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Invisible Face and/in Black Square: Strategy of Self-expression and Identity of Malevich's Suprematism

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Abstract: The self-acclaimed originality of the European avant-garde in the early 20th century was largely based on the rebellion against the visual tradition and the creation of the new "ism". As a classic genre of painting and the stubborn carrier of the figurative art, portraiture naturally suffered from the strong impact of avant-garde's radical ideology. Rosalind Krauss notes that the "grids" paradigm that emerged since Cubism has acted as an anti-narrative, anti-historical model of the avant-garde thus ended the possibilities of plastic arts imitating the real world. Malevich's Suprematism has pushed the abstract exploration of the avant-garde to the extreme and the pure. The function of depicting the figure's face in traditional portraiture completely failed here, focusing instead on the expression of the mysterious, transcendent and accessible metaphysical thoughts. From *Portrait of Matiushin* (1913) to *Self Portrait: Color Masses in Two Dimensions* (1915), the erasure of the face in portraiture played an important role in the maturation of the Suprematist identity and the "Black Square" modality, forming the intertextuality and dialogue with other Suprematist paintings in the same period, both formally and conceptually. This article aims to clarify the evolutionary process of "replacing iconic face with black square" by Malevich, as well as to explore the philosophical, religious and scientific synthetically motivations behind this phenomenon, namely how the fourth dimension and theosophy, doctrines that were extremely popular in avant-garde circle then, influenced on Malevich's strategy of self-expression and identity. At the same time, this article will also attempt to give some response and development on Krauss' "myth of originality" from the perspective of "faceless portraiture".

Keywords: black square, invisible face, Suprematism, fourth dimension, theosophy

Since the birth of Cubism, the fragmentation of reality and nature has become more apparent in western modernist art. Artists like Picasso and Braque further detached and reorganized the objects of painting around 1910, creating a multi-angle spatial illusion that is different from the traditional perspective in a two-dimensional plane with the use of a large number of straight lines and right angles. Synthetic Cubism, rose in 1912, was the first to use collage in painting planes, and the "hard-edged square-cut diamonds" structure¹ it created became the main source for European avant-garde's "grids" paradigm.

As a result of the introduction of French Cubism by Alexandra Exter, who was frequently traveling between France and Russia at that time, and the collection and display of Picasso's works by Moscow collector Sergei Shchukin, the Russian avant-garde led by Malevich at this moment has been keeping pace with their French colleagues in artistic concepts, and seeking new breakthroughs based on them. In 1913 the unique Cubo-Futurism was formed, in combination with Italian Futurism and Russian primitive art. Interestingly, Malevich also dated that year as the birth year of his "black square"², while it was not until the end of the 20th century that art historians finally discovered that the real creation time of the world-famous painting *Black Square* was actually two years later, i.e. 1915, the same year when the "0.10" exhibition was organized and the first Suprematist manifesto "From Cubism and Futurism to Suprematism" (*От кубизма и футуризма к супрематизму*) was issued. Therefrom, art historians reached a new consensus on the founding date of his new "ism".³ This anecdote of art history that was known as "Malevich's mystification" undoubtedly became the evidence of the academia to attack on the avant-garde's self-declared originality. However, if we carefully analyze the evolution of Malevich's creative thinking from 1913 to 1915, it will not be difficult to find the direct connection between the birth process of "black square" and the initiation of Suprematism. It seems that the process of the growth of the "black square" or Malevich's "grid" paradigm, from its beginning to appear to its occupation of the dominant position on the canvas, happens to be accompanied by the disappearance of the face in the Malevich portraits. Thus, this article attempts to reveal the truth and the underlying reasons behind the "Malevich's mystification" by analyzing the historical and metaphysical dimensions of the creation of the geometric abstract portraits in this period.

The geometric and abstract expression of the portraits by Malevich during these three years, along with the eventual replacement of the face with the black square, is actually connected with the comprehensive motivation of philosophy, religion and science, and is closely linked to the ideas of the "fourth dimension" and Theosophy that were popular in that time's avant-garde art circles – they provided a unique and rich ideological core while promoting the maturation of the "grid" paradigm of Suprematism. It can be said that these mystic theories are the real keys to solving the "myth of originality" of the Russian avant-garde as well as the "Malevich's mystification".

