

Endings,
Beginnings
and
Regret:

A Personal
Analysis of Anticipated
Career Regret

Endings, beginnings and regret:

A personal analysis of anticipated career regret

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Table of Contents

Intro	p.4
Defining	
Defining Regret through language	p.6
Definitions through scientists and thinkers	
Regret in Decision Making	p.7
Regret and Environment	p.7
Applying the study to anticipated career regret	p.8
Defining regret: “What is Regret?”	p.10
“Why is it (regret) so scary?”	p.11
Regret in Art	p.13
“Self”	p.15
“Black Suprematists Square”	p.17
Artistic research of my regret	p.22
Coming up with the idea	p.23
Research through Making	p.24
Conclusion	p.27
Evaluating my research	p.28
Appendices:	p.28
Works Cited:	p.30

Endings, Beginnings and Regret:

A Personal Analysis of Anticipated Career Regret

Graduation is already here and I have not explored all I was planning to. After graduating, I will finally work as a tattoo artist full time. Having spent the last year and a half studying at Willem de Kooning Academy and working at the tattoo shop, I am excited for this next step. Yet, I fear I have not explored the different stations like I was planning to when I enrolled four years ago. Did I fail? Will I regret not putting more effort into exploration?

Why is it, that I fear regret so much? Even if I don't explore every material available at the academy, I know I will be doing what I love – tattoos. Yet I cannot deny this fear of regret...

My aim in this writing is to explain ‘What is regret?’ and in doing so I hope to understand ‘Why is it so scary?’.

In this essay I will begin by analysing the word regret in the languages I speak, then I will use psychology references on regret to understand its different dimensions and create a new framework of regret. Hopefully here, my second question ‘Why is it so scary’ will become clear. Going forward, I look at how regret appears in contemporary art. Lastly, as I'm researching theoretically I will also research creatively – by making, the final chapter of this research paper will be a reflection of the making.



Defining Regret through language

I examine the word regret in Greek, Russian and English, the main languages I use and compare the three definitions. Similarities or differences could point to dimensions of regret that might help kick-start this research.

To me, regret's essence is best embodied in Greek, my primary language. "Μετάνοω" stems from "μετά" and "νόω," meaning 'after' and 'cognition' respectively. Quite literally, it suggests a post-act re-evaluation. Here, regret expresses a dynamic process of reflection and adjustment. If regret entails revisiting past actions, it's only natural for me to engage in it, striving for a future devoid of regrets. (Lexigram, 2015)

In Russian, regret is articulated as “сoжаление”. It possessed two definitions: one is contained within the self, as the feeling of sadness over a past event that cannot be changed. Two, extends outward and refers to compassion/pity for someone's regretful or sad circumstance. (Ru.thefreedictionary.com, 2003)

In English definitions I also found regret to have two interpretations. One would be the feeling of sadness over something sad or wrong or about a mistake made in the past. Two, like Russian, encompasses an expression of empathetic pain, commiserating with another's misfortune. (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024)

Across these languages – Greek, Russian and English - regret is uniformly understood as disappointment over a past occurrence. Notably, in Greek regret is not used to express commiseration (Greek possesses another word specific to commiseration “συμπόνια”). From this comparison we can derive that regret emerges as a universal human experience, transcending linguistic and cultural boundaries. Interestingly these definitions predominantly frame regret as strictly concerning past events. Yet, I'm anticipating future regret, a sentiment I believe is also universal.

Definitions through scientists and thinkers

Regret in Decision Making

After finding that anticipated future regret is not mentioned in language I delve deeper into the topic. “Regret in Decision Making” (Terry Connolly and Marcel Zeelenberg, 2006) discuss ‘Pre-emptive regret’. Reflecting upon a variety of studies they created the Decision Justification Theory. The psychiatrists posit regret as consisting of two distinct components: “You regret both that the outcome is poorer than some standard (often the outcome of the choice you rejected), and that the decision you made was, in retrospect, unjustified” (Terry Connolly and Marcel Zeelenberg, 2006, p.213). They propose that justification, can determine the degree of regret individuals experience. A decision that is justified even in the case of a bad outcome, leads to less regret than an unjustified decision. Justification meaning a combination of education, history, and personality traits. Decisions that align with personality characteristics of the decision-maker result in diminished levels of regret compared to decisions perceived as deviations from established behavioural norms.

