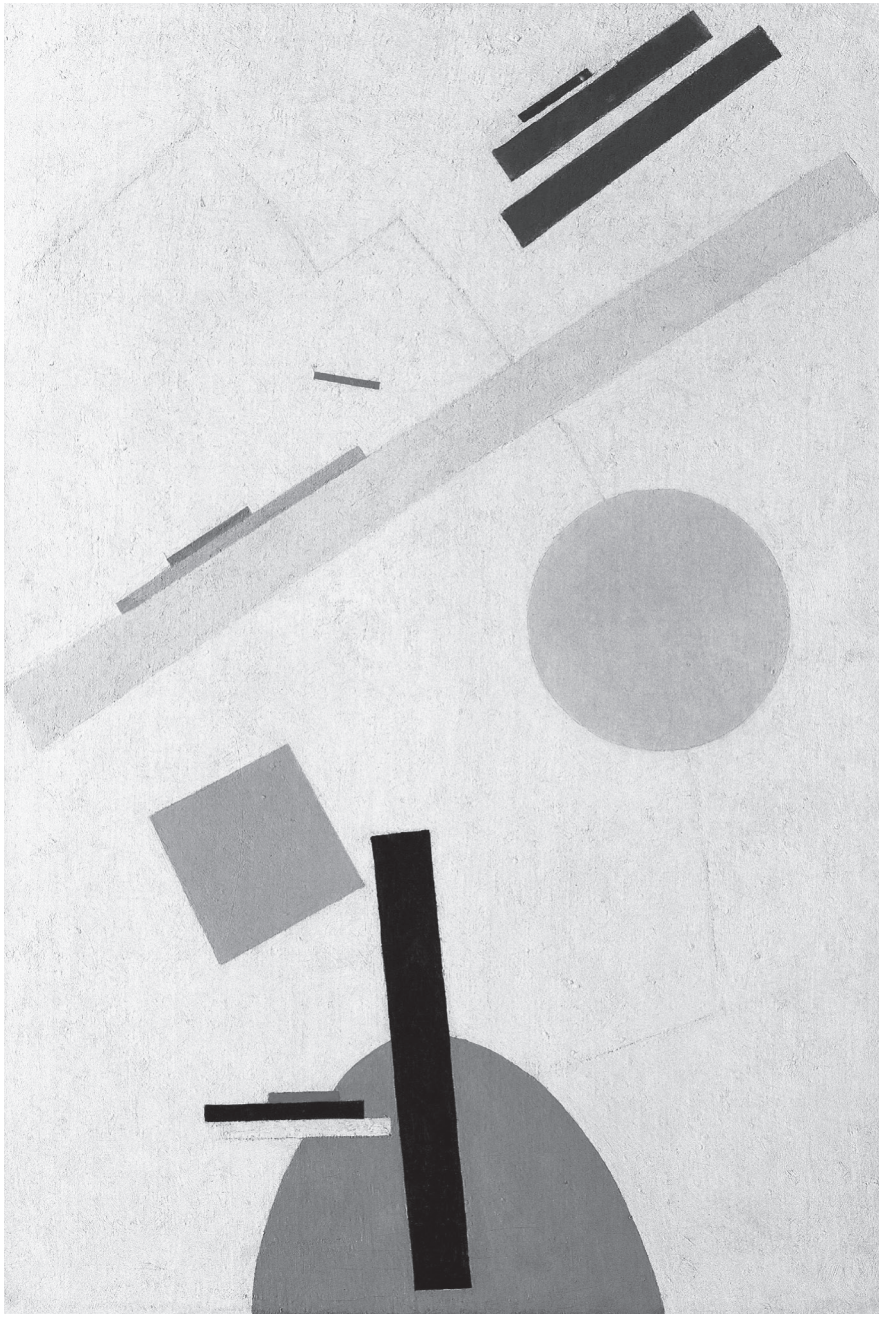

Figure 1: Suprematist Painting, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 65.4 cm, 1917 (The Museum of Modern Art, New York)