1. The Black Square's Disenfranchisement of the Portrait Face

It is no accident that Malevich used portraits as a testing ground for the creation of his new "ism" as well as a strategy of his artistic identification. First of all, portraiture occupies a large proportion in his earlier career when he was still following the existed styles – from the initial Realism, Impressionism, to the later Fauvism and Cubo-Futurism, Malevich had created a large number of women portraits, farmers portraits and self-portraits in different styles. Second, portraiture, as an important genre of traditional Russian art since the 17th century (especially the *peredvizhniki* of the second half of the 19th century pushed it to the summit) has been interiorized in the soul of Russian artists. Third, the modern art as a whole faced the loss of connection between the signifier and the signified, while the portraiture was relative lagging behind in the "modernization process" of all artistic genres because of its function of portraying the details of the realistic human face,⁴ thus, it has always been a stubborn carrier of figurative art. Therefore, it was inevitable that the abstract art would make a "major transformation" for portraiture in the early twentieth century.

In the autumn of 1913, Alexis Gritchenko, a Russian avant-garde painter who was expert in art theory, held a

lecture in the Moscow salon of Mikhailova, presenting Picasso's latest creative methods and ideas,⁵ and so, the mature "grids" paradigm of Synthetic Cubism was introduced into the Moscow avant-garde circle. A *Portrait of Matiushin* (Fig. 1) created by Malevich this year aroused Gritchenko's attention. In this typical Cubo-Futurist painting, squares of different colors and styles overlap and stack together while the face of the painter's friend, Russian avant-garde musician Matiushin is almost completely obscured, showing only a small part of the upper left corner of his head. Although no collage has been used in the work, Gritchenko believed that Malevich had had a better understanding than other artists on the visual effect of this new technique – the natural objects are obscured by plane geometry and the formal value of the painting can be highlighted.⁶ The eagerness of Malevich's search for the new "ism" appears to stem from the contest of originality with two other major avant-gardists of the same period. As early as 1912, Mikhail Larionov and his partner, Natalia Goncharova, had claimed that they had invented a new "ism" of painting – Rayonnism, and had for the first time wrote a theoretical manifesto in 1913, stating that "the whole world can be expressed fully in painterly forms: life, poetry, music, philosophy."⁷ In Larionov's *Portrait of a Fool* (Fig. 2), created in 1913, we can completely no longer recognize the contours of the human face and any facial feature. Instead, he replaces this face with the so-called "doctrine of luminosity, radioactive rays, ultraviolet rays, reflectivity" and other new tenets of the painting.⁸ Facing such a powerful competitor, if Malevich, who already inherited the "grids" paradigm, wants to make further breakthroughs, he must construct his originality at the height of its thinking.

From this, we can further understand the rationality of Malevich's dating of the year 1913 as the starting point of his "black square". In the Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun* at the end of the year, Malevich designed a diagonal-cut square to replace the spherical sun (Fig. 3), indicating that art is splitting and surpassing the nature. Regarding this as a starting point, the monochromatic grid gradually invaded all the painting genres used by Malevich. Two pieces of little-known pencil on paper works now belong to the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam allow us to glimpse Malevich's expression of the metaphysical meanings of "black square" from 1914 to 1915 and his further handling of portraiture. In a picture entitled *Village* (1914, Fig. 4), an independent grid totally breaks down all the possibilities of depicting reality. By presenting the word "Village" (*Деревня*) Malevich raised or reverted the actual village and the artistically depicted village to the Platonic idealistic "village", and he wrote the motivation of this operation beneath the grid: "Instead of drawing the huts of nature's nooks, better to write 'Village' and it will appear to each with finer details and the sweep of an entire village."⁹

Half a century later, this creative idea was "embezzled" by Joseph Kosuth in his famous conceptual installation *One and Three Chairs* (1965). However, Malevich is much purer in the turn to the Platonic World. After completely subverting the objective depiction of the reality in traditional landscape painting, Malevich immediately applied his more mature Suprematist concept to portraiture. In the pencil drawing *Cubo-Futurist Composition: Smoker with Pipe (Little Russian)* (Fig. 5), created in early 1915, the bald man's face is being swallowed by one edge of a huge black square while a small piece of black square is floating in the top right of the picture.