This study shows that anticipated regret truly is a universal experience, as I hypothesized, because it is crucial to decision making, fitting for my case of making decisions regarding the start of my professional life. I also retrieve that personality patterns impact decision making and in turn regret to a great degree. This compelling dimension is an aspect of regret I did not anticipate but one that now I find important. Regret appears abstract but, if we consider its reliance on personality we can begin to create a more in-depth explanation of it.

Incorporating the personality dimension also points to regret relating to identity. Looking at regret as a reflection of identity can explain the urgency of my eternal introspection. Artistic expression to an artist (or at least to me – artist) is always to some degree an expression of identity; Making the wrong career-path-decision would mean making the wrong art, wrong career and wrong expression of identity all as consequences and influences of each-other.

Regret and Environment

Personality, despite its obvious connection to the person is also greatly influenced by environment. We exist as parts of a collective, very rarely do people choose to live in isolation but that’s not the focus of this research. As we depend on the collective we are

also shaped by it. This affects personality, morality, cognition and I hypothesize also regret, using the following research I speculate the way being part of a collective of multifaceted artists shapes my anticipated regret.

“The Who in Regret: How Psychological Closeness Affects Regret and Social Distancing” (Karen Winterich, Vikas Mittal, J. Jeffrey Inman, 2010) expands knowledge on consumer regret through social comparison theory. “Social comparison theory states that individuals evaluate themselves in comparison to others, suggesting that individuals not only make comparisons to forgone alternatives, but also to the chooser of the forgone alternative.” (Festinger, 1954, as cited in Winterich, Mittal, J. Inman, 2010). Psychological closeness, “is influenced by physical proximity and/or similarities such as age or gender” (Tesser and Campbell, 1982, as cited in Winterich, Mittal, J. Inman, 2010). Based on a series of psychological studies, Winterich, Mittal, Inman discovered that psychological closeness is directly proportional to feelings of regret. This often results in social distancing: we tend to avoid the people who made the better choice in order to avoid feelings of regret. The degree of separation and the confidence in one’s ability to reach the desired outcome are proven here to reflect one’s self-confidence (in post-regrettable-action situations). Then feelings of envy are tested as a new variable in this regret research. The discovery is that individuals with high self-esteem experience minimal feelings of envy, which are not significantly affected by different scenarios, whether they are able or unable to reach the desired object. In contrast, individuals with low self-esteem not only experience envy towards others, but also develop a negative perception of the desired object when they believe it is unlikely for them to attain it (2010).

The study being about consumer regret focuses on obtaining an object but we can hypothesize the same relationship between psychological closeness – regret – envy will occur in the process of obtaining any outcome. Meaning taking the (regrettable/un-regrettable) steps to reach a goal. I base this assumption on social comparison theory, if it is proven and applicable in consumer regret it’s likely applicable to other types of regret. With this in mind I move forward to hypothesize upon anticipated career regret within my artistic practice.

Applying the study to anticipated career regret

Having spent four years in the academy psychological closeness has been established maybe not with all peers but definitely with some. Many are not sufficiently advanced in their careers (as we are still perusing education) however, I hold my own perspective on who is successful in their current works and who will achieve success in their careers. Watching them bring great artistic expression to life forces me to ask, “Should I have done that too? Worked with that material or explored that concept?” unknowingly applying social comparison theory. Perhaps because I critique and evaluate my own work and have no way of knowing how others assess themselves, I assume their practice leads to greater happiness and (eventually) success. This assumption is what leads to anticipating career regret.

Social media is also not to be overlooked here. I hypothesize two different routes that may lead to feelings of psychological closeness. One, watching an artist consistently post their work. Consistent, daily or almost daily input, can make us feel some sense of psychological closeness. Two, artists that choose the “showing daily life” marketing approach to their social media. This aims to fabricate a familiarity with the creator in turn establish a feeling of psychological closeness between creator and viewer ⁽¹⁾. Having the ability to see another artist’s engagement, likes, relevance in the scene or simply viewing their work as of high visual or conceptual quality can lead us to think “if only I had the time, space, financial ability, knowledge, skill to do that”. This would be an active example of social comparison theory taking place and leading to some feeling of regret.

