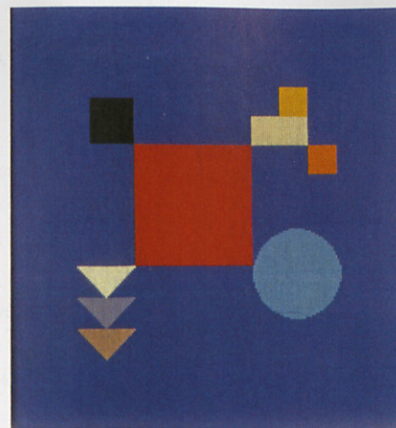


From left: Kazimir Malevich, *Black Quadrilateral*, n.d., oil on canvas, 6 3/4 x 9 1/2". Sophie Taeuber-Arp, *Untitled (Composition with Squares, Circle, Rectangles, Triangles)*, 1918, cotton, colored dye, 24 x 24 1/2". Josiah McElheny, *Interactive Abstract Body (Circle)*, 2012, cedar, mirror, cloth straps, metal, performer. Performance view, January 14, 2015. Photo: Dan Weill.



## “Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915–2015”

WHITECHAPEL GALLERY, LONDON  
Sarah K. Rich

“ADVENTURES OF THE BLACK SQUARE” begins with a rectangle: Kazimir Malevich’s undated little quadrilateral from the Costakis Collection. The painting is small and squat, and its lateral format pulls it dangerously close to representational traditions of landscape, but the piece nevertheless encapsulates some of the most vital features of Malevich’s earliest excursions into Suprematism. Multiple brushstrokes build the shape, as if to show that the artist arrived at the composition only as the result of minute, painstaking deliberations reminiscent of Cézanne. In spite of this meticulous building-up of paint, the form is bold, even ruthless in its domination of the composition’s center. At the same time, and quite remarkably, the shape dares to be to be a bit jaunty. Slightly acute at its upper right corner, the black rectangle (like several of Malevich’s Suprematist works) seems to veer into the frame like a superhero coming in for a landing. This is indeed a shape made for adventure.

It’s not really a problem that “Adventures of the Black Square,” at London’s Whitechapel Gallery, does not, in fact, feature any of the four black square paintings that Kazimir Malevich produced between 1915 and 1930. And it might even come as a relief that the exhibition, which scans one hundred years of global art production for the range of Malevich’s radical influence, presents few black squares in general. Recent exhibitions have already given viewers a chance to see versions of Malevich’s magnum opus, most

significant among them last year’s excellent retrospective at London’s Tate Modern, which returned the 1915 *Black Square* to its natural habitat by re-creating a portion of the “Last Futurist Exhibition 0.10.” Back in 2011, Gagosian Gallery in New York scooped other centennial anniversary exhibitions by mounting “Malevich and the American Legacy,” which armored the gallery walls with regiments of dark quadrilaterals by postwar American artists such as Mark Rothko, Ad Reinhardt, and Richard Serra.

Released from the job of recapitulating *The Black Square 0.10*, and unburdened by the task of cataloguing famous postwar iterations of *The Black Square Version 2.0*, curators Iwona Blazwick and Magnus af Petersen have expanded into other, less predictable territory. With a century of artwork by close to one hundred artists—many of them women, many coming from East Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, North Africa, and the Middle East—the exhibition explores connections between “abstract art and society,” according to the show’s subtitle.

