Article

GROUND

Peter Stupples

In 1913 the Russian artist Kazimir Malevich participated in the production of a Futurist opera *Victory over the Sun*, designing the set, costumes and lighting. He drew sketches on paper with either Italian pencil or black chalk. On some sheets he drew a free-hand square in which he inscribed ideas for a curtain or backdrop. In the wide margins he made notes – the number of the scene, colours, and titles. He made a clear distinction between an image within a square frame, free of notes, and the ground – the paper outside the depicted square on which he, and others, felt free to add numbers or written comments.[1] Both the artist and others acknowledged, clearly understood and respected, a difference between 'picture' – a form, a visual concept/metaphor'[2] and ground – formless, carrying no transcendental hooks for meaning, available only for marks of historical information.

In order to be able say we see anything on the sheet of paper, apart from its whiteness and the constantly altering shadows cast on its surface, there has to be a mark of some sort. Whatever that mark might be will act, in the first instance, as 'figure', the mark bearing potential meaning on the meaningless ground: Ehrenzweig, Krauss and others have emphasised that seeing is selective, "a conscious gestalt compulsion makes us bisect the visual field into significant 'figure' and insignificant 'ground'."[3] We attend to the concrete 'thing-object', the object with perceptual form, and are blind to, or even repress, other material lying in the same field of visual attention. In a logical sense, both Malevich's drawings and their surrounding notes, are 'figure' and the paper 'ground', but in a psychological sense, the designs are the 'thing-objects' and the notes are rendered 'secondary', both not-figure and not-ground, thus establishing a hierarchy of visual attention.

This division of what we see, when confronted by the opacity of any artwork, into figure, ground, and not-figure-not-ground, is the result of a range of factors, among them a psychologically conditioned will-to-see-form, a craving for meaning – the separation of the meaningless from the potentially meaningful, as well as the visual conventions of our culture.

One of Malevich's sketches for the fifth scene of the second act of *Victory Over the Sun* (1913, Figure 1) contains a square within a square.[4] The diagonal lines from each corner of the frame to the corresponding outer corners of an inner square give rise to a perceptual ambiguity. Do these lines indicate that the inner square is to be read as the top of a truncated pyramid, the bottom of a pit, the rear wall of a theatre stage, or something else? In addition the inner square is roughly divided into two triangles, one black and one white, but there is a distinct, if accidental/casual, suggestion that the diagonal line marking the two halves of the inner image is slightly curved. Given the context of the opera, the triumph of the realism of space-time, of an expanded perception, over the narrow and false sense of our place in the universe – through our dependence on clock-time regulated by the sun – there may be a suggestion that the viewer read the black as outer space, and the white as the turning edge of the planet lit by the sun, which will be captured by the opera's heroes, the Future-dwelling Strongmen.

So we have a ground, lines to indicate a box within a box, gestalt with an image that might suggest the edge of a planet against the infinity of space. But of course any 'reading' of this drawing will depend upon at least three conditions: our form-seeking gestalt, the conventions of reading images developed by our upbringing, education and culture, and our knowledge of the historical circumstances surrounding the creation and reception of the image. In the glare of these three sources of illumination, some of which might be strong, others weak or even switched off, the mind will create the foundations of an ahistorical myth, the foundations of a 'meaning' to satisfy a ganglion of our current desires.

The form-seeking gestalt, the desire to grasp the 'thing-object', is ruthless in its repression of logic to attain optical coherence, to impose a perceptual order. In Malevich's sketch the paper of the ground is the same unmarked paper that forms the body of the larger square and the inner triangles: the body/ground of much of the image is the very same as the paper outside the image. The black pencil lines that mark the boundaries of the image – the frame – gives us a picture to look at, to read both literally and with the advantage of historical information, as well as a visual hook[5] to speculate about meaning – allegorically, metaphorically, intuitively. Those who wrote the notes in the 'margins', including Malevich, subscribed to these conventions by respecting the picture space, though it was simply a sketch of an idea – even the person who, in child-like Cyrillic, pencilled their opinion that the image was 'stupid'. The writing is on a ground that is unseen, that is, to which we are normally blind, but the image is on the same ground, now turned into the conventional body of the image (the image-ground-together), but may also/simultaneously appear to be sides of a truncated pyramid, the wall of a pit, or the floor, ceiling and sides of a theatre set. We are both, and simultaneously, blind to the paper which is there, and yet blithely, recklessly creative in 'seeing', in a variety of senses, what isn't.

