

Helio Oiticica, Metaesquema 464, 1958

ART

# Adventures of Malevich's Black Square

*Opening today, a major new exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery reveals the wide-ranging artistic, political and social implications of Malevich's 1915 black square, says Louisa Buck*

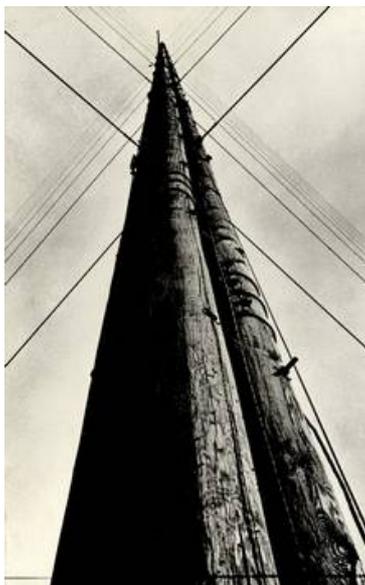


BY LOUISA BUCK  
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When the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich presented his Black Quadrilateral at The Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10 in 1915, this ultimate abstract gesture marked not so much an end point as a new beginning for art.

For as the Whitechapel Gallery's groundbreaking exhibition [Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society](#) now reveals, in the intervening 100 years Malevich's iconic work has provided a fertile launch pad for a multitude

of artists worldwide to explore geometric abstraction and all its social and political implications. Indeed, the blankness of this modest little painting offered what Whitechapel director and the show's co-curator Iwona Blazwick describes as “the exhilarating void of the unknown and a springboard for the imagining of new tomorrows”.



Aleksandr Rodchenko, Radio Station Tower, 1929

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In more than 100 works by both modern masters and contemporary artists working today, Adventures of the Black Square traces how these “new tomorrows” assumed myriad forms as the legacy of the Black Square reverberated throughout the century and continues to be played out around the world. The exhibition is organised chronologically around four central and interconnected themes of Utopia, Architectonics, Communications and the Everyday, as it examines how the complex lineage of abstract art also caused it to intersect with architecture, technology, graphic design and branding.

Right from the beginning there is an implicit tension between the spirituality of Malevich’s suggestive void and the politically motivated pragmatics of the

Russian Constructivists, who harnessed geometric forms to their revolutionary cause. This “push-me, pull-you” between the rationally objective and the emotionally-charged subjective implications of abstraction forms one of the show’s most compelling underlying themes.

Along the way there’s a wonderful wall devoted to the radio towers of Moscow and Berlin photographed by, amongst others, Rodchenko and Moholy Nagy. There are also stunning textile works by Anni Albers and Sophie Taeuber-Arp which underline how divisions between art and craft dissolved in the radical geometric designs of the German Bauhaus and how art and architecture similarly merge in the crisp angles and primary colours of Dutch De Stijl.

There’s an enjoyable introduction to the engaging playfulness of 1960s Brazilian Neo-Concrete art, a bracing encounter with the rigours of New York Minimalism and some unexpectedly gentle humour in the underground satire of the former Eastern Bloc, while the entire upstairs of the Whitechapel is devoted to the multifarious and often irreverent abstract riffs of a wide range artists working today.

It soon becomes evident that geometric abstraction could be used and interpreted in directly opposing ways, with the rigour of its repetitive units capable of expressing both the language of freedom and idealistic optimism as well as the impersonal rigours of unyielding totalitarianism. Early exhilaration at the march of technology and

thrilling aesthetics of industrialisation could easily tip into anonymous



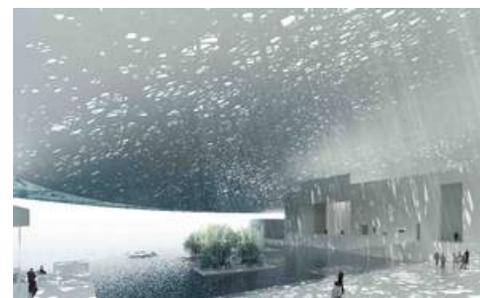
Josiah McElheny Interactive Abstract Body (Square) 2012

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mechanistic uniformity, just as the crisply unadorned spaces of early Modernist architecture swiftly mutated into grimly featureless tower blocks and vacuous structures of corporate capitalism.

This point is driven home in Brooklyn artist Josiah McElheny's Interactive Abstract Body, a giant wearable wood and glass mirrored circle and triangle which pays homage to earlier attempts at bodily abstraction – such as the Triadic Ballet by the Bauhaus' Oskar Schlemmer. These heavy and uncomfortable structures are donned by the Whitechapel's long-suffering gallery attendants at regular intervals during the two-month run of the exhibition.



Rosemarie Trockel, Who will be in in '99, 1988

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Another feature is the way in which the black square regularly reoccurs in unexpected and unsettling ways. It is provocatively reproduced by Rosemarie Trockel in a giant knitted work where it appears alongside Descartes' famous philosophical musing on human existence, "Cognito ergo Sum" (I think, therefore I am). It bulges and spews a length of dangling rubber in a 1960s sculpture by Eva Hesse; shimmies in a Hélio Oiticica gouache and resonates through the blacked-out blocks that cover the surface of Jenny Holzer's deeply disturbing oil painting of a heavily redacted government document made in 2010. It can be walked upon as the lead tiles of a Carl Andre pavement and – most

irreverently – can be overlooked and kicked over as Cildo Meireles's minute wooden cube, lying almost invisibly on the floor and measuring less than a centimetre across.

In tandem with the main exhibition, the Whitechapel is also organising a programme of complementary projects designed to augment its exhibits and chime with many of its core ideas. Most notable is Daniel Buren's East London restaging of his now-classic Seven Ballets in Manhattan of 1975, when a group of dancers reclaimed the radical and social ambitions of abstraction by taking to the streets carrying placards of his striped paintings.

Also make sure you don't miss David Batchelor's Monochrome Archive, an immersive multi-screen installation of over 500 images of white rectangles and squares. Often faded or empty notice boards or poster sites, the shapes were photographed by the artist over nearly two decades of wandering through cities across the world. He describes them as "absences rather than presences, like silences in a musical performance or gaps in a conversation". Occupying an entire room adjacent to the Whitechapel's main galleries, this inspirational work confirms that even in our jaded, image saturated age we can all find our own piece of abstract utopia in the streets around us.



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Gustav Klutsis, Design for Loudspeaker Number 5, 1922

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*Adventures of the Black Square: Abstract Art and Society 1915-2015 is at the Whitechapel Gallery until 6 April 2015*

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