

ABSTRACT

Title of Thesis: **FOUR ARTS REDEFINED**
 WŁADYSŁAW STRZEMIŃSKI'S THEORY OF UNISM

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Władysław Strzemiński, one of the leading figures of Polish Constructivism, developed his radical modernist theory of Unism during the interwar period, following the artist's move from Russia to Poland in 1922. Unism began as an artistic experimentation through an analysis of form in painting and was soon expanded to other arts – sculpture, architecture, and typography. The development of Unism from a purely analytical stage to a more practical one signifies an important aspect of Strzemiński's theory. Although the theory evolved to address successfully different arts, its key concepts, such as the idea of the unity of the work of art with the place of its creation, the principle of organicity, and the utopian belief in the ability of the work of art to organize life and its functions, remained consistent through the years and unified the four arts under the umbrella of Unism, and constituted Strzemiński's greatest achievement.

FOUR ARTS REDEFINED
WŁADYSŁAW STRZEMIŃSKI'S THEORY OF UNISM

by

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	iii
Introduction	1
Chapter One: Analytical Stage – Unism in Painting	5
Chapter Two: “Spatio-Temporal Rhythm” – Unism in Sculpture and Architecture	32
Chapter Three: Functional Typography	56
Conclusion	71
Figure Illustrations	73
Appendix	101
Bibliography	104

List of Figures

- Fig. 1** Władysław Strzemiński. Photo from Smolensk, 1921.
- Fig. 2** Władysław Strzemiński. *Unizm w Malarstwie*. Warsaw, 1928.
Title Page according to the design by Henryk Stażewski.
- Fig. 3** Witold Kajruksztis. Cover for the Exhibition Catalog
Wystawa Nowej Sztuki w Wilnie [New Art Exhibition in Vilnius], 1923.
- Fig. 4** Władysław Strzemiński. *Cubism – Tension of Material Structure*, 1919-1920.
Oil and crumbled cork on canvas, 22.5 x 17.5 cm.
National Museum, Warsaw.
- Fig. 5** Władysław Strzemiński. *Synthetic Composition 1*, 1923.
Oil on canvas, 65 x 66 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 6** Kazimir Malevich. *Suprematist Composition*, 1916.
Oil on canvas, 88 x 70 cm.
Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.
- Fig. 7** Władysław Strzemiński. *Postsuprematist Composition 2*, 1923.
Oil on canvas, 65 x 60 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 8** Władysław Strzemiński. *Dualistic Oppositions in Baroque*, 1928.
Concentric Composition and Independence of Color from Line.
Illustration in *Unism in Painting*. Warsaw, 1928.
- Fig. 9** Władysław Strzemiński. *Dualistic Oppositions in Baroque*, 1928.
Dynamic Tension of Line.
Illustration in *Unism in Painting*. Warsaw, 1928.
- Fig. 10** Władysław Strzemiński. *Dualistic Oppositions in Baroque*, 1928.
Contrasts of Shapes and Colors.
Illustration in *Unism in Painting*. Warsaw, 1928.
- Fig. 11** Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 4*, 1924-27.
Oil on canvas, 64 x 64 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 12** Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 5*, 1924-27.
Oil on canvas, 64 x 40 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

- Fig. 13** Władysław Strzemiński. *Postsuprematist Composition*, 1923.
Reproduced in *Blok. Kurier Bloku* 8-9, 1924.
- Fig. 14** Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 6*, 1928.
Oil on canvas, 64 x 64 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 15** Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 7*, 1929.
Oil on canvas, 77 x 63 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 16** Władysław Strzemiński. *Architectonic Composition 8b*, 1928-29.
Oil on canvas, 96 x 60 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 17** Władysław Strzemiński. *Architectonic Composition*, 1929.
Oil on canvas, 95 x 60 cm.
Anna Wesołowska, Łódź.
- Fig. 18** Władysław Strzemiński. *Architectonic Composition 3a*, 1927.
Oil on canvas, 62 x 62 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 19** Władysław Strzemiński. *Architectonic Composition 6b*, 1928.
Oil on canvas, 96 x 60 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 20** Władysław Strzemiński. *Architectonic Composition 9c*, 1929.
Oil on canvas, 96 x 60 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 21** Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 9*, 1931.
Oil on canvas, 48 x 32 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 22** Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 8*, 1931.
Oil on canvas, 60 x 36 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 23** Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 11*, 1931.
Oil on canvas, 50 x 38 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 24** Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition*, 1932.
Oil on canvas, 51 x 30 cm.
Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, The Netherlands.

- Fig. 25** Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 10*, 1931.
Oil on canvas, 74 x 50 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 26** Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 12*, 1932.
Oil on canvas, 50 x 38 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 27** Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 13*, 1934.
Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 28** Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 14*, 1934.
Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 29** Władysław Strzemiński. Cover page.
Kompozycja Przestrzeni – Obliczanie Rytmu Czasoprzestrzennego
[Composition of Space: Calculations of Spatio-Temporal Rhythm] Łódź, 1931.
- Fig. 30** Władysław Strzemiński. *Formal Similarity Between Gothic Sculpture and Architecture*.
Illustration to *Composition of Space*, Łódź 1931.
- Fig. 31** Gianlorenzo Bernini. *David*, 1623.
Marble, approx. 5' 7 in.
Galleria Borghese, Rome.
- Fig. 32** Umberto Boccioni. *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*, 1913.
Bronze, 3' 7 7/8" high x 2' 10 7/8" x 1' 3 3/4"
Museum of Modern Art, New York.
- Fig. 33** Katarzyna Kobro. *Spatial Composition 4*, 1929.
Metal, oil, 40 x 64 x 40 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 34** Katarzyna Kobro. *Spatial Composition 5*, 1929.
Metal, oil, 40 x 64 x 40 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 35** Katarzyna Kobro. *Spatial Composition 8*, 1932.
Metal, oil, 10 x 24 x 15 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

- Fig. 36** Katarzyna Kobro. *Abstract Sculpture 1*, 1924.
Wood, metal, glass, oil, 72 x 17.5 x 15.5 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 37** Katarzyna Kobro. *Suspended Construction 1*, 1921/1972.
(Reconstruction) Wood, metal, glass fibre, and resin, 20 x 40 x 40 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 38** Katarzyna Kobro. *Suspended Construction 2*, 1921-22/1979.
(Reconstruction) Metal, 26.2 x 39.6 x 28.6 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 39** Katarzyna Kobro. *Relations of colors in space*.
Illustration to *Composition of Space*, Łódź, 1931.
- Fig. 40** Katarzyna Kobro. *Spatial Composition 6*, 1931.
Painted steel, 64 x 25 x 15 cm.
Museum of Art, Łódź.
- Fig. 41** Władysław Strzemiński. *Rules of the architectonic composition*.
Illustration in *Composition of Space*, Łódź 1931.
- Fig. 42** Katarzyna Kobro. *First divisions of height and width of a volume*.
Illustration in *Composition of Space*, Łódź 1931.
- Fig. 43** Władysław Strzemiński. *Rules of the architectonic composition:
calculations of numerical ratios*.
Illustration in *Composition of Space*, Łódź 1931.
- Fig. 44** Władysław Strzemiński. *Project of an interior design*.
Illustration in *Composition of Space*, Łódź 1931.
- Fig. 45** Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro.
Design for a tobacco kiosk, Dec. 1927 – Jan. 1928.
- Fig. 46** Władysław Strzemiński. Neo-Plastic Room. 1948.
Exhibition Room in Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.
- Fig. 47** Władysław Strzemiński. Cover page for *Z Ponad*
[From Above] by Julian Przyboś, 1930.
- Fig. 48** Photo of Julian Przyboś, Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro.
c. 1930-31.

- Fig. 49** Władysław Strzemiński. Cover page for *Śruby* [Screws] by Julian Przyboś, 1925. Published by journal *Zwrotnica*.
- Fig. 50** Władysław Strzemiński. Cover page for *Szósta, Szósta*, [Six! Six!] by Tadeusz Peiper, 1926. Published by journal *Zwrotnica*.
- Fig. 51** Władysław Strzemiński. Typographical design for Poem *20 kg* by Julian Przyboś. *Z Ponad*, 1930.
- Fig. 52** Władysław Strzemiński. *Design of alphabet*. Komunikat “a.r.” 2. Łódź, 1932.
- Fig. 53** Władysław Strzemiński. Typographical design for Poem *Murarze* [Masons] by Julian Przyboś. *Z Ponad*, 1930.
- Fig. 54** Władysław Strzemiński. Typographical design for Poem *Światła* [Lights] by Julian Przyboś. *Z Ponad*, 1930.
- Fig. 55** Władysław Strzemiński. Typographical design for Poem *Florian* by Julian Przyboś. *Z Ponad*, 1930.
- Fig. 56** Władysław Strzemiński. Typographical design for Poem *Wieczór* [Evening] by Julian Przyboś. *Z Ponad*, 1930.

Introduction

For me, art means two things: formal experimentation and discovery (that is formulation of an idea), on the one hand, and its practical, utilitarian exploitation in everyday life, on the other.

Władysław Strzemiński¹

In an essay entitled, “Strzemiński and Kopro: In Search of Motivation,” Yve-Alain Bois noted that some works of art appear too early and are discovered too late to be fully comprehended and appreciated. According to the author, Władysław Strzemiński’s oeuvre belonged to such a category as it did not fit the established evolutionary model through which we approach history.² In so doing, Bois might have pinpointed an important aspect in the study of Strzemiński’s artistic career. Even though Strzemiński’s radical theory of Unism emerged within the constructivist context in the 1920s, it remained obscure to the majority of Western scholars until the 1970s, when it finally received some critical attention. Although this overdue reception of Strzemiński’s art has introduced the artist and his theory into the modernist discourse, one might argue that it has not been sufficiently discussed.

Paradoxically, Strzemiński remains both known and unknown within the discourse of art history. Scholars familiar with the artist’s oeuvre agree that he remains among the most highly original contributors to twentieth-century art. A Polish art historian notes that “his work is an essential element and of enduring value in the

¹ Władysław Strzemiński and Leon Chwistek, “Dyskusja,” [Discussion] *Forma* 3 (1935): 4-10. Reprinted in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, Ed. Zofia Baranowicz, (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo, 1975), 225.

² Yve-Alain Bois, “Strzemiński and Kopro: In Search of Motivation,” *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 123.

panorama of the world avant-garde.”³ Despite the fact that, in recent years, Strzemiński’s work has been more extensively studied by Western art historians, who concur that it “constitutes one of the most sophisticated discourses of the first wave of abstraction,”⁴ the theory, as well as its creator, remain among the lesser known artistic concepts of European modern art, and one might argue deserve more serious critical attention than hitherto received.

Władysław Strzemiński (Fig. 1), who became one of the leading figures and spokesmen of Polish Constructivism, developed his radical modernist theory during the interwar period, shortly after he and his wife, Katarzyna Kobro,⁵ moved from Russia to Poland in 1922. Their move coincided with the period following the regaining of Polish independence and the establishment of new physical borders in 1918 after more than a century of occupation and three partitions. This new political development resulted in an atmosphere of exhilaration as well as a belief in societal renewal, thus allowing artists like Strzemiński to explore new artistic concepts and pursue their implementation in the daily life of the emerging society.

The Constructivist movement, which was deeply rooted in the eastern parts of Europe and spread from there to other countries of Europe, redefined the position of the artist and his role in society. The utopian idea that art might affect a societal renewal and thereby carry universal importance appealed to modernists, like Strzemiński, who were active in the newly emerging or reemerging independent states of Central and Southern Europe. Having trained in Russia alongside Vladimir Tatlin, Kazimir Malevich, and

³ Jaromir Jedliński, “Konstruowanie Widzenia,” [To Construct Seeing] *Władysław Strzemiński. 1893-1952. W Setną Rocznicę Urodzin* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1994), 12.

⁴ Yve-Alain Bois, “Lissitzky, Mondrian, Strzemiński: Abstraction and Political Utopia in the Twenties,” *Cadences: Icon and Abstraction in Context* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991), 98.

⁵ Katarzyna Kobro (1898-1951), sculptor and a leading figure of Polish Constructivism.

other revolutionary artists, Strzemiński had first-hand experience in Russian modernism. Arriving in Poland in 1922, he was well-equipped to lead the Polish avant-garde and to introduce new ideas and concepts into Polish art circles. Strzemiński shared with the Constructivists a belief in the authority of art to reconstitute society, but he opposed the Constructivist claim of subordinating art solely to social utility. Instead, he argued for the autonomy of the work of art and the necessity of artistic experimentation through an analysis of form. It was this utopian belief in the ability of art to effect social change through form which guided Strzemiński's artistic career. His ideas regarding art were formulated over a period of few years in the early 1920s and were ultimately articulated as Unism in 1927.

Unism, Strzemiński's distinctive philosophy of art, began as an artistic experimentation in painting through an analysis of form. Nevertheless, the system was not limited solely to practical experimentation. Similarly to many modernists, Strzemiński also expressed his Unist principles in prolific theoretical writings. The Unist system outlined what would become Strzemiński's worldview based on the artist's utopian belief in the role of art in society. Considering the significant role Strzemiński assigned to art, it is understandable that his system of Unism could not remain limited exclusively to painting. The artist's versatile interests and talents enabled him to expand his new theory to other arts.

By tracing the chronological evolution of Strzemiński's theory of Unism, it can be observed that a period of formal analysis constituted its first stage and became a type of launching platform for its subsequent implementation in sculpture, architecture, and typography. The purely analytical stage of Unist theory, which initially encompassed

painting and later on also sculpture, eventually expanded into a slightly more practical application in architecture and typography. Hence, what started as minimalist theory in painting was soon universalized in the other arts: sculpture, architecture, and typography.

This application of Unism, or rather its development from a purely analytical stage to a more practical one, from painting into sculpture, architecture, and typography, remains an important aspect of Strzemiński's theory of Unism and one that has not yet been adequately discussed. The purpose of this study is to fill the lacunae in the scholarly treatment of Unism and thereby enrich the understanding of a decisive phase in the development of modern art generally. This study will examine both the analytical and utilitarian concepts of Unism, as well as the distinctive qualities of the theory based on Strzemiński's definition of the 'four arts' as laid out in his prolific theoretical writings and expressed in his artistic practice. Through the formulation of his Unist theory, Strzemiński successively examined the four arts as independent of each other and governed by their own individual laws. Each of the 'four arts' assumed different elements of Unist principles. Because each had a different origin and place in space, each held what the artist called its own distinct 'laws of organicity' that were characteristic solely of that particular medium of art. Nevertheless, Strzemiński's greatest achievement was the ability to unite the four distinct arts under the umbrella of Unism.

Chapter One: Analytical Stage – Unism in Painting

Only when the habit of one's consciousness to see in painting bits of nature, madonnas and shameless nudes has disappeared, shall we see a pure-painting composition.

Kazimir Malevich⁶

Strzemiński's first solo exhibition did not take place until 1927, when the works of the artist were shown at the Polish Art Club in Warsaw. It was during this exhibition that Strzemiński presented his theory of Unism in painting in a lecture. In that same year, the lecture was published in the journal *Droga* under the title, "Dualism and Unism," and a year later, in 1928, appeared as a small booklet entitled *Unism in Painting* (Fig. 2).⁷ It was in this lecture and two subsequent publications that Strzemiński laid out his Unist principles in relation to painting; the principles that would later extend into the fields of sculpture, architecture, and typography.

Even though Strzemiński first articulated his theory with exclusive regard to painting and assigned the term 'Unism' to it only in 1927, the artist had begun considering a new theory of painting years earlier. It is mostly between the time of his arrival in Poland in 1922 and the ultimate publication in 1928 of *Unism in Painting* that one can begin to discern the artist's early preoccupation with the concepts of organicity and the unity of the work of art; the concepts that would become the main principles of Unism and the ones that would, in Strzemiński's view, define the work of art. The artist

⁶ Malevich's manifesto was published in conjunction with the 1915 '0.10 The Last Futurist Painting Exhibition' in Petrograd; as quoted in Camilla Gray, *The Russian Experiment in Art 1863-1922* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1990), 207.

⁷ Władysław Strzemiński, "Dualizm i Unizm," [Dualism and Unism] *Droga* 6-7 (1927): 211-225, and *Unizm w Malarstwie* [Unism in Painting] (Warsaw: Biblioteka "Praesens" no 3, 1928). The title page and the graphic arrangements were designed according to the project by Henryk Stażewski – a colleague and one of the members of Praesens. The book was reprinted in Polish and English in 1994 in a series published by the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź as *Unizm w Malarstwie* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1994).

would fully verbalize what he understood by the concepts of organicity and unity of the work of art in *Unism in Painting*.

One must stress that Strzemiński did not arrive in Poland without any artistic experience. On the contrary, his artistic persona had already been shaped and strongly influenced by his experiences in Russia, where the artist spent his early life and career. Having experienced the Russian Revolution and having participated in the Russian modernist movement by means of his evolving relationships with Tatlin and Malevich, Strzemiński was well-versed in Russian Constructivism and Suprematism. This artistic growth among the leading modern Russian artists and theorists would provide him with the foundation for his later Unism. It was also Tatlin and Malevich who left the strongest impression on Strzemiński's early artistic development and resonated in the theory that developed a few years later. One may go so far as to claim that the theory of Unism was influenced more by Strzemiński's close relationship with the Russian avant-garde than through his connection to artistic developments in Poland. It was mostly due to the fact that, by the time the artist left Russia, his artistic education had already been strongly established and shaped by the influences of Russian modernism.

Before Strzemiński pursued a career as an artist, he trained to follow in his father's footsteps with a military career. Born in 1893 to a Polish family in White Russia (Belarus), he studied *architectura militaris* at the Tsar Nicholas Military Academy of Engineering in Saint Petersburg and served in the tsarist army, beginning in 1914 as an officer in a sapper squadron. Severely wounded in 1916 during the First World War, he was left an invalid. Unable to continue his military career, Strzemiński was forced to

reassess his life plans and begin a new career.⁸ There exists insufficient documentation related to the artist's life in Russia, especially for the years of 1916-1919, the period following his accident and leading into his involvement with the Russian artistic groups.⁹ The events of the October Revolution of 1917 undoubtedly affected Strzemiński's artistic development. The revolution provided the avant-garde artists an opportunity for a more active participation in creating a 'new world' and 'new order' and fueled their motivation and belief in the significance of their role in the life of society. Strzemiński's introduction to the art world could not have happened at a better moment. The energy and conviction of modernist artists at the time must have been quite contagious.

It is uncertain when exactly Strzemiński decided to delve seriously into the art world, but by 1919 he had already become a member of the Moscow section of IZO Narkompros, the Fine Arts section of the artistic administration.¹⁰ Thus, despite the lack of specific documentation, one can assume that the years of 1916-1919 were quite formative in shaping of Strzemiński's artistic career. He must have observed the engagement of Russian artists with the Bolshevik Revolution and the assimilation of the ideas of establishing a new order, new society, new artist, and ultimately new world. Furthermore, Strzemiński's association with the leftist establishment of IZO Narkompros

⁸ While convalescing at a Moscow hospital, following an amputation of his right leg and left forearm, Strzemiński met his future wife Katarzyna Kobro, an aspiring sculptor, volunteering at the hospital as a nurse. It is possible that the conversations with Kobro might have influenced Strzemiński's initial artistic exploration.

⁹ Olga Szichiriewa, "Władysław Strzemiński w Rosji," [Władysław Strzemiński in Russia] *Władysław Strzemiński 1893 – 1952. Materiały z Sesji* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1994), 97-101. Szichiriewa attempts to piece together the life of Strzemiński and his artistic development in Russia, but admits to the scarcity of documentation regarding the artist's life during that period. For an extensive and detailed outline of the artist's whole life and work see Zenobia Karnicka, "Kalendarium życia i twórczości," [Life and Work] *Władysław Strzemiński. W Setną Rocznicę Urodzin. 1893-1952* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1994), 61-93.

¹⁰ Narkompros ('The Peoples Commissariat for Education') was lead by Anton Lunacharsky; the IZO (Department of Fine Arts) section in Moscow was led by Vladimir Tatlin. The members, such as Malevich or Anton Pevsner, were mostly left leaning.

must have introduced the artist to many leading figures of the Russian avant-garde, including Tatlin and Malevich, if he had not already known them. Moreover, for a few months, Strzemiński was a student in SVOMAS (the Free Art Studios in Moscow), whose faculty consisted of figures such as Malevich, Tatlin, and Popova. The artist's affiliation with Malevich was strengthened in 1919 when Strzemiński joined the master's UNOVIS group¹¹ and eventually led its branch in Smolensk. Thus, Strzemiński began his career among the most progressive Russian artists, who, in the context of the October Revolution, believed emphatically in the need for new art that would redefine the society. This utopian vision, as well as the progressive quest for a new system in art, would later become evident in Strzemiński's development of the Unist theory.

Like many Russian artists moving to the Western parts of Europe, Strzemiński also decided to leave Russia and expand his artistic horizons in places like Paris. The artist crossed the green border between Russia and Poland and eventually stayed there for the rest of his life. Upon his arrival in Poland, Strzemiński, "...an alien, a 'Bolshevik,' uncompromising supporter of the new art, internationalist,"¹² had already experienced the exhilarating atmosphere of Revolutionary Russia and now found himself in a newly reemerged Poland. He saw his role as an artist in a manner similar to the artists of the Russian avant-garde – as a creator of a new society. Strzemiński agreed with the constructivist idea of 'organization,' which provided a chance for social integration – the unity of the work of art with society. The artist would later explain, "The aspiration for the uniform organization is the strongest and most general impulse of our time. It forms

¹¹ UNOVIS (Confirmers of the New Art) group was organized by Malevich in Vitebsk in 1919. The group consisted of his students and followers.

¹² Janina Ładnowska, "Budowniczego Dzieło Otwarte," [The Open Work of a Master Builder] *Władysław Strzemiński. 1893-1952. W Setną Rocznicę Urodzin* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1994), 25.

the social basis of Unism.”¹³ The artist believed that artists might recreate society on a new basis. The author of Unism, however, strongly opposed the idea of subordination of art to social needs. According to Strzemiński, art, through its autonomy, would dictate the social order, not the other way around.