Stemming from his engagement with the set designs of *Victory over the Sun* Malevich developed ideas, and a visual apparatus with which to illustrate/explore them, that would soon lead to Suprematism, publicly heralded by the black and red squares, painted in 1914-15. *The Black Suprematist Square* (Figure 2), simply labelled *Quadrilateral* in the catalogue of the show in which it first appeared, is painted in oil on canvas, measuring 79.6 × 79.5 centimetres. The *Black Square* is brushed on to a white painted ground, which can be glimpsed these days through the cracked black pigment. When first exhibited it was hung close to the ceiling across a corner of the gallery. In a Russian context it thus suggested an icon placed in the 'red', or 'beautiful', devotional corner of a peasant's wooden house.

If being a black square was so significant, the very reason for the painting, the key icon of a new visualising system, Suprematism, why didn't Malevich simply present a canvas painted black all over? Is the white necessary as ground (and of course we are blind to the canvas) to highlight the black square as the subject of representation? Or is the white not ground, but part of the representation, the black square lying in white space, suspended, as it were, in a void? Western art has a long-established convention that a 'picture' acts like a window, showing part of a scene that lies in the world of fact, myth or the imagination,[6] and that, in order to concentrate our eyes and mind on a significant part of that world (the 'thing-object') a frame is placed around it and, when we look at the picture, we become blind to all else. We repress the space in which the picture hangs and in which we, momentarily, have our being. The frame – the edges of the pictorially-designated space – invites the viewer to focus concerted attention on the image, rather than simply look at it. Focal attention, more deliberate than looking, needs some visual hook, must satisfy some temporarily aroused desire, in a Freudian sense, to engage our primary processes, to be sustained. Almost simultaneously that momentarily sustained attention tries to wrest a meaning, a form-satisfying, desire-assuaging, acceptable perception, from that effort (Freud's "secondary revision"). Malevich's black square is not simply blackness, but black on a white ground. In turn the white ground is, may be, could be, must be, part of the 'picture'. If the white is not simply ground what could it be? Simply whiteness? Or the conventional frame for focused attention? A conventionally bounded space, but suggesting an otherwise unlimited, even infinite (who is to 'tell'?) universe in which the black square floats, sits, lies, simply is? Our mind, our attention, immediately takes off into the almost unbounded realms of metaphor: the ego is pierced, the unconscious breaks through the cracks, subject only to the irksome restraints of the superego. Though the image may seem an autonomous object we, intuitively, because of the nature of our being, put ourselves 'into the picture' by means of metaphorical speculation.

From the first Malevich emphasised the metaphorical nature of suprematist images, at the same time insisting that they were simply black or red pigment on canvas, and therefore 'real' paintings – we are not blind to the nature of their being what they are, but at the same time they were also, for him, essentially signs of a new way of seeing out from the world into new realities of space-time, they were the Royal Infants. They were both in two dimensions and, simultaneously, in four, in a 'state of rest' and in 'movement'.

