It's obvious now that the forms and colors in the paintings that Malevich began painting in 1915 are the first instances of form and color. It was obvious to Malevich. In *From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism: The New Realism in Painting*, first published in December 1915, he wrote: "Forms must be given life and the right to individual existence," and "Color and texture in painting are ends in themselves." Before 1915 no form, color, surface, anything, existed as itself. The main development in painting in the nineteenth century is toward the independence of these things. After Malevich the development is of that independence. Almost ten years ago I saw an exhibition of Cézanne's paintings at the Metropolitan Museum, after not having seen many since a large exhibition perhaps ten years before that. Twenty years ago I liked Cézanne's paintings a great deal, and still do finally. But at that second exhibition I had to peer into them and look through the grayed color and wonder what it would be like not gray and then wonder what the forms would be like not crabbed by the figures and trees. This is a real complaint of the present against the past even though the past has to be considered as itself. With and since Malevich the several aspects of the best art have been single, like unblended Scotch. Free.

Fifty paintings are included in the exhibition at the Guggenheim Museum, most from the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, five from the Modern Museum here, and a few from individual owners. There are not many drawings. The paintings lent by the Stedelijk are about half of a group of seventy sent out of Russia and shown in Berlin in 1927. The whereabouts of fifty-five of those are known, including seven at The Museum of Modern Art; the rest are missing, including some large paintings, one of them a Suprematist work. This was the only one-man show of Malevich's work outside Russia and seems to have been the only time Malevich left Russia. The paintings were shown in Warsaw before Berlin. Three early paintings were shown in the Salon des

Indépendants in Paris in 1914. Four and five paintings, mostly Suprematist, were shown respectively in Berlin and at the Stedelijk in Amsterdam in 1922. Malevich was in only five other foreign group exhibitions, including one with *The Knife Grinder* in Wilmington in 1932, before he died in 1935. There are paintings in the Russian Museum, Leningrad, and the Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow, and in private collections in Russia, notably that of George Costakis. I don't know how many paintings there are altogether. Anyway, the Guggenheim exhibition seems not to contain the greater portion of either the existing paintings and drawings, or of his total work; and of that portion, more than half are early Fauve and Cubist paintings. I would like to see a lot more Suprematist paintings, especially some large ones. Judging by photographs of the numerous shows Malevich had in Russia and considering the seemingly rapid way he thought and painted, there are or must have been many more paintings.

There is one Impressionist painting of 1904 in the show, of a figure seated outdoors at a table, which shows that Malevich knew very well the things he later disliked. Otherwise, the exhibition begins in 1910–11 with the Fauve "peasant" paintings, a style which began in 1908. For the next ten years or so Malevich's development is fast, with five influenced styles in the first five years and about four changes within Suprematism in the second five years or so. The "peasant" paintings, which are very good, were influenced by Larionov and Goncharova, and all three artists were influenced by the Matisses in the Shchukin collection. In *Taking in the Rye*, apparently done early in 1912, three figures and the sheaves of rye are depicted as cylindrical masses, shaded and highlighted, with clear dark colors, viridian, alizarin, ultramarine, and copper for the rye. Some paintings of Léger's were shown in Moscow in 1912 and may have influenced this style and Malevich's subsequent one, that of *The Woodcutter*, evidently from a little later in 1912 – the books don't agree on these dates. The forms in *Taking in the Rye* are done in a scheme for showing a simple, highly lit mass; the forms in *The Woodcutter*, more jumbled and overlapping and without a suggestion of depth, are done in a flat schematic version of the light-to-dark shading of the volumes of *Taking in the Rye*. Later in 1912 this second simplification turns into a fairly standard, again good, early, tight, abstract Cubism, such as the 1912 *Head of a Peasant Girl*. The paintings of 1913–14 are fairly standard later Cubism, with diverse areas and fragments of objects. Some of these paintings are choppy and a little dull, such as *The Knife Grinder*, or ordinary, such as *The Guardsman*. Probably Malevich became tired of the style.

The first Suprematist paintings of 1915 are fairly simple. Those of 1916 are complex. In 1917–18 they are again fairly simple, usually white; the forms, occasionally somewhat three-dimensional, often shade into the surrounding white. Paintings dated only "after 1920" are simple, with either large colored areas, often crosses, or a few small colored areas. In the 1920s, Malevich evidently didn't paint as much; he wrote and taught a great deal. He also made many architectural drawings and models. The paintings and drawings of the early 1930s are of schematic figures with oval heads, once or twice divided. There are some portraits from 1933–34. Malevich was very lively, as was the whole situation in Russia, and the force shown in his rapid change of styles and in his writing is marvelous:

> Futurism opened the "new" in modern life: the beauty of speed. And through speed we move more swiftly.
>
> And we who only yesterday were Futurists, arrived through speed at new forms, at new relationships with nature and things.
>
> We arrived at Suprematism, leaving Futurism as a loophole through which those left behind will pass.
>
> We have abandoned Futurism; and we, the most daring, *have spat on the altar of its art*.

