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**Nuri Kuzucan: Playing
with the Edges of Painting**

*Art seeks out the edges of things, of understanding; therefore, its favourite modes are irony, negation, deadpan, the pretence of ignorance or innocence. It prefers the unfinished: the syntactically unstable, the semantically malformed. It produces and savours discrepancy in what it shows and how it shows it, since the highest wisdom is knowing that things and pictures do not add up.*¹

T.J. Clark, 1985

*...in the year 1913, in my desperate attempt to free art from the ballast of objectivity, I took refuge in the square form.*²

Kasimir Malevich, 1927

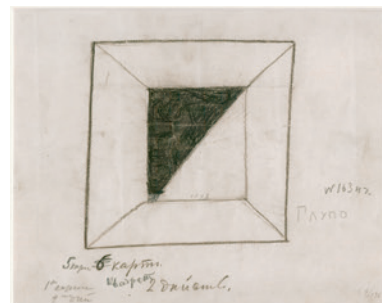
The edge is what defines the frontier of an object's shape or surface, the line where two sides of a solid material intersect, the limit between objects and the outer world. The concept of the edge is also associated with geometric forms, precision, and the delimitation of frontiers. When it comes to canvas painting, in relation to the primary concerns such of the discipline such as form, colour, light, and scale, the edge is perhaps a little overlooked... However, with respect to the picture plane, the edge is of such crucial significance to the painter that it could well be designated as existential: Are the beginnings and ends of forms to be delineated in sharp contrast or are they to fuse gradually? Do they outline the areas of each colour that is applied to the surface, or do they fade out within a mishmash of tones? Are the edges instrumental in defining depth? Whether they be wobbly and hesitant or, on the contrary, sharp and clear-cut, are the edges an extension of the painter's hands, or rather the reflection of psychological traces on the pictorial surface? And what about the canvas itself as an object? When considering canvas painting ontologically, i.e. as an object, isn't the edge, which delineates the contours of the field of vision, instrumental for the contention for dominion that opposes painting to its inevitable support, the wall? In light of these questions, it appears that the notion of the edge has indeed been somewhat undermined in discussions and debates around canvas painting. Yet, within Kuzucan's artistic practice, the edge plays as important a role as other major elements of painting, such as light, shadow, and form.

1. T.J. Clark, "Introduction," in *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton University Press, 1985), p. 12.

2. Kasimir Malevich, "Suprematism," in *The Non-Objective World* (Chicago: Paul Theobald and Company, 1959 [1927]), p. 68.

The first fully abstract painting by Kasimir Malevich, *Black Square*, shown in 1915 in the section granted to the artist within the scope of the *Last Futurist Exhibition of Paintings 0.10*, was based on a sketch for a curtain which Malevich had designed two years earlier for the purpose of a Futurist opera to be staged by his friends. In this outline for a backdrop, drawn by the artist for *Victory over the Sun* (1913), which re-

jected the dominant aesthetic codes of the times, i.e. symbolist art and naturalist theatre, Malevich placed a square within a box, drawn in one-point perspective, using diagonal lines to give the representation of the theatre stage a sense of three-dimensional space. He divided the square into two triangles, also with the help of diagonal lines, and painted the upper one black, leaving the lower one blank. It is as if the black and white triangles are captured in the midst of a fight for territory. Thus, we are left with a geometric abstraction of the most striking moment in the fight between light and dark: A solar eclipse. Malevich represented this idea suggested by the title of the opera, in the most simplified form, hinting with the most economical means possible at the defeat of light by darkness. If the sun didn't rise and set every day, if colours didn't change according to the light, and the shadows didn't stretch and then shorten, what would pictorial representation look like? What would painters paint? If the moon could forever block the sun's light, would we still need artists? Whether Malevich gave any thought to these questions while drafting this stage curtain remains unknown, but we do know that he and his friends advocated an art that represented daily experiences and the visible world in a radically different manner. For the Russian formalists – whether they be painters or poets – *ostranenie*, to make what is familiar strange, constituted the fundamental technique that art should implement, a desire felt by both Malevich and his friends. Accordingly, both words and forms had to be singular and strange, to the same extent that they were whole... That is precisely what the solar eclipse was: a momentary situation which, no matter how fleetingly, modifies the perception of space and time, making ordinary events strange. Kuzucan's recent works such as *Black and White Line* (2020), *Equinox* (2020), and the series *No. 1-5* (2021) stand apart from his usual urban landscapes and perspective games. These experiments expand his dealings with the three-dimensional space of representation outside the limits of the picture plane and belong to the very same pictorial space as that which emerged with Malevich's victory over the eclipse of the sun, shedding light on the crucial role of the edge for the very first time. It can be no accident that Kuzucan titled his work that consists of two 50 x 55 cm canvases placed vertically and hung 9 cm apart on the wall, *Equinox*. Operating within the same realm of quadrilaterals blind to the sun's light, Kuzucan's *28 Units (Wood, Fabric, Pigment, Light and Shadow)* (2023), on view for the very first time at Arter, takes the notion of the edge one step further, by carrying it to another dimension, where the canvas folds over to meet the wall: He hides



