

Can Abstract Art Still Be Radical?

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Theo van Doesburg, *Colour design for ceiling and three walls, small ballroom, conversion of Café Aubette interior Strasbourg (1926–7)*
Courtesy: Galerie Gmurzynska AG © the Artist

Is abstract art, especially the geometric kind, radical anymore? This is the big question that vibrates through the Whitechapel Gallery's rich and jam-packed history show, which starts with Kazimir Malevich's *Black Quadrilateral*, painted around 1915, staring at you as you enter like an empty eye socket. But it's more than just the wild legacy of Malevich's explosively novel black square that is charted here. Blocks, arcs, grids, circles, triangles—"Adventures" gives us an enthusiastic, pile-it-high history of non-representational hard-edged art, as it burns its way through a century and across continents, from its birth in the white-hot crucible of European and Soviet aesthetic and social revolution. And yet it's an energy that seems to have largely dissipated in our current moment, a hundred years later, no matter how much "Adventures" tries to pitch it otherwise.

Much is made by the show of how art geometric quickly came to represent utopian ideals of social progress, and this is certainly clear in the truly dizzying, super-compressed first gallery, which takes us from the graphic

and photographic experiments of the Russian constructivists, and into the European experiments of Mondrian's Neo-plasticism and Bauhaus pioneer Josef Albers. You get the very real sense that geometric abstraction, for all the strident manifestos, inspired artists in the way that it offered a symbol for liberation, for not settling for what the present had to offer. And it's breath-taking just how *old* it all is, how much was accomplished in such a short space of time. Lyubov Popova's 1916 *Painterly Architectonic* seems tense with the infinite possibilities it can only start to suggest; Theo Van Doesburg's *Colour design for ceiling and three walls* (1926-7), for a café in Strasbourg, reminds us that the movement for abstraction wasn't just utopian pipe-dreams, but a vision for remaking every aspect of social, urban life. A fantastic section of display cases devoted to historical publications shows just how the enthusiasm for non-objective art spread, through Europe, to North America and particularly to Brazil.

The show's big curatorial gambit is to trace the 'adventure' of geometric abstraction as if it were a baton being handed on, or a meme, hopping from one historical moment, one group of artists, one geographical locality, to another, like an artistic family tree. So for example, it's contacts with European modernists that spur the Brazilian artists Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica to develop their own 'Neo-Contretist' movement, while British artist Jeffrey Steele's encounter with the work of Hungarian-French Victor Vasarely in Paris was pivotal in Steele's development of his own 'systems' approach to visual abstraction, using mathematical procedures to produce densely complex visual rhythms in monochrome. By the time you step across Carl Andre's metal floor plates, you realize just how pervasive and authoritative non-representational art had become—the unchallengeable shape of all that was supposed to be progressive in art.

And then suddenly the show shifts and that idea of progress disappears in a blink. Surveying the fortunes of the 'black square' from the 1970s to the present, the show rehearses the way in which geometric abstraction and the legacy of the early avant-garde became material to be quoted and critiqued by more sceptical, postmodern artists. Rosemarie Trockel's glum textile panel *Who will be in in '99?* presents the title question above a black, Malevich-like cross on a grey background, suggesting that all artistic innovation is no more than a meaningless, periodic cycle of fashion.

What the show then deftly gets you to consider is how the geometric form turns from a sort of window onto the future, into an oppressive, opaque blank wall, an advert for going nowhere, with no way out. That's perhaps why much of the latter works in this chronological show betray a sense of inertia, like Peter Halley's airless abstract canvas *Auto Zone* (1985), which hints more at the claustrophobic world of office blocks and daily commutes than it points to an exciting, unknown tomorrow. But then, geometric blank form, you start to feel, end up meaning what you want it to mean—it is its sheer emptiness that allows artists to project their desires and frustrations onto it. Meanwhile, since minimal geometric design has been co-opted by everyday commercial culture—thank you IKEA—it's easy to condemn it as the slave of corporations, as in Gunilla Klingberg's sardonic video animation that turn supermarket logos into a rotating kaleidoscope of almost-abstract patterns (*Spar Loop*, 2000).

By the time you get to the most recent works, such as Adrian Esparza's delicate wall installation of coloured threads strung on nails, you get the sense that the potency of such geometric abstraction has dissipated into whimsical nostalgia, lounge-friendly decoration, or, at best, a faint desire to recall the critical, revolutionary potential of abstraction's early days, such as in Heimo Zobernig's Constructivist-like reworking of flat-pack shelving, incorporating an androgynous mannequin that might just be one more retail dummy, but could also be the heroic man-woman of the future, all over again (*Untitled*, 2009).

But with New York's MoMA attempting a dubiously anti-historical take on art-market friendly abstract painting with its "The Forever Now" show (see

[Instagrammers Step on Oscar Murillo at MoMA](#)), "Adventures of the Black Square" is at the very least a timely reminder of abstraction's once-explosive capacity to give a shape to the progressive desire for the unknown and the undreamt of, for a categorically human, technological art that freed itself of the dead tradition of the past and invented an optimistic visual vernacular for the modern, industrial world. Maybe those desires are still alive today, or maybe they're dead and gone. Or maybe geometric abstraction is now just another style that says "art" to us, without us really caring that much. In other words, if art still has a part to play in the transformation of social life, artists might have to take visual form seriously again—as seriously as these old dudes once took it, yet give a new, unknown shape to those desires.

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