Proximity is a topic that’s come up in and outside of this research period in my circle of peers and artists I’m close with across mediums, styles, nationalities, age groups, genders. From these discussions I interpreted that artists see the world not as it is but as what we imagine it to be or, as we would have created it. In a way we play God by putting ourselves in the shoes of the creator of a piece ⁽²⁾. By default, this leads to comparing our abilities with the abilities of said creator. Even when an artist has high self-esteem and is confident and happy with their practice, seeing someone create a beautiful work often leads to comparison and in turn (some degree of) regret.

I think this artistic regret happens even when there is no intention for mending it. For example, recently I was discussing with my colleague at the tattoo shop, how great it would be to know oil painting. Being able to apply oil colour painting techniques to the colouring techniques in tattoos opens possibilities for many beautiful effects. Realistically, we know we don’t have the time or energy to study oil painting and it’s not the only way to better our tattoo-work nor are our tattoos bad to begin with. Yet, the feeling of regret for not having studied oil painting remains.

Defining Regret:

“What is Regret?”

There can be many dimensions to regret psychological and conceptual. Having established some explanations within the self and in relation to the environment I will create a definition of regret that combines the previous findings.

Regret is the disappointment after a sequence of unsatisfying events: it has two main components: a poor outcome and an unjustified decision. The measurement for justification is created through a combination of personality education and history and it (justification) has an indirect relationship to regret (more justification, less regret). Parallel to the inward, regret is affected by one’s environment due to social comparison. Psychological closeness to a person that avoided the poor outcome, results in social distancing. The level of psychological closeness and degree of separation have a proportional relationship with regret (more x, more regret). The rapidness at which this correlation intensifies is determined by self-confidence.

If we consider my previous hypothesis regarding regret in context of an artist truth, regret is created by an artist’s constant motivation to create and subsequent comparison to creator of every artistic expression they encounter.

“Why is it (regret) so scary?”

as a crucial factor in decision-making, I have reached possibly the most important (yet very simple) conclusion: Without no regrettable outcome there would be no satisfactory outcome. The existence of that contrast is essential to both. Regret implies a less than satisfactory outcome, which should be feared and avoided.

I raised this question in the introduction in hopes that analysing regret will explain its scary nature. Partially I believe the fear arises from regret having a co-dependent relationship with personality and in turn identity. Both closely tied to artistic expression. As I reach the end of my studies and fully immerse myself in the professional world, I am confronted with the dilemma of how will my identity be moulded by this experience. The same applies to artistic expression, how will financially depending on my artistic practice shape it? There is no definitive answer that can be given but the unknown leads to the creation of many scary scenarios. Being in an environment of artists, as I discussed earlier, also fosters social comparison, which in turn presents several opportunities for experiencing regret. Entering the professional field involves defining our artistic expression and we can only hope that close proximity will not lead to comparison that results in a deep regret.

I have made the decision to be a commercial artist ⁽³⁾. Decision making as we have discovered relies on analysing anticipated regrets. The regrettable consequence I foresee is the loss of artistic freedom and in turn artistic identity. The thought of this scenario is petrifying but if regret is part of decision making my dread demonstrates that I possess the mental capacity to make a choice. At the same time, recognizing regret

Regret in Art

Trigger warning: blood, dead body

Moving forward I will examine two art-works that in my interpretation touch on the topic of regret. Having created a framework of regret and anticipated regret from the view-point of a young professional in the art industry, the goal in this examination is to see the ways regret is incorporated in works of established artists.