fact the way it struggles to distinguish itself from the paleness of its background push it into an ancillary condition relative to the thin resoluteness of the black rectangle performing a tilt at bottom-center. This tilt, however, presents problems of a different order. Its requisite weight threatens the integrity of the salmon square to its left, not to mention the seemingly ill-planned stacking of red and black rectangles upon white. Even what we may customarily refer to as its base is furtively stretched at the bottom-right corner, as if attempting, by an act of self-distortion, to offer a solution for its density—an attempt which, given that its tilting is only further illuminated against the parabolic powder blue, inscribes into the black a certain instability.

If *Suprematist Painting 1917* were of a more peaceful, more directly harmonious composition, we might say that its elements partake of a movement that is simply a kind of hovering or floating. Yet that would be to overlook the way in which each potential coordinating point seems to play out a loss of traction on the plane, where it performs its ecstatic unsettling and shifting. And it is this aspect of the tilting black rectangle which serves to open one's vision upward and across the painting, as if in review, to discover how the weight and position of the green rectangles at top-right only hint at being a pictorial crux insofar as the unsettling of the black rectangle appears to depend—and in fact, has depended from the first—in large part on those doubled green lines of force. Such force is repelled and returned by the tilt of the diminutive red rectangle that is manifest as both more and less than it is: occupying that space where the green lines and the dense black might have, given their directionality, crossed or met, the red appears to bear witness to the absence of this event, to carry that absence while bolstering its position by sending the lines of force back along their paths below and above right simultaneously. These movements of weight, tone, and shade continue to invite the eye into their rhythm and pace without resolution. Altieri remarks as well upon the picture's "sense of endless mutual modification, now raised to the degree that every tilt of every mark requires our adjusting our sense of the force of every other mark that strikes our attention. . . . [F]eeling cannot be equated with the material but has to be located in what is being done with the material."[61] Propelled by invisible powers, one's vision must contend with shifts and fluctuations that seem infinitely to hamper the usual congealment into rest or wholeness carried out by the common sense.[62] Indeed, its double-movement of oppositional tracing, of discriminating and delimiting appears to be directed by the forces at work in the painting, forces that—through the tension which they embody—give to each element its fleeting character. Here there is something of a fluidity at work in Malevich's geometrics; even where slim figures appear to attach to larger ones as if some kind of cosmic remorae, they nonetheless seem to exhibit a speed all their own.

There is one more aspect of *Suprematist Painting 1917* that is not to be overlooked, that in fact is as essential to the overall effect of the picture as any particular