Malevich paints in a freewheeling, practical way. In the Suprematist paintings there are no carefully painted areas or precise edges; there is not much sense and not much more evidence of adjustment. Mondrian's and most geometric paintings before 1940 are painted carefully and especially thoughtfully, thought about and changed some as they were being painted. This precision is part of their nature. By contrast, Malevich paints as if he had everything thought out beforehand and is just laying the areas in. Occasionally he paints over an area he doesn't like just as casually, unconcerned about it showing through. The priority of thought and the matter-of-fact execution are part of the nature of these paintings. Malevich paints as if he's busy, with a lot of ideas to be gotten down, and with the knowledge that color, form, and surface are what matter, and that care doesn't have much to do with these. His geometry isn't associated with clean edges, or even with four definite edges; in a few of the white paintings one or two edges are soft, and in a painting of 1917–18, the yellow trapezoid shades off into white on one side. Not until the work of Newman and Noland, and also Stella and Albers to a lesser extent, and including some early paintings of Reinhardt's, is there a somewhat loose geometry. Newman and Noland are more deliberate in the process of painting than Malevich. Since Malevich invented plain geometric forms he can't be praised for open-mindedness in their use, but it's nevertheless cheerful to see the shapes painted so freely and to realize that the thinking is also free. He has no doctrine about geometry itself.

The method of working of the "peasant" paintings, which are usually gouache, is similar to that of the Suprematist ones. They were obviously composed beforehand, as some drawings also show, and then painted surely and rapidly with few changes. *The Village*, undated, shows four buildings of similar size and three trees close in size to the buildings, all enclosed in the foreground by a picket fence. As usual, the scene fills the picture, and the objects, painted with large brushstrokes, are up close. The clumps of leaves on the trees and the points of the fence are ticked off with quick triangles. Nothing looks reworked. *The Floor Polishers*, 1911, with two figures back to back, is painted without so much brushwork but is very complex in composition and is just as surely done. It couldn't possibly have been composed even partially as it was being painted. In *Washing Woman*, 1911, perhaps the strange interior shapes of her skin were partly developed on the paper.

Drawings exist for many of the Suprematist paintings. A little, sometimes considerable, pencil line shows in most of the Suprematist paintings so that it seems that Malevich drew the forms on the canvas first. In *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918, both whites are filled to but do not quite cover an inconspicuous pencil line. In the painting with the yellow trapezoid, the three definite sides have been drawn first in pencil.

Suprematist Painting, Black Rectangle, Blue Triangle, 1915, is one of the best and simplest paintings in the exhibition and is astonishing for 1915, or since for many years. An ultramarine blue triangle overlaps a vertical black rectangle without the point of the triangle ending on the vertical midline of the rectangle and without halving the length of the triangle. The only points in a line are the lower left corner of the triangle and the bottom of the rectangle. The blue of course seems to change color as it narrows in the black. The black rectangle is not quite square with the white rectangle of the whole painting, which itself is not quite square. In the white area above the triangle is a small area painted out when it was wet (in the Stedelijk catalogue by Troels Andersen it is called a capital B). The black and the white are painted to a mostly covered pencil line. The black, probably painted second, is mixed into the white a little along the somewhat loose edge as if both colors were applied wet. The left edge of the black is sharp, as if it were changed after the white was dry. There are two sets of

faint scratches in the white running diagonally out from the lower corners of the black area. The blue triangle is painted as if both the white and black had been dry. The blue is checked through to red where it's over the black, suggesting that perhaps it had been originally red within the black rectangle.

In *Supremus No. 50*, also 1915, a somewhat complex painting, the shapes are usually painted to a pencil line on the dry white background. A small purple square has been enlarged. Something has been painted out in the upper left without concern for the difference between the old white and the new. In *Suprematist Painting*, 1915, the shapes are also filled in over dry white; a trace of pencil line shows along the upper edge of the black square and along the left edge of the blue trapezoid. The white in all of these paintings is usually painted with a loose scumble, in a way to quickly cover a large area. The colored forms are painted in a flatter, tighter way, that of filling in a small area, with brushstrokes often parallel to the edges. The surfaces are practical but still look as if Malevich enjoyed painting them. Surface was important to him, since he mentions the independence of texture and surface, both relative to illusionistic depth.