Even though Unism owed a great deal to the influence of the Russian masters, Strzemiński would use that influence more as a launching pad than as strict rules that, simply put, he could never follow. In 1922, Strzemiński had already suggested in an article entitled, “Notes on Russian Art,” published in the journal *Zwrotnica*,¹⁴ what he would use as a starting point for the further emergence of his Unist theory. In the article, the artist offered an insightful critique of Russian art.¹⁵ While his critique did not spare Tatlin and his ‘culture of materials,’ Strzemiński’s admiration and respect for Malevich and Suprematism are undeniable, even when the author indicated that in his own art he would move beyond the limits of Suprematism. He did not deny that Tatlin’s greatest accomplishment, one that influenced Strzemiński’s early work, would remain his discovery of the significance of the use of new materials in art. Yet, his failure, according to Strzemiński, would result from the inability to go beyond the mere idea of construction, which was limited solely to the problem of texture, thereby forgoing the problem of experimentation with form. According to the author, it was Malevich, who with his new system of Suprematism, progressed furthest in the development of new art. Malevich’s insistence on the exploration of non-objective art, flatness of the canvas, and

¹³ Władysław Strzemiński and Leon Chwistek, “Dyskusja,” [Discussion] *Forma* 3 (1935), 4-10. Reprinted in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 223-224.

¹⁴ *Zwrotnica*, first published in May 1922, was a revolutionary journal established in Cracow by the poet and leading cultural critic Tadeusz Peiper. Many avant-garde artists quickly established contact with Peiper and the journal became the first theoretical output of Constructivist ideas in Poland.

¹⁵ Władysław Strzemiński, “O Sztuce Rosyjskiej. Notatki,” [On Russian Art. Notes] *Zwrotnica* 3 (1922): 79-82 and *Zwrotnica* 4 (1923): 110-114.

universal principles of composition appealed to Strzemiński, who himself would carry these explorations even further in his Unist theory. Tatlin's Constructivism and Malevich's Suprematism were the result of an apparent disjunction between their understanding of the role of modern art and that of the artist in the Communist society. On the one side was Tatlin with his slogan of 'art into life' and the idea of 'production art;' on the other was Malevich, who believed in the autonomy of the work of art and the idea that only through experimentation with form would an artist be able to influence society. Only after an artist experimented with form would he be able to apply his abstract ideas into more utilitarian objects. In this regard, Strzemiński sided with Malevich; and following in Malevich's path, he assigned formal experimentation as the essential foundation of Unist theory. He would be extremely consistent in his steadfast loyalty to the importance of formal experimentation throughout his Unist experimentation.

Despite the fact that some have called Strzemiński "the missionary of Malevich's ideas, one of his staunchest and most convinced followers,"¹⁶ it must be stressed that Strzemiński's high regard for Malevich did not mean that the former fully embraced Suprematism. Strzemiński's reservations regarding his teacher's system are implied in the article and suggest the new path that Strzemiński would take toward his own Unist system, one in which Suprematism would be the point of departure, rather than its model. Furthermore, the artist would never embrace the spirituality of Malevich's Suprematism. Not only Strzemiński's article, but also his initial artistic practice reveal the legacy of the

¹⁶ Olga Shikhireva, "Władysław Strzemiński," *In Malevich's Circle: Confederates – Students – Followers in Russia 1920s-1950s*, (Moscow: Palace Editions, 2000), 86.

Russian avant-garde in his oeuvre. At the same time, however, new independent ideas also become more visible in his works.

The works exhibited by Strzemiński during the New Art Exhibition (Fig. 3) in 1923 illustrate his attitudes towards the Russian masters in his own artistic practice and reveal new tendencies that would later evolve into Unism. The exhibition, which gathered the leading Constructivists in the Polish and Lithuanian avant-garde, was an important milestone in fully launching the Constructivist movement in Poland.¹⁷ The works presented varied in style from one artist to the other, yet the overarching idea of constructing new forms prevailed in all works. At this stage, one finds evidence that Strzemiński was already looking for a new plastic language.

By comparing two of the works exhibited by the artist, his *Cubism –Tension of Material Structure* of 1919-20 (Fig. 4) and *Synthetic Composition 1* of 1923 (Fig. 5), one observes the changes in the evolution of Strzemiński's work. While the first canvas reveals the influence of Tatlin in its preoccupation with new materials and textures, such as cork, oil, or sand assembled in a cubist-type composition, the second canvas points to a new direction in Strzemiński's art, and not only in its composition, but also in its title. It was not as much the use of new materials that appealed to the artist, but rather the investigation of the tensions between the forms and the space. Strzemiński explained the new title of 'Synthetism' that was assigned to some of his compositions by saying, "Synthetism: flat canvases, aim: organic unity of the form and flatness of the picture plane." Strzemiński was beginning to bring the work of art to its physical essentials – the

¹⁷ It was the first constructivist exhibition in Poland, gathering the works of seven artists from Vilnius (Witold Kajruksztis [Vytautas Kairiūkštis], Helena Puciatycka, Władysław Strzemiński) and from Warsaw (Henryk Stażewski, Mieczysław Szczuka, Teresa Żarnower, Karol Kryński). Kajruksztis was not only a participant, but also, along with Strzemiński, a co-organizer of the exhibition.

flatness and the rectangular dimension of the canvas. His interest in the exploration of the relationship between the forms enclosed within the two dimensional space of the painting indicates the influence of Malevich, who also pursued an artistic investigation of space.¹⁸ The two artists, however, dealt with different kinds of space. Strzemiński would never move beyond the two dimensionality of the plane, while Malevich explored the third and fourth dimension in space.¹⁹

Nevertheless, Strzemiński seems to be moving beyond Malevich's Suprematist principles. By comparing Strzemiński's *Synthetic Composition* with Malevich's *Suprematist Composition* of 1916-17 (Fig. 6), the differences become quite apparent. The scholarly literature rightly notes on the *Synthetic Composition* that, "[c]ontrast – of size, color and shape – is still present, but Suprematist devices for evoking the dynamics (such as the use of oblique dispositions) or for suggesting depth (such as overlapping shapes) are carefully avoided."²⁰ In addition, the artist substituted geometrical forms with more biomorphic shapes.

It is possible that another of Strzemiński's synthetic compositions, now known as *Postsuprematist Composition 2* of 1923 (Fig. 7), was also exhibited in Vilnius. Strzemiński's terms 'Synthetism' and 'post-Suprematism' further indicate that he was progressing beyond Malevich's system in these works. He explained that, "In Suprematism, the background is a constructively passive factor: it only affects the shapes in a painting as such; an absolute merging of the background and the shapes into one

¹⁸ Andrzej Turowski, a leading scholar of Polish Constructivism, suggested that the year 1920 was a time of Strzemiński's artistic reorientation from Tatlin's problem of materials to Malevich's interest in space. Andrzej Turowski, *Budowniczość Świata. Z Dziejów Radykalnego Modernizmu w Sztuce Polskiej* [The Builders of the World. The Development of the Radical Modernism in Polish Art] (Kraków: Universitas, 2000), 50.

¹⁹ Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 274-294.

²⁰ Wanda Kemp-Welch, "Strzemiński's Theory of Unism (1922-1935)," *Polish Art Studies* 12 (1991): 63.

original whole leads to a postsuprematist painting.”²¹ In an attempt to reduce Suprematism’s dynamic tensions, Strzemiński adjusted the shapes of the forms in his composition in order to imitate roughly the linear edges of the canvas or the more curvilinear edges of other forms. Also, to moderate the tension created by contrasting colors, he used similar tones in representing both the forms and the background. The goal of unity between the background and the compositional forms would become one of the defining principles of Unism in painting.

The question may be asked as to why Strzemiński strived for such unity within the painting. For him, the unity was a result of the innate qualities of the work of art, the qualities, which he termed the ‘laws of organicity.’ The artist proclaimed that, “[e]ach form assumes its own organicity according to the law characteristic solely to it: [thus] to define the law of organicity of works of art, we cannot take as a model the law of construction of any other thing....”²² He later continued the definition referring to painting by saying, “The work of art must be constructed according to its own laws....[T]he painting does not convey anything, does not express anything, does not represent anything – it simply is, it exists. The work of art is a VISUAL ORGANIC WHOLE.”²³ It was the goal of achieving a ‘visual organic whole’ that preoccupied Strzemiński’s art from 1923-4 forward and would become one of the main precepts of Unism.

²¹ Władysław Strzemiński, *Blok*, 1 (1924): 1. English translation as in *Constructivism in Poland 1923-1936. Kettle’s Yard Gallery in Association with Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź*. exh. cat. (Suffolk: The Lavenham Press, 1984), 8.

²² Strzemiński’s Statement in *Katalog Wystawy Nowej Sztuki, Wilno* (June 1923): 19-21. Reprinted in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 10. The translation of the original texts is by the author of this study, unless otherwise noted.

²³ Strzemiński, “O Nowej Sztuce,” [On New Art] *Blok* 2 (1924): 2.

Strzemiński's early attempts toward the spatial unity in painting are visible in the synthetic compositions mentioned above. One might argue retrospectively that both *Synthetic Composition 1* and *Postsuprematist Composition 2* can be understood as constituting his earliest experimentation with 'Unist' compositions.²⁴ By balancing the biomorphic forms with each other within the plane of the canvases, Strzemiński searched for a sense of equilibrium among the various forms. In this regard, he seems to be investigating the spatial relations between the forms and the two dimensional space defined by a frame. The use of similar tones, especially in the *Postsuprematist Composition*, further accentuates the flatness of the canvas, as the related hues appear in the same plane thereby reducing the illusion of depth. Thus, both the paintings and texts created by Strzemiński shortly after his move to Poland reveal that by 1923-24 he was already beginning to articulate the founding principles of what would be codified as Unism. Yet, the desired "visual organic whole" demanded by the artist is not quite achieved in these compositions, as the tensions and differentiation between the forms and the background still exist.

In an essay entitled, "B=2," published in the Constructivist periodical *Blok* in 1924,²⁵ Strzemiński reiterated more clearly the main postulates regarding the organicity of the work of art:

A real = autonomous existence in the plastic arts: when a work of art is plastically self-sufficient; when it constitutes an end in itself and does not seek justification in values that subsist beyond the picture. An item of pure art, built in accordance with its own principles, stands up beside other

²⁴ *Synthetic Composition 1* opens the series of unist works assembled in the collection of Art Museum in Łódź, where the works have been assigned a numerical equivalent from 1-14 to allow a chronological organization of the artist's works. I would argue that although the two early works clearly constitute part of Strzemiński's early unist investigations, they do not yet fully belong with the unist compositions.

²⁵ *Blok* was a journal published by the first Polish constructivist group of the same name. For more information on the group see Appendix.

worldly organisms as a parallel entity, as a real being, *for every thing has its own laws of construction of its organism*. When we build one thing, we cannot do it according to the laws and principles belonging to another thing.²⁶

Strzemiński would remain remarkably consistent in his definition of organic laws and would extend them from Unist painting,²⁷ to the other arts, such as sculpture, architecture, and typography. It is important to keep the term of ‘organic laws’ in mind, as it will prove to be the unifying feature among the four arts with regard to the artist’s theory of Unism.

According to Strzemiński, the physical dimensions of the canvas and the physical flatness of the plane constitute the foundation of the organicity in painting. They are of crucial importance, as they dictate the construction of the composition. Strzemiński explains,

The innate properties of the picture (square boundaries and the flatness of the picture plane) should not just be treated as a place to position form, conceived independently. The innate properties (square boundaries and the flatness of the picture plane) are components of a pictorial construction, perhaps even the most important ones since pictorial forms can only emerge in relation to them. They must be dependent and closely connected.²⁸

Thus, because of its inherent physical qualities, the painting is a quadrilateral composition defined by a frame and exists independently of its surroundings. For the artist, the physical qualities of the painting dictated its pictorial arrangement. According to Strzemiński, the artist’s role is to reinforce those qualities by a unified composition within this framework, rather than to detract from them by means of a dynamic

²⁶ Strzemiński, “B=2.” *Blok. Kurier Bloku* 8-9 (1924), in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 22, English translation as in Bois, “Strzemiński and Kobra...”136.

²⁷ Considering the concept of ‘organic’ quality of a work of art, Turowski attempted to explain further that Strzemiński had a twofold understanding of the concept, “which defined ‘natural’ (as in a live organism) and ‘mechanical’ (as in a machine) unity of the elements creating the whole.” Turowski, *Budowniczość*, 92.

²⁸ Strzemiński, *Unism in Painting*, 11.

composition based on contrasts. This emphasis on the organicity of painting based on its physical qualities remains an essential issue in the discussion of Unism. The artist will look later for these inherent qualities in sculpture, architecture, and typography to define their own organic laws and to adapt his Unist theory to those varied media of art.

A closer examination of the Unist theory in painting is necessary at this point in order to understand fully Strzemiński's definition of Unism and his guidelines for achieving it. It was not until the publication of his 1927 article, "Dualism and Unism," and the 1928 booklet, *Unism in Painting*, that Strzemiński finally assigned the term 'Unism' to his theory and elaborated on what he meant by it. He thereby officially titled the new system and at the same time gave the name retrospectively to his earlier artistic explorations of form. The Unist system was a logical and inexorable consequence of the development of the work of art; for Strzemiński, it represented the unfolding of the history of art toward its culmination. The artist viewed art history as a trajectory of formal developments and a constant discovery of new compositional problems in painting within dualistic frames of conception. What Strzemiński termed as 'dualism' was the numerous oppositions (of lines, colors, and composition) present in the history of painting. The artist argued that this dualistic approach concealed the formal qualities of the work of art; the illusion of space negated the two dimensional character of the canvas, while the dynamism of the dualist work violated the closely-framed rectangular surface. Strzemiński argued against such dualism in art. According to him, in order to return to the purely formal concept of art, an artist must replace the dualistic composition with a Unist system – the system in which Strzemiński expressed a desire of achieving the

greatest possible unity within the painting, where the surface, form, shapes, and materials would be integrated.

In his theory, Strzemiński argued that the dualistic oppositions in painting resulted from the influence of the Baroque tradition. It must be stressed, however, that Strzemiński understood the term ‘Baroque’ differently from the understanding shared by most art historians. For him, the term went beyond the art historical period succeeding the Renaissance and extended into nineteenth century art.²⁹ This reading of art history sheds light on Strzemiński’s atypical methodology in the study of art history, one that allowed him to arrive at his radical theory. Rather than focusing on the discussion of specific schools or movements, although he was well familiar with them, he examines the development of art in exclusively formal terms, thereby reinforcing the significant role he consistently assigned to the experimentation with form.³⁰

Strzemiński explained that Baroque freed the painting from its Renaissance dependence on architectural surroundings. In contrast to the symmetrical organization of the Renaissance frescoes, dictated by the symmetrical dimension of the wall, Baroque, by removing it from the ‘wall,’ allowed for the reinvention of notions of painting. According to Strzemiński, the new system constructed by the Baroque tradition was based on multiple contrasts. In Wölfflinian terms of stylistic dichotomy, Strzemiński

²⁹ Strzemiński acknowledged the new formal experimentation in the art of Impressionists, Cézanne and even the Cubists, but he saw in their art a continuation of Baroque tradition. He said of Cézanne, “At first glance Cézanne’s paintings seem entirely different from Baroque paintings. In reality, though, the extended range of colors is here only an increase in the number of color contrasts of Baroque painting.” Strzemiński, *Unism in Painting*, 5.

³⁰ A much more elaborate treatment of the history of art appeared in a book written by Strzemiński, entitled *Theory of Vision*, published posthumously in 1958. In addition to discussing the formal developments in art, the author also places these formal development within the historical, political and economic context.

illustrated, through dualistic oppositions, the ‘dramatic tensions’ he saw in Baroque (Fig. 8-10).³¹ It is perhaps best to allow the artist to elucidate his point of view:

Baroque is the drama of painterly conflicts, the resolution of the dualisms of form:

- 1) *C o n c e n t r i c c o n s t r u c t i o n*. ...[It] tends to be enclosed within a circle or oval and results in a close connection of shapes. At the same time, however, concentric construction, with its arrangement of shapes gravitating towards the centre, does not offer any connection with the picture’s borders ... This is the source of the first conflict: the conflict between the painterly form and the space in which it is painted, a flat rectangle of canvas. ...
- 2) *I n d e p e n d e n c e o f c o l o r* from line – the second conflict of Baroque painting.... There is contrast of colors not delimited by line (contour). There is contrast of a strong linear framework with a fluid color. Color and line should cooperate aiming at a shape that is mutually and uniformly defined by both line and color....
- 3) *I m p a c t o f l i n e s*, the mutual closing of directional tensions [is] the third conflict of Baroque painting. It is the result of the treatment of painting as a sign of dynamic, direct action... In reality, line is only a line and nothing more....
- 4) *C o n t r a s t o f s h a p e s* ... The principle of contrast breaking the painting into several unconnectable shapes, detached and opposing one another, results in a general warfare of all shapes, a dramatic conflict of contrasting form....
- 5) *C o l o r c o n t r a s t*, irrespective of the type of Baroque painting, occurs always purely as dark-light oppositions..., either as a juxtaposition of complementary colors... or as contrasts in texture....³²

The goal of Unism was to break away from and overcome these dualisms and contrasts of Baroque:

Against this dualistic conception, attempting to connect things that cannot be connected, and finding its reason not in the attainment of its intended objective, but in the power of the struggling forces and in the too strenuous effort wasted to subdue them, against this conception producing forces in order to fight them continuously, but never to conquer them – we have to oppose a conception of a picture as a reconciled and organic unity. The dualistic conception must be replaced by the Unist one. Rather than

³¹ Leszek Brogowski provides a close comparison between Strzemiński’s and Wölfflin’s concepts of Baroque in his book *Powidoki i po--: Unizm i Teoria Widzenia Władysława Strzemińskiego* [Afterimages and after--: Władysław Strzemiński’s Unism and Theory of Vision], (Gdańsk: Słowo/Obraz Terytoria), 2001.

³² Strzemiński, *Unism in Painting*, 7-10.

the sublime dramatic outbursts and the power of forces – a picture, as organic as nature.³³

Thus, as seen from the discussion of the theory so far, the principle solution to Strzemiński's system was a unified organization of forms and shapes in painting, one that created visual coherence and an unbreakable whole, and one that resulted from the artist's consideration of the physical qualities of the painting (primarily its rectangular shape and flat surface). In other words, the pictorial composition should respect the inherent qualities of the work of art. Strzemiński suggested the neutrality of forms and colors, as well as elimination of time, as means of achieving the Unist composition.³⁴

The artist argued that the Unist system, which was to lead to a complete homogeneity of painting, should consist of neutral static forms within the flat surface of the canvas. The neutrality of forms and colors was necessary to achieve a uniform painting, because any implication of movement resulting from a chaotic composition, in which shapes interacted with each other, evoked dynamism. Strzemiński was quite specific in claiming that the shapes could not be symmetrical or geometrical, because symmetrical composition never achieved a genuine construction, as "each axis of symmetry can be infinitely extended," and thus, failed to realize a complete, coherent whole.³⁵ This perhaps explains why in his early works, mentioned earlier, Strzemiński moved away from geometric shapes and introduced biomorphic ones. The artist was already then striving for an organized unified composition. Similarly, the use of geometry, which existed in all variations of Baroque, did not result in a coherent composition. According to Strzemiński, it was equally subjective and random as any

³³ Strzemiński, *Unizm w Malarstwie*, 10, English translation as in Bois, "Władysław Strzemiński...", 137.

³⁴ Strzemiński, "B=2," in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 25-27.

³⁵ Strzemiński, *Unism in Painting*, 4.

other composition. Instead, the construction of the painting was to follow the principle of equal value of space. “Making some parts [of the picture] stand out while neglecting other is unjustified. The picture plane is of equal value and plays part in the picture’s construction in the same degree.”³⁶ Thus, each square centimeter is equally important to the construction.

As mentioned earlier, it was not just through the neutral forms within the composition that Unist painting could be achieved. The artist repeatedly noted that, “each form must be consistent with:

- a) the borders of the plane – through shape
- b) the background of the painting – through shape and color.”³⁷

Strzemiński also analyzed the use of colors necessary for constructing a unified composition. He claimed, “colors should not be grouped according to contrast which breaks the picture but to unite and connect the picture. Not according to diversity of color, not according to what divides but to what unites.”³⁸ Following Strzemiński’s specifications, a Unist composition was to be composed of hues of the same brightness and similar tones, as they would reinforce the uniformity of the picture. This uniformity in color created an equally unified mass of shapes connected to the picture plane.

Strzemiński claimed that only through such a uniform application of hues would the independence of color from line be eliminated. No longer would the line work in opposition to color, but would become its boundary. For Strzemiński, it was especially important as, “the removal of this dualism puts an end to the dualism between the flat surface plane of the picture and the three-dimensional form of shapes painted on canvas.

³⁶ Ibid., 11.

³⁷ Strzemiński, “B=2,” in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 25.

³⁸ Strzemiński, *Unism in Painting*, 14.

The picture aiming at the complete uniformity should be the result of its innate qualities.”³⁹

The presence of dynamic tensions and illusion of movement within the composition was related to yet another key factor in Strzemiński’s theory, that of time.⁴⁰ Its elimination was crucial for the artist as he explained, “time is a nonplastic element characteristic of other arts: literature, music. Not the interaction of one form with another, but a complete simultaneity of occurrence.”⁴¹ The artist claimed that the painting, which does not exist in time, but solely in space, cannot assume any position in time. It is regulated by its physical characteristics, while its surface is bound by specific measurements, rectilinear shape, and two dimensionality – nothing more and nothing less. He elaborated that, “Neither in the flat surface of the painting, nor in its square boundaries do we observe the dynamism as an outcome of the inherent qualities of the painting. To the opposite: dynamism as a spatio-temporal phenomenon defies the extra-temporal characteristic of painting.”⁴²

Thus, it can be ascertained that Strzemiński aimed to reduce or at best eliminate the time element resulting from a dynamic composition and dynamic structure of forms. Would that mean that Strzemiński failed to consider that perception of a work of art takes place within time? Not necessarily. One might argue that Strzemiński bore in mind both the element of time in painting resulting from the composition and the time element involved in perception. Considering the fact that the artist understood ‘perception time’

³⁹ Ibid., 15.

