

Expanded Painting

Expanded painting could be simply defined as painting plus something else. As a result, it is a kind of painting that moves out beyond the easel and the physical limitations of the image to investigate how far painting can go in spatial and temporal dimensions. By expanding off the wall it engages objects and environments while mingling illicitly with sculpture, installation, video and nearly all other media. But, is expanded painting a recent phenomenon or does it have a history? Does it take place in a broader social context? The story begins over a 100 years ago when artists began to challenge the limited presence of painting, gradually shedding flatness and craft-based rules, in favour of spatial and conceptual expansion. A century-long drive to transform the nature of painting has resulted in a paradigm shift as momentous as previous developments from the cave wall to portable easel painting. Ultimately, it involves a radical refiguring of the presence of the painted image and the object-based nature of painting.

The death of painting

Coincident with the transition in the nature of painting has been a consistent discourse about the end of painting as a relevant practice in an age of new media and information technologies. This begins in the middle of the nineteenth century when photography first challenged painting as a dominant mode of representation and continued into the twentieth century with the development of printmaking techniques, mass production technologies, cinema and digital media. With each of these new technological developments, ushering in new ways of capturing images of the world, painting was seen as superseded. However, with each instance, painting survived, albeit in an altered state,

staging itself as a response to, or anticipation of, the new conditions of visibility and reproducibility.

The multiple deaths of painting could be characterized as a series of re-births or transitions in the nature of painting. The end of painting, seen as a series of little deaths, becomes the story of painting's mutation by degrees. By surviving each mortal blow, and breaking free of the 'logic of the end',¹ an endless set of new possibilities is released in relation to painting. As Eva Geulen puts it when discussing another end in the history of art:

The end of art constitutes a privileged site for exploring problems of the end. For art, aesthetics, including the question of transcendence, overcoming, or obsolescence, is the domain in which questions of the possibility or impossibility of unity and closure, end and beginning, success and failure, are handled as *questions of form*.²

The so-called 'end of art' provides a privileged site for discussing historical shifts of any kind, whether they be social, political or aesthetic. When painting shifts from the cave wall to the built environment there is a significant shift in the nature of society and the language for art. The closure of one kind of world and the opening of another are reflected, amongst other things, by a change in the *form* of painting. Painting dies in one kind of society and is re-formed in another. When painting is no longer relevant, when it has come to the end of an historical line, then it dies to its formal conventions and opens the possibility of another state, another way of being painting. The end is a rupture, and a rhetorical device, that enables a re-examination of the rules that make the appearance of painting possible. The end of painting covers and discovers continuities, so that an alternative beginning can be proposed.

Cave, church, easel, other

By taking a broad overview of the history of painting from prehistory to the present, four moments of radical formal transition, leading from cave painting, to church painting, to easel painting, to non-traditional painting, stand out. These four epochs are schematic generalizations that do not take into account the complexities of detail between Egyptian and Greek art or the many styles of painting in Gothic, Byzantine, Renaissance, Modern and Postmodern

art. However, they do reveal basic technological and sociological shifts that temporarily throw light on how painting comes to be in each place and time.

Cave painting in Europe dates back 32,000 years to the Upper Paleolithic period and in Australasia some 40,000 years or more. All of these paintings are of animals and tracings of hands and the human body. No definitive information remains about them but some interpretations are that they are images of prey invoked to increase the outcome of the hunt³ or that they are images painted by shamen in visionary trances seeking to invoke the power of the rock itself.⁴ The rock paintings do not occur in the same place as habitation and are often in small remote caves. Consequently, they were not for decoration or for general consumption. While magic seems to be an important part of their reason for being, it is the form of the paintings, where they are found and the very appearance of an image that is of interest. As Jean Luc Nancy points out, cave paintings are the first time that an image-maker touches the wall not as support or obstacle but as a spacious place where something of the world can be evoked.⁵ The cave wall as a surface-for-painting is fixed and requires a certain kind of ritualistic visitation for both making and viewing the work.⁶

The transition to church painting involves painting frescoes on walls and ceilings in religious architecture. Since these works involve an immovable surface and religious ritual they are similar in spirit to cave painting. However, the secretive nature of the cave has been lost, with the paintings being displayed in public places and accessed by large numbers of people. While much can be said about the developments in style of imagery and the use of colour⁷ what is of interest is the formal presence of the painted element. Painting now exists to be seen and to communicate, and is tied very closely to the institution of the church both as a permanent architectural edifice and a source of social power.