For example, by placing the coloured elements in *Suprematism (with Eight Red Rectangles)* as reproduced in Figure 3 on a diagonal axis we are tempted to read 'direction' as they drift, say, from bottom left to top right, but also 'distance' – away from the picture plane, advancing towards the viewer, or receding into the space denoted by the ground. (To give the rectangles a greater sense of solidity, Malevich underpainted them with a pink-flesh tone that is not entirely contiguous with the red rectangles, leaving them with a slightly shimmering *orlo*, a mysterious underlit
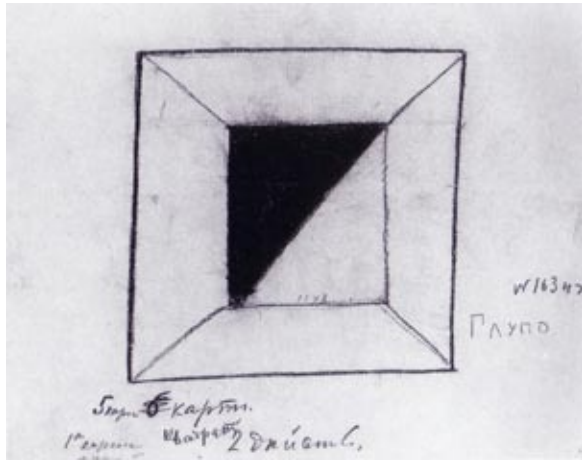
Figure 1: Kazimir Malevich, *Sketch of Décor for Deimo (Act) II, Fifth Scene, Victory Over the Sun*, 1913, Italian pencil on paper, 21 × 27cm (courtesy of St Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Musical Art).
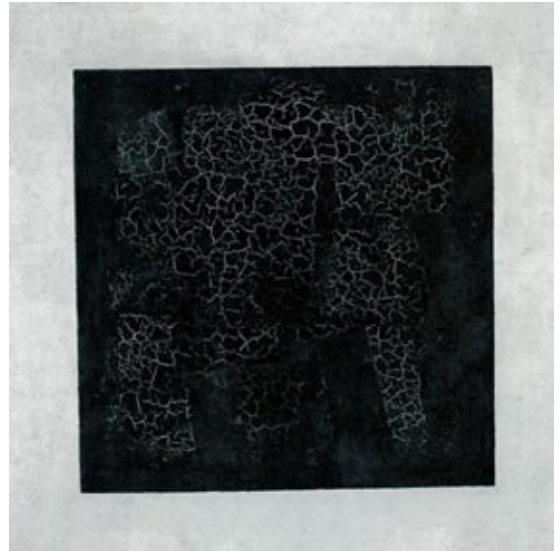

Figure 2: Kazimir Malevich, *Black Suprematist Square*, 1914-15, oil on canvas, 79.6 × 79.5 cm (courtesy of the Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow).

Figure 3: Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematism (with Eight Red Rectangles)*, 1915, oil on canvas, 57.5 × 48.5 cm (courtesy Collection Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam).

Figure 4: Ilya Repin, *Portrait of Eleonora Duse*, 1891, charcoal on canvas, 108 × 139 cm (courtesy of the Tretiakov Gallery, Moscow).

two-dimensionality that takes the mind into the fourth dimension). In this reading the now dirty white canvas ground is the space in which the red rectangles process. That space, in the logic of the world, comes to an end with the edge of the canvas. However, for the imagination of the viewer, the space, the ground, of necessity for the mind, must be/is unlimited. There is an ever-unfolding ground of which we have an essential, even if invisible, sense. The image becomes not what we literally see (whilst remaining insistantly that) but becomes an idea, a suggestion, a concept, speculation. It is not simply red pigment on white ground, but something almost animated, having a life, unfolding, becoming, a syncretic vision. Though there is the ground of the picture – the canvas, to which, because of the nature of our cultural social engagement with images, we are blind, and the ground of the posited space – the dirty white paint, which has an ambiguous status – seen as confined to the canvas on the gallery wall, but reaching in the mind to infinity, acting as the viscous ground of a visual life – there is also the ground on which we, the viewer, stand, to which we are temporally blind, looking at the image.

Of course this conundrum has always been so. For the most part we give these considerations no thought. We see a picture. The picture normally takes up the whole paper or canvas. The space and ground of the picture are one and the same, traditionally closed off from our world, separated off for our perusal, by a frame.[7] The three aspects of our temporary engagement – static canvas, image energised by the mind, static social space of looking – cannot readily be accessed together at one and the same time, our attention is usually directed first to one, then to another: when looking at the canvas, as canvas, on the wall we do not see the picture/image; when looking into the picture we do not see the 'canvas'; when mentally engaged with the image the social ground of our being is not in focus.

Ehrenzweig elaborated this concept of what he calls "differentiated attention", where figure and ground are seen as separate ideas, forms, things. The creative mind, he argues, is also capable of dedifferentiation, of seeing syncretistically, of seeing the picture-ground-will-to-meaning as a whole, of scanning the data present irrespective of ontological status.[8] Missing from his schema is any sense of the social space of looking.