⁴⁰ In “B=2” Strzemiński explained his understanding of time within a painterly composition, and provided quasi mathematical equations to support his analysis: “(movement = space x time) and (dynamism = form x space x time), “B=2,” in *Pisma*, 25-26.

⁴¹ Ibid., 25.

⁴² Strzemiński, “Notatki,” [Notes] *Zwrotnica* 11 (1927): 243, in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 36.

as the time interval needed for the eye to travel through the painting from one point to another, following a line or shape, he concluded that the more dynamic the tensions and collisions of shapes on the canvas, the longer time was involved in the painting. Hence, the element of time was foreign to painting and compelled the viewer to read the painting instead of looking at it and seeing it. By insisting on the total elimination of any type of contrasts between forms, lines, or colors, Strzemiński reduced to a minimum the time otherwise necessary to decipher a painting. The objective of the Unist system was a creation of “an extra-temporal picture, operating only within the notion of space.”⁴³ The issue of time is one of the more important elements of the Unist theory as the artist would carry it over to the discussion of other arts, such as sculpture, architecture, and typography. As will be discussed in later chapters, Strzemiński would approach the issue of time differently when analyzing the other arts.

Strzemiński’s theoretical writings presented thus far illustrate a surprising consistency of ideas, some of which were outlined as early as 1923 and 1924 and fully articulated in 1927. The logical, as it may appear, system of Unism, as outlined by the artist in theory, turned out to be much more difficult to represent in practice. Despite his earlier attempts to experiment with Unist-type compositions, scholars of Strzemiński’s oeuvre agree that the first Unist compositions were created between 1924 and 1927.⁴⁴ It is apparent in these works that the artist was experimenting with ways to achieve on

⁴³ Strzemiński, *Unism in Painting*, 12.

⁴⁴ Strzemiński donated his works to the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź in 1945. With each painting the artist included a note with a title and a date of when it was painted. Because the artist was dating the works ex facto, some errors in dates were later discovered. Thus, the early unist compositions which are now believed to have been created sometime between 1924 and 1927 were initially signed and dated to 1932. The active participation in publications of major constructivist journals might have helped in reassessing Strzemiński’s early unist works, as the artist often published their reproductions or sketches in those journals. The works similar in composition to the ones being discussed appeared in *Blok* c. 1924 (Fig. 13). However, Turowski mentioned in his latest publication that he would date all four works to the year 1927. Turowski, *Budowniczości*, note 219.

canvas the postulates he presented in his theoretical polemics. Two of the exemplary surviving works of that period are *Unist Composition 4* (Fig. 11) and *Unist Composition 5* (Fig. 12); both displayed during Strzemiński's solo exhibition of 1927 in Warsaw. The attempt to unify forms with the flat surface of the picture plane is visible in both works. The interlocking shapes of similar values and color mesh with each other like puzzle pieces. The forms resume straight edges in relation to the rectilinear borders of the canvas and become wavier towards the center and in relation to other forms. Strzemiński used a gamut of delicate pastel colors to distinguish between the background and the forms even less visible and simultaneously reduce the implication of depth in painting. The colors of similar value seem to be laid out on the same level emphasizing further the two dimensionality of the canvas. One cannot, however, speak of the artist's success in eliminating fully the figure – ground opposition. Although minimized, the differentiation between the forms and the ground is still quite apparent.

Slightly more successful are Strzemiński's works of 1928-1929: *Unist Composition 6* (Fig. 14) and *Unist Composition 7* (Fig. 15). It is in *Unist Composition 7* especially that the forms created of large interlocking shapes fill out nearly an entire surface of the canvas and together assume an almost rectangular shape of joined elements. The background becomes visible solely towards the edges of the canvases. Again, towards the outside, the shapes assume straight lines mimicking the straight edges of the canvas. Moving towards the center of the composition, the edges of the shapes become much softer and wavier. Here, the artist's idea of the equal value of each part in painting is slightly more visible and thereby better illustrates Strzemiński's attempt to match the practice with the theory.

The principle of unity manifested itself quite differently in the so-called *Architectonic Compositions* (Fig. 16, 17) created between 1926 and 1930, and more importantly show the evolution of Strzemiński's thought and theory. Although the works differ dramatically from the Unist compositions discussed hitherto, they constitute an important element in the evolution of Strzemiński's theory of Unism. These works mark a link between his experimentation in painting and his theoretical application of Unist principles in sculpture and architecture. In the *Architectonic Compositions*, Strzemiński suggested the use of mathematical calculations, based on the dimensions of the canvas, as the means of achieving ultimate objectivity in painting. "When beginning construction of the picture its basic dimensions – width and height – should be taken as a point of departure for defining the width and height of every shape, as well as its place."⁴⁵ Thus, although in a different way, Strzemiński yet again is taking the immanent qualities of painting as the basis for his practical experimentation. The application of mathematical calculation did not mean that the construction of the composition would become mechanical. Strzemiński clarified, "[e]ven the best knowledge of the methods of calculation cannot conceive the picture. Calculation should go together with intuition."⁴⁶ What Strzemiński meant by intuition was not some random feeling or the individual preferences of the artists, but rather the result of an extensive visual knowledge and familiarity with all visual systems. The work of art should stand above the individuality of the painter. "It is not a sweeping brush and fluency which make for a good artist. It is a poor painter who finishes a painting with one sweep of the brush. The eye should be

⁴⁵ Strzemiński, *Unism in Painting*, 14.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

not in the muscle, but in the tip of the brush.”⁴⁷ The line, color, and shape should not be arbitrary, but precisely coordinated by the artist.

Considering Strzemiński’s *Unist Compositions* discussed above, it may be difficult to understand how the artist intended to apply these mathematical calculations and managed to follow his Unist postulates. Strzemiński justified the use of mathematical proportions as a means of achieving an objective composition. An objective composition, in his view, was one that derived its origin from the dimension of the canvas and one that aimed to reduce the distinction between figure and background, similarly as in the *Unist Compositions*. In the *Architectonic Compositions*, the interlocking forms, so subtly suggested by the artist in his early *Unist Compositions*, are reduced to two or three surfaces of apparently clashing colors. The artist defended his choice of colors by claiming that they were of equal intensity; thereby affecting the viewer equally and following the Unist principles. The division of the geometric-type forms on the canvases was derived from the proportions of the canvas and was based on the golden division. Although the dimensions (96 x 60 cm) of most of the *Architectonic Compositions* and the proportions applied were identical, no two compositions are the same. Strzemiński’s constant exploration of new solutions in form is quite obvious in these works.

Compared to the *Unist Compositions*, the number of *Architectonic Compositions* created by Strzemiński is quite staggering. Considering just four of the surviving early *Unist Compositions* along with a few later ones, it is surprising that the artist created at

⁴⁷ Strzemiński, “Notatki,” in *Pisma*, 36. English translation as in Janusz Zagrodzki, “On the Question of Constructivism. Mediations on Color,” *Bulletin du Musée National de Varsovie* 36.1-2 (1995): 49.

least seventeen *Architectonic Compositions*.⁴⁸ The arrangement of the two or three irregular geometric shapes, as in *Architectonic Composition 3a* of 1927 (Fig. 18), *Architectonic Composition 6b* from 1928 (Fig. 19), and *Architectonic Composition 9c* from 1929 (Fig. 20), shows that Strzemiński constantly strives to eliminate the figure-ground opposition.⁴⁹ Some of the arrangements are more successful than others in achieving this goal. The eye of the viewer shifts from one shape to another struggling to apply the figure-ground roles to specific shapes. In the paintings where the forms balance each other, the character of each one can be inverted, thus, never fully revealing which is the shape and which is the background, thereby at least partially fulfilling the Unist principle. One scholar notes that through the introduction of curvilinear form into many of his *Architectonic Compositions*, Strzemiński violated “the deductivist law, at least in a rectangular painting.”⁵⁰ But perhaps the variations in forms in the *Architectonic Compositions* resulted from the ‘intuition’ of the artist who attempted to represent the proportions in new ways. Strzemiński would later explain, “The offered method of conduct concerns only the size of the shapes and their arrangement, it says nothing about the shapes themselves. This is up to the artist, who knows himself what shapes he needs.”⁵¹

⁴⁸ Many of Strzemiński’s works have been destroyed during the war by the Nazis, who considered his works as *Entartete Kunst*, thus the precise number of *unist compositions* created by the artist, remains unknown.

⁴⁹ Similarly to the *unist compositions*, the *architectonic compositions* were also assigned numbers individually to suggest the chronology of Strzemiński’s works. Additionally the architectonic compositions have been assigned a letter (a,b,c,d) corresponding to compositional arrangements of specific paintings.

⁵⁰ Bois, “Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro,” 143.

⁵¹ Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro, *Kompozycja przestrzeni, obliczanie rytmu czasoprzestrzennego*, [Composition of Space. Calculation of Spatio – Temporal Rhythm] (Łódź: Biblioteka ‘a.r’ no 2, 1931). English translation as in Bois, “Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro,” 143.

The *Architectonic Compositions* will return briefly in the discussion of Unist sculpture, but for now let us turn to Strzemiński's final practical experimentation with Unism in painting. It is quite surprising that what Strzemiński elucidated so intelligently and logically in his radical theory, appeared not to be as easily achievable in practice. The monochromatic composition, which might seem like a logical realization of Strzemiński's system, did not appear in the artist's oeuvre until the last phase of the Unist period. In fact, Strzemiński came closest to the realization of his theoretical polemics in the *Unist Compositions* created between 1931 and 1934. One scholar observed that one of the works created during that period, *Unist Composition 9* of 1931 (Fig. 21) represents the work where "Strzemiński's art matches perfectly his theory: not only is the rippled texture even throughout the whole canvas (each ripple is composed of two lines, a high relief line and a low relief line), but the colors are of exactly identical value and saturation,"⁵² and thereby balance each other and eliminate the figure-ground opposition as well as any implication of depth.

Unist Composition 9 as well as few of the other works of this period, nearly monochromatic in execution, reveal some remnants of the *Architectonic Compositions*. However, the geometric forms applied by Strzemiński are much more relaxed and less strictly geometric here. In *Unist Composition 8* (Fig. 22) and *Unist Composition 11* (Fig. 23), both of 1931, the attention is shifted from the specific shapes to the whole composition by a subtle differentiation in colors and by the application of texture over the geometrical forms underneath. Fish scale-like texture covers the entire canvases of three

⁵² Bois, "Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro," 139-140. Bois goes on to explain that the same value and saturation of colors along with horizontally distributed painterly texture make the forms inspired by architectonic compositions invisible in black and white reproductions of *Unist Composition 9*. For Bois that reinforces the argument that the choice of homogeneous saturation and value of the colors matched Strzemiński's theoretical polemics.

of the works, *Unist Compositions 8 and 11*, and another *Unist Composition* from 1932 (Fig. 24).⁵³ The scale-like texture shaped by small curvy elements rhythmically repeated over the entire canvas must, according to Strzemiński, act as a unifying agent, thereby eliminating any spatial relations between the forms and colors underneath. In the *Unist Composition 10* of 1931 (Fig. 25) and the *Unist Composition* from 1932, Strzemiński eliminated completely the *Architectonic Compositions*-inspired shapes by covering the canvas with a nearly monochromatic coarse, almost sand-like (in *Unist Composition 10*) and scale-like (in *Unist Composition*) textures. Yet, the eye still registers the subtle variations of colors in the small elements of the texture.

The monochromatic works from 1932-1934, *Unist Composition 12* of 1932 (Fig. 26), *Unist Composition 13* (Fig. 27), and *Unist Composition 14* (Fig. 28), both from 1934, belong to the final Unist creations in painting. All three are built by the application of swirly lines – some open, some closed – meandering over the entire surfaces. Strzemiński achieved this textural effect by simply squeezing the paint out of tubes and onto the canvases. The lines maintain the uniformity of the whole composition, as they are uniformly distributed throughout the whole canvas. The fact that the lines are of the same color as the background further unite all of the elements. The last two compositions defy the typical rectangular dimensions of the canvas and instead are perfectly square, measuring 50 x 50 centimeters. The artist, in his last attempt to unify the space, enlarged the pattern towards the center of the compositions to counteract the illusion of depth, which he claimed resulted from the uniformly distributed patterns. Stefan Wegner, a student of the artist, explained the action of the artist by saying, “the tension of form is

⁵³ Despite the fact the almost all unist and architectonic compositions have been differentiated numerically, the *Unist Composition* of 1932 has not been assigned any numbers. Thus, in this study it is referred to simply as *Unist Composition*.

stronger at the edge of the picture, while weaker, and therefore seeming more remote, in the center.”⁵⁴ By enlarging the pattern, however, Strzemiński achieved just the opposite and created an illusion of convexity. Wanda Kemp-Welch added that, to an average viewer, the effect of convexity was even more pronounced as it went against the long held Western tradition of perspective recession.⁵⁵

Strzemiński perceived his practice as constant experimentation with form, focusing on developing new solutions or new works of art without unnecessary repetitions. “An abstract painting has no other *raison d’être* than the discovery of new data, new in comparison to those offered by preceding works. This is why one should paint only when one has something to say.”⁵⁶ The two works, *Unist Composition 13* and *Unist Composition 14*, would, therefore, become his last Unist works. The artist realized that he had arrived at the point where another composition would simply be a repetition of already discovered ideas.⁵⁷

The analysis of Strzemiński’s works produced during the Unist period allows one to understand how challenging, if not impossible, it was for the artist to convey the aesthetic vision so eloquently outlined in his theory. Although, as noted before, some of the works were remarkably successful, considering the artist’s struggle, the compositions were, for the most part, not quite in concordance with the Unist system. The fact, however, that the theory was not attainable in practice does not undermine Strzemiński’s

⁵⁴ Stefan Wegner, in *Przegląd Artystyczny* 1 (1957): 11. As quoted in Kemp-Welch, 67.

⁵⁵ Wanda Kemp-Welch, “Teoria Unizmu w Malarstwie,” in *Władysław Strzemiński. In Memoriam*, (Łódź: PP Sztuka Polska, 1988), 86.

⁵⁶ Strzemiński, “Komentarz do obrazu” [Commentary to the Painting] *Forma* 2 (1934): 17-18. English translation as in Bois, “Lissitzky, Mondrian, Strzemiński...,” 102.

⁵⁷ When Stefan Krygier asked why Strzemiński stopped painting unist compositions, the artist replied that he simply did not envision any possibility of further artistic development of that system. Stefan Krygier, “...do solarizmu” [...towards solarism] *Władysław Strzemiński. 1893-1952. Materiały z Sesji* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1994), 103.

persistence in searching for the perfect form or significance of his theoretical and artistic system. His *Unist* and *Architectonic Compositions*, although not always rigorously following the Unist postulates, remain among the most radical and successful examples of avant-garde art.

The main goal of Strzemiński's theory of Unism in painting, as examined thus far, was without a doubt artistic experimentation with form. For Strzemiński, the painting was defined solely within the limits of the rectangular canvas and existed independently from the surrounding space unlike sculpture or architecture. The pure form was to be the self-sufficient element of the entire composition. A few years into his experimentation, Strzemiński would claim, "Scientific research of elements of plastic art (space, color, texture) remains a fundament of findings of new plastic art."⁵⁸ In his 'scientific research,' the artist went quite far, and one might argue that, by rejecting any type of illusionism, subjectivity, or expressionism, Strzemiński arrived at the neutral point in painting and brought to question the definition of the work of art. Was the Unist work with all its neutrality able to maintain any relation with the viewer? Turowski pointed out that, "by losing its symbolic import the painting – object became something like a commodity – but without gaining a clear – cut utilitarian value. Insignificant in the world of signs, in the world of things the painting was an absurd object - an extreme situation, in which this object's purely theoretical status became apparent."⁵⁹ Yet, it was this formal experimentation that was necessary for Strzemiński to move further in his Unist development and to successfully apply the theory to other arts, such as sculpture,

⁵⁸ Strzemiński, "Sztuka nowoczesna w Polsce," [Modern Art in Poland] in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 205.

⁵⁹ Andrzej Turowski, "Fizjologia Oka" [The Physiology of the Eye] *Władysław Strzemiński. 1893-1952. W Setną Rocznicę Urodzin*, exh. cat. (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1994), 35.

architecture and typography. For Strzemiński, it was the painting with its materialistic characteristics that was the sole object of his quasi-scientific experimentation, in which the artist became almost a scientist in search of an absolute Unist composition.

The study of the pure form in painting was linked to the artist's constructivist roots in the belief of integrating art and society. While the artist was unable to realize any of his more practical aspirations with Unist painting, the Unist system transposed to other art forms, such as architecture or typography, attempted to fulfill that demand.

Unism in Painting was to become the launching platform for Strzemiński's later endeavors that would spread into sculpture, architecture, and typography. Like many other modernists who did not limit their artistic systems solely to one medium, Strzemiński also expanded his theory to other art forms. Unism became not just an artistic theory or manifesto, but also a type of worldview encompassing other elements in life. Starting with the study of form in painting, Strzemiński moved to examine the form in sculpture, which became a transitional element in his implication of Unism into architecture. Thus, it was only after he exhausted his formal analysis in painting that he was able to experiment with the Unist principles in relation to sculpture, architecture, and typography.

Chapter Two: “Spatio – Temporal Rhythm” - Unism in Sculpture and Architecture

New sculpture, as it becomes united with the surrounding space, should be its most condensed and appealing part. This is achieved, because its shapes, by their mutual interdependence, create a rhythm of sizes and divisions. The unity of rhythm arises out of the unity of its calculated scale.

Katarzyna Kobro⁶⁰

In the 1928 article, “The Present in Architecture and Painting,” Strzemiński noted that while the boundary of a painting was its frame, there were no frames in sculpture and architecture. Therefore, by imposing any type of framework on sculpture, an artist violated the special characteristics of that art form.⁶¹ This statement reveals that Strzemiński was already then thinking about formal analysis in sculpture in terms of the Unist principles he established earlier in painting. However, because the two mediums differed from each other, the general principles of organicity and unity, just as in painting, needed to be modified to properly address the ‘organic laws’ of sculpture.

Although one finds numerous comments regarding sculpture as well as architecture in many of Strzemiński’s articles written in the late 1920s, it was in a book co-authored with his wife Katarzyna Kobro, entitled *Composition of Space: Calculations of Spatio-Temporal Rhythm* (Fig. 29), and published in 1931,⁶² that the Unist principles in

⁶⁰ Katarzyna Kobro, “Rzeźba i Bryła,” [Sculpture and Solid] *Europa* 2 (1929). English translation as in *Constructivism in Poland 1923-1936. Kettle’s Yard Gallery in Association with Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź*. exh. cat. (Suffolk: The Lavenham Press, 1984), 37.

⁶¹ Władysław Strzemiński and Szymon Syrkus, “Teraźniejszość w Architekturze i Malarstwie,” [The Present in Architecture and Painting] *Przegląd Artystyczny* 4 (1928): 5-8, in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 62.

⁶² Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro, *Kompozycja Przestrzeni. Obliczanie Rytmu Czasoprzestrzennego* [Composition of Space: Calculations of Spatio - Temporal Rhythm] (Łódź: Biblioteka a.r. nr.2, 1931). The book was written in the first half of 1929 and was originally planned for publication later the same year. Due to financial constraints and problems with gathering the necessary illustrations, the book was not published until February 1931. With seventy-nine pages of text and forty-nine illustrations, the book was a much larger volume than Strzemiński’s *Unism in Painting*. From now on it will be referred to as *Composition of Space*.

sculpture⁶³ were fully articulated in what has been called as “one of the most elaborate [theories of sculpture] of our century....”⁶⁴ The Strzemiński-Kobro duo seemed perfectly suited for the role – Strzemiński, an accomplished artist himself, but also a theoretician with a penetrating intellect, and Kobro, a sculptor who understood well the theoretical concepts of the Unist system, and was also able to provide a practical representation of the Unist theory in sculpture. Kobro’s role should not be diminished as the artist contributed greatly to the creation of *Composition of Space* through her theoretical input and more importantly through her sculptural creation. However, for the purpose of the present study, an emphasis will be placed on the work of Strzemiński.

Following Strzemiński’s earlier analysis of ‘organic laws’ in a work of art as a basis for formal composition in terms of painting, the artist and his wife this time shifted their attention to sculpture. Just as in the Unist theory in painting, the artists attempted to define the familiar term of ‘organic laws’ with regard to sculpture. However, the definition of ‘organic laws’ in sculpture was different from that in painting and resulted from the distinction between the two different art forms. Opening their discussion, Strzemiński and Kobro reiterated the differences between painting and sculpture:

The painting has natural limits that are determined by the dimensions of the canvas. It cannot go beyond its natural limits. This is why the construction of the painting takes its limits as a point of departure...A sculpture, on the other hand, does not have such natural limits, defined a priori. Hence the natural law must be for a sculpture not to enclose itself within a volume, but to unite with the totality of space, with the infinite space. The union of the sculpture with space, the saturation of space by

⁶³ Although the majority of scholars agree that *Composition of Space* is an extension of unist principles into sculpture, Janusz Zagrodzki argues against it claiming that the two (*Unism in Painting* and *Composition of Space*) were put together artificially. “Inside Space,” in *Katarzyna Kobro 1989-1951*, exh. cat. (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 1999), 71-79.

⁶⁴ Bois, “Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro...,” 144.

the sculpture, the fusion of the sculpture in space and its link with it constitute the organic law of sculpture.⁶⁵

The definition of the Unist principle of organicity of the work of art in relation to sculpture shows Strzemiński's steadfast loyalty to the Unist system. Although the organic law of sculpture required different solutions than those applied to Unist painting, it still bound sculpture with the general concepts governing the Unist theory developed earlier, that is the unity of the work of art with its place of origin. It also further indicates Strzemiński's unique approach towards the different arts. He, unlike other artists, approached each art form individually and searched for its own distinct laws of organicity, laws that existed *a priori* and thereby dictated the composition of that specific work of art.