The next paradigm shift in painting takes place with the rise of easel painting which takes painting out of its fixed relation to a place. While an easel is the wooden structure that holds up a canvas while the painter paints, it refers iconically to the fact that the painted surface can be lifted onto and off the easel and is inherently moveable and portable to and from various locations. Early easels were constructed like desks to hold the painted surface below the eye of the painter. Later easels were established as vertical, placing the surface to be painted at eye height. Typically the self-conscious introspective artist represents themselves in self portraiture facing the easel. The easel mirrors

the subject, since both are mobile, active, independent and authoritative. It is no coincidence that both came into being with the birth of humanism and a separation from the power of the church. As the easel tears itself away from the monumental authority of the church wall, so the individual pulls away from the hierarchy of god's kingdom.

The modern authority of easel painting carried with it prejudices about canvas and liquids, just as the subject carries certain prejudices of independence and self-possession. Easel painting has dominated thinking about the nature of painting for half a millennium. So it is no coincidence that when humanism and rational subjectivity are challenged in the twentieth century, that the next stage is set for a shift in the nature of painting.

Another beginning

The drive to get beyond easel painting with another kind of painting begins in the first decades of the twentieth century when avant-garde artists become as concerned with the form of the work as they are with its contents. Thus artists begin to take their exclusive attention away from what is happening inside the frame of the painting and start to consider the nature of framing itself. Similarly, imagery and aspects of representation that might have been confined to the flatness of an illusionary surface are detached as general principles and applied to concrete materials and situations. By challenging frame and surface the whole edifice of easel painting is dismantled, reaching a peak in the 1960s during the time of Conceptual art when a new form of post-studio practice is established. By the 1980s artists returned to the studio armed with the institutional critiques of conceptual art, producing neo-conceptual⁸ work that received the catchall title of 'installation art'. Installation art grew out of a dialectic between skills crafted in the painting studio and the political critique of art world structures particularly the 'white cube' exhibition space.⁹ Contemporary non-traditional painting takes its coordinates from installation art since installation art is the very broad formal term out of which a more specific and accurate practice is to be identified. Is there a more appropriate term other than, 'non-traditional painting', that can be historically and theoretically validated?

To find it involves looking more closely at four historical stages in the evolution of painting away from the easel to a contemporary non-traditional form:

- (i) The early twentieth-century avant-garde
- (ii) 1960s conceptual and minimalist art
- (iii) 1980s neo-conceptualism
- (iv) Recent non-traditional painting

(i) Early twentieth-century avant-garde – Punching through the screen

By aggressively penetrating the imaginary screen, constituted by the canvas substrate of painting, a repressed tension between virtuality and actuality, image and object is released with uncertain results for both painting and sculpture. While nearly every avant-garde artist in Europe is touched by this tension, five artists at crucial moments in their practice, lead the discussion. Namely Picasso during the period of cubist constructions, Tatlin at the time of his corner reliefs, Malevich during Volumetric Suprematism, Lissitzky and Proun Rooms, and finally Duchamp in the transition to the Readymades.

(a) Picasso's cubist constructions

Cubism is crucial to the understanding of non-traditional painting since it is the point where all the Renaissance delimitations of painting, in the form of perspective, flatness and framing, are thoroughly disturbed.

Broadly speaking, Cubism rejects the convention that a painting is a representation of reality and proposes instead the formal concept that a painting is a flat surface covered with conventional symbols of perception.¹⁰ Consequently, cubist artists refused to represent the unity of space and integrity of objects, something accepted unquestioningly since the Cinquecento. They replaced rational space with an indeterminacy of dismembered planes and multiple points of perceptual concentration. In the early stages of cubism, African sculpture was an important influence on Picasso, since it exemplified an ability to distort anatomy free of representational conventions. The result was that Picasso treated mass, void, line, plane, colour and value as independent entities that could be individually explored as part of an open-ended language of painting. Cubist artists became so vigorous in their rejection of Renaissance

conventions that 'contrariness' or complete inversion of rules became a hallmark of their paintings. Thus solids replace voids, voids replace solids, opaque objects become transparent, transparent objects opaque, straight lines curved and curved straight. It was in this kind of mood that the flatness of the surface of painting became solid and the wetness of paint was extended to include dry matter such as paper, rope, wallpaper, sand and so on. Thus a whole series of inversions of established pictorial conventions leads dialectically to physical extensions out from the painted surface, in the form of collage, *papier colle* and ultimately 'cubist construction'.¹¹