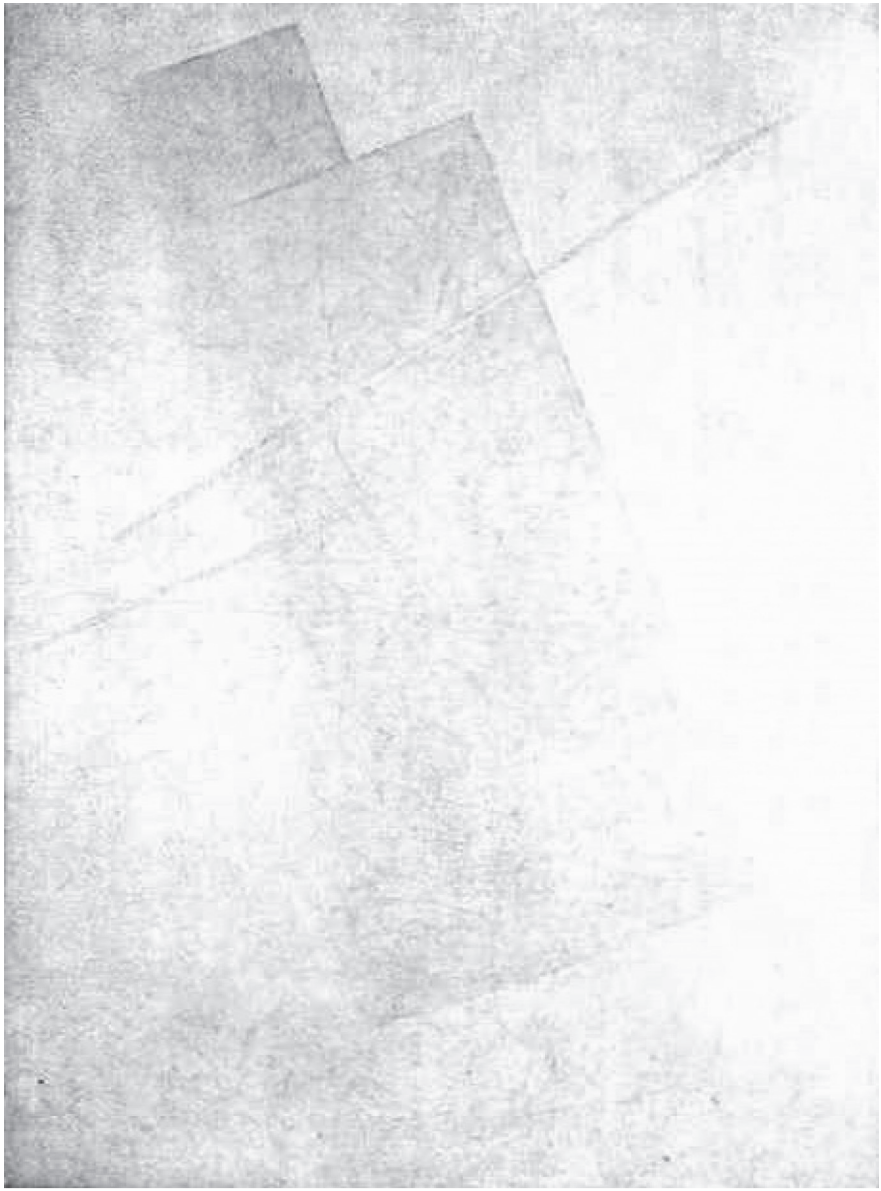

Figure 2: Suprematist Painting, oil on canvas, 97 x 70 cm, 1917–1918 (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam)

set of color and positioning contrasts. It is a form that Malevich had rehearsed with unmistakable similarity elsewhere (Figure 2). We find described in the background, as it were, of the geometrical drama a liminal presence of shape. Whether dissolving into or emerging from the textured white of the canvas—we have no

indication—it elicits a sense of belonging to this withdrawing white. Here the event of becoming most explicitly announces itself, and the merely apparent void of the painting manifests its kinship with even the most resistant of the elements, as if their very being were nothing other than this effort of resistance, provisional and ever-uncertain. It is this singular void that, beyond the infinity of elemental shifts and negotiations, offers the barest sense of fullness in the picture,[63] but which at the same time demands in exchange an altered sense of what it might mean for the elements to be present, to have a presence. It is the force, according to Malevich, that "pervades everything," that threatens to exceed even the bounds of his canvas.[64]

If there is any overall synthesis to be wrought from Malevich's painting, it can only come through the elaborate dialectic of force and counter-force, the interplay of differing dynamics and enactments of becoming that give to this picture its set of shifting rhythms. Through this dialectic we discover, over and again, that "there is no unity without intense local detours that in turn make unity inseparable from intricately balanced tension, with no overarching gathering force."[65] Insofar as every artwork carries within it the implication of an isolated world unto itself wherein the autonomy of the work consists, Malevich is able to marshal this most fundamental of artistic conventions in the service of a compositional style that insists upon radically new forms of worldliness and hence, a more profound sense of aesthetic autonomy. Yet this worldliness comes neither easily nor without strings. It demands of our sensuous capacities a disciplined and uncompromising transformation. It compels the common sense to reckon with its own activity as an abyssal, groundless force, a force which therefore can, and must, manifest itself otherwise.