The complete maturity of Malevich's "replacement of iconic faces with black square" is reflected in the 1915's oil painting and collage *Composition with Mona Lisa* (Fig. 6), which is also considered to be the last step of Malevich's complete turn towards Suprematism¹⁰. Malevich posted a picture of the famous *Mona Lisa*, which appears to have been casually torn from a newspaper, to the lower left-hand side of the painting, and placed a giant black square on top of Mona Lisa's head. The phrase "apartment to let" (*передается квартира*) below Mona Lisa appears to hint the viewer that the mimetic and aesthetic paradigms of traditional painting must be replaced; and the word "partial eclipse" (*частичное затмение*) to the left of the black square intends to form an intertextuality with the half black half white square sun in *Victory over the Sun* two years ago, pointing to the transcendence of his new "ism" over nature and figurativeness. However, Russian avant-garde experts such as Aleksandra Shatskikh and Sherwin Simmons did not seem to explain the reason why the black square was placed in this special position in their interpretation of this painting¹¹, that is, the black square here happens to replace the face of Mona Lisa – a classic image of the history of art¹², because, as a whole, the painting itself is a (post-)Cubo-Futurist version of Mona Lisa. The evidence for this argument is that a horizontal line below the middle of the background divides the picture into two parts – gray (upper)

and light yellow (lower), which are almost identical to the way Leonardo distinguishes foreground and distant view (the boundary is also in the lower half of the picture where the window sill locates). Therefore, although the outline of the human body in Malevich's work is extremely abstract and indefinable, we can still tell that the black square above the picture represents the head of Mona Lisa. Thus the title "Composition with Mona Lisa" can actually be understood as "the geometric abstract portrait of Mona Lisa with a Mona Lisa collage", whereas the Mona Lisa's face, originally representing the highest aesthetic beauty of traditional realistic art, has dropped off the altar, falling into the lower part of the picture, disenfranchised and deprived of the right to smile to the world by the new "ism" of art.

Malevich's act of gradually throwing realist art and classical images out of the altar is the process of the self-mystification his new "ism". This process was culminated in the "0.10" exhibition at the end of 1915, with the relaunch of the term "Suprematism" to the public. We see that the black square, as a "grid" paradigm, has always been the core of Malevich's self-declared originality during the genesis of Suprematism (or the so-called "Malevich's mystification") from 1913 to 1915. Since its birth, the concept of "black square" has been devoted to obscuring the face of portraiture, since, in the view of Malevich, the face is the last bastion of traditional art. The complete replacement of the face with the black square is the announcement of his absolute novelty in both spatial and temporal dimensions. Just as Rosalind Krauss put it in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*:

“In the spatial sense, the grid states the autonomy of the realm of art. Flattened, geometricized, ordered, it is antinatural, antimimetic, antireal. [...] In the overall regularity of its organization, it is the result not of imitation, but of aesthetic decree.”

“In the temporal dimension, the grid is an emblem of modernity by being just that: the form that is ubiquitous in the art of our century, while appearing nowhere, nowhere at all, in the art of the last one.”¹³

From the beginning to use the "grids" structure to hide the face to its complete replacement of the face, Malevich at the same time stabilized the shape and metaphysical connotation of the black square. The ultimate result is not only the rebel of the natural perspective method in the spatial dimension, as well as the slit of history in the temporal dimension, but also the approach to the supreme appeals of the avant-garde's new "ism" in the metaphysical dimension – “Being or Mind or Spirit. [...] The grid is a staircase to the Universal.”¹⁴ In fact, black square's disenfranchisement of the portrait face means that the mimetic function of western art through centuries has finally lost its efficacy, and the conceptual explanation of portraiture has finally transformed into the conceptual explanation of metaphysics. Therefore, this article here borrows Arthur Danto's famous rhetoric of "the philosophical disenfranchisement of art", for portraiture that has been disenfranchised of the face, has transformed into the carrier of philosophical thoughts, and by writing and issuing theoretical manifestos, portraitists have also transformed into artistic theorists or philosophers.¹⁵ In the context of Suprematism, the philosophical thoughts that ended traditional art are the "fourth dimension" and Theosophy, which combines the doctrines of science and occult religion.

2. The "Fourth-dimensional Portraiture" and the "Sophia" behind the Black Square

One of the most important doubts in the "Malevich's mystification" is the artist's revision of the stage design drafts in 1915 for the *Victory over the Sun* two years ago, the purpose of which is his apparent attempt to combine the creative concept of this futurist opera with the already mature Suprematist theory, and to once again endow it with higher metaphysical connotations, so that he could shift his own "absolute originality" to the earlier 1913 when he had discord with Larionov. In one of his newly revised costume design drafts, Malevich replaced the face of the protagonist "the Futurist Strongman" with an entire black square (Fig. 7), echoing the pre-Suprematist square sun two years ago, declaring that the "new humanity" has completely conquered nature both physically and spiritually, confirming his own assertion in the Suprematist Manifesto: "Any painting surface is more alive than any face from which a pair of eyes and a grin just out."¹⁶ Through this change, Malevich directly incorporated the temporal

orientation of Futurism into his new "ism" to build a completely new Suprematist utopia. In the words of Shatskikh, he links the "universe's energetic being" to his utopia, namely "electricity, gravitation, and the incorporeal, nonobjective power that so interested him"¹⁷. With the catalysis of the doctrines of "fourth dimension" and Theosophy, the reconstruction of portraiture by Malevich reached a true high ground of thought in the painting *Black Square*, which came out in late 1915.