Kasimir Malevich, Set design for the opera *Victory over the Sun* by M. Matyushin and A. Kruchenykh, 1st Futurist Theater, St. Petersburg, 1913, 2nd Doing [Act], 5th Scene. Graphite on paper. St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music. Photo © The St. Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music

the tasks' colour but allows them to reflect light, thereby crossing over the edge. This investigation into the edge of canvas painting is what I designate as Kuzucan's 'play with the edges of painting'.

Let us go back to the first avant-garde square in the history of art. If we look at the 1913 drawing by Malevich again and manage to forget that this was the sketch for a stage curtain by squinting our eyes – in all likelihood this is what the artist did himself – we may just perceive this square within a square as a plane, rather than reading it as a mimetic representation of three-dimensional space. Leaving aside what we know about its scale and size, the diagonal lines drawn for the purpose of conveying the depth of the stage may also be read as if these lines were drawn to indicate the frame of the painting. In other words, by abandoning the empirical representation of perspectival space, we may attain a modernist approach, the zero degree of form, if not of painting itself (which for Malevich also carried supernatural associations). This first geometric abstraction that the 1913 sketch served as the inspiration, is nowadays more generally referred to as *Black Square*. However, the painting's original title in Russian, *Chetyreugol'nik*³, the literal English translation for which is *quadrilateral*, derives from the Latin word *quadrum*, meaning

both frame and square. Tallying with the genesis of its original title, the *Quadrilateral* also points to the relationship between surface and form that remains intact within a white frame; Malevich does not manage to abandon this relationship completely, even at the zero point of form. In other words, this particular coincidence is precisely what reveals the painter's most vulnerable point, because no matter how the *Black Square* imitates the shape of the canvas on which it lies, and straightforwardly underscores the picture plane, the painter won't allow the black to take hold of the whole surface, and instead enframes it within the areas painted in white. In other words, Malevich does not leave the square without an edge. The very point where form vanquishes light not only indicates the parting of ways between the group of painters primarily preoccupied with the fight against light, form and representation, but also implies the presence of a window that, were it not closed, would allow one to reach a more authentic reality.⁴ Even though the horizon line disappears and the painter abandons mimetic representation, Malevich does not entirely reach the zero point of painting. In short, despite its victory over the solar eclipse's light, the pictorial surface remains a window. A square within a square.

Nevertheless, endowed with the mastery of visual trickery particular to painters, Malevich does not stop teasing the perceptive sensibilities of those with keen eyes; *Black Square* is actually not a perfect

3. Masha Chlenova, "0.10", in *Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925: How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, Leah Dickerman (ed.) (New York: MoMA, 2012), pp. 206-225.

4. As we all know, that window was definitively shut, and the end of painting declared, six years after Malevich first displayed his *Quadrilateral*, by Alexandr Rodchenko's notorious 1921 tryptich, *Pure Red Color, Pure Yellow Color, Pure Blue Color*, *de facto* abolishing the frame.