The point of departure for Strzemiński and Kobro was the crucial postulate that each sculpture in one way or another addressed the relation of space enclosed within it to the space outside it.⁶⁶ Each sculpture, the artists clarified, encloses part of the space within itself, while at the same time it separates the space enclosed from the space outside it. Hence, the sculpture can be analyzed as shaping the inner or outer space.

Similarly to his analysis in painting, Strzemiński and Kobro examined earlier sculptural developments to justify the need and logical evolution leading to the Unist sculpture. The analysis of sculptural methods and styles led the artists to the conclusion that hitherto sculpture had been almost consistently built as an enclosed mass within the space, isolated from the outside. The sculpture appeared to be carved out of the space around it, rather than to be part of it. Such isolated sculptural forms created a continuum

⁶⁵ Strzemiński and Kobro, *Kompozycja Przestrzeni*, in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 75. English translation as in Bois, "Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro...", 144.

⁶⁶ Strzemiński and Kobro, *Kompozycja Przestrzeni*, in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 74.

of multiple separated fragments, instead of a whole unified space. Strzemiński and Kopro were searching for a system in sculpture in which the composition of its elements would unite it with the space around it. This postulate would become one of the key elements of Unist sculpture, as it addressed the organicity of the work of art and its unity with the place of origin.

The artists noted that there had been initial attempts to reach out beyond the limits of what they called a primitive sculpture (solid mass carved out in space) – the architectonization of space. Based on the repetition of forms and proportional similarities, the sculpture was created in relation to architecture and stopped being a closed off mass. Strzemiński illustrated an example of such architectonization of sculpture in his drawing of elements of gothic sculpture and architecture, in which the figural forms and ornaments were rhythmically tied with the architectural space (Fig. 30).⁶⁷

Unfortunately, the artists claimed that the architectonization of sculpture did not fully solve the problem of fusing it with the space outside. While it opened the boundaries of the sculpture to the architectural surroundings, it did not merge with the space outside it. Hence, it can be said that the sculptural mass in this instance referred to the full architectural complex in which the sculpture became solely its fragment, but failed to become fully integrated with the space around.

The Baroque artists, with Bernini as the favorite, attempted to merge sculpture with space through dynamism. Perhaps Strzemiński and Kopro had Bernini's *David* (Fig. 31) in mind when they explained that the dynamism of the sculpture affected its balance

⁶⁷ In this example Strzemiński pointed to the sculptures from the royal portal in Chartres cathedral in France.

and the sculpture began to interact with the space around it through the fragment moving away from the center of the form. Although the artists acknowledged the revolutionary and innovative character of Bernini's work, they also managed to find flaws in Bernini's compositions. For Strzemiński and Kobro, the space was in constant equilibrium and the dynamism of the Baroque sculpture interfered with the stability of space. The kinetic energies of Baroque sculpture created an imbalanced system full of pathos and chaos.⁶⁸ Therefore, similarly as in Unist painting, the authors suggested rejection of dynamism for the sake of stability of forms. They listed the negative characteristics of Baroque sculpture as follows:

1. DYNAMISM
2. SIMULTANEOUS EXISTENCE OF TWO SEPARATE SYSTEMS OF EQUILIBRIUM
3. SCULPTURE AS A GROUP OF IMBALANCED SHAPES
4. DYNAMIC RHYTHMS INSTEAD OF FORM RHYTHMS
5. CONCENTRIC CONSTRUCTION AND RELATED TO IT UNEVEN TREATMENT OF FRAGMENTS OF SPACE
6. REMAINS OF THE MASS.⁶⁹

Therefore, the discussion of Baroque tradition already presented in *Unism in Painting* reappears again in the *Composition of Space*. By establishing the negative characteristics of Baroque sculpture, Strzemiński and Kobro furthered some of the parallels between Unist theory in painting and sculpture. Similarly, as in painting, the Baroque tradition in sculpture remained rather hard to overcome. The authors claimed that, with the death of Bernini, there began a stasis in the development of sculpture, and it was not until Umberto Boccioni that sculpture was moved in a new direction, different from the one postulated by the Baroque.⁷⁰ In works such as *The Unique Forms of*

⁶⁸ Strzemiński and Kobro, 85.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 90.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Continuity in Space of 1913 (Fig. 32), Boccioni approached the sculpture not as a solid, but rather as a sculptural zone. “Boccioni, in his Futurist sculptures, showed us how to liberate sculpture from the burden of solidity. Archipenko opened up the inside of the volume, but he kept the perimeters complete.”⁷¹ For Strzemiński and Kobra, although admirable, such a stance was still not enough. The artists insisted on the complete union of sculpture with space. “The dualism of opposed – sculpture and space contradicts the basic conditions of their existence. From Baroque dualism, we must move to the Unist sculpture, which is based on the union of space and sculpture.”⁷²

As the scholarly literature pointed out, “[t]he issue is to avoid what Rosalind Krauss has called ‘the logic of the monument’ - a commemorative logic that ‘distinguishes sculpture from the ongoing phenomena of daily life’ and plunges the viewer ‘into a state of passive contemplation that cuts him off from the concerns of everyday life.’”⁷³ Following this argument, one should note that Strzemiński and Kobra’s Unist sculpture, unlike Unist painting, was not meant to be for its own sake. The Unist sculpture was to sculpt the space. “... [T]he shape in the Unist sculpture is not the goal in itself, but only a representation of the spatial relations.”⁷⁴ Thus, although tied to the concept of unism, both painting and sculpture assumed their own individual and distinct laws of organicity.

The discrepancies resulting from such an approach were not, however, an indication of artists’ arbitrary application of the Unist system to fit sculpture. As the

⁷¹ Katarzyna Kobra, “Rzeźba i Bryła,” [Sculpture and Solid] *Europa 2* (1929). English translation as in *Three Pioneers of Polish Avant-Garde: Including an Appendix Concerning Franciska Clausen* (Odense: Fyns Kunstmuseum, 1985), 58.

⁷² Strzemiński and Kobra, 88.

⁷³ Bois, “Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobra...,” 146.

⁷⁴ Strzemiński and Kobra, 96.

authors of *Composition of Space* explained, “The general underpinning/basis of unism is the unity of the work of art with the place in which it is created, with its inherent features that existed before the work of art has been created.”⁷⁵ In sculpture, as mentioned earlier, there were no natural boundaries. Hence, the general postulate of unism, when applied to sculpture, required a spatial unity with its surroundings. The artists elaborated, “Sculpture must not be a foreign body in space, nor the center that dominates illicitly the rest of space. It must create the prolongation of space. If sculpture is to unite with space, the fundamental laws of space must govern its construction.”⁷⁶ The postulate for uniform construction in sculpture emanated from the stipulation that space in its infinity was a uniform entity. Strzemiński claimed, in his *Unism in Painting*, that each square centimeter should be of equal importance; similarly, in sculpture, he called for homogeneous treatment of all parts composing the sculpture.⁷⁷

Strzemiński and Kobro considered yet another important factor that contributed to the union with space, and that was the human component within the space. The idea of human movement would also come into play in the discussion of architecture, but for now it will be discussed in relation to sculpture. As the artists explained, “[t]he union of man and space is the action of man in that space. We come to know space through our actions. The vectors traced by the actions of man in space are: the vertical station of man and every object, the horizontal of the environment that he encounters on both sides, and the depth, before him, of forward movement.”⁷⁸ Human action could be reduced to this three-axis mathematical division, which at the same time could be used as means to

⁷⁵ Ibid., 99.

⁷⁶ As quoted in Bois, “Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro...,” 148.

⁷⁷ Painting reference in Strzemiński, *Unism in Painting*, 11, and sculptural reference in Strzemiński and Kobro, 91.

⁷⁸ Strzemiński and Kobro, 93.

achieve the most condensed plastic representation. Thus, according to the artists, by guiding the shapes and directions of the specific elements of a Unist sculpture, based on the directions of human activity within the surrounding space and the directions of three-axis mathematical application, the dynamism that was present in sculpture hitherto would be eliminated. “The unity with space is achieved through the lines of the sculpture which replicate the main lines of space, in so that the sculpture becomes in a way a condensed version of space.”⁷⁹ Therefore, one can speak again of the process of architectonization, but this time, unlike the gothic sculpture which aimed to merge with space through architecture, the architectonization happens from the space into the sculpture. In other words, the sculpture is architectonized in likeness of the space around it.

Therefore, the emphasis was never on the shapes as understood in the sculpture as a solid. The shapes in Unist sculpture were simply means to reach the unity with the space. “As long as the sculpture existed for itself, it could not achieve the unity with space, and became a foreign, non-organic body.”⁸⁰ Alone, an individual element had no meaning; it could be understood exclusively through its relationship with space. Strzemiński and Kobro believed that each form should partially shape the other forms. Thus, it is clear that, similarly to painting, the shapes of the composition in the Unist sculpture were subordinated to the overall uniform design.

As was mentioned earlier, between the two artists, it was Katarzyna Kobro who was responsible for the practical visualization of the Unist theory in sculpture.⁸¹ In her

⁷⁹ Ibid., 94.

⁸⁰ Strzemiński and Kobro, 97.

⁸¹ Although numerous examples of Kobro’s work still exist, (the majority housed in the Museum of Art in Łódź), a significant number has been lost or destroyed. Some were destroyed by the artist herself, when she burned them to heat up the apartment in which Strzemiński and Kobro lived with their young daughter Nika. Some sculptures have been reconstructed based on the clarity of mathematical calculations applied by Kobro in most of her sculptures.

works such as *Spatial Composition 4* of 1929 (Fig. 33), *Spatial Composition 5* of 1929 (Fig. 34), and *Spatial Composition 8* of 1932 (Fig. 35), one can observe what the artists meant by opening the sculpture to space. Quite successfully, Kobra managed to create compositions in which the multiple planes of the sculptures simultaneously envelop the space and extend into it. Compared to her earlier works, such as *Abstract Sculpture 1* of 1924 (Fig. 36) and *Suspended Constructions 1 and 2* of 1921 (Fig. 37, 38), the innovative quality is undeniable. While her earlier works still owe a great deal to the Russian Constructivists, such as Tatlin, and the Suprematism of Malevich, her later works signal the autonomous path the artist chose to follow, one that would lead her to the Unist sculptures.

The originality in the theory of Unist sculpture, one that marked another important distinction between painting and sculpture, lay also in Strzemiński and Kobra's ideas regarding color. The artists suggested color as a means of destroying the mass in sculpture. A sculpture with each side painted in a different color ceased to appear as mass; instead, it was ruptured into multiple fields and thereby was incorporated into the space around. Following their argument, one can conclude that color dematerializes the mass of the sculpture. The artists go even further by stating that the energy of color destroys the solid, and at the same time unites the sculpture with space.⁸² Although the artists' argument seems to contradict the use of color in Unist painting, one must remember that it aimed to achieve the same goal: unity. While monochromatic painting united its composition with the flat quadrilateral plane, the multiplicity of colors, by disrupting the solid and extending it into space through multiple projection planes, reinforced sculpture's unity with space.

⁸² Strzemiński and Kobra, 97.

Unlike in Unist painting, where the colors were muted and merged by the same level of saturation, in sculpture, the color gamut was chosen based on strong contrast, thus resulting in polychromy (Fig. 39). The stronger the tension between colors, the theory continued, the more it affected the space. The color extended from the sculpture into the space allowing for further integration of the two.⁸³ Strzemiński and Kobra elaborated on the subject,

Because of their different color intensity, we cannot see all the various planes at once. ... We do not unite adjacent colors but those that bear the same amount of energy. Thus we do not attempt to diversify the various forms by color but to lay a given color on various planes of the sculpture, perpendicular to one another and separated from the other color planes. ... Each color creates within the sculpture new spatial forms, more and more numerous, that fit into each other. The spatial forms, related by the given common color, hinge and create many “corridors” that link them together and with the exterior space. ... We have thus a system of spatial forms created by color.⁸⁴

Considering the arrangements of forms in sculpture prior to the application of color itself, the authors continued,

This system [of spatial forms created by color] is analogous to the system of forms of the sculpture itself, with one important fact however: both systems do not overlap... In this manner the extreme diversity of spatial partitions is emphasized in Unist sculpture: they are independent from one another and yet create through their connections an incalculable diversity of links between the sculpture and space.⁸⁵

The application of colors in the Unist sculpture, so eloquently versed in the fragments cited above, could be observed in some of Kobra’s works. Her sculptures *Spatial Composition 6* of 1931 (Fig. 40) and *Spatial Composition 4* of 1929 (Fig. 33) are exemplary illustrations of the use of polychromy in Unist sculpture. The surfaces are painted in the primary colors of red, blue, and yellow with an occasional use of grey,

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid. English translation as in Bois, “Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobra...,” 149.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 149-51.

white, and black. The colors are repeated throughout the sculpture over various planes; thereby successfully breaking the unity of the sculpture and visually dispersing the solid within the space.

The use of neo-plastic colors, analogous to those used by the artists of De Stijl, was clearly intentional. Characterized by the artists as high energy hues, these colors contained the necessary ‘power’ of contrast to break the solid. In fact, Kobra found them so successful that almost all of her colored sculptures exhibit that particular palette. The reason for such a limited number of colors used in a sculpture was explained by the fact that the introduction of too many colors would result in an unwanted association between the variations of the hues, thus, solidifying visually the sculpture.⁸⁶ Kobra and Strzemiński believed that the use of such a limited number of colors in her sculptures dematerialized the solid in the eyes of the viewer, leaving only colorful multiple planes.⁸⁷

There is yet another important concept regarding Unist sculpture that we must now turn to, one that Strzemiński had already introduced in his Unist theory in painting – the concept of time. It remains among the more interesting ideas of the theory and provides great insight into Strzemiński’s ability to manipulate successfully his theory to fit other art forms, such as sculpture and architecture. Looking back at Unist painting, we recall that Strzemiński argued that painting did not include the time element in its composition. As it was based on a two-dimensional plane, its arrangement of shapes

⁸⁶ Strzemiński and Kobra, 99.

⁸⁷ It must be noted, however, that some of Kobra’s sculptures, such as *Spatial Composition 5* of 1929 were painted white. Considering Kobra’s artistic training in Russia and similarly as in Strzemiński’s case, influence of Malevich’s Suprematism, one can relate her all white compositions to Malevich’s white architectonics. Perhaps the use of white paint was for Kobra another way of creating a sculpture that would be in union with the infinite space. For further comments on the complex legacy of Kobra’s oeuvre see Janina Ładnowska, “Katarzyna Kobra –A Sculptor of Space,” *Artibus et historiae* 22.43 (2001): 161-185, and the major exhibition catalogue on the artist, *Katarzyna Kobra 1989-1951*, (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 1999).

remained the same regardless of the position of the viewer. Following the artist's argument regarding the organic laws of a work of art, one recognizes that, because of sculpture's inherent three-dimensionality, it exists in both space and time. The introduction of depth in sculpture changes it successively during the viewing process. Thus, it was not only the arrangement of singular elements, but also the change of that arrangement resulting from the duration of aesthetic experience that was considered by the authors of *Composition of Space*.

To address the concept of time and space, Strzemiński and Kobra proposed a composition of what they call 'spatio-temporal' rhythms, as means to achieve a sculpture that would be united with space.⁸⁸ They explained the concept of spatio-temporality in the following fashion, "We call spatiotemporal the spatial changes in a work of art produced during the interval of time in which it is being viewed from various sides. Each movement of the spectator results in a different appearance of the arranged forms."⁸⁹ Unlike in painting, the sculpture was dependent on the movement of the viewer and its appearance changed along with that movement. It implied that the time element became part of the sculptural composition. The composition of spatio-temporal rhythms, which

⁸⁸ Scholars like Janina Ładnowska and Andrzej Turowski noted that even though Kobra and Strzemiński never quoted it in their *Composition of Space* they must have been familiar with Naum Gabo and Anton Pevsner's *Realistic Manifesto*, issued in 1920. Andrzej Turowski, *W Kręgu Konstrukttywizmu* [In the Circle of Constructivism] (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Artystyczne i Filmowe), 1979. 101-102. The Russian artists addressed the sculpture in a similar manner to Kobra and Strzemiński by proclaiming "We renounce in sculpture, the mass as a sculptural element. It is known to every engineer that the static forces of a solid body and its material strength do not depend on the quantity of the mass... But you sculptors of all shades and directions, you still adhere to the age-old prejudice that you cannot free the volume of mass." Despite a rather thoughtful analysis in the development of form in sculpture, the Polish couple did not bring up the Russian duo and never mentioned the concept of "a new element in creative art: the kinetic rhythms" proclaimed in the *Realistic Manifesto*. Naum Gabo and Anton Pevsner, "The Realistic Manifesto," in *Art in Theory, 1900-1990. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. C. Harrison and P. Wood (Oxford, 1992), 300.

⁸⁹ Strzemiński and Kobra, 100.

were “conditional upon measure and number,”⁹⁰ were means to representing the time element in sculpture.

Again Kobra’s work provides a visual interpretation. Upon examining her sculptures, such as the well-known *Spatial Composition 4* (Fig. 33), Bois noted that, “as we circulate around [it]... what was negative (empty) becomes positive (full), what was line becomes plane or point, what was straight becomes curved, what was wide becomes narrow.”⁹¹ The successful execution of Kobra’s work may speak the fact that, even though the works were occasionally displaced (placed on different sides) during some of the early exhibitions, they still managed to affect the space in a similar manner. The visual outcome resulting from positioning some of the *Spatial Compositions* differently from the original design indicated that the different placement was not wrong, just different.⁹² The interaction of the inner and outer space existed despite the unintentional mistakes of the organizers of the exhibitions.

It is important to return to the discussion of the rhythm introduced by the artists. As mentioned before, in Unist sculpture, the time element constituted part of the construction through the composition of spatio-temporal rhythms which were “conditional upon measure and number.”⁹³ Even though the artists agreed that the concept of spatio-temporal rhythm proposed by them was extremely complicated, an attempt to elucidate the issue should be made at this time. The main premise of this calculated rhythm was the unity of the potential rhythm of projection with the rhythm of

⁹⁰ Ibid., 101.

⁹¹ Bois, “Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobra...,” 151.

⁹² Janusz Zagrodzki, “Inside Space,” in *Katarzyna Kobra 1989-1951*, exh. cat. (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 1999), 75.

⁹³ Strzemiński and Kobra, 101.

the work of art, which meant that both were based on the same numerical expression.⁹⁴ Thus, numerical ratio began with the analysis of the sphere of projection, which was crucial to establishing the rhythm for the whole composition. The artists explained, “Looking at one projection, we should be able to see that in order for the rhythm to become fully pronounced, the ratio l to $h = n$ must be the same for all dimensions of all shapes that belong to the projection planes” (Fig. 41-42).⁹⁵ One scholar rightly pointed out that, upon examining the projection planes in the *Spatial Compositions 2-8*, it can be concluded that Kobra’s sculptures and Strzemiński’s *Architectonic Compositions* “have in common the same geometrical net. The surface of the painting could be developed into sculpture, and painting can be seen as the projection of the sculpture.”⁹⁶

The mathematical formula $[N=8/5]$, used as a basis for Kobra’s sculptures starting in 1928, was based on the numerical ratio of the Golden Section, which was later developed by Leonardo of Pisa, called Fibonacci.⁹⁷ Interestingly, Strzemiński’s *Architectonic Compositions* were based on the same numerical ratio. Looking at Strzemiński’s diagram of the calculations of numerical ratio (Fig. 43), one might notice that the sketched composition refers to the actual painting, *Architectonic Composition of*

⁹⁴ Ibid., 105.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 106, English translation as in Ładnowska, “Katarzyna Kobra...,” 179.

⁹⁶ Ładnowska, “Katarzyna Kobra...,” 179.

⁹⁷ Janusz Zagrodzki, a scholar on the artist, indicated that following the Fibonacci number sequence the dimensions in *Space Compositions 3, 4, and 5* were based on the number 8. (height $40=5 \times 8$, depth $64=8 \times 8$, and width $40=5 \times 8$). Zagrodzki, “Inside Space,” 74; Also noted in Christina Lodder, “Art into Life: International Constructivism in Central and Eastern Europe,” *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910-1930* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2002), 198. Zagrodzki also discusses the development and use of proportions and mathematical ratios in Kobra’s work in his article “Reconstruction of Katarzyna Kobra’s Sculpture” in *Constructivism in Poland 1923-1936. Blok. Praesens. a.r.*, (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1973), 55. On the other hand, Lisa Lotte-Bloom suggested (rather unconvincingly) non-mathematical basis for Kobra’s sculptures, “Katarzyna Kobra’s and Wladyslaw Strzemiński’s Conception of Art,” *Three Pioneers of Polish Avant-Garde...*, 28.

1929 (Fig. 17).⁹⁸ Although some began appearing in 1926, most are dated to 1929, a year that closely corresponds to the creation of the book. Thus, the *Architectonic Compositions* may also stand for Strzemiński exploration in form in relation to the proportions that he and Kobra intended for Unist sculpture. The compositions are built usually by two contrasting geometric forms interlocking with each other. The mathematical formula applied by Strzemiński dictated the dimensions of the forms. Equally important was the dimension of the canvas of the majority of the *Architectonic Compositions*. The works composed between 1928 and 1929 all share the same dimensions – 96 x 60 centimeters.

While Unist sculpture, just as Unist painting, was considered by the artists as experimentation in form,⁹⁹ it provided Strzemiński with a type of launching point or a reference for the application of Unist principles into architecture. Not surprisingly, therefore, the artist and his wife addressed the problem of architecture already in the *Composition of Space*. Such inclusive treatment was possible due to the similarity between sculpture and architecture, which lay in the fact that both were based on the composition of space and depended on the spatio-temporal rhythm. There were, however, inherent differences between them and the artist was ready to address them.

While the sculpture considered the human movement around it, architecture, in Strzemiński's view, should have been occupied with organizing the human rhythms inside of it. In the last paragraph of *Composition of Space*, with the heading

⁹⁸ Although most of the *Architectonic Compositions* were assigned numbers and letters, this specific one lacks any type of numerical identification.