Ehrenzweig understands dedifferentiation as a positive quality of the creative mind, capable of diffusing attention across vision and mind, to scan for relationships, contiguities, potentialities, that might otherwise, in too rigid a manner of looking, escape attention and potential comprehension. He might argue that Malevich's immersion in the production of *Victory Over the Sun* allowed his mind to wander into unfocused imaginative space, a not-figure-not-ground pulsing with intermorphing, unfocused, visual/mental potentialities, from which he could emerge back into the world with the concepts he would elaborate into Suprematism.

Georges Bataille introduced the concept of *l'informe* to stand for a less positive interpretation of dedifferentiation.[9] As Joseph Nechvatal describes it, *l'informe* "is pure destructive action", it is "what indifferenciates and confuses the world of meaning and form and its clear-cut differences".[10] Figure, in the hands of an artist, is a source or cause of meaning, is a declaration of the intention of meaning. In order to see an image for what it is, to declassify *(déclasser)* it as art, to see the opacity of figure and ground, Bataille invokes the action of indifferentiation *(l'informe)*, de-forming an image, stripping it of intention, decategorising figure and ground, meaning/meaninglessness, inside/outside the frame, purging the mind of history, the will to myth and interpretation, cutting off the signifier from any links with signifieds, from fragments of potential meaning, indeed seeing the world, finally, as banal and empty of sense or meaning. What the operation of *l'informe* does do is to highlight the operation of its opposite, the mechanisms of differentiation, their basis, their groundedness in culture, psychology, history, myth and metaphor, the modalities of the-will-to-alteration.[11]

It is precisely the delight in playing with the differentiation of figure from ground, in seeing marks as both altering the classification of ground into mythical figure, and, simultaneously to see them melding back towards ground, the becoming and unbecoming, that catches hold of the trained/conditioned, the perceptive mind confronted with sketches, drawings, the intentionally 'unfinished' work, the *non finito*: "a deliberately cultivated effect, sought out for its intimacy, its sensitivity to the artist's slightest thoughts, and its capacity to surpass the most polished works in expressive force", according to the obviously engaged desires of James Elkins.[12]

For example, in his charcoal on canvas *Portrait of Eleanora Duse* (1891, Figure 4) Ilya Repin used cross hatchings of various degrees of intensity to bring us a woman relaxing in an armchair, but fixing us with a gaze that is far from

relaxed, that seems to penetrate, to question, even to doubt our very authenticity, whilst asserting her own, even superior sense of being intensely real in all its complexity. We are, as it were, commanded to silence, before such a gaze. The ground is canvas. The charcoal marks scud across the canvas, thinly around the edges, allowing the canvas to be seen, showing the drawing as charcoal marks – we can even follow the artist's hand as it quickly fills the ground with zigzags. This is Derrida's *arche-trace*, the origin of the origin of the figure, evidence of both the existence and the erasure of difference between ground and possible figure. A meaning is becoming/dissolving, is being developed on that ground, that contains within itself the inevitability that it will as-if (if only because it never was) recede into the ground, the ground now being understood as the picture plane; or it comes towards us out of that plane, meaning inhabiting a symbolic, hypothetical space between picture plane and viewer; any final meaning of that ontologically unstable image (unstable in the sense of it having any/many meaning(s) for the viewer) being always deferred.[13] We can also make out the *contorno*, marking the edge of the chair back, the ending of a sleeve, the left-hand side of the face. Flat ground becomes embellished with charcoal marks, their intensity increasing to become a suggested wall, a right side to the armchair, suggesting that ground is now metamorphosing into three-dimensional space and then intensifying in effect to suggest a body and, most triumphantly, a face and gaze with every necessary attribute of character, of personality, capable of disturbing the equanimity of the viewer. Yet at the same time, the viewer is precisely enchanted by the figure-ground relationship: the artist leaving the ground present, thus enabling him with greater bravura to demonstrate his skill at working the trick of turning the drawn trace of charcoal into enigmatic but absorbing image.[14]