In 'Guitar' (Figure 2.1), made in the winter of 1912–1913, Picasso 'constructs' a guitar from cardboard and string using the exact same conventions that he had developed in several years of cubist painting. He uses the same subject matter as his paintings in that he often painted musical instruments and musicians. He also uses the same cubist anti-conventions of casting voids as solid and solids as voids and so on. Rosenblum identifies cubist construction as the next step on from cubist collage in painting:

The very nature of collage, with its piecing together of materials conceived as physical realities, was almost more closely related to palpable constructive processes of the sculptor than to the illusionary techniques of the painter. In 1912 Picasso made metal and paper cut-outs such as *Guitar* which in a logical but heretical way, paralleled the technique of pasting papers in the world of real space by liberating Cubist planes from the confines of a flat rectangular background.¹²

Picasso had never trained as a sculptor and never claimed to be one. Consequently, the work appears to be a spatialization of cubist painting that simply discards any need for canvas, paint and a 'flat rectangular background'.

It is the relation between Picasso's cubist paintings, collage works and cubist constructions that suggests a triangulation between illusory depth, literal surface and actual volumes. This triangular tension results in a move towards a 'constructed' rather than a 'painted' painting, that influenced and inspired other avant-garde artists such as Tatlin, Malevich, Lissitzky and Duchamp. Even though Picasso only did a few cubist constructions, and returned to painting on canvas almost immediately, he had let the genie out of the bottle for the others to invoke.

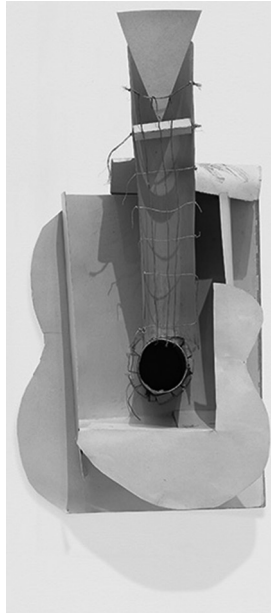


Figure 2.1 Pablo Picasso, *Guitar*, 1912, paperboard, paper, string, wire (restored), 65.1 × 33 × 19 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York © Succession Picasso. Licensed by Viscopy, 2016

(b) Tatlins painting reliefs and corner reliefs

Vladimir Tatlin as a young artist was so impressed by Picasso's cubist paintings that he sold his possessions to pay for his visit to Picasso in Paris in 1913. At that time Picasso was working on his cubist constructions and Tatlin immediately understood their significance for painting. He begged Picasso to let him stay as an unpaid assistant but to no avail.¹³ Returning to his studio in Moscow he completely transformed his practice from painting on canvas to what he called 'painting reliefs' and then 'corner reliefs.'

The first painting reliefs (Figure 2.2) were made in direct response to Picasso's cubist constructions and featured the shallow construction of objects using selections of materials such as metal, wood, wire and paint. These works were still close to painting since they were presented in a frame and hung on the wall. Soon afterwards he dropped both the flatness of painting and the frame to develop corner reliefs that occupied the indeterminate space where two walls joined (Figure 2.3).

From these works Tatlin developed his philosophy of *faktura*, or 'real materials in real space',¹⁴ which is posed as the polar opposite of 'painted objects