⁹⁹ Kobra reiterated the importance of formal experimentation shared by painting and sculpture in her article "Sculpture and Solid" by saying "...we must become radically ...aware that sculpture is neither literature, nor symbolism, nor individual psychology or emotion. Sculpture is exclusively the shaping of form and space. Sculpture appeals to all men and it speaks to all of them alike. Form and space is its idiom." In *Constructivism in Poland 1923-1936. Kettle's Yard Gallery in Association with Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź*, 37.

“Consequences”, the artists pointed to the features of architecture, which was “not just a design of comfortably functioning apartments,” but because it was based on human needs, required “full unity: placement of utilitarian objects, constructivist inventions, quality of color and direction of shapes, which direct the rhythm of human life within architecture....”¹⁰⁰

What Strzemiński aimed at was to go beyond the limitation of painting and sculpture. Architecture offered him the functional element that a picture or a sculpture did not possess and could not address. That is not to say that the artist approached the problem from a purely utilitarian perspective. On the contrary, Strzemiński’s approach toward the problem of architecture was unlike many of his contemporaries and needs to be brought to light here. Strzemiński, as was illustrated in the discussion of unism in painting and sculpture, was a staunch advocate of experimentation with form. Many of his contemporaries, however, preferred a more utilitarian concept of art. Initially as a member of the Blok group, Strzemiński clashed with Mieczysław Szczuka (another member of the group) over the issue of utilitarianism, of which the latter was a strong supporter. Later as a member of the Praesens group,¹⁰¹ Strzemiński was also unable to find common ground between his ideas and those of the fellow members, the architects. This continuous conflict shows the artist’s inability to compromise his artistic ideas for the sake of utility. Strzemiński strongly believed in Unism and the ability to influence society through art, not the other way around. This, however, was not the view of his colleagues. The artist eventually left both groups dissatisfied and unable to compromise his ideas. The core of the conflict lay in the approach towards the problem. While the

¹⁰⁰ Strzemiński and Kobro, 118.

¹⁰¹ For more information regarding the Blok and the Praesens groups see Appendix.

architects were willing to place practicality and usefulness over formal innovation in their work, Strzemiński aimed for the opposite. Even though architecture offered him a needed outlet to implement his ideas in a more functional art, he was not willing to compromise the formal quality over the utilitarian one. At the same time, such an attitude reveals the utopian character of Strzemiński's vision. He believed that by treating the technical conditions as a means of examining formal problems, he would be able to arrive at a solution that incorporated innovative systems which could participate in the shaping of society. Architecture would become, in his utopian approach, the organizer of social life.¹⁰² As he noted in his article, "Principles of New Architecture," published the same year as *Composition of Space*,

- 1) The elements of architecture are: a) the pauses of man while performing any type of activity; b) movement between one activity and another.
- 2) The goal of the architecture is organization of the rhythm of successive movements and pauses, and thus formation of the entirety of life.
- 3) The final goal of architecture is not building practical houses, nor enlarging abstract sculptures and calling them exhibition pavilions. The goal is to regulate the rhythm of society and the individual.¹⁰³

In his view, it was the artwork that carried the authority to regulate human movement and thereby organize the new society.

In an article following the Exhibition of Polish Architects in 1928, Strzemiński also acknowledged functionalism in architecture as a method based on the analysis of human activities and subsequent construction that would be based on these findings. The artist concluded that, "In that sense, the architecture became the regulator of human

¹⁰² Strzemiński, "Zasady Nowej Architektury," [Principle of New Architecture] *Linia* 3 (1931): 68-69. in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 141.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

movement.”¹⁰⁴ The functionalism in architecture, according to Strzemiński, by regulating the human movement in space, made architecture more spatial, and thereby connected it with other architectural forms. In other words, as it regulated human movement within the space, it also united the space inside and outside of the architectural forms, as well as with that of other buildings. Consequently, it shared some of the basic principles of unism, in which a work of art was to be integrated into its space.

Summing up the development of architectural forms, Strzemiński concluded that past architecture emphasized aestheticism, while the constructivist architecture moved to the other extreme, that of technology.¹⁰⁵ Neither one adequately addressed the needs and functional rhythms of the people inhabiting it. Strzemiński did not even spare Le Corbusier, whose influence over the Polish architects was significant at the time, accusing his architecture of a lack of unity between the construction, aesthetic, and utilitarian qualities.¹⁰⁶ “Currently the four-walled aesthetic boxes of Le Corbusier and his followers are in style, but this is only a temporary fad. Modern architecture as it develops its concept of construction... approaches the spatial architecture,”¹⁰⁷ which was the goal of the artist.

The concept of spatio-temporal rhythms, as applied in sculpture, allowed for uniform relations between the sculpture and space; in architecture, however, it was to

¹⁰⁴ Strzemiński, “Architektura Współczesna na tle Wystawy Stowarzyszenia Architektów Polskich,” [Contemporary Architecture in the Context of the Exhibition of the Society of Polish Architects] *Wiek XX* 13 (1928): 4-5. in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 66.

¹⁰⁵ Strzemiński, “Teraźniejszość w Architekturze i Malarstwie,” [Present in Architecture and Painting] *Przegląd Artystyczny* 4 (1928): 5-6, *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 63-64. and Strzemiński, “Architektura Współczesna ...,” in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 65-67.

¹⁰⁶ Strzemiński, “Zasady Nowej Architektury,” 141. For further comparison of Strzemiński and Le Corbusier see Urszula Czartoryska, “Miara, Światło, Przestrzeń. Strzemiński i Le Corbusier,” [Measure, Light, Space. Strzemiński and Le Corbusier] in *Władysław Strzemiński. 1893-1952. Materiały z Sesji*, (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1994), 40-48.

¹⁰⁷ Strzemiński, “Recenzja książki L. Moholy – Nagy, *Vom Material Zur Architektur*,” [Book review: L. Moholy – Nagy, *Vom Material Zur Architektur*] *Europa* 13 [10] (1930), 413-414. in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 135.

organize human life in unity with its surroundings. Strzemiński explained, “This plastic rhythm by creating the continuation of the functional rhythm becomes the human rhythm, a rhythm joint with the human life, an outcome of that life. [The plastic rhythm becomes] not an unnecessarily added ornament but the life itself.”¹⁰⁸ Thus, once again, Strzemiński manipulated his Unist theory and its principle of unity of the work of art with its space and the consideration of its inherent qualities into the realm of architecture. In his eyes, the goal of architecture was to simplify and unify the movements of its inhabitants and the space around them.

Let us go back to the discussion of the *Praesens* group vision of architecture, as it will shed more light on Strzemiński’s utopian vision of architecture regulating human life through plastic rhythms, a vision which was at odds with some of the members of the group. While the architects viewed the role of architecture based solely on the social needs of the inhabitants, Strzemiński opted for a more encompassing approach, in which the universal issue of “architectonization” of space was the key. “*Praesens* members wished to subordinate the architecture to society, Strzemiński wanted to organize the social order through the architectonization of space.”¹⁰⁹

The differences in approaches of the members of *Praesens* and that of Strzemiński can be better understood in terms of practical implications. While the *Praesens* architects looked for actual architectural solutions that could be easily implemented in the construction of Polish cities, the program for Strzemiński seems to have been more abstract and lay for the most part within the theoretical realm. His theory, therefore, was not meant specifically for a particular building, but rather

¹⁰⁸ Strzemiński, “Architektura Współczesna ...,” 67.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 94.

addressed the universal concept of architectonization of space, which Strzemiński, along with Kbro, so comprehensively analyzed in *Composition of Space*.

The noble ideas that drove Strzemiński's ideas regarding architecture were strongly influenced by his utopian vision for the role of art in society. Just as he envisioned logical organization of painting and sculpture, he believed in a similarly rational organization of society. His and Kbro's architectural ideas, therefore, stemmed from that utopian vision of a new society. When Strzemiński claimed that the social influence of art is indirect,¹¹⁰ what he meant was that art would influence society through its organization of form. Thus, in his view, society would evolve to resemble the carefully organized canvas of a Unist painting, in which each part and element were equally important. Architectural designs along with their spatio-temporal rhythms would further implement the Unist ideas into the every day life of the masses. In that sense, the reorganization of the living quarters and the cities would bring about a reorganized society. As modern day scholars agree that "Such a metaphoric theorization sounds utterly naïve, yet it is important: on such a dream – the dream of Unist art as a metaphor for a future classless society – the whole enterprise of Strzemiński was grounded."¹¹¹

The social concept of organization and construction of architecture in interwar Poland allowed Strzemiński to direct his ideas into a more specific context. Thus, he turned to Łódź, the town he resided in since 1931, as a model to articulate his architectural aspirations.¹¹² As mentioned earlier, Strzemiński's architecture was not meant to regulate the life of an individual, but that of the entire society. To contrast the

¹¹⁰ Strzemiński, "a.r.2" 1932.

¹¹¹ Bois, "Lissitzky, Mondrian, Strzemiński...", 102.

¹¹² Strzemiński, "Łódź sfunkcjonalizowana," [Łódź Functionalized] *Mysł Współczesna* 11 (1947), in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 324-354.

traditional concentric plan of the cities, Strzemiński proposed his plan of a city as an organic whole, referring to his Unist theory, based on functional zones that could serve the whole population. Just as in sculpture, the city was to open its spatial planes, rather than close them off into separate buildings. Just as a singular dwelling was to guide the life of an individual, the city was to organize the life of the society within. In this utopian concept, Strzemiński envisioned the chaos of the ‘Baroque’ city replaced by the spatially integrated whole. Even though in his articles and other theoretical texts, Strzemiński did not term any of his architectural works as ‘Unist,’ the above examination of his approach points to the parallel concepts between the Unist principles in painting and sculpture with that of architecture. The goal was yet again a unified and spatially integrated whole that resulted from the ‘organic laws’ in which architecture constituted its existence in space and perhaps, more importantly, its integration with the movement of society within. Perhaps, not in its clearest form, the Unist concept is present in the artist’s discussion of architecture.

Because neither Kobra, nor Strzemiński had architectural training, it was almost impossible for either one to support theoretical ideas with actual architectural designs. Nevertheless, the artists did attempt to implement their theory into practice.¹¹³

Strzemiński’s attempt at architectural design can be seen in one of the illustrations

¹¹³ It can be noted, that Katarzyna Kobra also undertook the task of architectural design in her *Project for a Functional Nursery School*, designed after 1932. The model for the nursery appears to have been her sculpture *Spatial Composition 8* of the same year. While the sculpture had an open structure integrating it with space, according to the couple’s theory, the nursery closed off the open areas with walls. Bois mentioned that the Functional Nursery was simply “a clumsy enlargement of one of her sculptures” and that it “contradicts the theory that there is a radical distinction between a work of art, which is not functional, and a building” (“Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobra...,” 134) Although he raises a valid point, it must be noted that, for Strzemiński and Kobra, painting and sculpture served as preliminary experiments for later incorporation into functional objects. And although not very successful, it was an attempt to replicate the type of spatio-temporal rhythms used in sculpture into an architectural design, which was also subject to similar rhythmic composition.

accompanying *Composition of Space*. What the artist called “a project of an interior design/composition” (Fig. 44) shows a schematic diagram of an apartment room with colorful planes distributed throughout the whole room. Strzemiński explained that the aim of the composition was the organization of human movements reduced to the required minimum. Just as in Unist sculpture, the entire composition was based on a spatio-temporal rhythm, which was in turn based on carefully calculated ratios. In this case, to connect the rhythm of human movement with the surrounding space, one of the measurements Strzemiński incorporated was an average height of man at 1.75 m.¹¹⁴

Similar in composition was the “Design for a Tobacco Kiosk” (Fig. 45), submitted jointly by Strzemiński and Kobro for the ‘Competition for Kiosks, Stalls, etc. for Street Sale’ held in Warsaw.¹¹⁵ The resemblance to *Spatial Compositions* is obvious as is the preoccupation with its arrangement in space. As was noted by one scholar, “The design stood out from the others, mainly because of its simple, purposeful construction and (probably) the Neo-Plastic disposition of color on the walls.”¹¹⁶ Thus, the artist never forgoes the possibility to implement his ideas into everyday life. Similarly, in Strzemiński’s design for the Neo-Plastic exhibition room in Museum of Art in Łódź (Fig. 46), the artist attempted to dictate the movement and arrange the space of the room through the use of colors. The result, quite stunning visually, was not perhaps the most successful in achieving its goal. As the viewer traverses the exhibition room, the colors of the walls do not have the desired effect. In Strzemiński’s defense, however, one might

¹¹⁴ Strzemiński and Kobro, *Kompozycja Przestrzeni*. Illustration 2.

¹¹⁵ The work was reproduced as fig. 20 in *Architektura i Budownictwo* 8 (1928), 311. As shown in *Katarzyna Kobro 1989-1951*, exh. cat. (Leeds: Henry Moore Institute, 1999), 151.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

add that the artist approached an already established architectural form and was able to implement his ideas only through color.

The theoretical idea of Strzemiński and Kobro's architectonization of space relied on the study of spatial relations, similarly to the Unist painting and sculpture. This universal approach to architecture was based on Strzemiński's utopian concept of architecture's ability to shape society through form, shape, and spatio-temporal rhythms. The formal experimentation, therefore, remained crucial for the artist, as the fundamental activity that would contribute to the social good. In a later article from 1937, "A Sculpture is..." Kobro similarly concluded,

[t]he task of a spatial composition is the shaping of forms, which can be translated into life. The spatial composition is a laboratory experiment that will define the architecture of future cities. The spatial composition, in becoming architecture, organizes the rhythm of human movement in space. The rhythm of a work of art then becomes the rhythm of the movement of crowds and individuals.¹¹⁷

Strzemiński's vision for society stemmed from an experimentation in form which began in Unist painting and later developed in Unist sculpture. The analogy between sculpture and architecture allowed the artist to implement further his Unist postulates in architecture. The common idea of organization was employed differently in the two mediums. In sculpture, it was to organize space, and in architecture, it was to organize the rhythm of human motion, and thereby organize social life. The functionality of architecture resulted, according to the artist, from simplified and unified organization of spatio-temporal rhythms of man. The discrepancy between his theoretical writings and practical experimentation, especially the not always successful architectural drawings, sketches, or maquettes, clearly points to the highly utopian character of Strzemiński's

¹¹⁷ K. Kobro, "Rzeźba stanowi..." [A Sculpture is...], *Głos Plastyków*, 1-7, English translation as in *Katarzyna Kobro. 1898-1951*, 169.

vision. In it, Strzemiński always aimed for the highest possible solution. Strzemiński would continue his quest toward applying the concept of rhythm to life through yet another medium, that of typography.

Chapter Three: Functional Typography

[The idea of rigor in poetry] aims for uniform word intensity in poetical expressions...and attempts to create a coherent construction unified in each element of the connected poetic notions.

Julian Przyboś¹¹⁸

In concluding *Composition of Space*, Strzemiński and Kobro reiterated the basics of their theoretical concept regarding sculpture and architecture, but also included a point regarding typography. It stated that the “typographical page is a sequence of consecutive spatial units appearing after each other (during the reading process), and thus should be regulated according to a numerical ratio.”¹¹⁹ Did that mean that the concept of rhythm that was applied to Unist sculpture and architecture could also be applied to typography? Yes, the concept of rhythm returned yet again. This time, however, Strzemiński introduced the idea of rhythm as part of the composition of the typographic design. Although Strzemiński never actually referred to his typographic designs as Unist *per se*, the parallels between his idea of functional typography and his earlier Unist experimentations in painting, sculpture, and architecture are undeniable. Without calling it Unist, Strzemiński, nevertheless implemented some of the Unist postulates into his typographic designs.

The fact that Strzemiński was interested in typographical design is not surprising. Undoubtedly, it was a result of the significant role of typography within the modernist movement in the 1920s and 1930s. With such a strong emphasis on the theoretical writings accompanying artistic practice, many publications, in the form of small booklets,

¹¹⁸ Julian Przyboś, *Idea Rygoru*, 1927. In *Linia i Gwar* (Kraków, 1959) As quoted in Piotr Rudziński, “Konstruktywiczna Typografia wobec poezji. Dwa przykłady,” [Constructivist Typography and Poetry. Two Examples] *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* 46.1 (1984): 46.

¹¹⁹ Strzemiński and Kobro, 118.

journals, and leaflets, were issued by virtually all avant-garde groups throughout Europe. Numerous artists quickly took interest in typographic design as it allowed them to experiment with a rather unknown and so far unexplored medium. Strzemiński was no stranger to those practices and actually developed an interest in typography early on in his career. The goal for him and many others who delved into typography was to design a page that would be legible first and foremost, but at the same time, one that would affect the viewer through the typographical layout, as the printed page was not only read but also seen. The artists who undertook the new medium were considered “pioneers of the visual message...[who] demolished the crumbling walls separating off the various visual forms of art by blowing up their bolts. As a result a relationship was set up between various different means of expression, blending together painting, architecture, sculpture and typography so that they all sought the same ends.”¹²⁰ Strzemiński embarked on the exploration of typographic design with the same enthusiasm and discipline he exhibited in his earlier artistic explorations. The Unist principles, which preoccupied the artist’s thought throughout the 1920s and into the early 1930s, would find their resonance also in his typographic designs.

Although Strzemiński’s interest in typographical design went back to the beginning of his artistic career, his renewed interest and ideas in typography were related to the formation of a new avant-garde group called *a.r.* The group, active between 1929 and 1939, gathered poets and artists in its circle.¹²¹ This close collaboration between poets and artists allowed Strzemiński to further explore the new medium of typography. In the first manifesto issued by *a.r.*, the artists presented the program of the group:

¹²⁰ Andre Belleguie, *Le Mouvement de l’espace typographique: années 1920-30: Werkman, Zwart, Strzemiński, Egging, Schuitema, Berlewi* (Paris: J. Damase, 1984): 10.

¹²¹ For more information on the group, see Appendix.

a.r. fights for art based on laws as unshakable as the laws of nature. a.r. announces: organic construction, logic of form and of construction as implied by the logic of the raw material; architecture is a composition of movements in space, architecture of designs that transport man ... Spatial sculpture linked with the space instead of the pillar with four façades. Poetry: a unity of vision condensed to a maximum of imaginative allusions and a minimum of words ... a.r. builds art on the principles of terseness, elimination, concentration. A work of art is a result of calculation of the aesthetic elements.... a.r. propagates art in which each mm² and mm³ is organized...¹²²

Thus, already in the first manifesto distributed by the group, one sees the reappearance of the terms related to the Unist system formulated slightly earlier. The idea of unity so exhaustively articulated in terms of painting and sculpture, as well as in architecture, this time addressed additionally poetry. Even though, as mentioned earlier, the idea of integrating text with its visual and graphic aspects interested Strzemiński early in his career, it was not until his later typographical designs that one detects the influence of the Unist system. Therefore, it was the collaboration of the artists and poets within the *a.r.* group that allowed him to explore typography and unism together. Although small in number, the group was extremely successful in its activities, with its biggest and most important accomplishment being the creation of the International Collection of Modern Art in Łódź.¹²³ However, typographical design, as well as publication through ‘Biblioteka *a.r.*’ [Library *a.r.*], remained among the most important pursuits of the group.

The best representation of the connection between the Unist system and Strzemiński’s typography was illustrated in one of the publications of the *a.r.* group, a poetry volume, *Z Ponad* [From Above] (Fig. 47), written by Julian Przyboś. Przyboś, a poet actively participating in the Polish avant-garde, joined *a.r.* group upon a request

¹²² “Komunikat grupy a.r.,” [a.r. manifesto] *Europa* 9 (1930): 287-288. The manifesto appeared initially as a leaflet accompanying the publication of Przyboś’s poetry volume, *Z Ponad*, published in 1930. English translation as in *Constructivism in Poland 1923-1936. Blok. Praesens. a.r.*, 27.

¹²³ For more information on the collection see Appendix.

from Strzemiński (Fig. 48).¹²⁴ He became one of the two poets in the group (Jan Brzękowski joined the group slightly later), along with the artists, Strzemiński, Kobro, and Stażewski as the remaining members. The relationship between Przyboś and Strzemiński is of crucial importance in examining possible Unist implications in the artist's typographical designs, as the artists shared similar visions regarding the role of art. The collaboration of the two derived from similar artistic preferences regarding the construction of a composition, in Przyboś's case in poetry, and in Strzemiński's in typography. Moreover, the two artists were familiar with each other, as they worked together before Przyboś, as already a long time friend of Strzemiński, joined *a.r.*

Despite the fact that many Polish artists, not to mention the European ones, successfully experimented in the medium of typographical design, the volume *Z Ponad*, published in 1930, was unique among the other typographical designs of that time. The exceptional quality of the volume is due to the innovative typographical design of not just the cover page, but of each of the poems inside the volume. Strzemiński revoked traditionally accepted typographical designs and applied new typographical solutions that were integrated with the text of the poems, and far exceeded the typographical experimentation of other modernists hitherto. When published, the volume was met with many congratulatory remarks from numerous European artists and was viewed as a remarkable achievement.¹²⁵

¹²⁴ From the letters Strzemiński wrote to Przyboś, it can be concluded that Strzemiński was the founder of the group and remained through the years as its driving force. In June 1929, the artist wrote to Przyboś, "My wife and I are splitting *Praesens* and are organizing a new group based on broader conception of modernity – poetry, painting, architecture. Would you like to join us in the group?" Strzemiński, Letter to Przyboś (27 June 1929), in "Listy Władysława Strzemińskiego do Juliana Przybosia z lat 1929-1933," [The Letters of Władysław Strzemiński to Julian Przyboś] ed. Andrzej Turowski *Rocznik Historii Sztuki* 9 (1973): 225.