The "fourth dimension" doctrine has influenced the French avant-garde art circle as early as the previous Cubist period, which is an indisputable fact of the academia. Maurice Princet, known as "le mathématicien du cubisme", has dedicated himself to introducing the latest "fourth dimension" concept in mathematics to artists of the School of Paris.¹⁸ However, from the perspective of painterly modality, both Picasso and Metzinger were still trying to demonstrate this mathematical notion without completely excluding the concrete objects. But in Malevich's works, the "fourth dimension" manifests itself in the form of a single or several abstract geometric cubes that are independent of each other, to illustrate the theory that is difficult to show with a two-dimensional plane of a painting.

On the "Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0,10" on the 19th December 1915 (in old Russian calendar), Malevich hung this 79.5 x 79.5 cm Suprematist *Black Square* in the "red corner" (красный угол) where icons are hung in traditional Slavic dwellings (Fig. 8), and this is, essentially, to use the black square to replace the picture that usually shows the image of the Holy Virgin and the Son. And this behavior of Malevich is considered to be "certainly a conscious gesture" by Sherwin Simmons after studying the letters of Malevich.¹⁹ So the black square here not only refers to the "new culture of art" after "things vanished like smoke"²⁰, directly claimed by the artist, and too, it is not merely a transformation of concrete world from "partial eclipse" to "total eclipse" in Shatskikh's statement²¹, what it has hidden (or revealed) is actually the face of God that is beyond the ability of expression of iconography, or we say, it is the "fourth-dimensional portrait" of God – for the image of God cannot be conveyed by traditional three-dimensional portraiture.

Historical materials can verify the direct impact of the "fourth dimension" on the birth of Suprematism. According to John Golding's account in *Paths to the Absolute*, Malevich, guided by Matiushin, learned about the theory of the book *The Fourth Dimension*, published by one of the theory's founder Howard Hinton in 1904.²² The latter used mathematical logic to discuss transcendental three-dimensional geometries in the book and drew 12 "tesseract" (Fig. 9), a.k.a. four-dimensional analog of the cube on the frontispiece. According to Simmons' investigation, Pyotr Uspensky, who directly transmitted Hinton's thoughts to Russia, took Hinton's book as a reference and conducted further "fourth dimension" theoretical writing. His publications and lectures in Moscow during 1913 to 1915 have drawn the active attention of the local Futurist literary and art circles. From a letter from Malevich to Alexandre Benois in 1916, we can tell that Malevich was well known about Uspensky's theory.²³

After learning the fact that Hinton has advanced the "grids" pattern to the metaphysical dimension ten years earlier than Malevich (although no one classified Hinton as an artist), we further find that Malevich's use of black square to attempt to show the "fourth-dimensional portrait" of the God on a two-dimensional plane is also very likely not to be his original invention. Simmons takes our gaze to another book – *Man the Square*, published by the American architect Claude Bragdon in 1912, and states that Uspensky, who owned the book, was likely to have passed on its content to Malevich indirectly or even directly between 1914 and 1915.²⁴ But here we are going to clarify the correlation and the uniformity between the square of Malevich and that of Bragdon. First, Bragdon drew a transparent three-dimensional cube on page 11 of the book, with a black square that is obviously a two-dimensional plane in the middle of the cube (Fig. 10). The text below explains to us the meaning of the image: "THE ARCHETYPAL WORLD [The Cube] AND THE PHENOMENAL WORLD [The Square]". Bragdon further explains in the book:

"Fix this image clearly in mind: the creative plane, that is, the archetypal world, or world of causes, a crystal cube 'like unto clear glass,' divided midway by an iridescent film, the phenomenal world, made up of matter in a different state or condition – analogous, let us say, to oil on water, or to the bubble which sometimes appears in the neck of a bottle."²⁵