Despite the white background and the shapes often being painted on dry white, and despite Malevich's talk of space and infinity, his Suprematist paintings are not very spatial. The two or several shapes are like pieces of paper on top of one another and on top of the white, which is hardly more spatial. This is in contrast to the surface and space in Mondrian's paintings, which is double: both flat as it appears to be, and then also rather deep. All painting until Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Still is more spatial than that of Malevich. Only Still and Kelly and especially Yves Klein and Stella are flatter, since a qualified equation can be made between the shallow space in front of the shapes of a frontal small painting, which acts as a window, and the space behind the shapes in frontal large paintings such as Pollock's.

Large rectangles and trapezoids are buried beneath the small volumes, representational parts and lettering of the later Cubist paintings, which Malevich sometimes called Futurist, such as *An Englishman in Moscow*, 1913–14. In *Woman at Poster Column*, 1914, two rectangles, one medium sized, vertical, and pink, and the other twice as large, horizontal, and yellow and not square on the right, are painted right over the small Cubist parts. The two areas connect locally to the rest of the painting only by a black line extending slightly into the pink and by a black area repeating at a greater angle the angled side of the yellow. A purple and a blue area are painted fairly flatly, though overlapped by the Cubist elements, and a pink strip along the right edge is nearly free, only touching the recessed blue area. Color is less important in the Cubist paintings than in the "peasant" ones. In this painting, color is becoming independent, as are the two or three main flat shapes. In 1915, Malevich wrote of the independence of both color and form. He also wrote a whole essay in 1930 on the relation between color and form, which is sensible and thorough though sometimes complicated, as qualifications are given to previous qualifications. Malevich warns about the abstractness of the distinction between color and form and is careful to protect the "complicated creative process" against theory of any kind, and also against science, which may be useful but is "knowledge," not art. Color and form may change one another but a color doesn't have a form or a form a color. I think people still believe that color is less important than form and it's interesting to find in Malevich's writing and to see in *Woman at Poster Column* both aspects becoming clear at once. There's a lot of force to the desire for independent color and form.

The yellow, the two pinks, the blue, and the purple in *Woman at Poster Column* are all colors of the same kind and of the same value, making a set. In *Taking in the Rye*, the ultramarine blue, the viridian, and the two alizarins, one toward red and the other toward purple, form a set of intense, dark colors.

The two alizarins are a pair, a split color, like the two pinks, one of which is rosy and one a little orange. These sets and contrasts, almost in the early paintings and completely as they become clear in the Suprematist paintings, are not harmonic, do not make a further overall color or tone. The blue, black, and white of the painting with the blue triangle are unchangeably themselves; they can't combine; they can only make a set of three or any two in the way that three bricks make a set. In *Supremus No. 50* the red and black make the most obvious set, a pair in this case, since they are about equal in area. Size is a factor in relating the colors. The larger white ground and the two much smaller yellow squares are also part of the set because all are full color, simple, primary, and, in a way, monochromatic when grouped. The difference in value in this case is as extreme as possible and yet is irrelevant to the set. A minute cerulean-blue line under a large red one and the small purple square are colors from completely different schemes, the purple from one like that of *Woman at Poster Column*. These contrast but don't mix with the four "monochromatic" colors. In *Suprematist Painting*, 1916, a rectangle of cadmium red light adjoins a smaller rectangle of cadmium red medium. This contrast is greater in kind, since they are from different sets, than that between the cadmium red medium and the black, yellow, green, and blue areas. A light pink trapezoid is again from a set like that in the *Woman at Poster Column*. The two whites of the white paintings are pairs like any two colors from *Woman at Poster Column*. Autonomous color is still full of possibilities – for example, Flavin's use of two adjacent tubes of contrasting white light.

There's a gap between such paintings as *Woman at Poster Column* and the first Suprematist paintings. The gap was possibly crossed visually by designs for the opera *Victory Over the Sun*. With hindsight the real crossing seems logical but actually I think it's mysterious, incredible, and awesome.

> The intuitive, it seems to me, should reveal itself in forms which are unconscious and without response. . . .
>
> The intuitive form should emerge from nothing.
>
> In the same way that Reason, which creates things for everyday life, takes them from nothing and perfects them. . . .
>
> The square is not a subconscious form. It is the creation of intuitive reason.