But enough of mud, molluscs, and fish. The rain came down on me one morning so that I shouldn't have been surprised if whales had dropped out of the sky. The river was whipped with such fury that the splash of each splash splashed back again. The surface was like boiling mercury. The rain ran off the sides of my canvas cover like the fountain which played around the Sultan of Cheribon's couch to keep the poor

On page 66 of *Sweet Thames Runs Softly* Robert Gibbings embellishes his verbal narrative of a passing, but violent, summer storm on the river with a woodcut of black clouds, pregnant with rain, a barn and trees on the far bank, and a row of water plants waving in the foreground, blown by the approaching wild weather. The ground is the paper of the page, to which we are blind, reading the printed words – themselves a complex image forming themselves into lexical marks that become words, which, through the rules of syntax become language that creates an ever-becoming narrative image in the mind, itself invested with our own experiences and feelings. That narrative is arrested, wrested from our personal imaginary, by the black lines that use the same paper of the page as the ground for the words: that paper is now sky, clouds, water, a barn roof. There is the same ability of the mind to shift from one mode of apprehension to another as there was with the portrait drawing of Eleanora Druse.

I would also argue that there is another, an intermediate, ground belonging to images. The trace of charcoal, the passage of paint or a ceramic glaze, for example, whilst being on a structural ground – paper, canvas, clay – is also part of another ground, a ground on ground, as it were, the mass of marks that coalesce in the eye-mind of the viewer as a figure. This pigmented ground becomes starkly apparent if we come close to the image, push into it with our eyes, look at it through a magnifying lens, where we are awash in a sea of marks acting as a ground upon which

or out of which the figure begins to float ontologically the more securely as we walk back away from the surface to grasp the syncretistic image: Malevich's *Quadrilateral* is comprised of a field of black, cracked (always cracking?) paint, a field/ground of pigment, out of which we extrapolate a squarish figure on another similarly constructed ground of off-white pigment of varying thickness and having a varied surface texture, with fugitive highlights and shadows, depending upon the intensity and direction of light playing on the surface.

For some viewers the figure of, say, Kandinsky's elaborated works of 1912-13, sometimes referred to, with tragic reductivity, as 'abstract', but more tellingly as 'non-objective' or 'non-figurative', is a very picture of this intermediate ground, a visual chaos that, the closer we get in, the less we are able to extract from it any sign with which we can either culturally or safely identify.[15] It becomes Bataille's coloured mess. In the opinion of Rosalind Krauss, this is the very essence of modernism, the burden of her complex study *The Optical Unconscious*.[16] 'Background', the pictorial ground against which the major subject of the image acts, is inscribed, a setting for the figure, is now rejected. Ground is instated, ground and figure merge. Any ontological pictorial difference between figure and ground is erased. Yet the same logic applies: the complex figures of such non-figurative works, exfoliate, as Elkins describes it, into a field/ground of more or less congealed marks, the one overlapping the other, spreading across each other, losing all the ontological stability with which they might become endowed when seen as 'figure', the subject of the work of art from the viewer's general perspective. For Derrida this ground on a ground is essentially aperspective.[17] This experience of seeing the intermediate ground of pigment itself, a readjusting of our attention, of our focus to the world of the marks, is not confined to modernism, of course, but to any art – Ehrenzweig closely examines the palette and artist's hand in a Rembrandt self-portrait.[18]

These aspects of the relation between figure and ground, in all their complexity, have been elaborated in many books on Western art, from Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (1960) to James Elkins's *On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them* (1998), with his eloquent plea to see images for what they are – both as signs and as not-signs.

These ideas can also be used to create an understanding of the way some non-Western art practices can be seen as a way of transforming the banal into the transcendental. For example, we may see the skin as ground in body art. Marks of scarification or tattooing, painting the body, are figures literally raised upon the ground, yet are also contiguously and essentially part of the ground in an even more intimate way than charcoal 'resting', as it were, on canvas.

The visual is everywhere a form of socialisation, here the marking of territory, there a demonstration of status, everywhere the communication of historically specific, culture-saturated messages, couched in formal systems (even when seeming most informal) created to sanction the expression of boundaries of belonging and exclusion, of histories and futures, and the safe public expression of the most wilful subconscious drives. The ground of the skin is simply another medium upon which to denote visually meaning-bearing marks of social and metaphoric discourse,[19] giving rise, as Malevich was anxious to demonstrate, to an order of thinking-through-the-visual that is different to, may go beyond, written and spoken language.