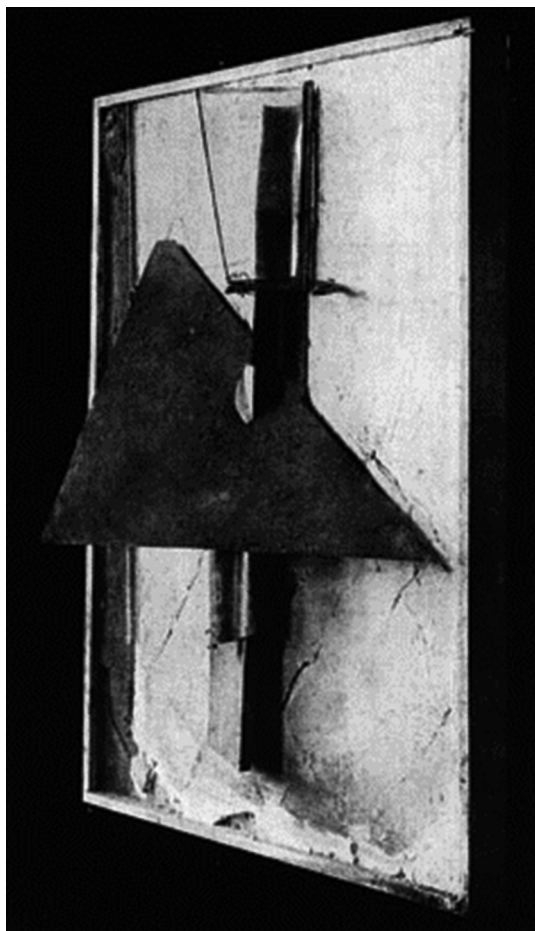


Figure 2.2 Vladimir Tatlin, *Painting Relief*, 1914 (destroyed), image courtesy of *The Russian Experiment in Art*, Camilla Gray, Thames and Hudson, 1962

in representational space.' The frame of painting was seen as a barrier isolating the work of art from real life and locking it into a private ideal bourgeois world. This conflicted with the revolutionary ideals of the new Russia and the leftist artists who supported, and were supported by the new regime. Tatlin went on to design his most famous work, *The Monument to the Third International* (1919–1920), which was to be an enormous public building twice the height of the Empire State Building and constructed in glass and iron. Though never built it symbolizes a monument to the new artist-engineer who

dismissed easel painting as an anachronism both in its tools and its social conventions.¹⁵

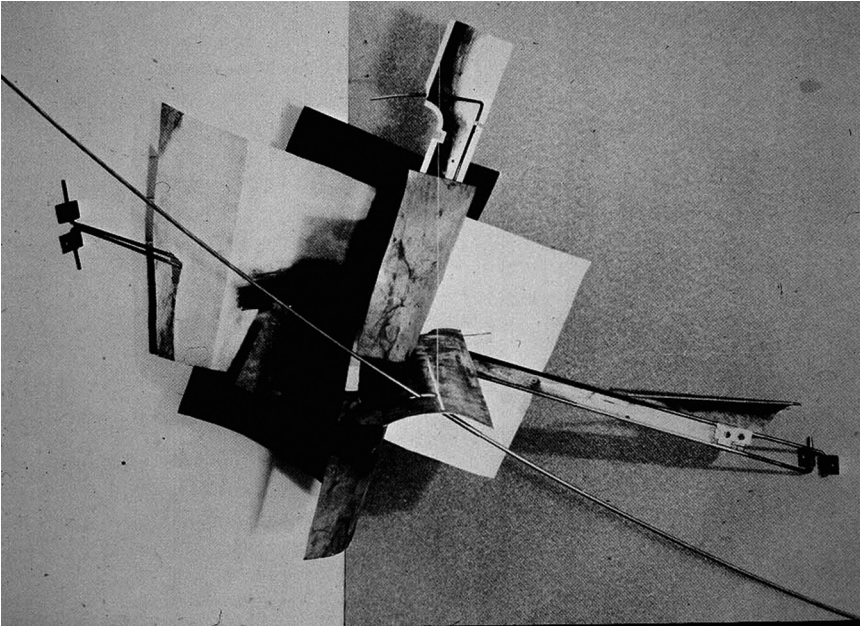


Figure 2.3 Vladimir Tatlin, *Complex Corner Relief*, 1915 (reconstruction by Martyn Chalk 1994), courtesy Annely Juda Fine Art, London © Martyn Chalk

The power of Tatlin's rejection of painting operated as a slingshot that catapulted him out of pictorial conventions into new ideas of artistic production where not only painting would come to an end, but art itself. Art fully merged into the demands of a new technological worker state would no longer be art, but a

new mode of cultural practice in relation to productive mode and social formation.¹⁶