square. Observed carefully, one realises that the sides of this quadrilateral do not meet at a 90-degree angle; the lines elude becoming parallel vectors, if only slightly, and do not exactly follow the shape of the square surface they are bound to, i.e. the shape of the picture plane. As for the white frame, which Malevich deliberately painted so that the brush strokes remain noticeable (most probably to retain a degree of *factura*, i.e. more texture), it actually becomes the conveyer of drifting and deviation, not only of the negative space that suggests frame but of the human eye and perception as well. Insofar as the geometric system created by Malevich himself computes the world on the basis of light and dark, these drifts and deviations take us to Nuri Kuzucan's squares and quadrilaterals and games with the edge of painting. To the extent of my knowledge, Kuzucan's variegated games that showcase the picture plane's deceptive world of quadrilaterals began to gain prominence with his work titled *Black and White Line*.⁵ Just as they did in the 1915 exhibition where Malevich first showed *Black Square* and its various permutations, quadrilaterals also play a principal role in Kuzucan's *Black and White Line*, and his following works from the series *No. 1-5*. Similar to Malevich's, neither Kuzucan's forms nor their edges are perfect. A little thicker than customary, these seemingly square-shaped canvases (when in fact, their format, 50 x 55 cm, makes them *quadrilaterals*), convey a sort of geometric *ostranenie*, that is, something odd is happening in them. The square sits on top of a square, the intermediary space alternatively thickens and thins out, and, as the surfaces become slippery, shapes go adrift. The tones of grey, which at

Black and White Line,
2020
Acrylic on canvas
55 x 50 cm

5. Of course, Kuzucan's interest in the edge in earlier works may be suggested as providing further examples. For instance, we could take the moment in 2010 when the artist began to extend the shadow of the buildings depicted in his paintings of plans and bird's eye views onto the outer edges of the canvas as a starting point. Then, one could follow these edges for 10 years, tracing the progressive thickening of Kuzucan's stretchers. Keeping the length of this text and the scope of this exhibition in mind, I chose to narrow my focus to a specific constellation of non-perspectival, square-shaped pictures.

6. This is precisely the reason why Stella's early works are considered at the crux of American Minimalism. See Hal Foster, "The Crux of Minimalism" in *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1996), pp. 34-68 and Thierry de Duve, "The Monochrome and the Blank Canvas" in *Reconstructing Modernism*, Serge Guilbaut (ed.) (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), pp. 244-310.

first seem as though they are forms tucked into a corner and eclipsed, preclude the illusion of size and volume when looked at from a different angle; the figure-ground relationship doesn't add up, and the shapes remain ambiguous. Moreover, Kuzucan leaves the paint that seeps from underneath the masking tape that he uses to delineate the edges separating the quadrilaterals. He thus allows the "errors" of the system he created to be visible. These predominantly black and white paintings, comprise sharp quadrilaterals and offer multiplying surfaces. With the addition of the shifting and deviating edges to the equation, they connote the digital world. Seen in this light, Kuzucan's quadrilaterals begin to invoke the aspect ratio of the wide array of digital screens and the shapes of the hundreds of pictures shared daily on these devices. As such, this muted black and white palette veers towards the binary code system that computer processors are based on: This reduced colour palette that presides over Kuzucan's unique three-dimensional system (more on that soon), i.e. black and white, also summons up the binary model's fundamental unit of the "byte". As for the colours he uses in the series *No. 1-5*, rather than the visible physicality of the pigment, they emanate from the sides, calling to mind the light that escapes from photocopy machines or scanners, or the dead pixel strips that appear on the broken surfaces of damaged digital screens. Malevich may well have discarded light by introducing a world of two-dimensional quadrilaterals to the vocabulary of oil painting at the beginning of the 20th century, but he had not managed to close the window entirely, eventually remaining trapped on the surface of the canvas in his modernist inquiry; looking at them today, these courageous attempts hence remain looking somewhat "home-made". Kuzucan's conversation with Malevich on quadrilaterals and their respective edges resembles the relation of the digital to the analogue, remaining indebtedly close, yet retaining an ontological arm's length distance.

