



Cover image: Kazimir Malevich, *Sisters*, late 1920s, oil on canvas, 76 × 101 cm. With thanks to Rūtenė Merkliopaitė and Raimundas Malašauskas

The caption that accompanied this painting in the recent Malevich retrospective at Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum read as follows:

"Malevich is known to have predated many of his works in order to adjust his chronology and to fill gaps in his oeuvre. One example is this painting of two identically dressed women in a park, with a backdrop of pedestrians walking along a boulevard. The composition and the pastel palette clearly shows the influence of cubism and Cézanne. Malevich himself dated the work 1910, after his Pointillist period. The date of this painting was not in doubt until the late 20th century, but it is now known to belong to a group of works from the late 1920s. On the back of the painting, Malevich wrote: 'I painted the two sisters in order to break free from Impressionism.' He thus clearly was attempting to provide evidence of a stylistic transition that in fact had not occurred. *Sisters*, however is still considered one of Malevich's finest Impressionist paintings, and it demonstrates that he exhibited true mastery of painting techniques toward the end of his life."

Now:

For almost a century, no one noticed that Malevich backdated this painting by some 20 years. During this time, art historians saw precisely what they wanted to see in this supposedly "early" work — namely, a dot on a trajectory entirely in line with Modernist ideas of aesthetic progress. This is still the most common point of view, from which a painting with a falsified date implies the narcissistic and slightly pathetic gesture of an already-famous and self-obsessed painter preoccupied in old age with perfecting the illusion of completeness and coherency. In other words, Malevich was an artist busy anticipating his impending museumification.

The Modernist commentator can afford to poke affectionate fun at such vanity because Malevich's historical reputation and technical virtuosity are more than enough to absolve the white lie. This being the case, the Stedelijk curators naturally respected ACTUAL chronology and hung the painting in the last room of the retrospective, thereby making of our hero not only a bit of a fool, but worse, a good student who merely made a good job of his Impressionist exercise. Perfect Cézanne palette, Kazimir. Exquisitely rendered light, Kazimir, etc. etc.

Such rote evaluation pays no heed to the painting's ostensible subject, the sisters themselves. This is because the Modernist credo is not concerned with representation, only the *conditions* of representation — subjective ways of perceiving the world, the intrinsic nature of materials, the circumstances of an artwork's reception, and so on. Simply put, orthodox Modernist eyes don't see the subject. Sisters or apples, it's all the same. But they're equally blind to the fact that Malevich is retroactively making fools of THEM, putting them in their

place—which is to say, back in the past where they belong. Consider another angle. Here's what the Russian critic Boris Groys recently wrote about his compatriot:

“Malevich was not an active revolutionary in the sense that his oeuvre criticized the political status quo or advertised a coming revolution; he was revolutionary in a much deeper sense ... Revolution is the radical destruction of the existing society. However, to accept this revolutionary destruction is not an easy psychological operation. We tend to resist the radical forces of destruction, we tend to be compassionate and nostalgic toward our past—and maybe even more so toward our endangered present. The Russian avant-garde ... was the strongest possible medicine against any kind of compassion or nostalgia. It accepted the total destruction of all the traditions of European and Russian culture—traditions that were dear not only to the educated classes but also to the general population.”

What are the implications of Groys's words not only in view of Malevich's honestly-dated 1915 *Black Square*, but equally his deceitfully-dated *Sisters*? That's to say, what does this backdated painting look like through NON-Modernist spectacles—or no spectacles at all?

Let's remind ourselves what we're looking at: textbook 19th-century Impressionism painted AFTER the apex of 20th-century Suprematism. Whether the Modernists choose to see it or not, the painting is a representation. Technically speaking, it *absentizes* an object which is present (a flat canvas) in order to *make present* an object that is absent (a pair of sisters). The sisters seem to be taking a gentle walk through a park. We can't say for sure if they're inside or outside the park, but the fence behind them forms a limit that separates them from other subjects: people, dogs, trees, foliage. Strikingly, the ladies are wearing exactly the same outfit—same hat, same lipstick, and are carrying exactly the same umbrella. They even have the same boob size and haircut. They are so uncannily similar, in fact, that we wouldn't have thought twice if, instead of *Sisters*, the painting were titled *Twins*. True, one appears to be taller than the other—more about that in a minute. First, consider that if Malevich chose to make the two figures so similar yet referred to them as sisters rather than twins, we can say that this title EMPHATICALLY refers to the fact that one is nominally older than the other, which is also to say that one *came before* the other. And from our newly non-Modernist—i.e. non-historicist, non-nostalgic, non-critical, and therefore rather speculative—perspective, it's perfectly plausible to conclude that Malevich didn't paint two sisters at all, but A SINGLE WOMAN MOVING THROUGH TIME.

Both figures are clearly looking in our direction. Notice that although their faces are also markedly similar, one seems thinner and more blurred than the other. Now conjure in your mind for a moment one of Edward Muybridge's seminal photographic sequences from the 1870's—the movement of a running man, for instance. The crudely

animated frames show how our height naturally varies according to the length of the stride, bending of the knees, straightness of the spine, and so on. Bear in mind, too, a rudimentary law of perspective: the closer an object is to us, the bigger it appears. Both explain why one so-called sister is painted slightly taller and slightly bigger than the other. And why is one profile slightly thicker? Because the one on the right was painted while the head was in the process of turning toward the artist, while the one on the left was already staring at him. In short, if you accept the single woman hypothesis, the anomaly doesn't manifest the different identities of two distinct people, but *two different intensities of one person.*

Finally, switch attention to the overall composition. Split the picture down the middle and you're left with two essentially symmetrical pictures that mirror each other. Then recall that the Suprematist repertoire was strictly limited to squares, circles, and crosses—all shapes divisible into halves that mirror each other both vertically and horizontally. In his 1923 manifesto, "The Suprematist Mirror," Malevich wrote that everything—God, the Soul, the Spirit, Life, Art, Labor, Movement, Space, Time—is infinite and therefore equal to nothing. As Groys implies, Suprematism amounted to one big ZERO, an attempt to wipe out all history and memory.

Malevich knew well-enough he would one day be unmasked as a fraud, and *Sisters* shows he was prepared for that. All things considered, this modest oil painting disguised as dated Impressionism ("dated" inasmuch as Impressionism was already *outré* by 1910) manifests nothing less the Suprematist approach to the question of time itself. Not linear, not oriented toward some spurious notion of "progress," but, on the contrary, *cancelled* and therefore eternalized. In a word: infinite.

This is precisely where Malevich was headed. So instead of dismissing his *Sisters* as a showy exercise in completeness, consider it as the mirror opposite: an eternally contemporary work that can transform the way in which the world—and, so, the course of time—appears to us. To be continued.

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