Here, Bragdon explains the fourth-dimensional space, i.e. the way of existence of the archetypal world in an incredibly clever way: he invites the reader to imagine the three-dimensional phenomenal world (the real world) where we live as a two-dimensional film inserted in the middle of a crystal cube, and the crystal cube is the very archetypal world metaphysical. Bragdon clearly realized the difficulty of presenting the "fourth dimension" theory on the paper plane, so he skillfully lowered the "third dimension" and the "fourth dimension" by one dimension and turned them respectively into the "second dimension" and the "third dimension" that ordinary people can understand. And then he guides the readers to restore their original dimensions through imagination. (The method is called "Projection" in mathematics.) In the second half of the book, Bragdon developed this crystal cube structure by presenting the four-dimensional archetypal world as "'A' the individual", and the three-dimensional phenomenal world as "'B' the personal consciousness"²⁶, implying that people's existing consciousness can only make us rest on the existence of reality, but if we want to reach the spiritual transcendence and become the true "individual", we must break through common sense. The Suprematist utopia built by Malevich is trying to find a way to know the archetypal world through art. By returning all the images in the existing logic to "zero" and even by erasing the possibility that people express God's image, he uses the black square as a "fourth-dimensional portrait" to declare the orthodoxy of his new art in the new world.

The other two Suprematist portraits of Malevich created in 1915 allow us to see more clearly his application of Bragdon's method. The only part of the body that can be identified in *Self Portrait: Color Masses in Two Dimensions* (Fig. 11) is the face of the portrait, i.e. the huge black square at the top of the picture.²⁷ In this case, the artist's face that has been depicted as a two-dimensional plane actually represents the three-dimensional face of the phenomenal world, and the background that forms the spatial relationship with the face is naturally the archetypal world with a higher dimension. *Painterly Realism of a Boy with a Knapsack: Color Masses in the Fourth Dimension* (Fig. 12) clearly tells the viewer by its title that the white no-reference system and borderless background space is actually the fourth-dimensional space, the only black square and red square on the picture represent the boy's face and the (body with) knapsack.

Interestingly, however, in Bragdon's interpretation of the crystal cube model the two-dimensional square representing the phenomenal world was actually described as an "iridescent film", and it is believed that the film could only be printed in black in the book due to the printing technology or the consideration of circulation. We can not judge whether the dual resemblance of Malevich's black square with Bragdon's model in terms of both form and connotation is a coincidence, but one thing is certain that the absolute realm that Suprematism pursues is that even the colors of natural light cannot penetrate, just as what Malevich said five years later in *Suprematism: 34 Drawings* (*Супрематизм. 34 рисунка*): "The most important in Suprematism – its double basis – are the energies of black and white serving to reveal the forms of action, I mean only the purely utilitarian need for economic reduction, hence color disappears."²⁸

Bragdon's theory also solves a long-standing question in avant-garde studies about whether there is a connection between Suprematism and Theosophy. Neither Shatskikh nor Golding has been able to establish the connection between the two, and even earlier scholars such as Peter Fingesten even directly asserted that Malevich was not a mystic²⁹. In fact, however, Bragdon directly expressed his position in the book *Man the Square* in line with the Theosophical Society³⁰, and the opening text directly quoted the saying in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), written by the founder of Theosophical Society – Russian occultist philosopher Helena Blavatsky:

"The phenomenal world receives its culmination and reflex of all in MAN. Therefore he is the mystic square – in his metaphysical aspect – the Tetraktys³¹; and becomes the cube on the creative plane."³²

It is clear that the crystal cube model of Bragdon was just to show the metaphysical cube envisioned by Blavatsky more than 20 years ago. The theory of "fourth dimension" and Theosophy are highly unified here in Bragdon's book. Therefore, same as the other two pioneers of abstract art – Kandinsky and Mondrian, Malevich was

also greatly influenced by Theosophy. Theosophy advocates breaking the barriers between different disciplines and the different religious ideas of the east and the west. The truth it pursues is the common truth that religion, philosophy and science are all intended to approach, that is, a kind of universal truth. The theory of "fourth dimension" tries to inquire about the existential form of a higher dimensional world on the basis of the three-dimensional phenomenal world, which also raises the scientific issue to the metaphysical level and integrates it with philosophy. Therefore, behind the "fourth-dimensional portraiture" of Suprematism, there is actually hidden wisdom similar to the truth of Theosophy – a universal wisdom of pan-religion and pan-science. Although Blavatsky made her career in the West, the thought of Theosophy was also popular in the late 19th century's Russia. The noted religious philosopher of the Russian Silver Age, Vladimir Solovyov states in *The Philosophical Principles of Integral Knowledge* (*Философские начала цельного знания*, 1877) that the "free theosophy" (свободная теософия) is "the organic synthesis of theology, philosophy, and experimental science, and only this synthesis may contain in itself the integral truth of knowledge."³³ Theosophy, as the name itself implies, refers to the "divine wisdom" (Greek: theos, sophia), in which "wisdom" comes from the Greek word *Σοφία*. In the Silver Age Russian Orthodox theology, the "divine wisdom" is understood as the feminine form of the "fourth hypostasis", i.e. a "fourth person of the Trinity".³⁴ In Solovyov's opinion, "Sofia" is the principle of the unity of all things, the manifestation of God, and the Eternal Feminine.³⁵ In his account on "Sophia" in 1875, the true responsibility of the "wisdom art" has been clearly defined, he wrote:

“[...] But the fact is that works of art produce in us an absolutely special impression that is still more powerful, or even much more powerful than the impression produced by the corresponding reality. This would not be possible if the work of art were a mere reproduction of that reality. Art does not copy individual phenomena; it is not photography. All works of art must have a general and universal character.”

“[...] And if a man can produce these images (distinct images of the ideal world), and if others can understand them immediately, this proves that that ideal reality, that metaphysical reality, is the proper territory for man. It proves that man is a metaphysical being.”³⁶

The "wisdom art" advocated by Solovyov is a new art that avoids the imitation of the phenomenal world and points the function of artistic expression to a higher dimension with a unified paradigm. By this token, the "fourth dimension", Theosophy and Suprematism are, of course, all unified with the spirit of "Sofia", except that they each present themselves respectively in the form of science, philosophy and art. Although Solovyov seems to contradictorily oppose the movement of works of art towards pure generalities and abstraction³⁷, his so-called abstraction is essentially different from that of Suprematism, but closer to the postwar Minimalism influenced by Oriental Zen – the Suprematist Abstraction has not yet reached the point where Minimalism represents "emptiness" by completely negating the painterly paradigm. It still uses the "grids" paradigm associated with other avant-garde artists, and the idea of "Sophia" is obviously integrated into the paradigm of the black square together with the "fourth dimension" and Theosophy. In addition, from the second paragraph of the above quotation, Malevich's geometrical abstract portraiture has met all the conditions of Solovyov's "wisdom art" at the same time: it has general and universal character (black and square), while still holds the basic paradigm (grid); it is an image of the ideal world (fourth dimension) and can be understood immediately by others its metaphysical meaning (hanging on the red corner). Therefore, we say that Malevich's Suprematism is a kind of "wisdom art", and behind the black square that eliminates and unifies all the concrete faces, hidden the image of the very "Sophia".

3. A Second Disillusion of the "Myth of Originality"?

After the above analysis, we find that the evolution of Malevich's "replacing face with black square" from 1913 to 1915 can be described as an extension of the definition of portraiture as a genre in painting, relieving it from the limitation of depicting the secular faces and upgrading it to the metaphysical state of "Sofia". And his self-acclaimed

originality was being created in the process of gradually disappearing the face of the portrait and endowing it with metaphysical meanings.

So we will once again return to the issue of "myth of originality", or in the case of this article – the strategy of self-expression and identity of Malevich's Suprematism. Krauss put forward two perspectives mainly when questioning the avant-garde's discourse on originality and anti-historicism: one is to accuse avant-garde artists of duplicating each other in the pictorial symbol system of "grids" to create patterned works, hence falsely confusing the idea of reshaping history with self-creation; the other is to reveal the institutional background that enables the operation of "myth of originality".³⁸ Of course, this article discussed the creation of Malevich only in the context of her first point of view. However, this view of Krauss focuses more on the paradigm used by the avant-garde, while on the other hand despises relatively the issue of the inheritance of the kernel of thought in the "myth of originality", and the case of Malevich in this article just make some reasonable supplements on this issue.

The trick of shifting the beginning of the new "ism" to two years ago, as well as the *Self Portrait: Color Masses in Two Dimensions*, in which the artist's own face was replaced by the highly metaphysical black square, are both convincing proofs of Malevich's self-mystification: the former strengthens the exclusivity of his originality in the time coordinate of history, while the latter directly mystifies his own image and places it in the same dimension with the transcendental ideal world, which can be described as the "self-apotheosis". But we can also see that no matter how he attempted to date the birth year of Suprematism back to 1913, its form and thought can be traced back to the earlier "fourth dimension" and Theosophy. The crystal cube model Bragdon used to show the Theosophical ideas in 1912, and even Hinton's "tesseract" icons in 1904 have enough evidence and legitimacy to call themselves the direct prototype of the Malevich's black square, while the reason that Malevich still remains the "myth of originality" is that the images drawn by non-artists Hinton and Bragdon are not yet included in the artworld category³⁹.