At this point, another actor comes to the forefront in the constellation of painters that I imagine happening between Kuzucan and his forerunners who play with the edges of painting: Frank Stella. Unlike his fellow minimalist artists and theorists who renounced painting and shifted to sculpture Stella stayed on his own track, i.e. that of painting as a discipline, but rather than seeing the pictorial surface as a limited playing field, he incorporated the object status of the canvases into his practice, making it a problem to solve through his painting practice.⁶ In my opinion, Kuzucan's *Black and White Line*, and the following quadrilaterals are specifically in dialogue with Stella's *Black Paintings* series, which he made between 1958-1960 when he was still in his twenties. (The resemblance of the two titles is surely not a coincidence!) Pro-

duced with a house paintbrush and enamel paint, Frank Stella's *Black Paintings* consist of large canvases featuring black strips. What appears in these paintings to be a sort of figure-ground relationship created through black and white is actually a visual play between the black of the enamel paint and the coated white of the canvas. In other words, Stella also plays some sort of game with the edge, and unsettles the self-confidence of the viewer's eyes once more, by means of a simple illusion, through the lineless lines that delimit the edge. Stella's *Black Paintings* are of crucial importance for the history of painting in that they grant physical three-dimensionality to the canvas by sustaining this rational, modular structure not only visually, but in the object as well. The main feature that is reminiscent of Stella's canvases in *Black and White Line* and subsequent "edge paintings" is that Kuzucan's canvases are thicker than normal and also expand the surface of the painting to the sides of the stretcher, thereby extending to and including the edge. In his *Black Paintings*, Stella chose to achieve this material thickness by making the thickness of his stretchers the same as the width of the black stripes applied on the painting's surface, which were in turn determined by the thickness of the house brush that he used. This is why the *Black Paintings* are modular structures, and why Stella prefigures the entire organisational structure of the canvas through a single decision; hence, everything departs from aligning the black stripes according to the thickness of his chosen brush. The kind of game that Stella specifically implemented in this series, but also sustained in his later practice – that is, the mirroring of both formal characteristics and the morphology of the object– transforms the painting into a signifier, dependent on the shape as well as the proportions of the frame that supports it. The object is both the signifier and the signified; the painting then becomes a sign. Just like Stella, Kuzucan addresses the issue of the frame, initiated by Malevich's quadrilateral, by folding it onto the edge that meets the wall. Kuzucan custom orders his canvases for his paintings of quadrilaterals and begins to use the determined thickness of the edge itself as a painting surface. As is the case in both *Black and White Line* and *No. 1-5, Equinox* and his larger *28 Units*, the surfaces of the sides of the canvas become an element of the play with perception devised by the artist. In these works, all surfaces of the painting comprise the shapes that map its own form; that is, they come together with the quadrilateral itself in the rectangular world of the picture place. Yet the painting, seemingly reduced to its simplest elements by Stella's restrictions, and also by its deductive structure, is expanded once again in Kuzucan, be-



Adnan Çoker, *Homage to Malevich* [Maleviç'e Saygı], 1985. Oil on canvas, 150 x 150 cm. Erhan Kamışlı Collection

cause the combinations and permutations generated by this geometric order suddenly proliferate, bringing coloured light into the equation, from the edges.⁷

In *Equinox* and *28 Units*, Kuzucan rekindles Malevich's war waged against mimetic representation and move towards abstraction through quadrilaterals, though he does so from a different angle integrating light back onto the surface of the canvas. When *Equinox* is viewed head-on, the surface of the canvas on top appears to be divided into quarters: The upper left quarter is pitch black, just like Malevich's square, whereas the one immediately underneath is pure white. In other words, non-colour (black) and all-colours (white) are neighbours. As for the quadrants on the right, they act as a ceasefire, so to speak, painted slightly off-white, between black and white, light and darkness. (It is impossible not to think here of *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, the white square on a white surface which Malevich created three years after *Black Square*.) As for *Equinox*'s lower half, that

is, the canvas hung 9 cm below the upper half, it consists of a pure white surface, at least when faced directly. Yet, if we were to leave it there, the description would remain incomplete, because Kuzucan's work does not end on the frontal plane; he incorporates the edges of the stretchers, thereby rendering their side-effects such as emanating lights, and shadows cast by their thickness into the big picture. On the upper canvas, the black square folds to the left side of the stretcher and stops halfway; it is no longer the perfect square perceived from the front. The lower right edge of the same piece responds to the empty space left there with a black stripe, starting a conversation across diagonals. This rectangular black stripe on the lower right edge jumps onto the canvas below and continues on the edge of its upper quadrant. It is as if the strips of Stella's *Black Paintings*

sharpen in Kuzucan's play with the edge of painting; and the support, already objectified by the minimalist painter, divides up into sections, as though dissolving into its own grid, carrying this idea a step further. Kuzucan is not done yet playing with the edge: in *Equinox*, the seemingly dispersed antagonisms between black-white, shadow-light, and colour also break free of the surface and start to expand onto the wall. This leads us to *Equinox*'s final surprise: the play of bright, coloured light, contained in the empty space between the two canvases. This is the result of an exchange on the folded sides of the two stretchers facing each other, as if two electronic devices are communicating with one another. Kuzucan hid a red stripe in the fold under the upper canvas, and we only become aware of it due to the coloured light reflected onto the surface of the white wall that it's hung on. Due to the light-absorb-

