

monochromatic operations

Kazimir Malevich was a mad man who thought he was simultaneously infecting and curing the future by releasing into art and society an iconography conceived along bacterial lines. His desire to see his Black Square on a White Ground multiply, spread, and contaminate the aesthetic sphere, as posters, tattoos, graffiti, coffin adornments or whatever is nothing if not viral, and medical, in concept. Malevich's Black Square was his pharmakon, his additional element, his pigment, infection, change agent, cure, poison, medicine and charm. Calling himself the doctor and getting about the State Institute of Artistic Culture in Leningrad in his white lab coat, he developed a pedagogy which

considers all painters as medicine considers the sick ... [and] finds that various kinds of illness exist in the field of arts, too, that artists can also be classified according to various kinds of these wonderful illnesses or states, thanks to which an artist's organism produces one or another form of behavior, what we call art or artistic culture.¹

The artistic culture that he taught and diagnosed, be it as too naturalist, realist, geometric, romantic or lyrical, was most commonly in need, according to the good doctor, of a corrective dose of suprematism. Malevich was also, clearly, a bit of a self-promoting joker.

placebo

The monochrome shop is just one more mutated return of the biological agent that Malevich released into the world almost 100 years ago. The pathology that we hope to treat by rehashing the worn trope of rehashing-the-monochrome is in this case our own, although it is certainly not ours alone. Our hypothesis: an inescapable element that produces artistic behaviours today, our wonderful illness if you will, is commodification: the commodification of ourselves, and our objects, and of everything that passes between us. This is a far from exceptional argument to make about artists or anybody else. But we make it because the symptoms of the abstraction rendered by the economization of everyday life on the bodies that live it, on our bodies, are legion, interrelated and spreading: the cheapening of friendship and subsequent heightened social isolation; the normalization of financial and ontological insecurity; anxiety; depression; destructive behaviours... It could only be sheer desperation that would see us attempt to treat these symptoms with a quack curative found in the history of geometric abstraction. The monochrome shop is an attempt to do just this, an attempt to cure our commodified selves by submitting them, bodily, to an intense dose of commodification. Through the naked gesture of commercializing an ostensibly non-commercial art space by using it to sell our own work, we are not only doing something that already happens all the time anyway (the only difference being the degree of our blatancy), we are proposing something that we believe more of us should do more of the time, together, for our own reasons, and according to our own needs: a communal kind of self-administered medication.

auto-curation

The monochrome shop is the result of an attempt at a pan-continental collective or collaborative undertaking between a fluctuating and dispersed group of artists. As the project progressed, and the number of people involved in it shrunk and expanded and shrunk again, I proposed the term auto-curation

as an attempt to conceptualize and articulate the curatorial element of a project without a curator; an unruly form of headless curation perhaps, or an attempt to dissolve the figure of the curator and share the responsibility herein across a group of stammering artists. It is also important to point out that auto-curation evolved in part as a response to an artist-run gallery's mandate of only accepting proposals for curatorial projects, and doubts communicated to us by the gallery director about whether this project had an adequately curatorial element. The monochrome shop was from the outset a collectively oriented artistic project, not a curatorial one, something that, despite our professed indifference to the distinction, we feel strangely compelled to insist on.

Auto derives from the Greek for 'self, ones own', curation from the Old French for 'treatment of illness', or Latin for 'a taking care, attention, management'. Rooted as it is in medical rhetoric, care in curation's etymology is inseparable from cure, and thus from an unfit patient who needs to be fixed. Artists today, as those subject to curation, could be seen as descendants, at least in language, of this historical group: the sick, the unwell, those of whom we say there is something wrong. Our pathology is an infantilized dependency. We need to be looked after by someone else. The curator, at its etymological origin, is an overseer, manager, or guardian. More specifically, the original use of the term referred to those, in the 14th century, who oversaw, managed or guarded minors and lunatics. When it comes to the business and publically sanctioned display of art, artists, it seems, like children and the mad, cannot be fully trusted to take care of themselves. We are inheritors of a history of institutionalization that is readable today in the conditions of our professionalism. According to the dominant logic of artistic distribution and display, we need a curator to contextualize our work to a public, or a dealer to help us maintain our ontological illusion of distance from the market while they get as much money as they can for our work. Auto-curation, at its inception, was based on a rhetorical assertion, and a brash one. We don't want to be overseen, managed or guarded. We can take care of ourselves, and each other.