Decrypting the fact of the "myth of originality" after the end of traditional art, we can not only see the ceaseless repeat of Krauss' so-called "grids" paradigm, but if looking into the broader art history of the 20th century, the artistic concepts that were "invented" by Malevich himself have also become the prototype of other art giants. The conceptualization of the real object of the phenomenal world in Kosuth's *One and Three Chairs* (by putting in the word "chair" and its definition) is very similar to what Malevich did in the *Village*; and whether in terms of the irony of the classic image of art history or the use of "readymade", Malevich anticipated by four years Duchamp's famous *L.H.O.O.Q.* (1919). For sure, neither Duchamp nor Kosuth nor their defenders would recognize the connection between their creation and Malevich because they refuse to break the "myth of originality" or their own artist identities that they have been so proud of. From this, we can say that the continuation of the "myth of originality" is not only the inheritance of the "grids" paradigm, but also the circular reciprocation and even the "copinism" of artistic ideas and creative methods. In this sense, with the research on the ideological relationships in art history continues to deepen, the avant-garde art of the 20th century will surely have a second disillusion of the "myth of originality".

However, Krauss' views of defining the "grid" of avant-gardists as anti-developmental and anti-historical may not be fully effective here in Malevich's case. From the perspective of form and propositions revealed in the Suprematist manifestos, his self-declared originality is indeed based on the rebellion against history. However, from the perspective of the deeper artistic ideas of Suprematism, the works of Malevich from 1913 to 1915 have a clear connection with the "fourth dimension", Theosophy, as well as the religious philosophy of the Russian Silver Age from the end of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th century, and their way of connection is undeniably revealed in the portraiture creation during these three years – through geometric abstract portraits of invisible face, he inherited, continued, integrated and developed all of these metaphysical doctrines, let alone invited art to participate in the discussion of scientific and philosophical issues. Therefore, from this point of view, Malevich's strategy of self-expression and identity is not completely anti-developmental or anti-history, but an important and indispensable part of Western intelligentsia at that time.

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¹ A term used by art historian John Richardson, see John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso: The Triumphant Years, 1917-1932*, Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, Dec 24, 2008, pp. 77-78.

² That is, the geometric design by Malevich for the futuristic opera *Victory over the Sun*, premiered in Petersburg in December 1913. See Горячева Т. *Почти всё о «Чёрном квадрате»*. / Приключения «Чёрного квадрата». — СПб.: Государственный Русский музей, 2007, pp. 10-11.

³ Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black square*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2012, p. 2.

⁴ See Lushnikov's description of this view: "(В традиционном портрете) надо показать человека таким, каков он есть, а не таким, каким желал бы его смерить художник своим традиционным аршином... В портрете меньше, чем в других жанрах, допустимы всякого рода вольности и отступления, что иной раз выдаётся за изысканность вкуса и творческое новаторство." In Б. В. Лушников. Указ. соч. — С. 5—6.

⁵ A. Grishchenko, *Roki Ruri i Natishku* ("The Years of Storm and Stress"), New York: Slovo, 1967, p. 63.

⁶ W. Sherwin Simmons, *Kasimir Malevich's Black Square and the Genesis of Suprematism, 1907-1915*, Garland Publishing, Inc., New York & London, 1981, p. 132.

⁷ Mikhail Larionov and Natalya Goncharova, *Rayonists and Futurists: A Manifesto, 1913*, from *Russian Art of the Avant-garde, Theory and Criticism*, revised and enlarged edition, edited by John E. Bowl., p. 90.

⁸ Mikhail Larionov, *Rayonist Painting, 1913*, from *Russian Art of the Avant-garde, Theory and Criticism*, revised and enlarged edition, edited by John E. Bowl., p. 98.

⁹ Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black square*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2012, p. 14. Translated by the author.

¹⁰ Ibid. p. 18. Shatskikh also shows on this page that the actual creating time of this work should be in the spring of 1915 instead of 1914, which was generally accepted before.

¹¹ Their discourse on this work can be seen respectively in: Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black square*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2012, p. 18-22. || W. Sherwin Simmons, *Kasimir Malevich's Black Square and the Genesis of Suprematism, 1907-1915*, Garland Publishing, Inc., New York & London, 1981, p. 146-149.

¹² In particular, the theft of Mona Lisa in Louvre in August 1911 largely made the painting to become the focus of attention all over the world. At that time, the media even accused Apollinaire and Picasso of the French avant-garde art circle to be the backstage manipulator of the theft. So we can get a glimpse of the fact that "Mona Lisa" was truly the focus of attack by the new artistic trends at the time.