¹²⁵ Strzemiński stayed in touch with many of the European artists and invited them to participate in the 1932 Modern Typography Exhibition. The exhibition was a result of the artist's campaign for an

Looking at the *Z Ponad* volume, one might argue that the reason for such success was due to the fact that both the poet and the artist shared similar postulates regarding the construction of the structure of the text, in Przyboś's case, and the visual quality of a work of art, in Strzemiński's. Strzemiński's articulation of the Unist theory in painting came at about the same time as Przyboś's text entitled, *Idea Rygoru* [The Idea of Rigour].¹²⁶ Following the formation of new theoretical ideas in both Strzemiński's and Przyboś's work, *Z Ponad* marked a new phase in the work of both and differed dramatically from the earlier publications on which the artist and the poet worked collaboratively.¹²⁷

As the scholarly literature points out, what was common for the Unist theory and *Idea Rygoru* was the unified construction of the work of art, as well as functionalist and economic means of construction.¹²⁸ Both artists in their different mediums called for a homogeneous and unified structure. Przyboś required from modern poetry "formal equilibrium," based on a poem unified throughout its literary content.¹²⁹ Strzemiński called for an organized layout based on rhythmically arranged visual units. Thus, when the artists proclaimed in their *a.r.* manifesto the plastic art in which each cm² and cm³ were equally important, they expanded this concept of equal value to typography and

exchange of information between different artists and publications throughout Europe, and hosted works by twenty artists from five European countries: France, Holland, Germany, Poland, and Italy.

¹²⁶ Julian Przyboś, *Idea Rygoru* (1927).

¹²⁷ Among Strzemiński's early typographical designs were his 1924 cover page of Przyboś's poetry volume entitled *Screws* (Fig. 49), and the 1926 cover page for *With Both Hands*. In both cases Strzemiński only designed the cover page, never interfering with the poems inside. During that time period Strzemiński also designed cover page for Tadeusz Peiper's play *Six! Six!* of 1925 (Fig. 50). In these early examples, especially the *Screws* volume, one notes that Strzemiński twists his letters and places them rather randomly. Although less successfully, Strzemiński was already experimenting with ways of conveying meaning through form, but as was mentioned before, it would be in the *Z Ponad* volume that the artist achieved best results.

¹²⁸ Piotr Rudziński, "Konstruktywiczna Typografia wobec poezji. Dwa przykłady," 46.

¹²⁹ As noted in Rudziński, 46.

poetry, in which each typographical unit and each word was equally important.¹³⁰ The manifesto only briefly introduced the concept of typography and Unist principles. It would be in Strzemiński's other texts that the parallels would become much more pronounced.

In a book review of Jan Tschichold's *Eine Stunde Druckgestaltung* published in *Europa* journal,¹³¹ Strzemiński presented some of his theoretical ideas. Among them, the reappearing concept of organicity described here as follows,

...a painting is an organization of unity enclosed within the square plane; a sculpture is an organization of spatial unity and joins sculpture with space; architecture should organize rhythms of the movements and functions of man in space. Typography organizes the readability of a page...it organizes its rhythm."¹³²

Thus, this time the author attempted to apply the idea of rhythmic organization that was part of Unist sculpture and architecture to typography. While in architecture the spatio-temporal rhythms were to guide the movement of the inhabitants, in typography, the carefully designed layout was to direct the eye of the reader. Strzemiński would elaborate on the subject and fully verse his theory of typography in an article entitled, "Functional Typography."¹³³

"Functional Typography" was introduced as the way to achieve the successful organization of the printed page through the elimination of unnecessary decorations and ornamentation on the page. Strzemiński proposed his functional typography as a

¹³⁰ "Komunikat grupy a.r." nr. 1, in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 130.

¹³¹ Strzemiński, "Recenzja Książki J. Tschicholda *Eine Stunde Druckgestaltung*," [Book review. Jan Tschichold *Eine Stunde Druckgestaltung*] *Europa* 13 (1930): 414, in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 137.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 137.

¹³³ Strzemiński, "Druk Funkcjonalny," [Functional Typography] *Grafika Polska* (1933): 37-45. in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 165-168. Same text would reappear as a booklet issued by Biblioteka a.r. no.6 in 1935.

substitute for the ornamented typography which originated in Renaissance tradition.¹³⁴ Strzemiński consistently remains very conscious of the historical developments of a specific art medium, in this case, typography. Summing up the achievements and errors of the past typographical design, the artist argued that, in modern typography, form became the function of content. Thus, the process of composing a typographical page should be reversed. Only a good understanding of the text guaranteed a successful page design.¹³⁵ The typographical layout of the page was the first visible sign of the poem, one that regulated its organization and the reading process. Therefore, if the content was misunderstood, the layout would not be legible. Strzemiński, as usual, takes into consideration the organic qualities of a work of art; in case of typography, the text itself becomes one of the key concepts of the composition.

Strzemiński strongly believed in the idea that the layout and the poem were equally important and equally contributed to the ultimate design. The artist's uncompromising nature when related to his aesthetic ideas is visible in the fact that on many occasions Strzemiński adjusted the typographical design of Przyboś's poems until he was able to achieve the unified typographical layout he desired from the start. The numerous corrections and adjustments described by the author in his letters to the poet proved how significant the design layout was all the way to the last detail. When some of Przyboś's poems, designed by Strzemiński, were reproduced with slight changes in a journal *Europa*, Strzemiński wrote letters of pointed criticism to the editor for compromising the specific layout of the poems. Additionally, his preoccupation with

¹³⁴ Strzemiński, "Druk Funkcjonalny," 165.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 166.

creating a comprehensive visual object and an unwillingness to compromise his aesthetic theory can be seen in one of the letters he wrote to Julian Przyboś on June 27, 1929:

The poems are so perfect that I have never believed that you could make such a great leap forward. ... In the graphic arrangement I attempted to cooperate with the construction of the poems by different characters of the lettering and by vertical and horizontal lines. ... Unfortunately, I could not build up the “20 kg” [Fig. 51]. All my trials gave confused results. From my graphic failures I infer that apparently there are deficiencies in the uniformity of the structure. For that reason I’m sending you back the poem on the condition that you’ll work on it some more towards a greater uniformity and a more compact structure. ... Perhaps I may be wrong as to the “20 kg”—if I am, please return it immediately for print: but I’m addicted to thinking with my eyes, and if I can’t hit upon some visual pattern, I feel something out of line.¹³⁶

Just as Strzemiński explained in the letter, the visual experience of the poem was for him equally important to the content of the written word. As he considered carefully the visual experience in terms of painting and sculpture, so in typography it was a valid element in establishing a successful composition. As one of the scholars pointed out, “a typographical construction, according to Strzemiński, could never act as an illustration of meaning, but as the visible equivalent of words.”¹³⁷

Strzemiński would go so far as to compose a new design of the alphabet to fit within the rules he established for typography (Fig. 52). Just as Tschichold attempted to redesign the characters of an alphabet, so did Strzemiński follow his own design and was met with results similar to the German artist.¹³⁸ “The source of form is contrast,” he wrote about his alphabet; “thus we discard duplicated elements repeated symmetrically,

¹³⁶ Strzemiński, Letter to Przyboś, (27 June 1929), English translation as in *Constructivism in Poland 1923-1936. Blok. Praesens. a.r.*, 113.

¹³⁷ Esther Levinger, Esther. “Return to Figuration: Władysław Strzemiński and the Move From Idealism,” *Art History* 24.1 (Feb 2001): 105.

¹³⁸ Zofia Baranowicz, however, claimed that next to Tschichold’s alphabet, Strzemiński’s design constituted *novum* on an international scale. “Grupa ‘a.r.’ w Świetle Korespondencji.” [a.r. group in light of their correspondence] *Rocznik Historii Sztuki* v.9 (1973): 291.

and contrast elements used to construct a character as shape, size, and direction.”¹³⁹

Accordingly then, the letters of the alphabet were reduced to a few lines of opposing directions and shapes. Any element that would contribute to the symmetrical appearance of any two lines was removed. Unfortunately, the result although interesting visually was not very successful. Strzemiński’s quest towards visual simplicity of forms made the letters almost illegible. Moreover, Strzemiński did not take into consideration the requirement for the additional letters that were characteristic of the Polish language. Thus, Strzemiński’s alphabet could not be used in any real typographical design as it would interfere with the legibility of the text. Yet, it remains an interesting visual experimentation of possible application of his theory into practice. One also finds resonance of these letters in the cover of Przyboś’s *Z Ponad*.

Returning to the consideration of Strzemiński’s application of the Unist ideas into typography, the idea of ‘organicity’ reappears multiple times, thereby reinforcing an argument that it was inherent in the artist’s evaluation of every medium and constituted one of his most original contributions. Just as these laws were distinct for painting, sculpture, and architecture, so in typography did the artist find its own inherent laws of organicity. Strzemiński viewed typography as a medium composed of typefaces and pages in which the homogenous design of the whole text was the main goal. The artist achieved it, as previously mentioned, through “the rhythmic organization of units of different dimensions – the strophes of a poem, for instance. Such a construction made

¹³⁹ Strzemiński, in a.r. 2 manifesto, as quoted in Turowski, “Komentarz do Korespondencji W. Strzemińskiego,” [Commentary to Strzemiński’s correspondence] *Rocznik Historii Sztuki* 9 (1973): 275.

the rhythm of the text visible, and matched the rhythm of eye movements in the act of reading.”¹⁴⁰

Strzemiński’s designs for Przyboś’s poems in *Z Ponad* were meant for individual reading rather than loud recitations; therefore, the emphasis on rhythm and visual quality in the typographical design were that much more important. “The printed words are seen, not heard,”¹⁴¹ as El Lissitzky had said. Strzemiński’s main emphasis, thus, was on the visual arrangement of the text. Przyboś, on the other hand, was responsible for the unified composition of his poems, which he referred to at one point as ‘Unist.’ Understanding Strzemiński’s principles discussed in the *Unism in Painting*, Przyboś advocated similar coherence and unity in the structure of his poems.

Because the poems were to be read, whether aloud or silently, an emphasis was placed on the concept of time. Similarly to Unist sculpture, the typographical page demanded some type of organization to control the relationship between the layout and the text itself. Thus, following a path similar to the concept of rhythm as the means of organizing the time element present within a work of art, as discussed in the case of sculpture and architecture, Strzemiński also defined such rhythms for typography. To follow the Unist principle of an objective composition, Strzemiński introduced the use of proportions and rhythm of the shapes as the basis for his functional typography.¹⁴²

The text, Strzemiński argued, must be organized in such a way that the groupings of words create a rhythm. These spatial units create a tension between particular compartments; thus, dictating the visual rhythm of the text. These groupings of various

¹⁴⁰ Levinger, 106.

¹⁴¹ As quoted in Irena Urbaniak, “Analiza Zgodności Znaczeniowo-Graficznej “Sponad” Juliana Przybośia w Opracowaniu Typograficznym Władysława Strzemińskiego,” *Łódzkie Towarzystwo Naukowe. Sprawozdania z Czynności i Posiedzeń Naukowych*, 5 (1982): 1.

¹⁴² Strzemiński, “Łódź,” *Głos Plastyków* 9-12 (1934), in *Pisma*, 191.

parts of text could be differentiated by the use multiple typefaces of various shapes, sizes, and colors, which would emphasize the contrast between various groupings and organize the rhythm of legibility. This issue raises an important point in the discussion of relations between Strzemiński's Unist system and typography. The artist approached the problem of typography the same way he did painting, sculpture, and architecture. He took as a basis the 'organic laws' of a work of art. Just as in Unist sculpture and architecture, where rhythm constituted a part of the composition, similarly in typography, the rhythm was required to achieve a successful design.

In an attempt to implement the theory of functional rhythm into his design, the artist organized his poems and the cover page of *Z Ponad* according to a type of grid in which he used carefully calculated proportions. In order to achieve homogeneous designs, the artist composed each typographical design out of multiple units into which he divided the composition. The successful division of the poem, Strzemiński claimed, could result only from a good understanding of the text. Thus, looking at some of the typographical layouts of the poems, such as *Murarze* [Masons] (Fig. 53), *Światła* [Lights] (Fig. 54), *Florian* (Fig. 55), and *Wieczór* [Evening] (Fig. 56), we observe Strzemiński's means of dividing the composition into clusters of words that were separated further by a thick black line. To further heighten the visual experience, Strzemiński applied varied font sizes.

The artist believed that such a construction would result in a composition that rhythmically guided the eye through the poem. Looking at some of his typographical designs, one notes that the division of units on the page is never the same. As each poem provided Strzemiński with a new content, it required a different organization of space.

The successful result of the typographical design of the poems included in *Z Ponad* could be supported by the comment made by Jerzy Kwiatkowski, a literary scholar, who accused Strzemiński of visualizing on the page what should have been discovered individually during the process of reading.¹⁴³ Moreover, in following the Unist principle of organicity, the artist calculated the rhythm and applied his proportions in reference to the dimensions of the book itself, thereby returning to the Unist demand for rational calculations.

The careful design of the typographical page, as well as its rhythmic organization, became the key concepts required in a successful typographical layout. Strzemiński articulated this idea in a discussion with Leon Chwistek, published in *Forma* in 1935,

The entire text divides into several groups of signification. Each group (with a uniform typeface) contrasts with the others by its dimension, the place it occupies in the composition, and the typefaces used. These graphic contrasts between the individual groups result in remarkable legibility and transparency of the text. The rhythm of form arises from the rhythm of content.¹⁴⁴

Following Strzemiński's argument throughout his theoretical writings, one may conclude that the graphic contrasts and dynamic expression of some of the units within the composition, although distinctive from any of the Unist concepts, were due to the fact that typography, being a different and independent medium, was governed by its own laws.

Work on the design of the volume *Z Ponad* was started in 1929, but, as we know from Strzemiński's numerous letters, he continued to make corrections throughout 1930. As Turowski noted, it was during the period of these typographical adjustments that the

¹⁴³ Jan Kwiatkowski, "Świat poetycki Juliana Przybosa," [The Poetic World of Julian Przyboś] (Warszawa: 1972), 107. As quoted in Urbaniak, 2.

¹⁴⁴ "Dyskusja L. Chwistek – W. Strzemiński," *Forma* 3 (1935): 4-10. English translation as quoted in Levinger, 107.

artist formulated fully the rules of his functional typography.¹⁴⁵ Within the volume, the artist arranged twenty-four poems and Kobro designed two.¹⁴⁶ The couple used various values and different types of fonts and arranged them in horizontal and vertical configurations, which were to correspond visually with the meaning of the text. The goal was to awaken a new visual sensitivity in the individual and, thus, an intimate experience with the text. Various structures of specific poems rested on the Unist principle of objectivity. The work of art, as Strzemiński discussed in his *Unism in Painting* and *Composition of Space*, was to be devoid of any marks of individuality of its artist. Instead, it was to be built based on numerical ratios that were calculated with the dimensions of the medium material in mind. Thus, typography was to follow the same rule of composition based on careful calculations.¹⁴⁷ Strzemiński designed specific unified measures and ratios, which were to be applied to the book and its publication.¹⁴⁸

Describing the dimensions for the book as 21 x 17.5 cm, Strzemiński indicated that the arrangements in all poems were designed according to the numerical ratio of 5 to 6.¹⁴⁹ On the other hand, the artist used the ratio of 5 to 8, as discussed in a previous chapter, in the design of the cover page for *Composition of Space* (Fig. 29). The mathematical ratio of the cover was the same as in many of the *Architectonic Compositions* composed by Strzemiński. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the

¹⁴⁵ Turowski, *Konstruktywizm*, note 187, p. 97.

¹⁴⁶ The two poems designed by Kobro were “Ziemniaki” [Potatoes] and “Zmęczeni” [Tired]. Julian Przyboś, *Z Ponad* (Cieszyn: Biblioteka “a.r.” no.1, 1930).

¹⁴⁷ As Strzemiński noted in a letter to Przyboś, “the arrangements are based on the unified mathematical scale...” Strzemiński, Letter (30 November 1929): 227.

¹⁴⁸ Strzemiński’s letters remain a great source of information concerning the creation of the *Z Ponad* volume.

¹⁴⁹ Strzemiński, Letter to Przyboś (1930), 231-232. For more in depth analysis of the mathematical ratios used by Strzemiński see Levinger, 106-7.

canvases measured 96 x 60 cm, which corresponds to the ratio of 5 to 8. The two or three elements within the compositions followed the same mathematical ratio.

The overall design of *Composition of Space* differed from that of *Z Ponad* (Fig. 47). It was based on vertical and horizontal units of letters of various colors and shape.¹⁵⁰ The cover page of *Z Ponad* was composed of simple geometrical letters in colors analogous with those used by the De-Stijl members. Furthermore, the characters are of different shapes. The arrangement of the characters at first appears to be quite random; however, upon closer examination the careful division of space reveals itself to the viewer. *Z Ponad* shows a much more complex layout. As the artist was not responsible for the text inside, it was in the visual presentation that he was trying to achieve the desired goal. And the goal in Strzemiński's mind was rather utopian. Not only did the artist claim that this new functional typography would dictate the basic rhythm of the text to the reader, thereby allowing for a full engagement with the poem, but he also argued that these typographical signs would accentuate the quality of the text and transgress social boundaries.

For Strzemiński, however, such were the goals of modern typography – to dictate a rhythm for the reader to become fully engaged with the text. Thus, his initial ideas and thoughts regarding modern art as experimented in Unist painting were realized in a medium that could be applied to everyday life. Following the artist's artistic exploration, the attempt to apply his principles to a more social aspect of art is understandable.

Typography allowed Strzemiński to extend some of his principles into the art of daily

¹⁵⁰ Janusz Zagrodzki suggested that the simple slightly-geometrical characters evoke the artist's exploration of new alphabet, "Drukarstwo Nowoczesne w Kręgu Władysława Strzemińskiego," [Modern Typography in the Circle of Władysław Strzemiński] *Władysław Strzemiński. In Memoriam*, 106.

life, and thus he, along with other constructivists, fulfilled the utopian need to implement their art into life, to shape society with their life.

Conclusion

The trend of a homogeneous organization marks the deepest and most universal impulse of our epoch. This constitutes the social base of Unism.

Władysław Strzemiński¹⁵¹

In his discussion with Leon Chwistek in 1934, Władysław Strzemiński admitted, “[f]or me, art means two things: formal experimentation and discovery (that is formulation of an idea), on the one hand, and its practical, utilitarian exploitation in everyday life, on the other.”¹⁵² This statement summarizes Strzemiński’s artistic development and his constant mediation between formal experimentation, such as his Unist painting or Unist sculpture, and the attempt to apply his artistic theory into daily life, as he envisioned it through architecture or typography.

Even though the analysis of the Unist theory in painting only begins to expose the artist’s versatile personality and his numerous artistic achievements, it provides a comprehensive evaluation and starting point for Strzemiński’s later artistic developments. Undeniable is the fact that there existed a discrepancy between Strzemiński’s theoretical writings and their practical applications. It seems that the attempt to represent in practice what he versed so poignantly in his radical theory was not always successful. It does not, however, weaken the theory itself, but rather points to its utopian character, one that was so common in the practices and theories of many avant-garde artists.

Strzemiński sought to confirm his belief that Unism could become the tool for shaping social consciousness and that it could become a worldview and not just a mere artistic system. What Strzemiński was searching for was art that would redefine society,

¹⁵¹ Strzemiński and Chwistek, “Dyskusja,” in *Władysław Strzemiński. Pisma*, 223-24.

¹⁵² Strzemiński and Chwistek, “Dyskusja,” in *Pisma*, 223.

change its behavior through form, shape, and color, and create a unified social body. Because this totalized and utopian vision of social progress could not be so successfully implemented in practice, formal experimentation remained the core element of the artist's theory. In his artistic experimentation, *Unism in Painting* and *Composition of Space* laid the foundation of the formal development which would find its culmination in an art capable of organizing the social aspects of human life.

Additionally, the formal experimentation was important, because it arose from the visual legacy built up by preceding artistic movements. Strzemiński's radical theory did not negate past art, as many modernists did, but rather sought in it the justification for new ideas and theories. Unism was, according to the artist, a logical development of form and the natural consequence of the historical evolution of art. In *Unism in Painting*, Strzemiński defined the neutrality of the painting, voiding it of any symbolic or illusionist meaning. He also defined the basic principles of the Unist system, which he later expanded into sculpture, architecture, and typography. Although each art form was viewed differently by the artist and was developed rather independently of one another (except for sculpture and architecture) in his theory, each revealed strong parallels and connections with the Unist theory. This remains one Strzemiński's greatest achievements. Although the theory evolved to address successfully different arts, its key concepts, such as the idea of the unity of the work of art with the place of its creation, the principle of the organicity of the work of art, and the utopian belief in the ability of the work of art to organize life and its functions, remained consistent through the years and unified the four arts under the umbrella of Unism. And here lies Strzemiński's unique ability to approach each medium of art independently.

Figure Illustrations



Fig. 1 Władysław Strzemiński. Photo from Smolensk, 1921.

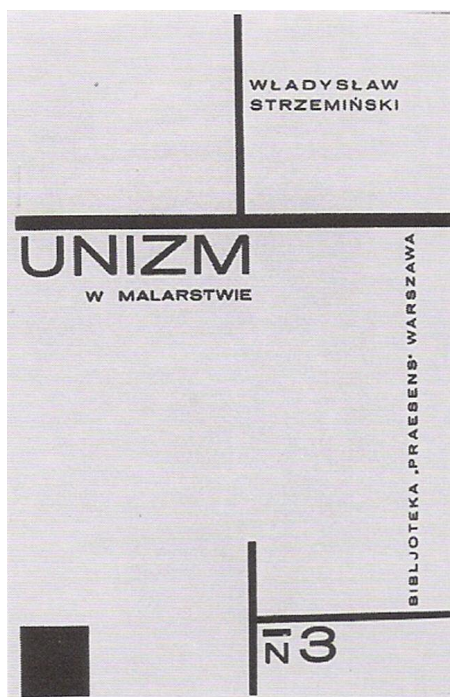


Fig. 2 Władysław Strzemiński. *Unizm w Malarstwie*. Warsaw 1928.
Title Page according to the design by Henryk Stażewski.