The common requirement of independent surface, color, and form is that they occur upright and flat. The three aspects generally develop together, though irregularly, one forcing another further. The depiction of perspective and volume makes it impossible to have an independent surface, since the surface must follow the tilt of the perspective toward the top of the picture and the curves of the volumes everywhere. Color must be diluted to agree with perspective and must be shaded to show volume, occurring full strength only in a narrow strip. Form has nothing to do with the depiction of objects, so when it is used to depict objects it must be crumpled to fit and forced away from the plane of the painting. The free rectangles in *Woman at Poster Column* are already vertical, flat, aligned with the rectangle of the painting itself, and positioned in relation to it. *Black Square* then probably came from thinking about the white upright square of canvas and so is a second plane within the first. The unchanged white, either canvas or painted, might have suggested black, making the first Suprematist colors. "The plane, forming a square, was the source of Suprematism, new color realism, as non-objective creation." The black square could be centered or slid up and down and sideways within and parallel to the white square. This consideration of the whole rectangle of the painting is important and familiar now. The square is placed in relation to only that one other shape and so isn't composed traditionally. If this is composition it's single-shot composition. Malevich objects to traditional composition but doesn't attack it as often

as he does the subservience of surface, color, and form. Perhaps he doesn't regard composition or the lack of it as such a distinct problem as he does the other aspects.

Both Malevich's simple and complex paintings are obscured somewhat by similar later work by other artists, the first because they are so familiar and their assumptions are so basic, and the second because they are unfamiliar and historical, related to such work as Kandinsky's rigid geometric paintings. Despite the many parts in the complex paintings, the quality of traditional composition is not very strong. The composition is newer and unlike Cubist composition, which is directly derived from traditional composition. So far, most work having many parts, mainly sculpture, is still derived from Cubist composition, an amalgam of connected fragments going into space. Malevich's forms are placed as whole and discrete shapes. His composition of whole shapes is somewhat like that of Serra's large irregular sculptures. Some ideas in his complex Suprematist paintings are abstracted from old composition, such as the two small triangles pointing in opposite directions in *Supremus No. 50*, though these are novel even so since they are alone and distant on the white ground. The most common new structure in the complex paintings is the group of parallel long rectangles, either straight or without parallel sides or angled away from the general parallel. The four long red rectangles, all like strips of paper, in *Supremus No. 50* are an example. Two black strips of very different size, an idea that occurs frequently, underlie the red rectangles and form an X, which itself is very different in kind from the parallel reds. The difference in size becomes extreme with the minute triad of yellow and two cerulean-blue lines underneath one red rectangle. In *Eight Red Rectangles*, the shapes are all laid flat side by side along a diagonal axis. In *Suprematist Painting*, 1916, most of the shapes follow a diagonal slightly off that of the painting. A large long black rectangle lies horizontally and under the prevailing parallel group, part of which is a large blue square, overlying a long thin red line which lies over the black, all of which is very nice. There are some exceptions, none extreme, to the flat plane and the simple placement and grouping. In *Football Match*, 1915, a parallelogram and a trapezoid slant away from the plane, and the diminution of the shapes toward the top suggests distance. In the painting in which the yellow trapezoid slants and shades into the surrounding white, Malevich is evidently trying to get around his usual thinking and also learn something from the recent white paintings with shaded forms, which he called "aerial Suprematism," and which he later criticized. The single, flat, fine crosses follow these paintings.

> And that moment when the idealization of form took hold of them [the Greeks and Romans] should be considered the downfall of real art.
>
> For art should not proceed towards reduction, or simplification, but towards complexity.

The paintings by Malevich are not quite so particular in quality, as "complex" as, say, those by Mondrian and Matisse. His best work was done in a few years; for his reasons and because of the Russian Revolution he didn't develop it further. The paintings are sure but there are none that have a settled sureness, that are casually great. Malevich associated what he thought were radical politics with his radical art, accepting an idealism and generalization which he wouldn't have accepted in his art, and excitedly supported the Revolution. He taught and wrote and tried to interest his society in his ideas. As usual that society didn't think they were interesting and finally thought they were useless, even threatening. Malevich was arrested in 1927 for going to Berlin. Of course two political forces capable of maintaining a war are bound to be similar. Malevich's work is the most nearly non-objective, for lack of a better word, of any until recently. There's not

much in the work that shows his fantasy about industry and flying, which gets most fantastic in the 1920s, after most of his Suprematist paintings. His work is more radical than Mondrian's, for example, which has a considerable idealistic quality and which has an ultimately anthropomorphic, if "abstract," composition of high and low, right and left. Art doesn't change in sequence. By now there is work and controversy many times over within the context Malevich established.