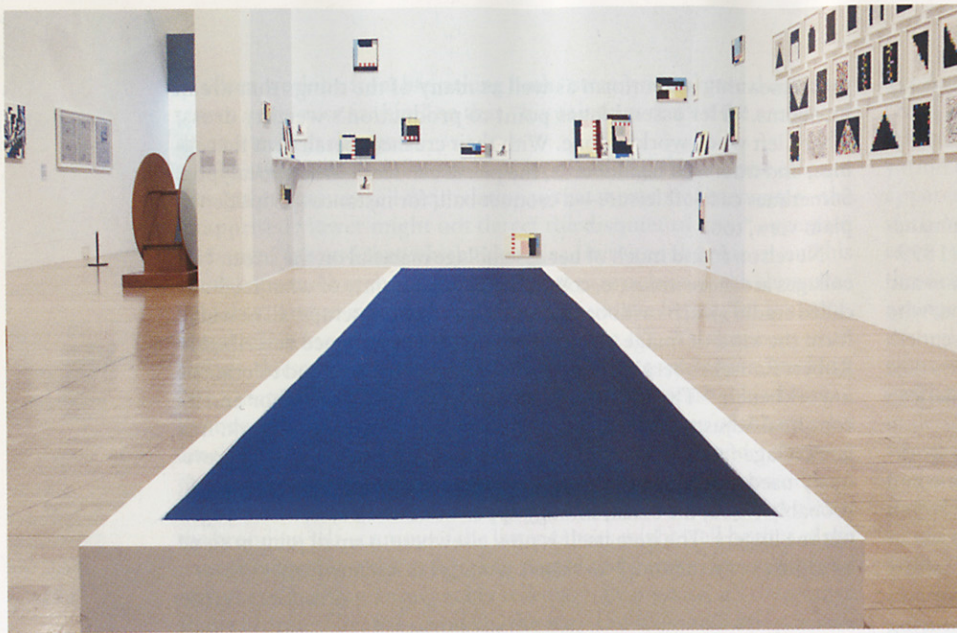
In many respects, it is the *and* that carries the biggest load in that subtitle. Since the first iterations of modern abstract art, its relation to society has been a matter of urgent debate. The exhibition narrows the scope a few degrees by presenting artists who have mostly *intended* their work to engage the social. Preserving intentionality as an implicit criterion of selection, the show detours around Meyer Schapiro’s famous (and admittedly hard to demonstrate) argument that even the antisocial desire for autonomy in much abstract art bears the imprint of modern social conditions (such as alienation). The curators narrow the focus further by emphasizing artistic practices that are primarily aligned with the liberatory or progressive. So with no Italian Futurism on display, for example, unknowing viewers might get the impression that hard lines and repeated forms always indicate left-wing politics. But beyond those latent exclusions, the exhibition accumulates a wide range of artistic practices and a deep bench of important artworks, all of which were chosen because they related to one or more of the exhibition’s four cardinal categories: “Utopia,” “Architectonics,” “Communication,”

and “The Everyday.” The resulting installation is at times chaotic, at others invigorating.

The rooms follow a roughly chronological organization, with artworks of shared artistic movements or geographical concentration clustered together. The first floor gives viewers a strong foundation in Suprematism and Constructivism, with women artists appearing early, prominently, and often: One of Lyubov Popova’s “Architectonics” hangs near a deep-blue cross-stitch by Sophie Taeuber-Arp in the first room. Around the corner, a spatial composition by Katarzyna Kobro explores the possibility of using empty (i.e., real) space as a planar, even figural element in sculpture. Scores of avant-garde periodicals, along with architectural models, films, photographs, and performance documents, pull the paintings and sculptures into complex networks of artistic and social practice. Theo van Doesburg’s flattened model for the cinema-*cum*-dance hall of the Café Aubette conjures a De Stijl environment that manages to be at once transcendent and trendy. Meanwhile, a 1944 film by Harry Holtzman treats Piet Mondrian’s posthumous studio as something between a heavenly sanctuary and a haunted house (the footage eerily begins with the door to Mondrian’s studio opening on its own, as if the artist’s ghost were inviting us in).

But for the most part, the exhibition gathers examples from the early twentieth century as a sort of launching pad from which geometric abstraction rockets into the expanded territory of the subsequent decades and of different cultures. Indeed, one of the primary achievements of the exhibition is that it captures the myriad ways in which geometric abstraction—whose inventors aspired to forms of universal legibility—has increasingly become subject to local idioms. Consider the work of Andrei Monastyrski and Collective Actions, whose “out of town” art events in the 1970s involved trips to the countryside outside of Moscow, often for indeterminate purposes. Photographs of one such event feature participants (to stipulate that they are either artists or audience members is to miss the point) holding up moderately sized colored rectangles by the side of a snowy road. In what way do the





From left: View of "Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915–2015," 2015. Wall, from left: Anna Parkina, *TEATRIX*, 2008; Nazgol Anzarinia, *4 March 2012*, pp. 18 & 19, 2012; Nazgol Anzarinia, *22 September 2012*, front page, 2012; Doug Ashford, *Many Readers of One Event*, 2012; David Batchelor, *October Colouring-in Book*, Spring 1976, 2012–13; Floor, from left: Josiah McElheny, *Interactive Abstract Body (Circle)*, 2012; Willem de Rooij, *Blue to Black*, 2012. Photo: Stephen White. Andrea Fraser in cooperation with Allan McCollum, *May I Help You?*, 1991, video, color, sound, 19 minutes.



objects mediate the relationship among the people gathered? What social function do these rectangles serve? Are they for sale? Is this an exhibition? A protest? The work's resistance to social legibility, as well as the evident glee of the group (which is all the more astonishing given the Dr. Zhivago-like winter that surrounds them), disrupts the totalitarian ideologies to which some modernist uto-

## The exhibition captures the myriad ways in which geometric abstraction has increasingly become subject to local idioms.

pian thinking eventually led. In this exhibition, the work also dramatizes a shift from the nowhere/everywhere of Malevich's utopias to narratives of physical displacement and cultural inscrutability in the Cold War-era USSR.

