

Nuclear Waste Is Art in the Work of Taryn Simon



Taryn Simon's Black Square XVII void in the wall at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art. Courtesy of Garage.

In an active nuclear plant somewhere on the outskirts of Moscow, Taryn Simon's latest piece of art is processing out radioactive properties—and will be doing so for the next 1,000 years. Through the vitrification process, Simon worked with the top secret Russian State Atomic Energy Corporation to repurpose nuclear waste to create a compound suitable and safe for disposal. The end result, which will not be unearthed until 3015, will be a glassy black square titled *Black Square XVII*.

The art installation and research behind Simon's project, however, will be unveiled later this week at G (<http://garageccc.com/en>)arage Museum of Contemporary Art (<http://garageccc.com/en>)in Moscow, as part of their Field Research project. *Black Square XVII* will be stored in a concrete reinforced steel

container, within a holding chamber surrounded by clay-rich soil, at the Radon nuclear waste disposal plant located 72 km northeast of Moscow. The black square will remain there until its radioactive properties have diminished to safe levels for human exposure and exhibition.

Yet, *Black Square XVII* will have a permanent space within the museum as a concrete wall with a cut-out relief of where the art will reside in the future, alongside a wall text that describes the process and facilities. Simon spoke to The Creators Project about creating *Black Square*: “It’s everyone’s and no ones...It lives in a whole world of unknowns.”

A portion of the text reads, “*Black Square XVII* was created in collaboration with Russia’s State Atomic Energy Corporation (ROSATOM), during the centenary year of the debut exhibition of Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* painting. Simon’s *Black Square XVII* is composed of medium-level, long-term nuclear waste containing organic liquids, inorganic liquids, slurries, and chemical dusts from a nuclear plant in Kursk, and from pharmaceutical and chemical plants in the greater Moscow region.”