“Self” 1991-now

Marc Quinn (1964-now)

Self is a series of contemporary self-portraits. Starting in 1991, every five years the artist makes a new iteration. He collects his own blood and makes a cast of his head that is then poured from his blood. The work is preserved in silicone and kept frozen by a special display-cooler. Each sculpture captures exactly how Quinn looked at the time but also documents his health through his blood. It blends self-documentation, self-reflection and vulnerability by making a very literal self-portrait. (marcquinn.com, 2024)



“Self 1991” first iteration, marcquinn.com/

In my view it’s a genius work: it combines aesthetic quality, conceptual quality and is shocking in a way that separates it from other works and forces curiosity from the viewer. Being so tied to identity it has the ability to speak on a vast variety of topics.

Quinn started the project as he was battling alcohol addiction, the progression of the portraits and his blood hold that history by showing how his body underwent that process. Both the difference in his features and the changes in his blood show a metamorphosis or even a rebirth. (Will Self, 2009)

This can be interpreted as performance art about regret; the portraits function as a means of preserving regret and displaying regret while the duration of the series gives it its performative quality. If regret is re-evaluation of unpleasant moments from the past this work parallels that sentiment as a display of the past that allows investigation of it. Same as regret it reflects the content of one: in regret – morals in “Self” – DNA.



“Self 1996”, second iteration
marcquinn.com



“Self 2001”, third iteration
marcquinn.com



“Self 2006”, fourth iteration
marcquinn.com



“Self 2011”, fifth iteration
marcquinn.com

Black Suprematists Square, 1915

Kazimir Malevich (1879-1935)



ЧЕРНЫЙ СУПРЕМАТИЧЕСКИЙ КВАДРАТ (BLACK SUPERMATIST SQUARE) 15/12/1915, Малевич Казимир, The State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow

The work and Suprematism

The “Black Suprematist Square” ⁽⁴⁾ is oil on linen canvas 79,5x79,5cm by Kazimir Malevich painted in 1915. The painting was part of the “last futurist painting exhibition: 010 (zero-ten)”. That was when Malevich introduced Suprematism with his new collection of paintings where the Black Suprematist Square was the centrepiece. He also exhibited his manifesto *From Cubism to Suprematism* where he writes that he stepped beyond zero entering minus one, letting go of any realistic depiction or any figure representation that can be rationalized. It was meant as artistic liberation from figurative depiction. The Black Suprematist Square is zero - the truest depiction of nothingness. His next paintings were the minus one - the feeling that arose from letting go of realism and thus reality. (Andrei Sarabyanov, 2016)

Artistic and Historical context

Before Suprematism, Malevich was already chasing abstraction. He explored Futurism and Cubism, both movements emerging from industrialism; previously the goal was to depict reality, industrialism and the development of film and photography created a new urgency to depict something new - beyond realism. Important to note is that Malevich avoided painting factories, which were prominent in Futurism especially. He sees the factory as destroying individualism and humanity. (Valeria Kosyakova, 2021)