Postcolonial approaches to abstraction are abundant; some are more successful than others. The museum's wall label does not inform viewers that the well-known *Southern Cross*, 1969–70, by Cildo Meireles—the tiny, 0.4-inch-wide cube of cross-laminated pine and oak—indicts Jesuit missionaries who diminished the indigenous practice of rubbing different kinds of wood together to invoke the divine. But the work doesn't need the narrative to succeed: Its astonishingly small size and vulnerability deliver a clear rebuttal to models of empowerment that rely on bigness. By comparison, Adrian Esparza's *Leadlight*, 2015, in which the artist unravels a serape and organizes the threads in geometric patterns on the wall, seems obvious and less formally effective (though his work unsettles the binary pairs of male/painting, female/textile that persist in earlier sections of the exhibition).

Contemporary practices dominate the second floor. With environments, installations, and performances, abstraction here enters a field that seems to be expanding according to Hubble's law, gaining speed and ferocity

the farther it gets from the big bang of the *Black Square's* 1915 debut. The strongest examples here recall the theatrical, architectural, and decorative etiologies of avant-garde abstraction, even as they often exploit the less appealing features of abstract art's ideological developments (its rhetoric of purity, its co-optation within discourses of bourgeois aesthetic mystification, its reliance upon narratives of masculine power, to name just a few). Some works optimistically test the possibilities for abstract art as a viable tool for gaining insight into social interaction: Josiah McElheny's mirrored geometric figures, meant to be worn like sandwich boards, remember the circles and shapes of Oskar Schlemmer's 1922 *Triadic Ballet*, though the wearers walk among viewers rather than dance on a distant stage, so that they might interact with visitors. (It is not clear whether a critique resides in the fact that the dancers move clumsily and with visible fatigue under the heavy armature of breakable mirrors.) Other works more convincingly unpack abstract art's role as that blankness on which fantasies of upward mobility are projected: In Andrea Fraser's video *May I Help You?*, 1991, actors posing as gallery staff subject Allan McCollum's "Plaster Surrogates" to Delphic pronouncements that parrot statements of taste and privilege first delivered by the likes of Aline B. Saarinen and André Emmerich, only to then ventriloquize criticisms of such statements by Pierre Bourdieu.

David Batchelor attends to institutional discourses, too, by dismantling the first issue of the journal *October* in order to ornament each page with radiant shards of color and severe black geometries reminiscent of Suprematism. On the front cover the central *o* of the title seems to rise, sparkling, over a mountainous triangle, like the sun for Zarathustra. By using color to amend *October*—a publication that was, after all, named for the revolution that incubated the Russian avant-garde—Batchelor thrusts the unruly pleasures of chroma onto a journal that famously only shows work in black and white. The artist's intervention is funny; it looks a bit like a graduate student went haywire with her highlighters. But Batchelor's *October Colouring-in Book*, *Spring 1976*, 2012–13, also strikes a poignant note of con-

trast with all those artist-produced journals that appear on the floor below. The abstract artist, at least in this instance, no longer fills journals with manifestos as part of a group: He doodles on journals with which he does not agree.

If Batchelor's work conjures images of the isolated artist armed with markers and a good sense of fun, Doug Ashford's installation approaches the problem of loneliness much more directly. The antecedent for Ashford's 2012 *Many Readers of One Event* installation was a *New York Times* report on the death of three boys who suffocated in the trunk of a car just yards away from where family members and police had been searching. Ashford reproduces the story's main photograph, which portrays a father collapsed in someone's arms in despair, and tucks it between two small-scale panels that he's painted in overlapping planes of color. Among similar paintings installed nearby hang photographs of different couples reenacting or physically interpreting the collapse as captured by the mass media. Associations with Warhol's "Death and Disaster" series, 1962–63, are hard to avoid, but Ashford keeps the scale much more intimate, the tone more subdued. As abstract panels sometimes cover, protect, or hover on the wall near the photographs, the compositional elements within the panels become increasingly legible according to features of human interaction—touch, intersection, transparency, concealment. As planes overlap and people embrace (and in the embracing try to imagine what other people must have once experienced), the images search for the places where connections between people and things might be thinkable. Without making hubristic claims to geometry's universal legibility, but still relying on abstraction's capacity to signify desire for cultural universality, Ashford's installation contemplates a longing for (and impediments to) human interaction through empathy. The term was once posited as abstraction's opposite, but in Ashford's practice, and in the exhibition's finest moments, it is a sought-after companion that might still guide painting into new realms of the social. □

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