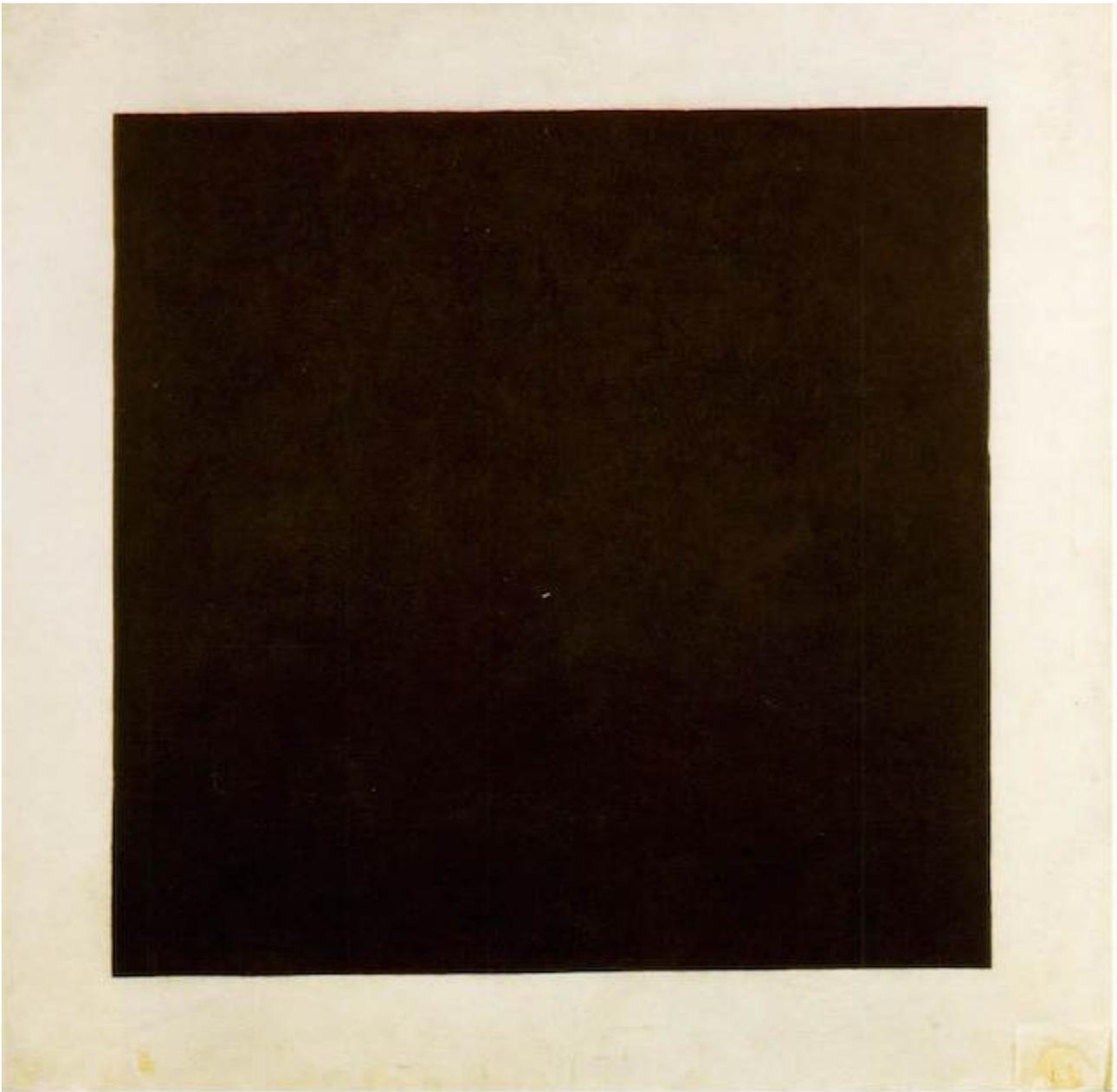


Exterior view of vitrification facility, Federal State Unitary Enterprise Radon, Russia

The entire process, from ideation to orchestration, is the crux of the artwork. Simon spent three years in research mode as part of Garage Field Research's cross-disciplinary platform for artists and curators. The research project has no predetermined outcome, but instead serves to engage a greater Russian audience in the arts through art relating to Russian culture.

Shares Simon, "I have familial roots in Russia and it's that strange thing of enormous distance and no direct repaire or day-to-day relationship with it. The artwork is kind of functioning in a similar form because I have all of these narratives passed down through generations and paintings of where my family used to live and imaginations of a connection to something that I am, in fact, very far from. In the same way this work is going to be embedded in the soil and was produced in this proxy absent form. It does reflect that state of distance but with closeness."

Simon's art is usually linear and research-based. Her works overturn facts and trusted institutions through her academic explorations to unearth ruptures in our formal thinking and acceptance of order, digging deep into large social themes of justice, power, and politics. Her process is akin to that of an investigative journalist on a mission to uncover a greater truth present right below the surface, and she finds her mediums in documentation: inquisitive emails, photo-journalistic portraits, video footage, and a mass of legal paperwork. She usually pairs an image with factual text that carries a journalistic tone. Yet for all of her pragmatic, cerebral sleuthing, Simon's end result, is artwork fraught with emotion. Her inmate portraits work to rattle us into empathy.



Black Square by Kazimir Malevich, 1915, State Russian Museum, via Wikimedia Commons

Her research excavates the humanity from seemingly impossible situations with melancholic undertones. She's created an "abstract romanticism" in her still-life works: In the series titled *Contraband*, Simon shot a portrait of a dead bird sent in the mail from Indonesia to Miami. It was just one of 1,075 photographs at the U.S. Customs and Border Protection Federal Inspection Site. In *The Innocents*, a collection of stories of individuals who served time in prison for violent crimes they did not commit, Simon takes a portrait of man standing in front of a car at a crime scene.

This latest *Black Square XVII* is a great departure in process for Simon, as the object and installation may never fully materialize. The "black square" series is an active homage to Kazimir Malevich's 1915 Suprematist masterpiece, *Black Square*, where the artist painted a black square on canvas with a white

border. According to Simon, "the simple composition represented both an end and a beginning in art history: an attempt to create a new abstraction devoid of overt social or political meaning."

This Russian *Black Square* is hidden within the soil. It is untouchable and toxic and still a thing of beauty and fascination. Simon instructed that a letter to the future be inserted within it—this is the closest she comes to ownership or having her signature on the artwork. For now, her conversation about the process must hold our imagination for what art is; for now, *Black Square* will enter a place in Russian art history.

Explains Simon, "It's an ongoing project because one doesn't know what's going to happen with this piece. And what's going to happen with the facility and the storage of it. We have certain guarantees at the moment... But it's an ongoing project that will continue for the rest of my lifetime. I hope... and then beyond."

Field Research: A Progress Report runs from June 12August 23, 2015 at the Garage Museum of Contemporary Art (<http://garageccc.com/en>) in Moscow.

For more about Taryn Simon see her website (<http://tarynsimon.com/>).