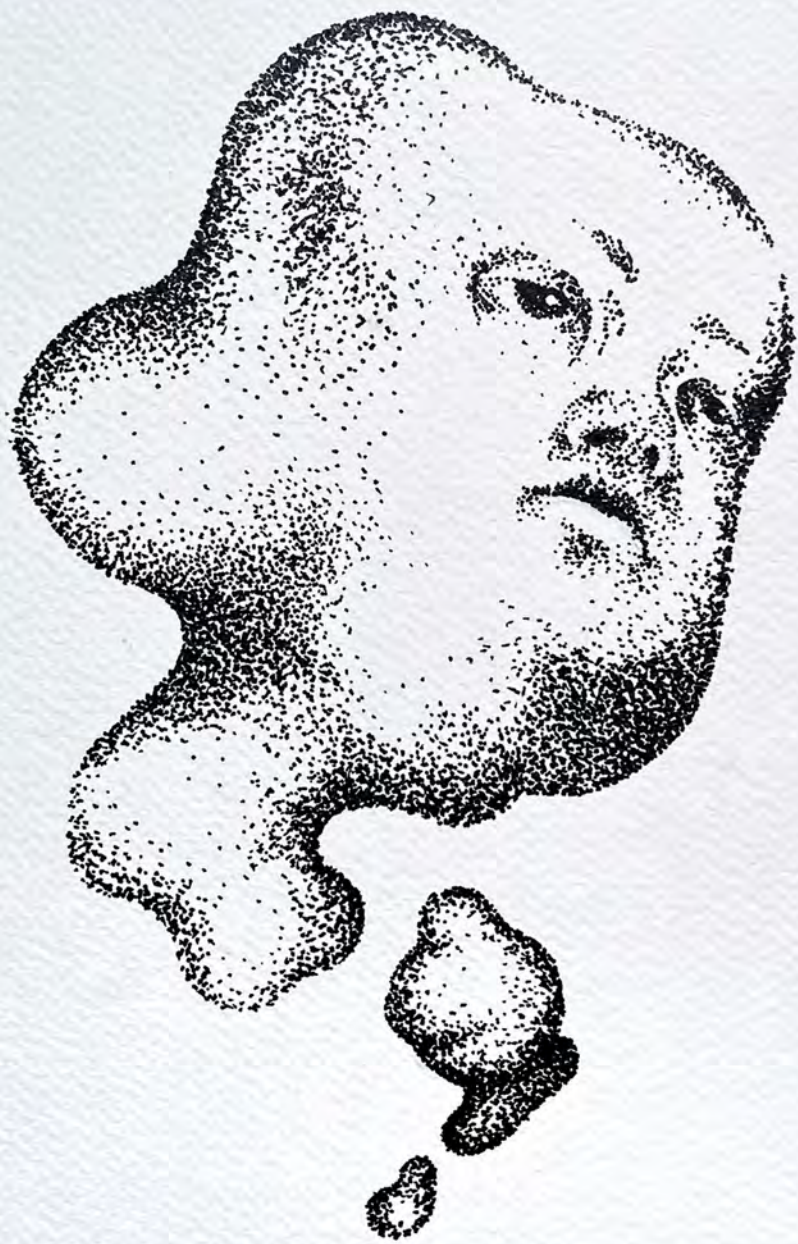
Historically, Suprematism existed in a very politically charged time, during the First World War and shortly before the Russian Revolution. The future here is relevant as the Black Suprematist Square is brought to the stage-front of his life later. During Lenin time (1917-1924) Malevich focuses on philosophy and teaching. He develops a teaching method for artists designed to free them from objects and realism, which he viewed as tyranny for an artist. Around Stalin time (late 1920's) Malevich paints again. He comes back to figures but his objects are faceless, anonymous, the background is Suprematist and the themes translate emptiness. He does not give names or explanations to his later work, but experts translate it as him witnessing the death of Christianity and culture ⁽⁵⁾. His influence on the world of art outside the Soviet Union becomes the ground for many interrogations. When Malevich becomes sick with cancer his plead to be treated in specialized European hospitals is denied and he dies in Leningrad (USSR). His last Suprematist exhibition would be his funeral. After his body is cremated, his ashes are turned into a Suprematist sculpture and placed in a public memorial. During WW2 the memorial is bombed and destroyed, after it is re-enacted but eventually it is destroyed again, in its place today stands an apartment complex. (Valeria Kosyakova, 2021)



Malevich in his deathbed, surrounded by his works (1935)

Malevich's Regret

I derive three forms of regret from this piece and the context. Art regret, political regret and existential regret. Art regret shows in his effort to un-learn realism and form, shown both in Supermatist ideology and the teaching technique that he develops. There are a few motives for political regret here. One is the first World War, something that could not have escaped Malevich. There was an awareness that industrialism brought the war and as mentioned Malevich saw a loss of humanity in industrialism and the factory. Two is the Russian Revolution, 1915 was a time of uncertainty but one could argue that doesn't necessitate regret. But, the establishment of the Soviet Union (following the revolution) brought great destruction and death. Malevich's Supermatism arguably could have been an anticipation of a regrettable future. Lastly, existential regret I see represented in his funeral-exhibition. On top of the tragic circumstances of his death, Malevich by making his funeral Supermatist makes it into nothingness. If the point was to go beyond zero he accomplishes that in his work, then in his death and finally in what happens to his memorial. One could argue that he spent his career chasing this nothingness so it would not be regretful to him but the goal being a return to nothingness implies a regret for existing in the first place.