I have configured these aspects of ground, in slightly different contexts, in order to present them – the ground of marks and images on a ground –, to use them, in their turn, as the ground for further speculation on other aspects of seeing, that somewhat shifts the ground of my own narrative.

In our own relations to images there is both what might be called a social and a psychological ground of looking. They are not at any time separate, but interactive and reflexive. For the sake of clarity they can be treated first apart and then brought together through the examination of a single set of images.

I have been looking at Malevich's *Quadrilateral* and *Eight Red Rectangles*, at Repin's portrait and Gibbings's woodcut, as reproductions in books, sitting in my study, cooled by an autumn gale chasing the treetops outside the window. I have been looking at them with intent, with the knowledge that I want to use them to make an argument for the subject of this article, to expand the ground of visual (dis)apprehension from its traditional treatment into a wider field of understanding in relating to art. The room of my study has been the social setting of my engagement, my focused attention. The reproductions of these images existed themselves, as I worked, within a singular context, the

social ground for their apprehension – on the pages of books, the books resting on other books, the books on my desk, surrounded by other paraphernalia, shelves, a lamp, prints on the walls, grey light over my right shoulder, this complex ground itself existing in time and a greater space – after mid-day, in early autumn, in a quiet hill suburb of Dunedin, a city in the South Island of New Zealand. That social ground of apprehension could change – to the walls of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam where Malevich's *Eight Red Rectangles* is normally housed, to the Tretiakov Gallery on the south bank of the Moskva River in Moscow were Repin's portrait and Malevich's *Quadrilateral* usually hang.

'Being in my study', 'in the gallery spaces' of the Stedelijk, for example, is for each and every viewer, on each an every occasion, a unique psychological ground. We may bring with us to such spaces a prior determined intention to give focused attention to images – not to all those present, but to a select few, selected by us and others – curators, gallery directors, patrons, information leaflets, audio guides, internet searches, newspaper articles, television programmes, word of mouth, a vague network of general knowledge – often many of these, in varied combinations of attention and chance encounters. We bring ourselves in all the current complexities of our presentness – including mental absence – our minds being elsewhere and everywhere –, but ostensibly engaged in focusing attention on specific images. We are present most especially in Lacanian terms, as egos sensitive to every nuance of being-seen – standing before the image, trying to look attentive, intelligent, engaged, smart, or sitting back, feeling tired, not fully focused, but looking around, being seen as looking around and unengaged, taken less seriously, slackers, feeling like hiding, running away, becoming belligerent, regressing, wanting mother, fearing father, having a tantrum – here and now – NOW!

When we engage with an artwork this psycho-social ground, because they have now, inevitably, become cohesively conjoined, indeed can never be split apart, is often ignored, as our overt manner of engagement is always the same – obedient, ego-suppressing, bland. What the exterior doesn't always present is the existential mechanisms of being, the essential ground of our experiencing – remembering, forgetting, casting into the future, relating, responding to the being-seen, subject to the engine of our metaphorics – in which the unconscious constantly interferes, intervenes with hopes and fears, desires and their suppression. This we may designate as the ground of our-being-in-the-world which will be the platform from which we see Malevich's *Quadrilateral* – 'it's stupid', morbid, the death of art, cracked paint, anyone could do it, am I to take this seriously, The Royal Infant, how long do I have to stand here, what do you think, they think, am I supposed to think, tonight I must…, this morning I should…, there's an itch.[20] 'Seeing' as Lacan suggested, is not a simple act, but chiasmatic in its complexity.[21]

This psycho-social ground might seem banal, it usually is, but it is the ground out of which we draw, but briefly, our focused attention to the figure and ground of the work, to the intermediate, Derrida's aperspective ground. It is the ground, simultaneously absent and present, that gives form to the metaphorics of our mental states. It is the ground of our reality.