In Suprematism we bear witness to the utopian endeavor of constructing a perceptual order from the ground up. Tied to that order, for Malevich, was the possibility for new forms of organization—economic, social, cultural—and ultimately, new modes of meaning-creation suited to a revolutionary class that sought to demolish all previous modes of historical life. To this extent, Malevich's surfaces reflect in their very materiality a resolute and unmistakable quality of violence. Yet they bear as well traces of preservation, the survival of sensuous potentialities inscribed within the seeds of that historical tradition, where it strains at the limits of what and how it can signify.[66]

Notes

1. *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. T. E. Hulme (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishers, 1999), 51.
2. Extract from "Futurism-Suprematism, an Abstract," trans. John Bowlt, in *Kazimir Malevich 1878–1935*, ed. Jeanne D'Andrea (Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center, 1990), 177.

3. Cf. Malevich, "On New Systems in Art/Statics and Speed," trans. Christiana Bryan, in *Malevich on Suprematism. Six Essays: 1915–1926*, ed. Patricia Railing (Iowa City: The University of Iowa Museum of Art, 1999), 60.
4. "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting," trans. Xenia Glowacki-Prus and Arnold McMillin, in *Malevich on Suprematism*, 28.
5. Though the extent of Bergson's influence on Malevich is unclear (see Patricia Railing's Introduction to *Malevich on Suprematism*, 14n4), given that he rarely cites the theorists whose work informed his own suppositions, Charlotte Douglas makes a compelling case for the depth of this influence (see her "Suprematism: The Sensible Dimension," *Russian Review* 34:3 [1975]: 266–81), noting that while "Bergson is not explicitly mentioned by name in Malevich's writings available in the West . . . his concepts are present throughout, at times very clearly," 274. Moreover, given that Bergson was a central theoretical influence for the Futurists, whose methods and works Malevich studied intensely throughout his transition to Suprematism, it is all the more probable that Malevich had acquainted himself with the principal aspects of Bergson's philosophy. In this connection, cf. Brian Petrie's "Boccioni and Bergson," *The Burlington Magazine* 116, No. 852 (1974): 140–7. See also Peter Stupples, "Malevich and the Liberation of Art," in *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* (2001): 11–36, esp. 15–6; as well as Charlotte Douglas, "The New Russian Art and Italian Futurism," in *Art Journal* 34:3 (1975): 229–39.
6. As Malevich put it: "Now that art, thanks to Suprematism, has come into its own . . . and has recognized the infallibility of non-objective feeling, it is attempting to set up a *genuine world order*, a new philosophy of life. It recognizes the non-objectivity of the world and is no longer concerned with providing illustrations of the history of manners." *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism*, trans. Howard Dearstyne (New York: Dover Press, 2003), 100 (italics mine).
7. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. Arthur Mitchell (Mineola, N.Y.: Dover Press, 1911), 315–29.
8. Malevich underscores this point in no uncertain terms: "[T]o the Suprematist, the appropriate means of representation is always the one which gives fullest possible expression to feeling as such and which ignores the familiar appearance of objects. Objectivity, in itself, is meaningless to him; the concepts of the conscious mind are worthless. . . . Everything which determined the objective-ideal structure of life and of "art"—ideas, concepts and images—all this the artist has cast aside in order to heed pure feeling." *The Non-Objective World*, 67.
9. "Suprematism," trans. Xenia Hoffmann, in Railing, *Malevich on Suprematism*, 105.
10. Ibid., 104.
11. "Suprematism: The Sensible Dimension," 278.
12. "Malevich, Painting, and Writing: On the Development of a Suprematist Philosophy," in *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism*, ed. Matthew Drutt (New York: Guggenhein Museum of Art, 2003), 34.
13. Malevich, *The Non-Objective World*, 21. He writes, furthermore, "What we are fighting for, as has been said, is nothing other than our consciousness and, in this connection, the fact that our nervous systems and our brains do not function always and

absolutely under the control of our conscious minds but rather, are capable of acting and reacting outside of our consciousness, has been left out of account" (20).