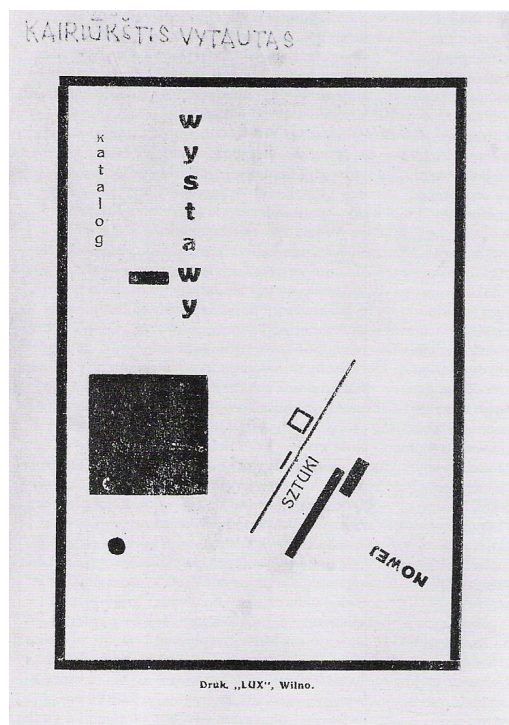


Fig. 3 Witold Kąjruksztis. Cover for the Exhibition Catalog *Wystawa Nowej Sztuki w Wilnie* [New Art Exhibition in Vilnius], 1923.



Fig. 4 Władysław Strzemiński. *Cubism – Tension of Material Structure*. 1919-1920. Oil and crumbled cork on canvas, 22.5 x 17.5 cm. National Museum, Warsaw.

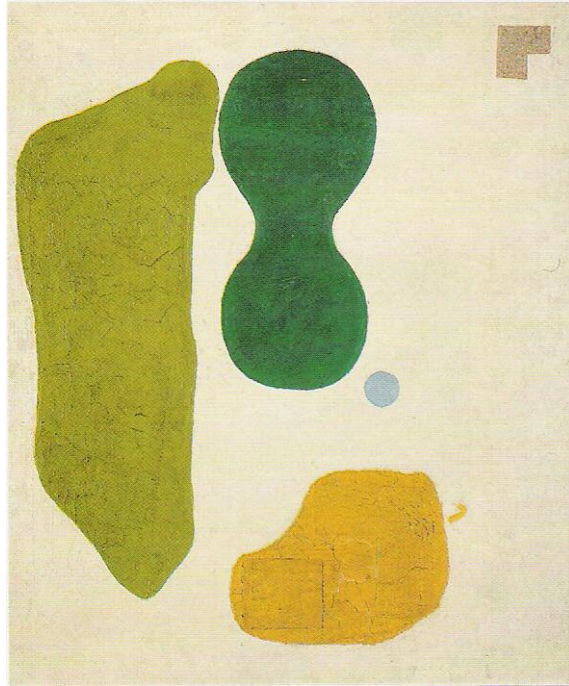


Fig. 5 Władysław Strzemiński. *Synthetic Composition I*. 1923.
Oil on canvas, 65 x 66 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

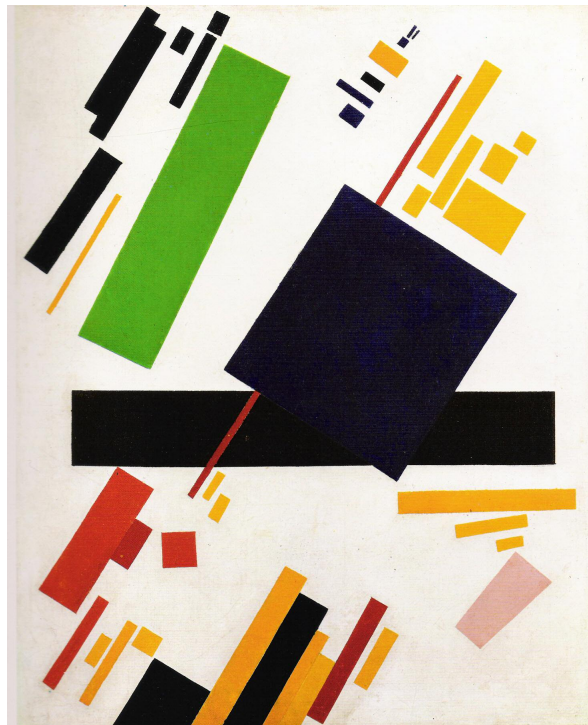


Fig. 6 Kazimir Malevich. *Suprematist Composition*. 1916.
Oil on canvas, 88 x 70 cm. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam.

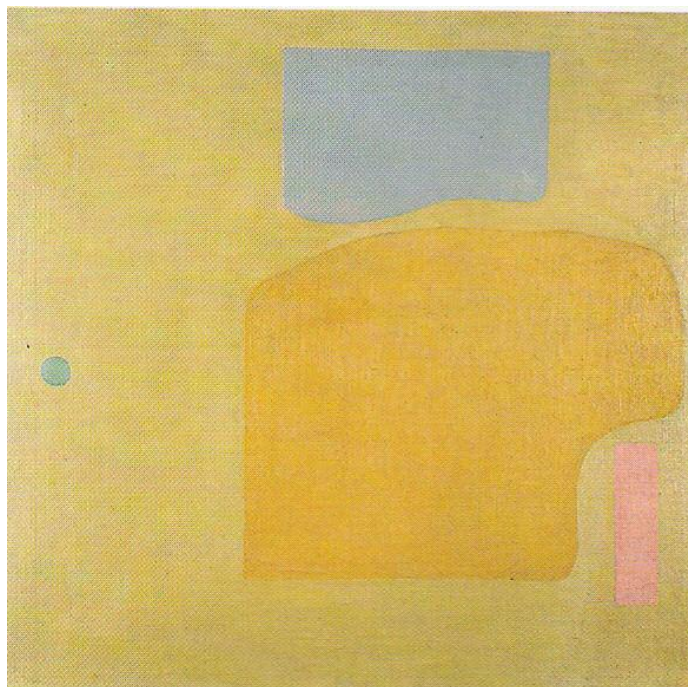


Fig. 7 Władysław Strzemiński. *Postsuprematist Composition 2*. 1923.
Oil on canvas, 65 x 60 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

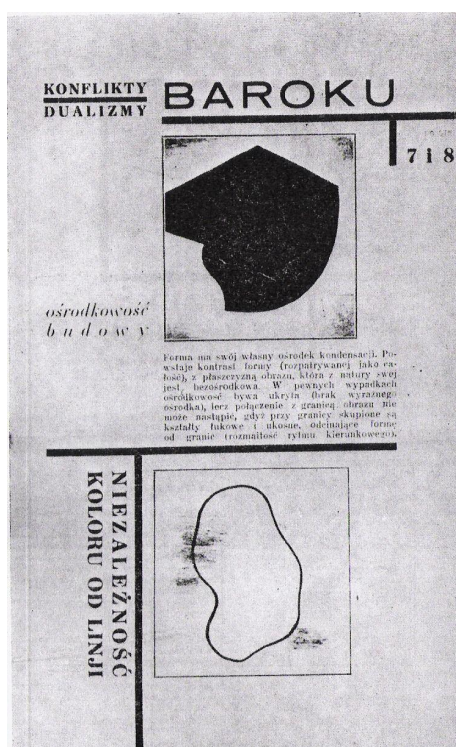


Fig. 8 Władysław Strzemiński. *Dualistic Oppositions in Baroque*. 1928.
Illustration in *Unism in Painting*. Warsaw, 1928.



Fig. 9 Władysław Strzemiński. *Dualistic Oppositions in Baroque*. 1928. Illustration in *Unism in Painting*. Warsaw, 1928.



Fig. 10 Władysław Strzemiński. *Dualistic Oppositions in Baroque*. 1928. Illustration in *Unism in Painting*. Warsaw, 1928.

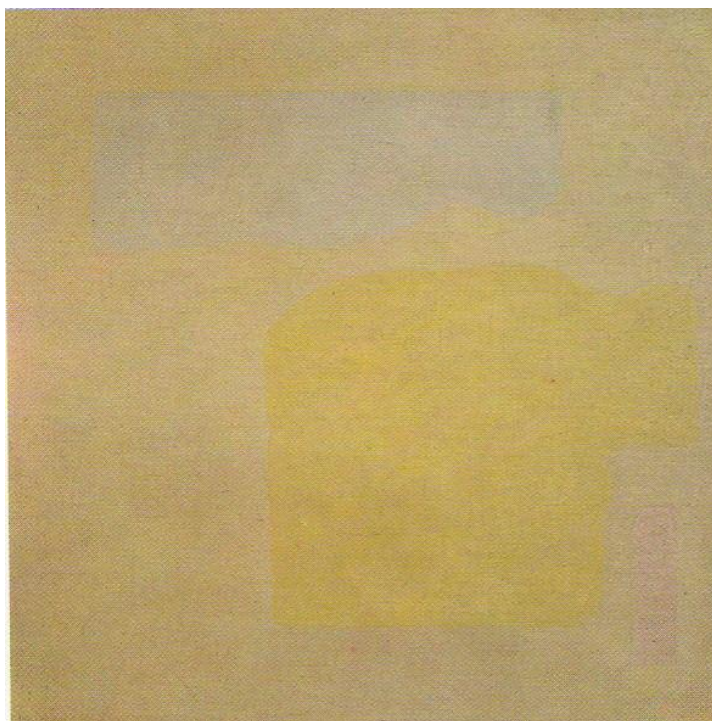


Fig. 11 Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 4*. 1924-27.
Oil on canvas, 64 x 64 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

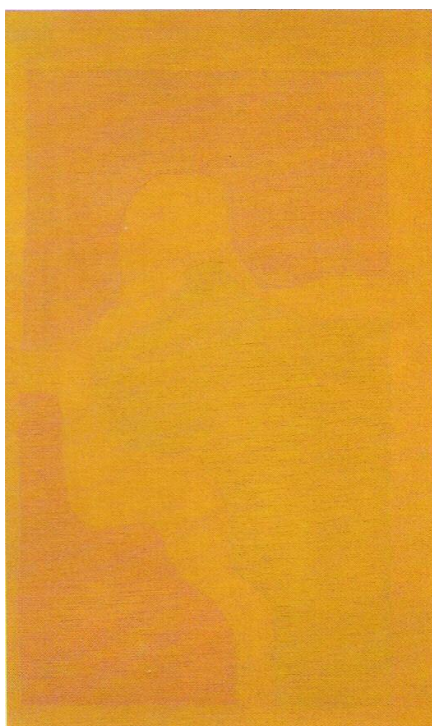


Fig. 12 Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 5*. 1924-27.
Oil on canvas, 64 x 40 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

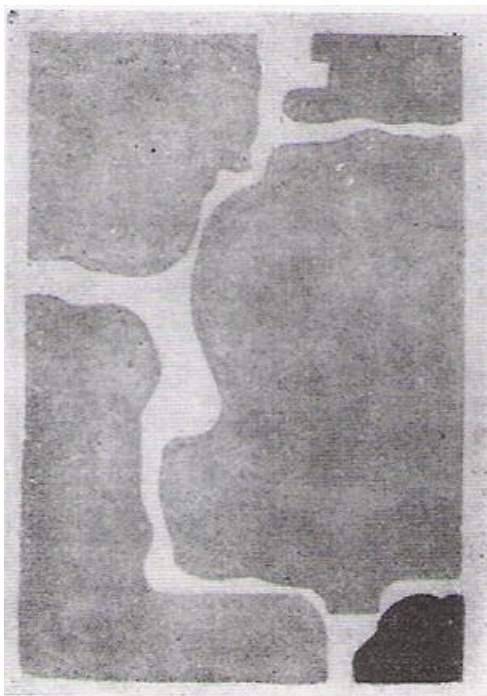


Fig. 13 Władysław Strzemiński. *Postsuprematist Composition*. 1923.
Reproduced in *Blok. Kurier Bloku* 8-9, 1924.

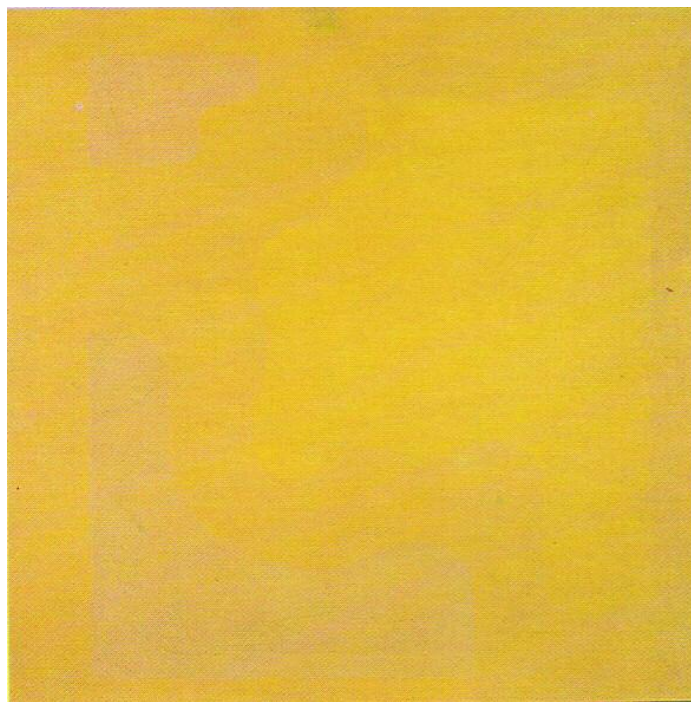


Fig. 14 Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 6*. 1928.
Oil on canvas, 64 x 64 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.



Fig. 15 Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 7*. 1929.
Oil on canvas, 77 x 63 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

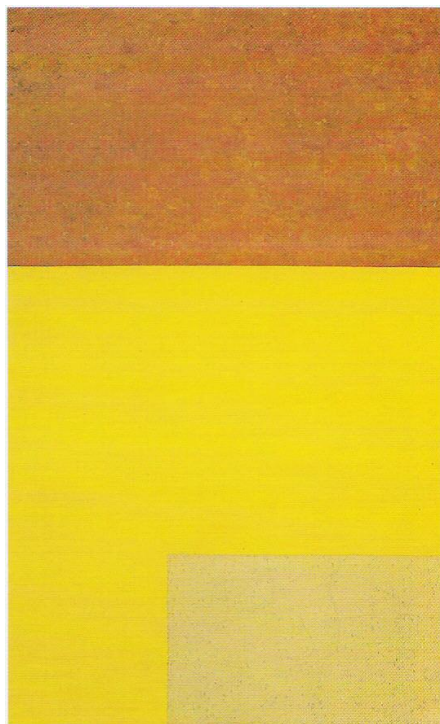


Fig. 16 Władysław Strzemiński. *Architectonic Composition 8b*. 1928-29.
Oil on canvas, 96 x 60 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

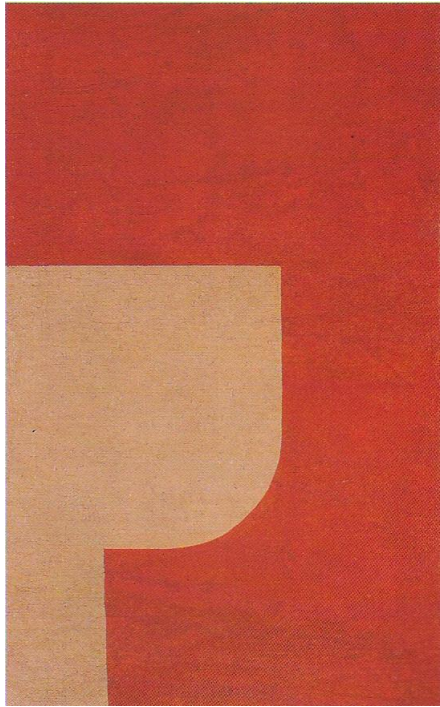


Fig. 17 Władysław Strzemiński. *Architectonic Composition*. 1929.
Oil on canvas, 95 x 60 cm. Anna Wesołowska, Łódź.

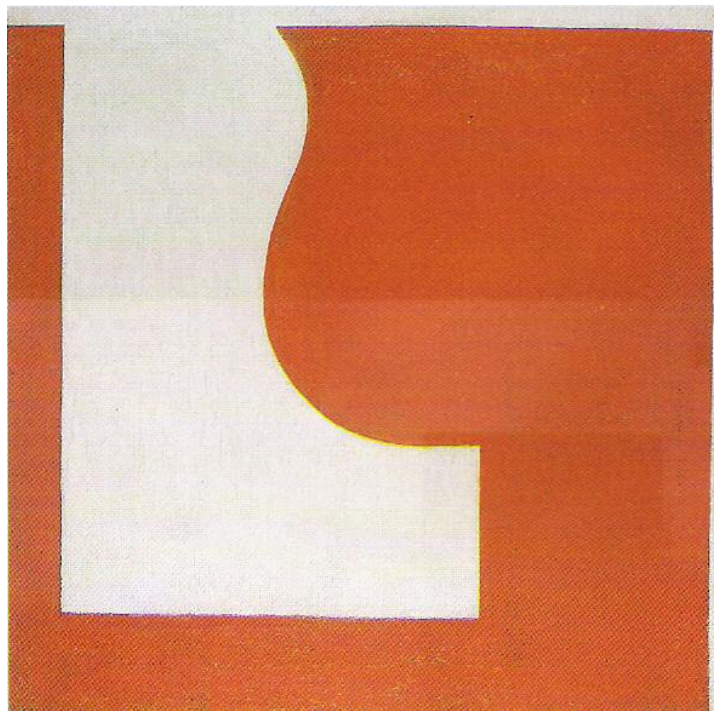


Fig. 18 Władysław Strzemiński. *Architectonic Composition 3a*. 1927.
Oil on canvas, 62 x 62 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

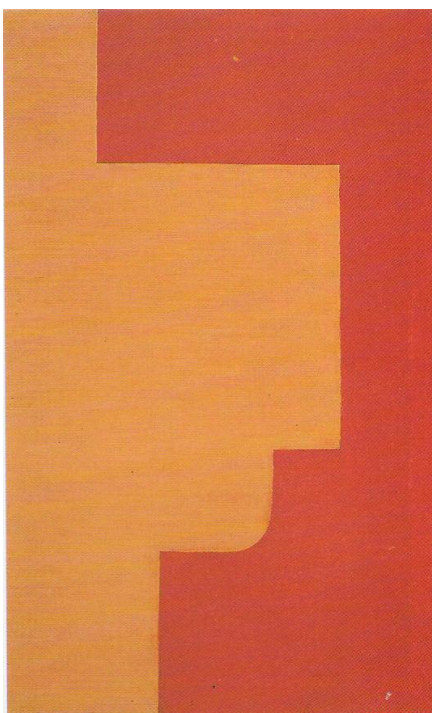


Fig. 19 Władysław Strzemiński. *Architectonic Composition 6b*. 1928.
Oil on canvas, 96 x 60 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

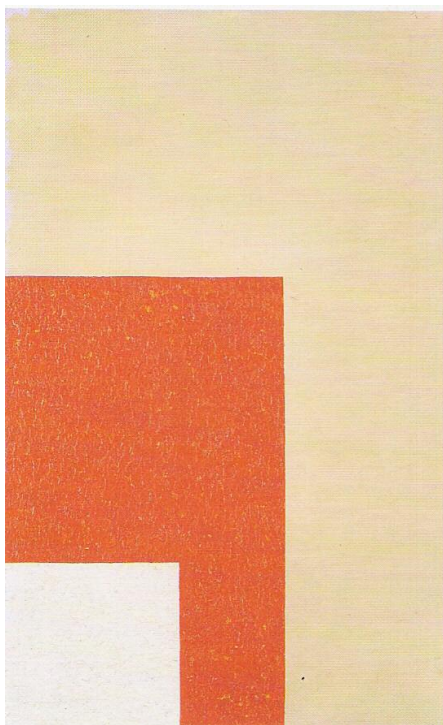


Fig. 20 Władysław Strzemiński. *Architectonic Composition 9c*. 1929.
Oil on canvas, 96 x 60 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

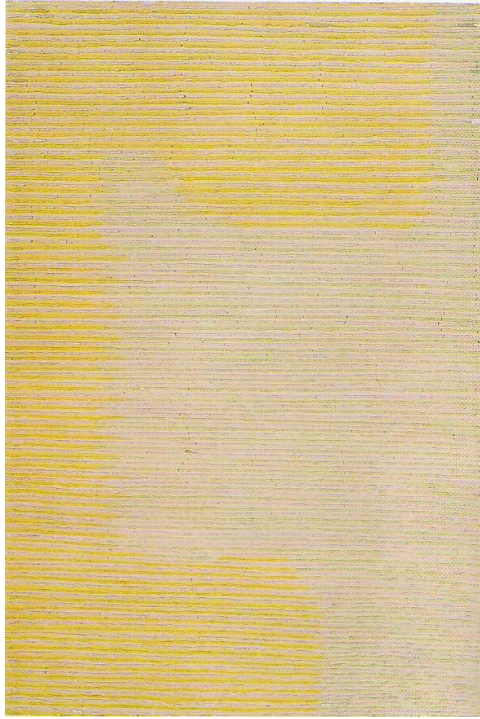


Fig. 21 Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 9*. 1931.
Oil on canvas, 48 x 32 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

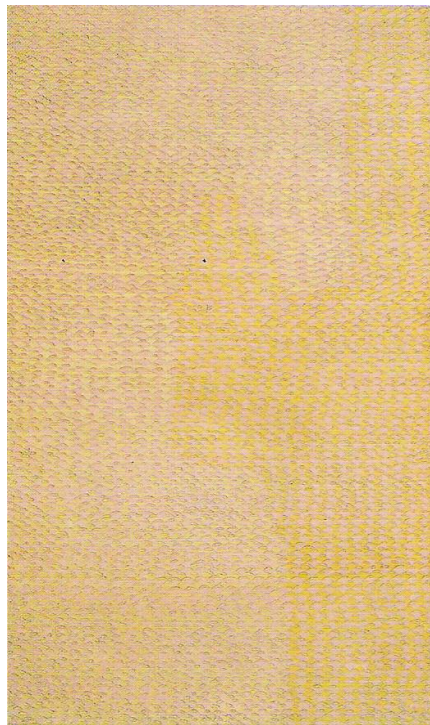


Fig. 22 Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 8*. 1931.
Oil on canvas, 60 x 36 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

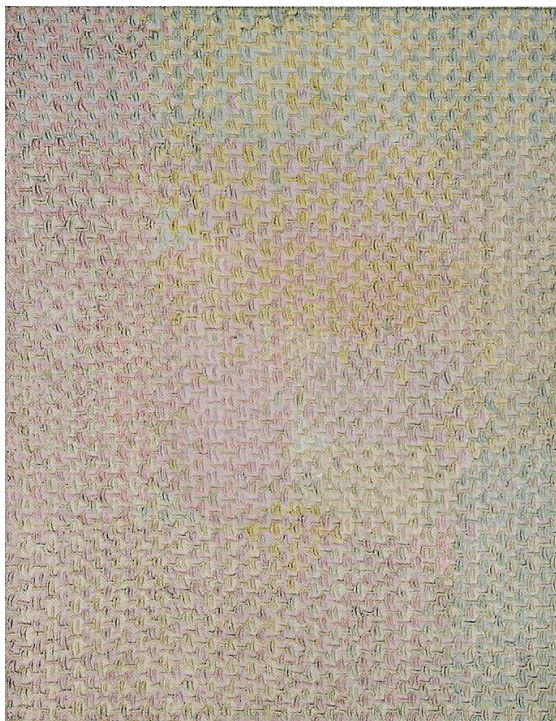


Fig. 23 Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 11*. 1931.
Oil on canvas, 50 x 38 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

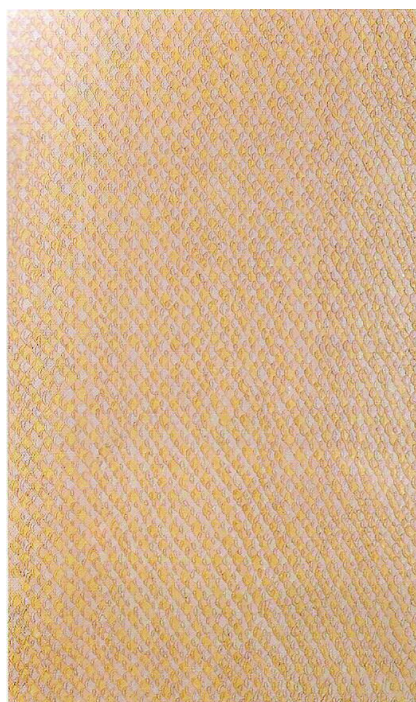


Fig. 24 Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition*. 1932.
Oil on canvas, 51 x 30 cm. Kröller-Müller Museum,
Otterlo, The Netherlands.