7. In order to break free from this dead-end which he had propelled himself into, Stella altogether abandoned the quadrilateral after *Black Paintings*, and began to reflect the shapes of his canvases in the forms that appear on the surfaces of his paintings, starting with *Aluminium Paintings* (1960) and *Copper Paintings* (1960-61); yet, in these later works, surface and canvas continue to determine one another, as they did in *Black Paintings*.

ing qualities of the strip of black, that the artist painted across, half the width of the stretcher, the strong hue reflected on the wall from the red pigment is perceived as a coloured light source itself; leading one to suspect an artificial source. *Equinox* is not only in dialogue with Malevich and Stella because Kuzucan's play with the edge of painting is not limited to the surface of the canvas. This game continues on the folded edges of the stretcher, this intermediary space opens up Kuzucan's work to invite other artists. When attempting to grasp the nature of this particular effect of coloured light, the first work that comes to mind is *Icon 1*, the 1961–2 work by Dan Flavin, known for his use of fluorescent light tubes in his installations, and a friend of Stella's. *Icon 1*, the last work which Flavin created before renouncing canvas painting, is a square-shaped canvas, which the artist painted red, (like Rodchenko's *Pure Red Color*), with a red fluorescent light tube of the same length as the canvas it's placed directly on top of. In *Equinox*, however, Kuzucan does not need to plug in a device to create the effect of light. Therefore, after a brief nod to Flavin, a closer kinship can be established by looking back to Kuzucan's formative years. I posit that the light that emanates and fills in the empty space between the two canvases in *Equinox* are in dialogue with the sense of light in the paintings of Kuzucan's studio teacher, Adnan Çoker.⁸ This is in reference to the arbitrary light insinuated by the floating architectural forms against pitch-black backgrounds, that signature style, designated as "hanging forms" or "light elements" by Çoker himself. However, unlike his professor, who masterfully achieves an illusion of light through carefully modelled colour transitions, Kuzucan produces the effect of light by making an architectural arrangement, devising a system that allows for both the surface and colours to reflect the existing light. This practice underscores the difference between the two artists' approaches to the architecture of painting: where one creates the illusion of light and space, the other achieves them through arrangement. This play with light is continued and further expanded upon in Kuzucan's *28 Units*, in which the artists boxes the emanating light into frames. Furthermore, in this particular work, the artist pushes the quadrilaterals towards the background, multiplying the potential of play with the edge of painting by 28.

Kuzucan breaks down painting into its simplest elements and uses them as a basis to create a new system. While doing so, he spills over the edges; Kuzucan's playful approach to the edge in painting is also a historical conversation with fellow artists, who, like himself, embarked on journeys to discover the frontiers and potentialities of painting. Kuzucan rescues shadow and light from existing in an illusory space

8. In another interesting coincidence, the work that also gave its name to Çoker's 1989 retrospective exhibition held at the Derimod Art Gallery and was used for the cover of its catalogue, was titled "Maleviç'e Saygı, Yüzelli Çarpı Yüzelli Santimetre" [Homage to Malevich, Fifty by Fifty Centimetres]. Adnan Çoker, *Maleviç'e Saygı, Yüzelli Çarpı Yüzelli Santimetre* [Homage to Malevich, Fifty by Fifty Centimetres] (Istanbul: Derimod, 1989).

created by the painter and transforms these crucial elements of painting into a spatial experience through the games and manœuvres that the artist implements in *Black and White Line, Equinox, No. 1-5*, and *28 Units*. This is a different test of the viewer's perceptual range. In this way, the heavy formalist burden of modernist painting, which started when Malevich declared war on the sun, a fight that continued through the likes of Rodchenko, Stella, Flavin and Çoker, turns into a game that Kuzucan plays along the edges of painting.