14. *On the Soul*, II.6 418a18. Unless otherwise noted, I follow Joe Sachs's translation: *Aristotle's On the Soul and On Memory and Recollection* (Santa Fe, N.M.: Green Lion Press, 2001).
15. "*Prōtō aisthētikō*," *On Memory and Recollection*, 1.450a12.
16. "*Kurion aisthētērion*," *On Sleep and Waking*, 2.455a21.
17. Irving Block, for example, unproblematically characterizes the unifying activity of perception as an "association of ideas" ("Aristotle and the Physical Object," in *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 21:1 (1960): 94. See also D. W. Hamlyn, "*Koine Aisthesis*," in *Monist* 52:2 (1968): 199.
18. L. A. Kosman, "Perceiving that We Perceive: On the Soul III, 2," *The Philosophical Review* 84:4 (1975): 499–519.
19. Ibid., 517.
20. Klaus Oehler, "Aristotle on Self-Knowledge," *The Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 118:6 (1974): 497.
21. *On the Soul*, III.4.429a10–11: "*tou moriou tou tēs psuchēs ō gignōskei te hē psuchē kai phronei*."
22. *On Memory and Recollection*, 1.450a8–25.
23. In the second chapter of Book Gamma of the *De Anima*, Aristotle notes that if there is some sense other than sight which senses that it is seeing, that other sense must perceive "both seeing and the color that is its object" (425b13–14), this would imply yet another sense that must be aware of that contained in the second, and so would lead to an endless regress. However, this conclusion seems to have been overturned by the time of *On Sleep and Waking*, wherein Aristotle very clearly states that while each individual sense has its own special function, "there is also a common faculty associated with them all, whereby one perceives (*aisthanetai*) that one sees and hears" (2.455a13–17). (Here I am emending slightly H. S. Hett's translation in the Loeb Classical Edition [*Aristotle, On the Soul, Parva Naturalia, On Breath* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957)] where he translates '*aisthanetai*' by 'is conscious.')
24. On this point, as well as its implications, I am indebted to Daniel Heller-Roazen's exemplary study of Aristotle's concept of the common sense in *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (New York: Zone Books, 2007). Much of what I say below concerning Aristotle bears the imprint of Heller-Roazen's rich analysis.
25. *On the Soul,* III.2.426b18–21.
26. Cf. *On Sleep and Waking*, 2.455a20–22, *On the Soul*, III.2.426b13–15.
27. Regarding this point, see Pavel Gregoric's *Aristotle on the Common Sense* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), in particular 129–62.
28. *On the Soul*, III.2.426b30–32.
29. Ibid., III.2.426b24–26.
30. As Heller-Roazen notes: "That which simultaneously perceives multiple sensible qualities would seem necessarily drawn, by its passive power, in several directions at once, defined by traits incompatible with one another," *The Inner Touch*, 46.
31. "*Tō einai men gar diaireton, topō de kai arithmō adiaireton*," *On the Soul*, III.2.427a5.