(c) Malevich's Volumetric Suprematism

Malevich and Tatlin were ideologically opposed since Malevich continued to believe in the transcendental power of abstract painting. Malevich affirmed the absolute autonomy of painting while Tatlin believed painting should be dismantled in service to new technology and the state. Malevich believed the Russian Revolution opened the way for a new spiritual freedom above and beyond the demands of a technological society. Despite these differences, which culminated in blows on one occasion, they shared a remarkably similar path leading from cubist influenced painting through to forms of object

making established on painterly pictorial conventions. Malevich between 1913 and 1918 developed through various stages of Black Suprematism, Coloured Suprematism and White Suprematism. Suprematism, so named by Malevich, was an avant-garde movement in painting that was defined as a search for 'pure sensation'.¹⁷ This period of intense activity culminated in a work entitled *Suprematist Composition: White on White* (1918), which was a painting of entirely white tones.

For Malevich the colour white represented all space in all time, achieving the ultimate invocation of pure sensation in paint. As such *White on White* was a terminus point, leaving him nowhere else to go in the practice of easel painting. His subsequent work could only go beyond the canvas and signalled a new spatio temporal practice known as Volumetric Suprematism. In it he applied the principles of suprematism to everyday practices such as teaching, applied arts and what has been ambiguously understood as a form of architecture. In works known as 'architektons' he extended the geometric purity of suprematist painting into three-dimensional form (Figure 2.4).

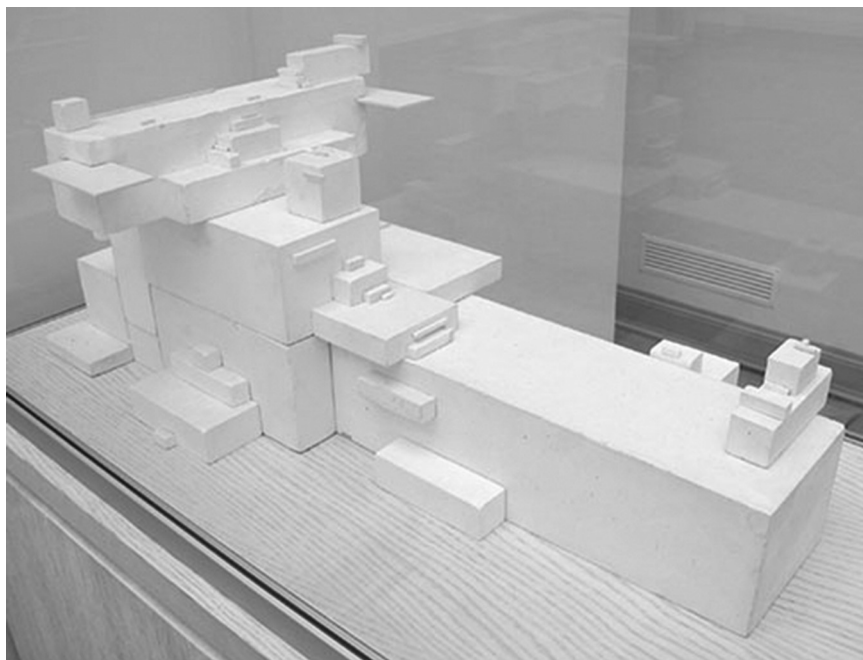


Figure 2.4 Kazimir Malevich, *Alpha Architecton*, 1920, Creative Commons. Photo by Saliko

While these works have an architectural appearance and subsequently influenced artists and designers who would teach at the Bauhaus, they are more readily understood as a material extrusion based on the pictorial conventions and motifs developed in Malevich's Suprematist paintings particularly those from the coloured suprematism period (Figure 2.5).