The term auto-curation borrows from a critical practice of care that is indebted to the historical notion of self-care as unearthed by Foucault in Volume 3 of *The History of Sexuality*. For Foucault, self-care is a collection of ongoing critical practices of reflection on oneself and ones conduct and relations to the world. Such cultivation of the self, however, isn't limited to internal self-examination, but has a strong social dimension. Self care, since the Hellenic and Roman period, has been contingent on the activity of talking and writing to others, to friends, about one's self, one's conduct and one's relation to the world. As friends, we thus not only become implicated in each other's care, but also open up for one another, via our differences, potential futures that wouldn't have otherwise appeared on our singular horizons. Relations of friendship - or more specifically, the habitual relations you establish with those whose paths you cross repeatedly, and with whom you find a generative or rewarding combination of similarity and difference, of confidence and chance - such relations stand alongside reflection and self-examination as modes of thought, and remain a vital element to the possibilities of critique and change. Such relations are what matter to auto-curation.

In this instance, we insist on our auto-curation as a collective endeavor, but not only that, and not at the expense of the singular selves that inhabit it. To say that individually we are the artists involved in this project, while collectively we are the curator of each other's (and our own) works, is true enough, but is also a little too neat. Whether our desire here is to occupy both positions, or neither remains intentionally obscure. Auto-curation arises in

the to-and-fro that such a posture requires of us, the ongoing oscillations between our singularity and our place within a group, and the refusal of the false choice between one position or the other. The self in auto-curation is a whatever self. Its intelligence is one of intelligibility, becoming, plurality, and flow. Or so it says of itself.

palinodal

In practice, as the monochrome shop took shape, auto-curation's assertion that we can take care of ourselves and each other did not always hold. We take these moments not as proof of the incorrectness of an idea, so much as evidence of how difficult it is to achieve the kind of care-based self-critique that auto-curation describes, especially within a group of artistic egos, each with fundamentally different relationships and proximities to the collective, to the other individuals involved, to the ideas at play in the project, and to art making in general and the professional community in which it happens. Despite everybody involved believing in the generative potential of working with and across such differences and the tensions they gave rise to, the time and effort that this required proved a major impediment to moving the project forward, and was ultimately more that some participants were willing or able to give. In hindsight, there was a certain naivety in proceeding as if the desire for equality in relations between participants could simply be willed, written and spoken into being.

From within our collaboration auto-curation has been critiqued for its masturbatory and adolescent rhetoric, its overdependence on the etymological relations of curation rather than actual lived ones, its fictional nature, and the male-ness of its voice. The broader project of the monochrome shop has in turn been internally critiqued as being in need of saving, being overly ironic, and for running the risk of being little more than a cheap prank. These critiques could well still hold, despite the extent to which the project, and this text, have attempted to incorporate or respond to them, and the contexts from which they arose. This incorporation, while not without its gaps and silences (mine and yours), is an attempt to acknowledge the voices that shaped and coloured the monochrome shop, and to respect the shared desire of those still involved in the project and those who recently chose not to be, to see the internal struggles that the project negotiated somehow put on display.

Auto-curation does not propose anything new. As a description it could easily enough be applied to a wide range of existing and historical collective or communal practices. It might, all said and done, be just a wordy re-packaging of what is commonly known today as artist-run culture. Our intention with this reiteration is not to supplant existing terms or notions, but rather to keep them, and ourselves, warm. We are all under the same blanket. We are not well, and we need to help each other get better.

Mark Cunningham

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1. Kazimir Malevich, from a submission to *The Work Plan of the Department of the Painterly Culture for 1926-1927*.