32. Ibid., III.2.427a11–15. For Sachs's second translation of "boundary" I have chosen instead "limit," which more faithfully, I believe, reflects Aristotle's change in terminology in this passage from *sēmeion* to *peras*.
33. Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch*, 47.
34. Heller-Roazen reports that throughout the tradition of commentary on Aristotle's works, "[t]he simile resisted interpretation, even as it remained of obvious import for the exposition of the doctrine of the animal soul," ibid. In fact, from Alexander of Aphrodisias to Themistius and into the course of Arabic commentary, expositions of this principle introduced alterations to the point-line analogy, whereby a number of lines intersecting at a single point are added, as well as the notion of a circle for which the point serves as its center. Cf. ibid., 47–50.
35. Such reification translates into a number of accounts of the analogy itself. Gregoric, for example, uses a further image—that of the boundary between black and white squares on a chessboard—in an attempt to clarify the first. In so doing, Gregoric is led to attribute opposing qualities to the limit itself: "The boundary of a white square is also the boundary of a black square, so the boundary seems to be both white and black. Because the perceptual part of the soul is able to regard the boundary as a single thing and as something which is both white and black, the perceptual part can simultaneously access and discriminate white and black," *Aristotle on the Common Sense*, 155. This attempted solution, as I see it, leads to the further question of the distinctness of white and black within Gregoric's boundary itself. That is, in order to see how the limit, on its own, contains white and black together, yet maintains them as distinct, one would thus have to posit a second limit within that limit, whereby the problem is reproduced, and so on. Thus, the treatment of the delimiting power of the common sense as itself an object of sense invites one into the territory of Plato's third man argument—a problem with which, to be sure, Aristotle was well acquainted.
36. Francisco Gonzalez, "What's in a Moment? Time for Aristotle (and Heidegger)," presented to the Ancient Philosophy Society in association with the meeting of the Society for Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy, Montreal, November 2010.
37. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 306–7.
38. Though Bergson never puts it in precisely these terms, his thesis that time is the more primary ontological category is present throughout his work. In *Creative Evolution*, for example, he states his intention of "defining more precisely . . . a philosophy which sees in duration the very stuff of reality" (272). As well, he analyzes, in *Matter and Memory*, the way in which temporality is concentrated into objects by perception: "[A]t the same time that our actual and so to speak instantaneous perception effects [a] division of matter into independent objects, our memory solidifies into sensible qualities the continuous flow of things. . . . So that sensible qualities as they are found in our memory-shot perception, are, in fact, the successive moments obtained by a solidification of the real" (trans. N. M. Paul and W. S. Palmer [New York: Zone Books, 1991] 210–1).
39. "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism," in *Malevich on Suprematism*, 38. See also "From Cubism to Suprematism in Art," ibid., 23.
40. *On the Soul*, III.2.426b29. Of the discriminating power of the *koine aisthesis*, Aristotle states: "For just as it is the same thing that says that good and bad are different, so

too *when* it says that one is different it also says so of the other (and the when is not incidental—I mean the way it is when I *say* now that they are different rather than that they are different now—but it both says so now and says that it is so now); therefore they are distinguished at the same time, so that it is an indivisible act in an indivisible time" (ibid., III.2.426b24–29.

41. Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch*, 55.
42. Malevich attributes to Cubism the first "revelation on the plane of various forms of time" ("On New Systems in Art/Static and Speed," in *Malevich on Suprematism*, 63), yet still accomplished as tied to a recognizable object.
43. Ibid., 77.
44. Ibid., 59.
45. "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism," in ibid., 31. Cf. Malevich's statement in "Suprematism": "The Suprematists have deliberately given up objective representation of their surroundings in order to reach the summit of the true "unmasked" art and from this vantage point to view life through the prism of pure artistic feeling," in *The Non-Objective World*, 84.
46. Charles Altieri, "Why Modernist Claims for Autonomy Matter," in *The Journal of Modern Literature* 32:3 (Spring 2009): 15.
47. As Malevich notes, "Nature's perfection lies in the absolute, blind freedom of units within it—units that are at the same time absolutely interdependent. . . . [E]very solid is a unity of absolutely free units, and what we see in nature is simply the mass integration of free units" ("Futurism-Suprematism: An Abstract," in D'Andrea, *Malevich*, 177–8).
48. T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism*, (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 273–4.
49. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 301.
50. It was precisely in annihilating objects that Malevich saw the otherworldly implications of his painting: "The familiar recedes ever further and further into the background. . . . The contours of the objective world fade more and more and so it goes, step by step, until finally the world—"everything we love and by which we have lived!—becomes lost to sight." "Suprematism," in *The Non-Objective World*, 68.
51. *Kazimir Malevich 1878–1935*, 178.
52. "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism," in *Malevich on Suprematism*, 34.
53. "Non-Objective Art and Suprematism," in *Essays on Art*, Vol. 1, ed. Troels Andersen (Copenhagen: Borgens Forlag, 1968), 120. "It became clear to me that what had to be built were new frameworks for a painting of pure color. And they would have to be constructed so as to obey color's own demands. As a defender of individual independence within the collective system I understood that painting should also dispense with painterliness—with a mixing of colors—and make color an independent unity, playing its part freely in the overall construction."
54. "On New Systems in Art/Statics and Speed," in ibid., 63. Elsewhere, Malevich refers to these elements as "*supremes*," ("Futurism-Suprematism: An Abstract," in D'Andrea, *Malevich*, 178).