Our perception of figures and ground are more problematic when we confront contemporary interactive video installations, such as *Elle* (Figure 5), conceived and constructed by Catherine Ikam and Louis Fléri together with a team of technologists. In a darkened room visitors/viewers see an image on a screen of the animated face of a digital android looking like a real-life woman. The android's face moves across the screen making a melodic noise that might be called music. The screen is fitted with motion detectors. When there are several visitors in the room *Elle* picks one out and appears to make eye contact, coming closer to the screen plane, smiling and then withdrawing. There is a microphone available into which visitors might speak or sing. *Elle* appears to listen, and her singing voice is re-synthesised to the tone of the speaker. Mads Haahr describes her as "a slightly sleepy Mona Lisa doing an endless dreamy dance through bitspace".[23]

In *Elle* the originary ground of the image is the digital video film unseen by the viewer, for whom the actual ground of perception is the video screen. Despite modern technology, however, *Elle's* animated face moves against a background, a dark cyberspace, that acts as the groundspace of her apparent being. Only by interfering with the technology can the viewer see the pixels that form the aperspective ground of the image. The psycho-social ground is a darkened room which the viewer shares with others in a quite uncanny relationship: each can only dimly see the other, as they move in an out of shadow. Visitors[24] are acutely aware of a novel sensation that has little to do with *Elle* – the image is incidental: the anxiety of not knowing if they are being seen, an acute self-consciousness that

Figure 5: Still from Catherine Ikam and Louis Fléri, *Elle*, virtual reality installation, realised 1999 (image courtesy of Louis- François Fléri).

makes focal attention so different in an interactive environment to one where, as it were, and only by comparison, the viewer is anonymous, present but not seen by other gallery visitors, part of a ground outside their attention.

In the darkened room, where interactivity might be suddenly and publicly expected of the visitor, focal attention becomes accentuated. The novel, and somewhat uncomfortable situation, brings that attention to a pitch of intensity. There is the possibility that it is you who might be picked out/upon by the android for her virtual attention and smile, and that if you 'speak' to her, as it were, your own voice will modify the singsong of your virtual interlocutor. The psycho-social ground is somehow both real and unreal: it may go through stages of development and change, not too dissimilar to the confrontation with a more traditional art form – first acquaintance, feeling your way into what a thing is/might be, how you feel you should stand and act in its presence, a growing familiarity with the image, seeking a meaning for it/of it, of your relationship to/with it, of your presence in this space at this time, and then a gradual separation, a feeling that you have exhausted, for the moment, the possibilities of that engagement, a loosening of the focal attention, a gradual but insistent interference with the experience of the image of feelings and mental images from outside, from the past and potential futures, before a final disengagement.

There is then a richer range of senses of 'ground' than traditionally encompassed by art's history, a theoretical range of modalities not solely connected to the exegesis of individual images. This range of modalities has become more apparent, if not always readily comprehensible, through the writing of Krauss and Elkins in recent years.[25] The social aspects of apprehension, however, in my opinion, have often been out of focus and not brought within the general frame of apprehension. This article is an attempt both to clarify and to enlarge that field of engagement.

Peter Stupples is a social historian of art. He was Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Russian and Soviet Studies at the University of Otago before becoming Head of the Department of Art History and Theory (1990-1998). He is currently Senior Lecturer in Art Theory and History at the Otago Polytechnic School of Art. He has written widely about Russian art and the social history of art. Among six books published is Pavel Kuznetsov: His Life and Art (Cambridge University Press, 1989). Recent journal articles include: "Malevich and the Liberation of Art", *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* (2001:11-35); "Visual Culture, Synthetic Memory and the Construction of National Identity", *Third Text* (17, 2, 2003:127-139; "On Hanging 'War and Peace'" (*Scope: Art 1*, November 2006:43-49); six entries in the *Dunedin Public Art Gallery Guide* (December 2007); "Visual Voices: Heeding the Specificity of the Cultural Context of Art" (*Junctures*, 2007:1-10). In press during 2008 are "Suprematism in the Antipodes: Malevich in New Zealand", *New Zealand Slavonic Journal* and "Malevich and Vorticism", *Canadian-American Slavonic Papers*. A

further paper on ''The Vestimentary and Identity: British Pop Art'' is under consideration by another journal. Stupples has also curated art exhibitions at the Dunedin Public Art Gallery: November 2004 -- July 2005 ''Sites for the Eyes: European Landscape in the Collection of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery''; April 2006-July 2007 ''War and Peace''. He has two further curated shows under consideration. He is currently engaged in writing a four-part study of *Art: Culture and Society* – two parts of which are completed: Vol.1 *The Social Life of Art* and Vol. 2 *Pre-Modern Art: Making Social Sense*.