¹³ Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 1986, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 9-10.

¹⁴ Ibid. p. 10.

¹⁵ Danto's discussion on the end of art can be seen in: Arthur C. Danto, *The End of Art*, in *The philosophical disenfranchisement of art*, 2005, Columbia University Press, pp. 81-115.

¹⁶ Malevich, *Ot kubizma I futurizma k suprematizmu; Essays on Art*, 1: 38. Here quoted from: Chistina Lodder, *Man, Space, and the Zero of Form. Kazimir Malevich's Suprematism and the Natural World*, in *Meanings of abstract art: between nature and theory* / edited by Paul Crowther and Isabel Wünsche, 2012, New York : Routledge, p. 52.

¹⁷ Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black square*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2012, p. 43.

¹⁸ See Marc Décimo, *Maurice Princet, Le Mathématicien du Cubisme*, 2007, Paris: Éditions L'Echoppe.

¹⁹ W. Sherwin Simmons, *Kasimir Malevich's Black Square and the Genesis of Suprematism, 1907-1915*, Garland Publishing, Inc., New York & London, 1981, p. 233.

²⁰ К. С. Малевич. *Чёрный квадрат [М]// Азбука*, Москва, 2001, С. 38.

²¹ Aleksandra Shatskikh, *Black square*, Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 2012, p. 44-45.

²² John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute: Mondrian, Malevich, Kandinsky, Pollock, Newman, Rothko, and Still*, Princeton University Press, 2000, p. 62.

²³ W. Sherwin Simmons, *Kasimir Malevich's Black Square and the Genesis of Suprematism, 1907-1915*, Garland Publishing, Inc., New York & London, 1981, pp. 240-241.

²⁴ Ibid. p. 242 and p. 258.

²⁵ Claude Fayette Bragdon, *Man the square: a higher space parable*, 1912, Rochester, N.Y.: Manas Press, pp. 10-11.

²⁶ Ibid. p. 22.

²⁷ So while the picture of the work on the Internet appears in different directions, the correct way to present it must be to have the black square at the top of the picture – the work is exactly hanging like this in Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

²⁸ Original text: "Самое главное в супрематизме — два основания — энергии черного и белого, служащие раскрытию формы действия, имею в виду только чисто утилитарную необходимость экономического сокращения, потому цветовое отпадает." К. С. Малевич. *Чёрный квадрат [М]// Азбука*, Москва, 2001, С. 109.

²⁹ Peter Fingesten, *Spirituality, Mysticism and Non-Objective Art*, in *Art Journal*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Autumn, 1961), published by College Art Association, pp. 2-6.

³⁰ Claude Fayette Bragdon, *Man the square: a higher space parable*, 1912, Rochester, N.Y.: Manas Press, pp. 3-4.

³¹ Or the tetractys (Greek: τετρακτύς), is a triangular figure consisting of ten points arranged in four rows: one, two, three, and four

points in each row, which is the geometrical representation of the fourth triangular number. As a mystical symbol, it was very important to the secret worship of Pythagoreanism. There were four seasons, and the number was also associated with planetary motions and music. – Dimitra Karamanides (2005), *Pythagoras: pioneering mathematician and musical theorist of Ancient Greece*, The Rosen Publishing Group, pp. 65–65

³² Claude Fayette Bragdon, *Man the square: a higher space parable*, 1912, Rochester, N.Y.: Manas Press, p. 9.

³³ Вл. Соловьев. *Философское начало цельного знания*. // Вл. Соловьев. *Сочинения* в 2 т. Т.1. М., 1988. С. 178-179.

³⁴ W. Goerdts in *The Encyclopedia of Christianity* (2008), p. 122.

³⁵ See Vladimir Sergeyevech Solovyov, Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov*, translated by Boris Jakim, Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, Laury Magnus, 2009, Cornell University Press II and 徐凤林:《索洛维约夫哲学》, 北京大学出版社, 2007, pp. 208-224.

³⁶ Vladimir Solovyov, *The Sophia, "On Man's Metaphysical Need"*, in Vladimir Sergeyevech Solovyov, Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Solovyov*, translated by Boris Jakim, Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, Laury Magnus, 2009, Cornell University Press, p. 118

³⁷ Ibid. "...but, on the other hand, they must not be pure generalities; nothing is more inimical to art than abstraction."

³⁸ Krauss' arguments on these two perspectives can be seen in: Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, 1986, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 151-170.

³⁹ Namely Danto's "artworld", the specific content of which can refer: "The Artworld" (1964) *Journal of Philosophy* LXI, pp. 571-584.