55. With reference to Malevich's *Suprematist Painting: Eight Red Rectangles*, Tim Harte captures the connection between the artist's withdrawal of earthly things and the motion that erupts in their wake, where "a dynamic arrangement of forms facilitates a heightened sense of steady otherwordly motion. . . . Devoid of a discernible reference point, the rectangles possess no overt sense of speed, yet their shape, texture, color, and arrangement all bolster the painting's inherent suggestion of dynamism." Tim Harte, *Fast Forward: The Aesthetics and Ideology of Speed in Russian Avant-Garde Culture, 1910–1930* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2009), 139.
56. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea*, 278.
57. In this connection, Clark notes that in Malevich's painting "[c]olor is a weight that something else has elevated. . . . Composition is an energy that keeps the colored shapes in the air, but only for the time being. We are meant to share the juggler's anxiety as well as his or her rapt attention." *Farewell to an Idea*, 276.
58. "The Concept of Force as a Frame for Modernist Art and Literature," *boundary 2* 25:1 (1998): 198–9 (my italics). Altieri here refers specifically to Malevich's *Black Square and Red Square*, yet I take his insights to be applicable to a wealth of Malevich's Suprematist works.
59. Malevich, *The Non-Objective World*, 68.
60. A kindred discussion of this piece can be found in Altieri's "Why Modernist Claims for Autonomy Matter" (13–6). Altieri's focus there, however, is centered more principally on the self-reflexive aspect of Malevich's painting and the possible convergence of will between audience and artist.
61. Ibid., 13.
62. Borrowing a famous Adornian phrase, Altieri insightfully describes this refusal of wholeness as "something like a negative dialectic." Ibid., 15.
63. With regard to this point, Clark writes of Malevich: "No painter has ever been less schematic than he was: every square inch of his canvases, even or especially those with little or nothing in them, is hideously detailed and particular, as if proving a point irrefutably, or exorcizing a kind of horror at particularity by apotropaic magic. . . . Nothing is more material than a Malevich off-white," *Farewell to an Idea*, 269, 275.
64. Branislav Jakovljevic notes of this excessive character, "What Malevich discovered upon completing his first Suprematist painting is that nonobjectivity is uncontainable. . . . It made obvious that the frame does not protect the painting from its milieu, but the other way around. By framing the picture *in*, the world frames itself *out*." "Unframe Malevich! Ineffability and Sublimity in Suprematism," in *Art Journal* 63:3 (2004): 28.
65. Altieri, "Why Modernist Claims for Autonomy Matter," 15.
66. Thanks are due to the Museum of Modern Art and the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, for permission to reproduce Malevich's works. A version of this paper was presented in November 2011 at Trinity College, Hartford, where I benefited greatly from Trinity's philosophy faculty, both for their gracious invitation and for the wealth of insightful questions to which I was treated as their guest. I owe debts of gratitude as well to Francisco Gonzalez and especially to Sara Brill for her help at each stage in the development of this essay.