1   Museum staff added accession numbers, others added various cryptic notes.

2   I use words conjoined with a slash to signify a combined meaning, a verbal clutch of senses, not unlike the visual 'combines' of Robert Rauschenberg.

3   Anton Ehrenzweig, *The Hidden Order of Art* (Frogmore: Paladin, 1970), 35; Rosalind Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1993), 303-307

4   Kazimir Malevich, *Sketch of the Décor for 'Deimo'* (Act) II, Scene 5, *Victory Over the Sun*, 1913, Italian pencil on paper, 21 × 27, St Petersburg State Museum of Theatre and Music.

5   I am using 'hook' here with at least two meanings: as barb to catch at our gestalt and as an image on which to hang the current shreds of our desire – a meaning.

6   In Russian the same word is used to designate both 'picture' and 'scene'.

7   By frame I do not here literally mean a wooden frame around the canvas. Malevich did not frame, in this sense, any of his works before the 1930s, by which time not- having-a- frame was seen as potentially subversive.

8   Differentiation and dedifferentiation are not discrete experiences, but are dependent for their actuality on the nature of the conscious tasks we are engaged in at any one time, as well as on our own ego-functioning. See Ehrenzweig: 1970, 35-59. Paul Klee speaks of a developed sense of multi-dimensional attention in *The Thinking Eye* (London: Lund Humphries, 1961).

9   Georges Bataille, 'Informe', *Documents* 7, December 1929, particularly 382.

10   Joseph Nechvatal, ''Review of *Formless: A User's Guide*'', Centre George Pompidou,1996,in *Thingsreview* (New York), 27 October 1996.

11   Krauss:1993, 152, 166-167.

12   James Elkins, *On Pictures and the Words That Fail Them* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 76.

13   This passage owes a debt to Jacques Derrida, Of *Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974), 62, 132.

14   This process James Elkins describes as ''transcendental'', see Elkins:1998, 19-20, where he uses Derrida's *Memoirs of the Blind* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1993), especially 45-56, as the basis for his own elaboration of this process and as a critique of Derrida's more oblique prose.

15   Our psychological safety is at risk. The ego's will-to-form is threatened by what appears to be the chaos of a rapacious, destructive subconscious.

16   Krauss: 1993.

17   Derrida: 1993, 45.

18   Ehrenzweig: 1970, plates 13-14.

19   See, for example, Terence Turner's classic statement of the case, ''The Social Skin'', in *Not Work Alone: A Cross-Cultural View of Activities Superfluous to Survival*, edited by Jeremy Cherfas and Roger Levin (Thousand Oaks, Calif.,: Sage Publications, 1980), 110-140.

20   This approach follows the well-established ideas outlined by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962).

21   Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho–Analysis (Séminaire de Jacques Lacan*, vol. 11, *Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse)*, translated by Alan Sheridan (New York: WW Norton, 1978), 91–104. For an interesting commentary on this passage see James Elkins's draft chapter on ''The End of the Gaze'', http://www.jameselkins.com/Texts/visualculturegaze.pdf, downloaded 23 April 2008.

22   I would like to thank Sue Novell, one of my postgraduate students, for drawing my attention to Catherine Ikam's work, as well as to the essay by Mads Haahr.

23   Mads Haahr, ''The Dreams of an Accelerated Culture'', *Crossings: eJournal of Art and Technology*,1.1, 2001: http://crossings.tcd.ie/issues/1.1/Haahr/ last accessed on 30 October, 2008.

24   The word 'visitor' seems to fit the role of the viewer better than any other to describe those choosing to look at an artwork in these social circumstances.

25   See, in particular, Elkins: 1998, ''Modes of Figure-Ground'', pp. 113-125.