This kind of inter-dimensional shift from painting principles into material constructions is of the same order as Picasso's movement from cubist painting

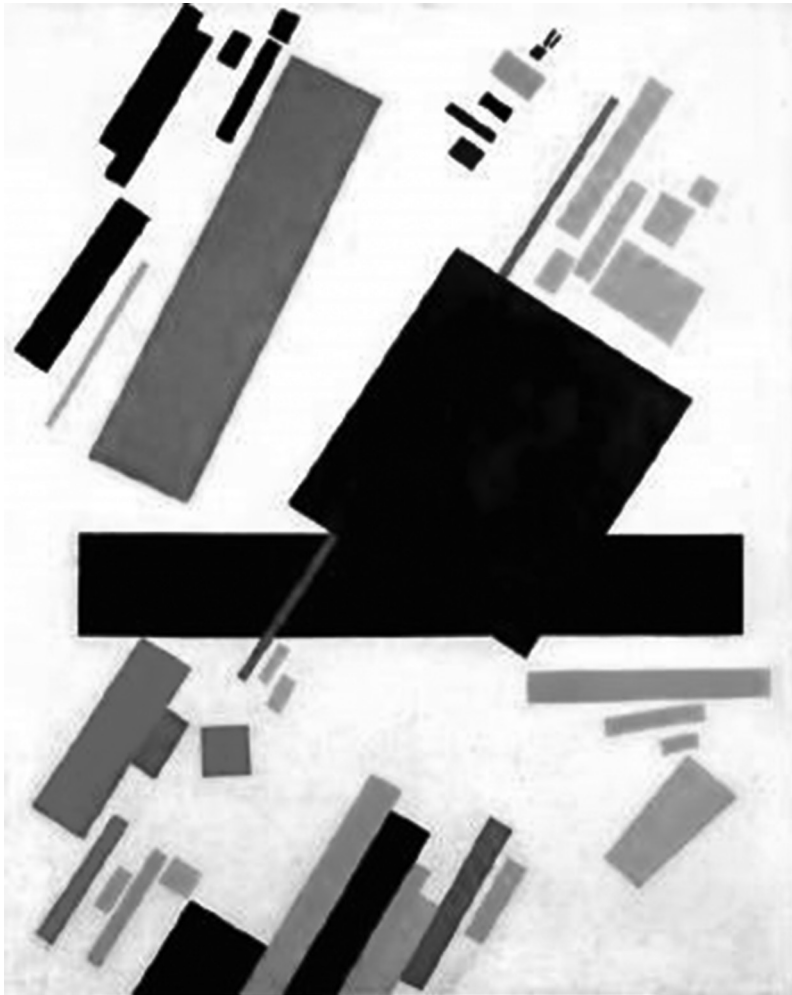


Figure 2.5 Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition*, 1916–1917. Photo by Hogers & Versluys. Collection of Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam

to cubist constructions. The metropolitan Moscow avant-garde, in which Malevich flourished, was functioning as an experimental laboratory taking Picasso's innovations in painting to the next stage of development that Picasso was unable to do himself.

(d) Lissitzky's Proun Rooms

Before falling under the influence of Malevich and the principles of Suprematism, El Lissitzky trained as an engineer and architect. His predisposition was to develop a fusion between the visual arts and architecture that culminated in a series of paintings he called 'Prouns'. Proun was a Russian acronym signifying 'for the new art'¹⁸ and meant for Lissitzky a place where painting could 'change trains to the spatial effects of architecture'.¹⁹

Like his Russian contemporaries, Malevich and Tatlin, Lissitzky's idea was not containable by the mere surface of painting. Thus by the mid-1920s principles developed in oil on canvas had evolved into theatre and exhibition design. As Alan C. Birnholz points out:

It is important to recognise that Lissitzky approached Proun composition essentially as a problem in the definition of space. As the Proun series developed, the spatial interplay increased in both in dynamism and subtlety.²⁰

Eventually the visual language of the Proun paintings, geometric and refined, exploded out to occupy an entire room (Figure 2.6).

As Lissitzky puts it himself:

Room-space is not there for the eyes alone, it is not a picture; it must be lived in ... the six surfaces (floor, four walls, ceiling). These are the given factors to be designed.²¹

Lissitzky's evolution into objects, painted wood and interior design elements meant that he had moved away from the virtualities of painting into 'real space and real material life',²² a position very similar to Tatlin's 'real materials in real space'. However, Lissitzky was somewhere between Malevich and Tatlin in that he was indifferent to Malevich's exotic metaphysical concerns while at the same time not willing to sacrifice art as Tatlin did to the demands of industrial culture.²³

All the artists discussed so far have evolved out of painting into three-dimensional forms while at the same time continuing to carry the essential