Artistic

Research

of my

Regret

The last component of my regret research involves artistic exploration through making. The most reliable approach to find out if I will regret not having experimented more during my time at Willem de Kooning Academy is to experiment and so I did. I documented my making process and here I summarise it. The installation is not yet finished so sadly I will not be able to write about the final result.

Coming up with the idea

My first reaction was to plan how I can incorporate every station and skill into this project. Soon I realized that was fear of regret. Much as I wanted to try everything I also wanted to make a beautiful work and usually that requires spending some time with the material. So I decided I will try porcelain my reasons being: 1) I have wanted to try it since I learned it was a possibility back when I was in the first year. 2) Porcelain reminds me of Ukraine. Ukrainian households usually have a display of porcelain plates and cups and figurines. My house is no exception; thought I grew up in Cyprus my Ukrainian mother made sure our house had a more-than-packed display of porcelain. Growing up in Cyprus in a Cypriot refugee family, the fear of my home being taken away was instilled into me from a young age. Before 2013 I thought to myself *"If they take Cyprus at least I have Ukraine"*. In 2022 our house in Ukraine was burned, everything in it also burned or looted but it makes no difference. If I make my porcelain here, now, maybe no-one can take it away from me.

Having picked my material, I needed a vision. Regret is like the Lernean Hydra. She was the multi-headed serpent that guarded lake Lerna. "It was often said to have been exceptionally difficult to kill because, as soon as one head was cut off, a new head, or more commonly two, would grow up in its place" (Robin Hard, 2004). Heracles discovered that the heads would stop growing only if fire was used. To get to this conclusion he had to enter the battle, similarly to kill a regret one has to tackle it, take the route you fear you will regret not taking. I thought it's more than fitting for my project to be many-many heads. Serpents don't speak to me. Motivated by being in the baby phase of my career

and child regret being a topic that came up too often in my search results I liked the idea of making baby heads. Bonus it allowed for absurd amount of baby-making jokes making mine and the station peers experience even more fun. Through the research I also now find this parallel between Quinn's heads and mine, for this I will make one as an homage to him. Often, like in this instance, I find that my work is decoded to me with time, which is why I chose to use artistic research as one of my methods. I remain open to interpretations of this work and I'm curious to hear reflections on it when it is displayed.

Research through Making

Finally, I started working. I drew baby heads to understand the proportions, I made moulds from baby dolls, I clay-made my own baby heads, I even 3D printed one in hopes to make a mould from it. Some things went horribly like the clown baby mould that took three days to make when I anticipated six hours and turned out to be extremely difficult to cast and almost useless. Other things went great like when I decided to take a risk and make a huge baby head (45x45x40 cm to be exact), I did spend too many hours on it so it did take away hours from the small baby heads but the outcome so far is worth it.



Clown baby mould mentioned in the text, this image is from the last steps once I was able to take out the clay model from the plaster



The big baby head I am so proud of, side view, still in the drying process



Me destroying a clay model made for casting once I learned how difficult and expensive big moulds are



Try out of mixing porcelain with cotton, still drying



Sketch before applying pigment, baby head after bisque firing. Coming to the conclusion that tattoos are my true calling and I do not regret not trying porcelain (and other materials) sooner I made the decision to use tattoo art in decorating the head. Here (and in the cover of this essay) I use Copperplate inspired typography which is the 'go to' type for lettering tattoos.

Conclusion

Every so often I asked myself:

- do I regret not doing this sooner?
- No

I may at times feel like committing to being a commercial artist will have a negative impact on my career but during these few months, every time I had to tattoo some commercial design I was so excited to make a piece because 1) I get to see the finished product (unlike ceramics that take months) and 2) I can make someone feel more at home in their body. It could have been great to do ceramics sooner, but, there is a reason why I chose tattoos and the same I believe applies to all the other skills I did not acquire. I found regret and comparison theory really true for myself, much of my fear of regret is from seeing everyone make beautiful work but I should trust in myself. At the same time, this research helped me realise how crucial regret is to decision making, instead of being paralyzed by that fear, I can now recognise that it is an essential step in making a choice. Applied to a PowerPlay perspective this research shows the relationship between financial gain – fear or financial instability - artistic practice – artistic freedom, pointing to how much regret is intergraded into life decisions touching these inescapable dimensions. Using the previous findings, we can begin to question how many career choices were made based on anticipated regret from choices made out of fear of financial instability and in turn how the capitalist system acts as a PowerStructure that among other thing can shape the creative expression of artists. Simultaneously, regret can be a powerful tool as well. Showing your regrets strips you as a maker naked and shows your viewer your true self; your values in the case of Quinn who showed us his commitment to life or your depression in the case of Malevich who showed a new depth of sadness.

Evaluating my research

The topic of regret is very vast and possesses many angles. For my research of anticipated regret from a young adult entering the art industry I could benefit from conducting interviews with people in the same position, it's a topic that has naturally come up but a structured interview could bring new insight. Research on financial regret later on in life also could widen the understanding of regret I was able to produce. In general, when researching regret, I find it important to have a specific angle, there is great amounts of compelling discussions and views on regret and it can make getting lost in it quite easy.

Appendices:

1. Both can be classified as parasocial relationships. “One of the striking characteristics of the new mass media-radio, television, and the movies-is that they give the illusion of face-to-face relationship with the performer. The conditions of response to the performer are analogous to those in a primary group. The most remote and illustrious men are met as if they were in the circle of one's peers; the same is true of a character in a story, who comes to life in these media in an especially vivid and arresting way. We propose to call the seeming face-to-face relationship between spectator and performer a parasocial relationship.” (Donald Horton, R. Richard Wohl, 1965)

2. Piece here refers to any artistic expression. Examples are buildings, bridges, clothing items, paintings, prints, tattoos, make-up, movies etc. Any artistic expression can be applied in this paragraph.

3. Working in a tattoo shop full time. Tattoo shops or walk-in shops or tattoo parlours are the places that have specific working hours (regardless if there are clients booked the shop will be working). The focus and mind-set is that we provide a service so we do tattoos to make the client happy which does not mean the tattoo will align with the kind of tattoos the artist is “passionate” about and it implies that we can work in a variety of styles. The incentive here is that tattoo shops guarantee financial stability since they appeal to a wider audience. Tattoo Studios or Private Studios work by appointment. Those are a place for tattoo artists who want to choose the kind of tattoos they give. Often they do not perform a big variety of tattoo styles which can make it harder to have a consistent flow of costumers as the audience is smaller, the incentive here is artistic freedom. I, motivated by fear or financial instability choose to work in a walk-in shop.

4. It's often referred to as the “Black Square” but, Malevich included the word “Suprematist” in the name. I use the name that Malevich gave as I find that to be the right thing to do and because the creation of Suprematist art movement, is an important dimension of the piece. Also Malevich and others have made many recreations of it, using the right name avoids confusion.

I use Russian sources for this work. I realize that it makes the sources inaccessible to some readers but: English sources miss the historical and political context of the work which I find unfair to the artist and work and misleading toward the reader. It would be illogical for me to rely on sources that are miss educated on Eastern European history especially when discussing a piece that is influenced by the socio-political context of the time.

5. The Soviet Union made religion illegal, it didn't stop people from believing but everything had to be done in secret. Also, many restrictions are placed in art; any art made public had to be approved by the government who pushed agendas and actively tried to stop creative thought as it could be grounds for an uprising. The Soviet State pushed for Constructivism and Productivism, both (art) movements that incorporated propaganda. Malevich is believed to be strongly affected by these restrictions in expression, coming from a Ukrainian village born to Polish parents, Christianity was and is a big part of Eastern European village life. Seeing the illegalisation of religion was not easy. He got his start in art by doing Christian folk art, themes of which continue to come back in his later work but never too obviously. Even with the Black Suprematist Square, in the 010 exhibition the painting was placed in the red/beautiful corner. In Eastern Orthodox Christianity that would be the placement of icons of Jesus, Malevich later names the black square the god of Suprematism.

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