

Sebastian Riemer photographed iconic paintings by the Polish-Russian artist Kazimir Malevich and transformed these into negative icons – an artistic act, which cannot be reduced to a mere post-modern play with quotations. The work of Malevich, this pioneer of non-objective painting, could also be interpreted – despite its radical innovation – as a seamless continuation of the tradition of Christian cult images, as cultivated especially by Greek Orthodox icon painting. In the legendary exhibition *O.10 The Last*

Futurist Exhibition of Paintings, which took place in Petrograd in 1915, Malevich hung his key work, the *Black Square*, in the position normally reserved, within the home of an Orthodox family, for an icon. As with every artistic innovator, however, the way Malevich dealt with tradition was open and thus highly volatile. His Suprematist paintings were based on a completely different iconography than that of traditional icons, although it has rightly been pointed out that, with the forms of the square, circle and cross, he made use of key Christian symbols and, through the concentration on these abstract signs, did not do away with but rather formally epitomised and radicalised the iconography of icons. What must have appeared to traditional believers as a form of iconoclasm was, for Malevich himself, by no means an iconoclastic act, but rather a renewal of tradition.

Sebastian Riemer's negative images pick up on the ambivalent character of Malevich's paintings; they are by no means demonstrative negations. They both negate and affirm simultaneously. They are not cult images, and yet they do not deny their transcendental potential. In the Wittenberg prison, a number of Riemer's pictures after Malevich are not presented in a cell, which might have implicitly invited contemplation, but rather in a corridor, where one can walk past them and not necessarily spend longer periods of time in front of them as would be appropriate for pure cult images. Their vivid contradictory nature is thus emphatically related to Martin Luther's own ambivalent relationship to images. [KH]

‘MY PREOCCUPATION WITH MALEVICH ALSO HAS TO DO WITH THE FIELD OF TENSION BETWEEN SPIRITUAL AND SECULAR READINGS OF THIS NON-OBJECTIVE PAINTING AND KEEPS THE AMBIVALENT POWER OF IMAGES IN ABEYANCE.’