Polygons – A Description

Text: Markus Schrenk | Section: Articles by Artists

Polygons

The painting *Polygons* – black poster colour consisting of casein (milk proteins) on gold-/ochre-coloured coarse chipboard composed of large wooden polygons – has the dimensions of 79.5 x 79.5 cm.

Gradient, fraying letters are set in a retro typography based on Jan Tschichold (here: *Stuntman* by Daniel Zadorozny, 2003). On display in the House of the University (HdU) of Heinrich Heine University (exhibition *Kunst und Wissenschaft: Beispiele symbiotischer Verhältnisse* [Art and Science: Examples of Symbiotic Relationships]**,** 16 November 2017 until 31 January 2018), following the traditional way to display Russian icons.

If divided into single terms the 9 x 9 letters form the statement: "Infinite Possibilities unfold when Malevich's Black Square disintegrates into Tangram Pieces". *Polygons* was initially conceived as concrete poetry and is published in an early version in La Traductière (No. 29, Paris 2011) on paper. At the HdU, a play with materiality, visual aesthetics and spatial positioning is added to the poetic component.

This text is concerned with tangram puzzles, (Russian) icons, Kasimir Malevich's Black Square and the typography used in *Polygons.* On each of these topics there are more profound and more scientific things to say. The text is limited to what served as a source of inspiration for *Polygons.*[1]

Tangram

The Chinese game *Tangram*, probably invented some hundred years B.C., consists of seven (often black) simple geometric forms (usually) made of wood: a small square, a parallelogram, two small triangles, one medium-sized and two large triangles. The seven polygons can be joined together to form a large square (the usual basic form) as well as representational images of animals, people, everyday objects, etc. The two-dimensional figurative representations created from tangram parts resemble the highly simplified, flat, facetted forms of Cubo-Futurism.[2]

According to legend, the Tangram puzzle was created when a novice, tasked by his abbot to travel the world and draw its beauty, dropped his square board. It broke into the seven pieces listed above. Apparently, he was unable to put them back together to form the original square. What he discovered while trying to reassemble the square, however, was that by joining the polygons in different ways an infinite number of possibilities to depict the manifold forms of nature was created.

The etymology of the word "Tangram" is controversial. "Tan" could refer to the Tang imperial dynasty (618–907) or stand for the Chinese word "t'an", i.e. "spread out". "Gram" could mean the Greek word "γράμμα", that is "what is written" or "letter".[3]

Icons

The religiously consecrated images of saints of the Eastern Churches are usually painted using egg

tempera on unframed wood primed with gold leaf or ochre paint. The translucent golden background symbolises the divine light. A non-central perspective, two-dimensional representation is preferred to exemplify that icons are mere images and not reality itself. The depicted, not the representation, is to be paid homage. In the traditional Russian parlour, religious icons, protecting the believers, are hung diagonally in the upper eastern corner of the room.

Malevich

There are at least four versions of Malevich's *Black Square*. The first version[4] from 1915, which was shown at the art exhibition *0.10* of the Suprematists at the Dobytschina Gallery in Petrograd, measured 79.5cm x 79.5cm. During the exhibition *Black Square* was hung prominently ["schöner Winkel"]. The traditional way of displaying icons has already been discussed above.[5]

The exhibition's aim was to break through to non-representational, abstract art. The "0" of its name[6] stands for the zero point of painting, which was to be liberated from its service to objectivity and indirectly from its servitude to religion and state.

Malevich himself noted in a text on the exhibition: "I have transformed myself into the zero of forms and have fished myself out of the stinking mud of academic art."[7] And:

> "When I made the desperate attempt in 1913 to free art from the weight of things, I exhibited a painting that was nothing more than a black square on a white ground […]. It was not an empty square that I exhibited, but rather the sensation of non-representation."[8]

As Horst Bredekamp vividly writes, Malevich's square has at least one precursor. Bredekamp enumerates the characteristics of these squares which again are taken up by *Polygons*:

> "In the first volume of his *History of the Macrocosm*, the English physician and natural philosopher Robert Fludd[9] visualized[10] a creation story[11] that begins with the original image of the Hyle, the equivalent of nothing[12], as a black square. […] The color of its dark surface is by no means consistent. […] the structure [lets] light shine through […]. [The] application of black [is] not applied in a uniform layer […], but partly closing, partly transparent […]. A similar process has occurred with an icon of modernism, Kasimir Malevich's *Black Square*. […] Four years ago[13] it was suggested on basis of material investigations that the fine cracks that soon appeared in the darkness of the black color were intended from the beginning. Since Malevich painted over the painting before it had even dried, he had to know that a Craquelé would appear […]. Therefore with both Fludd and Malevich, there is no homogeneity in black, and with both the irritation of the black that breaks out from below is definitely regarded as an infinite process of "et sic in infinitum" ["and so on to infinity"][14] […]. But even more important is the internal agency, the breaking through of an inner force that makes it impossible to fix statically what can be seen. […] [The] shimmering structure […] [belongs] to the principle of the creation of the world […] [that] inner force of the work […] that manifests itself in the flickering of surface and depth."[15]

Since his *Black Square* is "more of a manifesto than a painting" (Irina Antonowa)[16], it is not surprising that Malevich did not paint exactly. The sides of the square are frayed and do not run parallel to the sides of the canvas. Like the Craquelé mentioned above, the inexact deviation from regularity contributes to the liveliness of the work.

Typography

Jan Tschichold (1902–1974) takes up László Moholy-Nagy's theses in a special edition of *Typographische Mitteilungen* [Typographical Notes] (1925), who, in 1923, called for a *New Typography* (which included, among other things, the renunciation of upper and lower case letters).

Tschichold was in close contact with Moholy-Nagy, El Lissitzky and other Bauhaus artists who, as is well known, used the same geometric, clearly reduced formal language as the Russian Bauhaus counterpart, Constructivism or, that is, Malevich's Suprematism.[17] Tschichold's elementary writing consists of simple letters that are customary for the Bauhaus and have been freed from ornament.[18]

Image above the text: Markus Schrenk: *Polygons* (2017). Translation into English, including the quotes from Malevich and Bredekamp: Riad Nassar. Photo: Karsten Enderlein.

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[1] I would like to thank Simone Brandes for her invaluable support – art-historical, artistic, craftsmanship – and Swen Kuttner – http://www.beschriftungen-kuttner.de – for the extremely helpful advice on typography, for the design, the foil cut and the application of the letters.
[2] Before his non-representational Suprematism, Malevich was a supporter of Cubo-Futurism.
[3] My knowledge about Tangram puzzles is based on: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tangram and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tangram.
[4] The motif of the black square can already be found on the curtain Kasimir Malevich (1878–1935) designed in 1913 for the stage set of the futuristic opera *Sieg über die Sonne* [Victory over the Sun] by composer Mikhail Matyushin. On that curtain it was supposed to symbolise the transition from everyday experience to a world beyond.
[5] See: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:0.10_Exhibition.jpg.
[6] While eventually 14 artists participated in the exhibition, the number "10" after the zero refers to the originally planned number of artists.
[7] Taken from: http://www.db-artmag.com/archiv/06/d/thema-malewitsch.html.
[8] From Dorothea Eimert: *Kunst und Architektur des 20. Jahrhunderts, Band 1* [Art and Architecture of the 20th Century, Volume 1] (New York: Parkstone International, 2010: 84).
[9] Robert Fludd: 1574–1637.
[10] *Metaphysics and natural as well as art history of both worlds, namely the macrocosm and the microcosm* (1617).
[11] With a monochrome square copper engraving by Matthäus Merian the Elder.
[12] In Aristotelian metaphysics, the primordial substance on which everything is based.
[13] I.e. 2008.
[14] "Et sic in infinitum" is written on all four sides of the copperplate engraving by Merian.
[15] From Horst Bredekamp: *Beuys als Mitstreiter der Form* [Beuys as a comrade-in-arms of form] , in Ulrich Müller: Joseph Beuys. Parallelprozesse. Archäologe einer künstlerischen Praxis [Joseph Beuys.

Parallel Processes. Archaeologist of an artistic practice] (Munich: Hirmer Verlag 2012: 28–31).

[16] Irina Antonowa was president of the Pushkin Museum. The quotation is taken from: http:// www.spiegel.de/kultur/gesellschaft/bilder-hinter-malewitschs-schwarzem-quadrat-a-1062749.html.

[17] My knowledge about Tschichold's typography is based on: http://www.fontblog.de/ konstruktivistische-schriften, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Elementare_Typografie and https:// de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jan_Tschichold.

[18] The typography Stuntman used here is based on Tschichold and is taken from Gregor Stawinski: Retrofonts (Mainz: Hermann Schmidt Verlag 2009: 260).

Tags

1. Border Crosser
2. Kasimir Malevich
3. Markus Schrenk
4. painting
5. philosophy
6. science-related art