Fig. 25 Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 10*. 1931.
Oil on canvas, 74 x 50 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

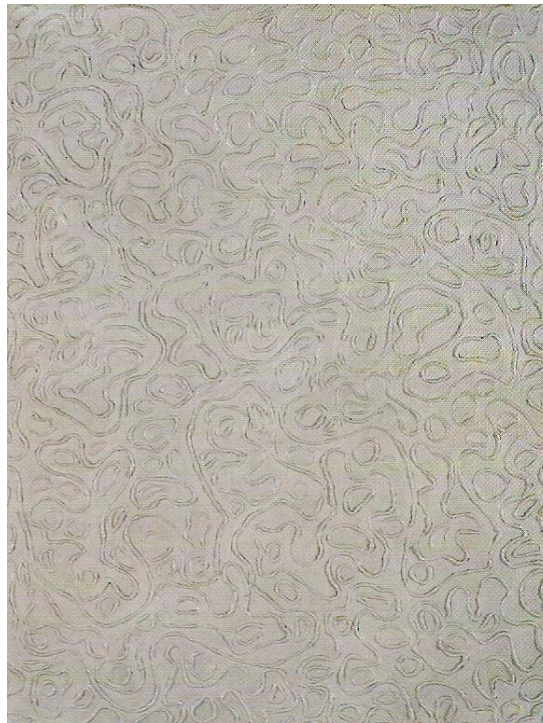


Fig. 26 Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 12*. 1932.
Oil on canvas, 50 x 38 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

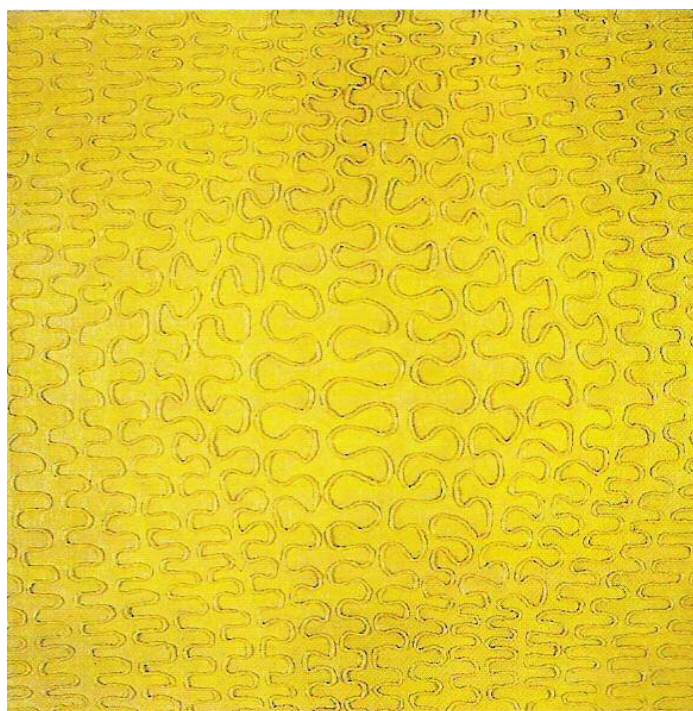


Fig. 27 Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 13*. 1934.
Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

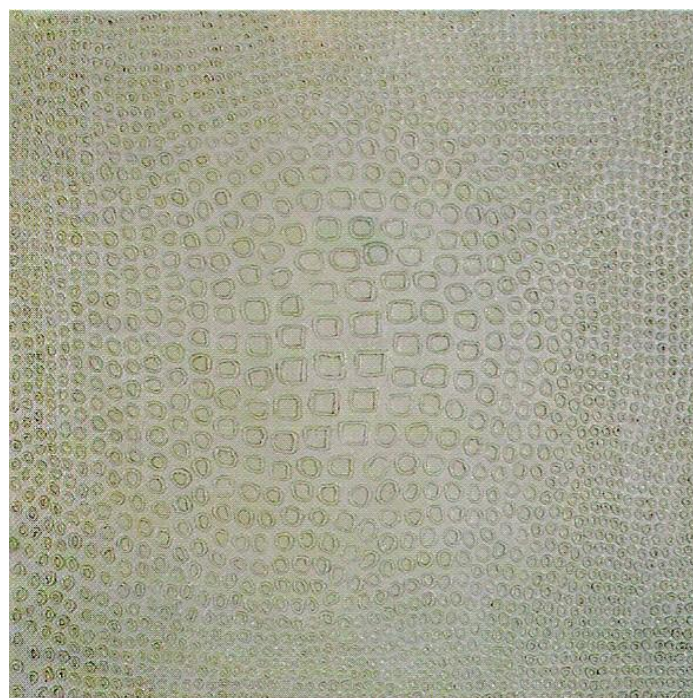


Fig. 28 Władysław Strzemiński. *Unist Composition 14*. 1934.
Oil on canvas, 50 x 50 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

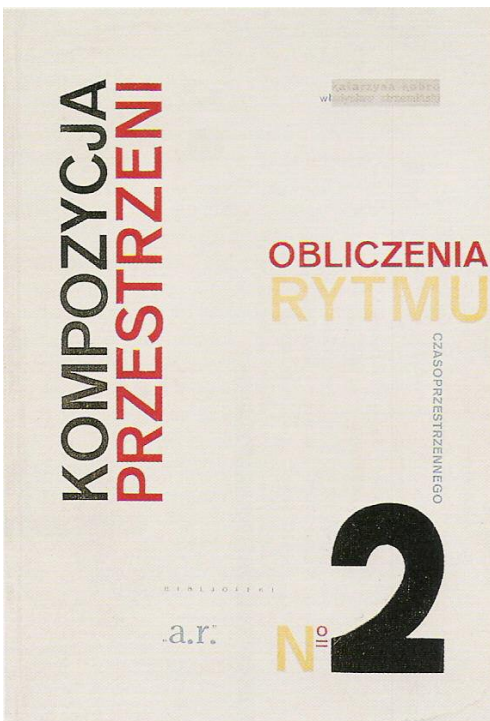


Fig. 29 Władysław Strzemiński. Cover page for *Kompozycja Przestrzeni – Obliczenia Rytmu Czasoprzestrzennego* [Composition of Space: Calculations of Spatio-Temporal Rhythm], Łódź 1931.

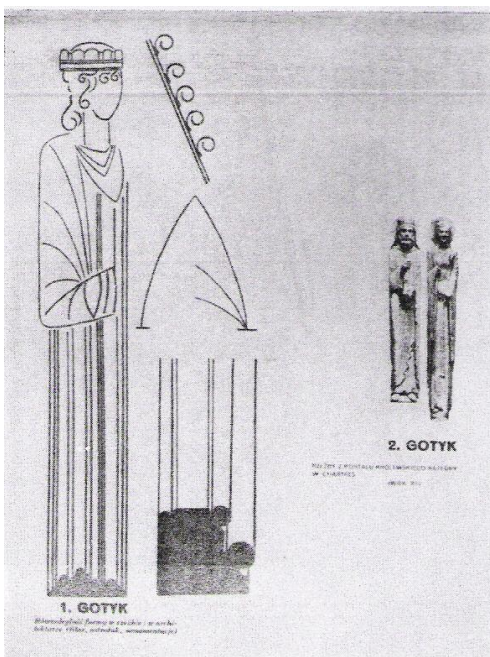


Fig. 30 Władysław Strzemiński. *Formal Similarity Between Gothic Sculpture and Architecture*. Illustration in *Composition of Space*, Łódź 1931.



Fig. 31 Gianlorenzo Bernini. *David*. 1623.
Marble, approx. 5' 7 in.
Galleria Borghese, Rome.

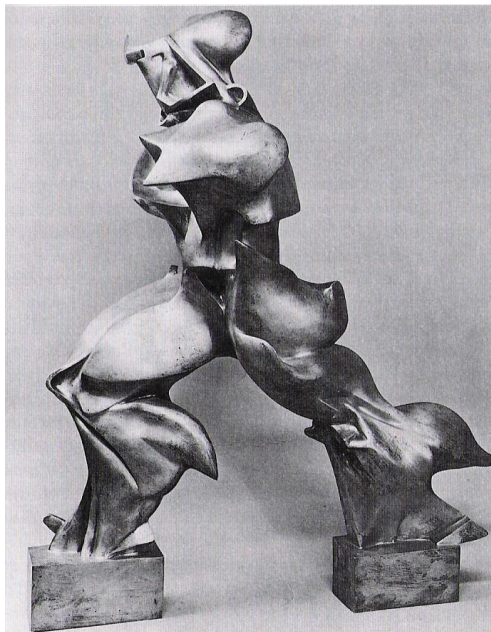


Fig. 32 Umberto Boccioni. *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*. 1913.
Bronze, 3' 7 7/8" high x 2' 10 7/8" x 1' 3 3/4"
Museum of Modern Art, New York.



Fig. 33 Katarzyna Kobro. *Spatial Composition 4*. 1929.
Metal, oil, 40 x 64 x 40 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

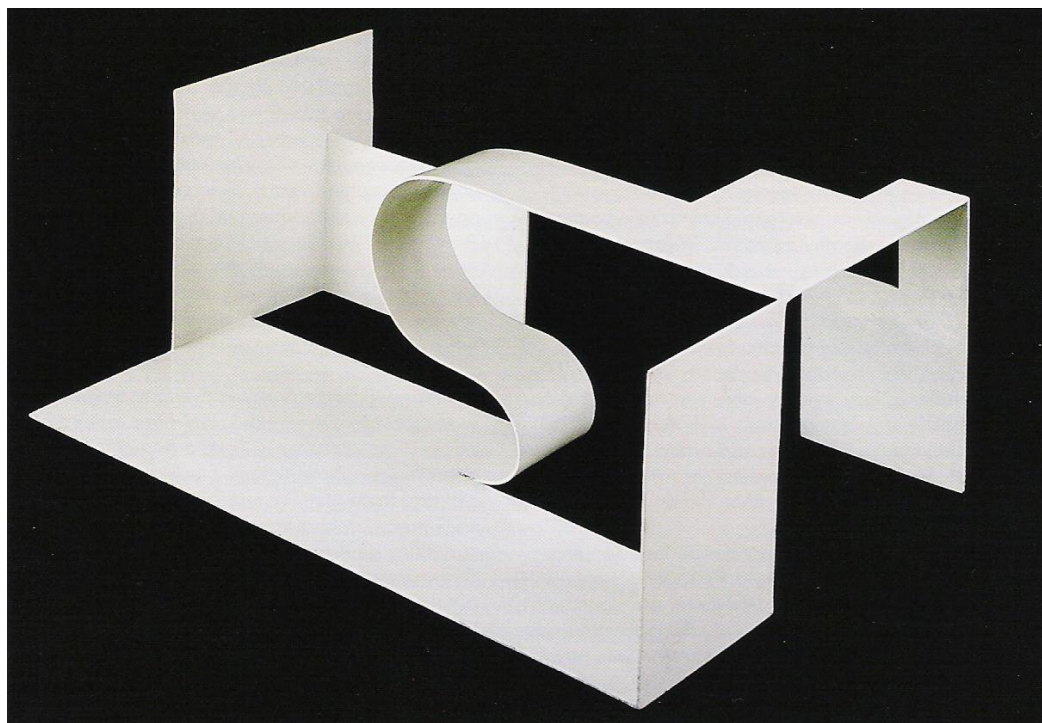


Fig. 34 Katarzyna Kobro. *Spatial Composition 5*. 1929.
Metal, oil, 40 x 64 x 40 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

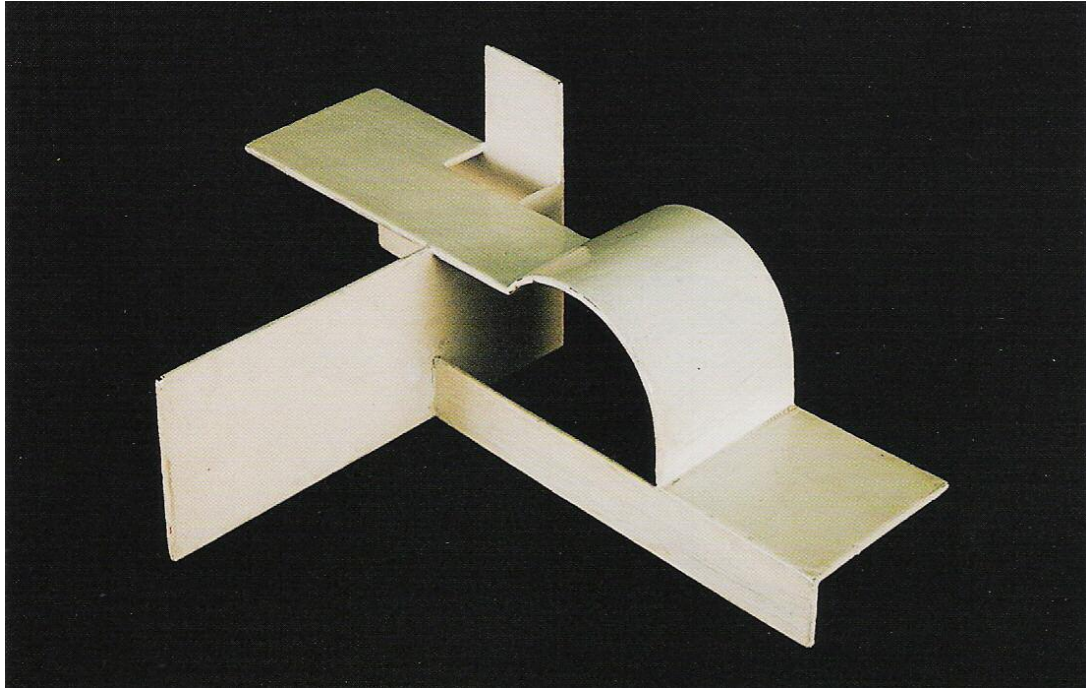


Fig. 35 Katarzyna Kobro. *Spatial Composition 8*. 1932.
Metal, oil, 10 x 24 x 15 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.



Fig. 36 Katarzyna Kobro. *Abstract Sculpture 1*. 1924.
Wood, metal, glass, oil, 72 x 17.5 x 15.5 cm.
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

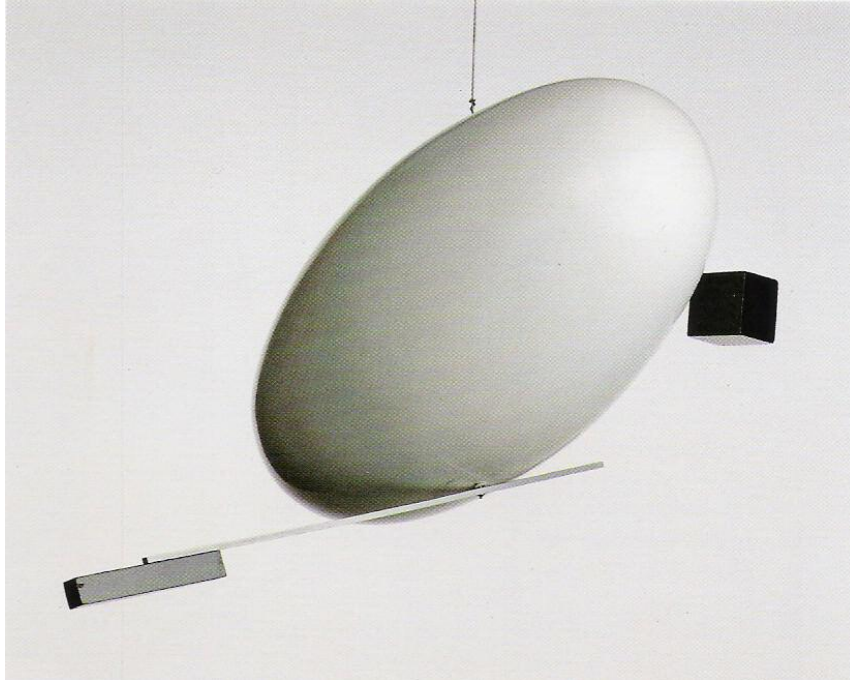


Fig. 37 Katarzyna Kobro. *Suspended Construction 1*. 1921/1972.
(Reconstruction) 20 x 40 x 40 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.



Fig. 38 Katarzyna Kobro. *Suspended Construction 2*. 1921-22/1979.
(Reconstruction) Metal, 26.2 x 39.6 x 28.6 cm. Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

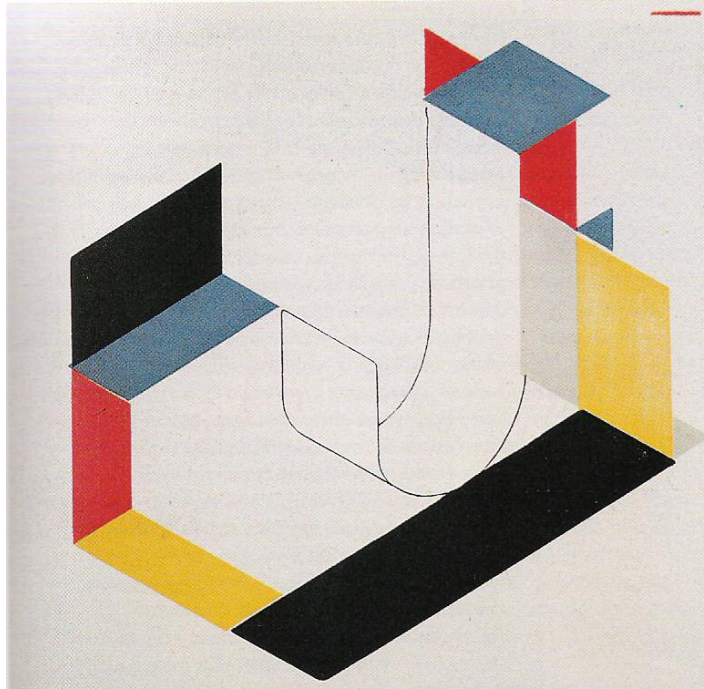


Fig. 39 Katarzyna Kobro. Relations of colors in space.
Illustration in *Composition of Space*, Łódź, 1931.

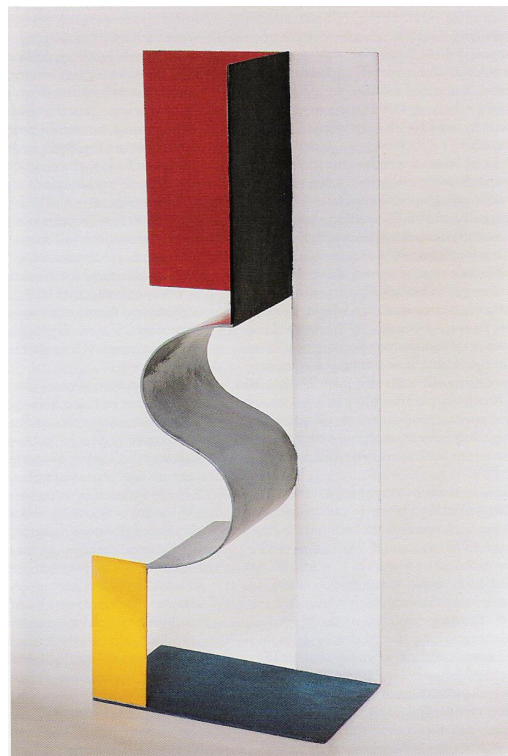


Fig. 40 Katarzyna Kobro. *Spatial Composition 6*. 1931.
Painted steel, 64 x 25 x 15 cm. Museum of Art, Łódź.

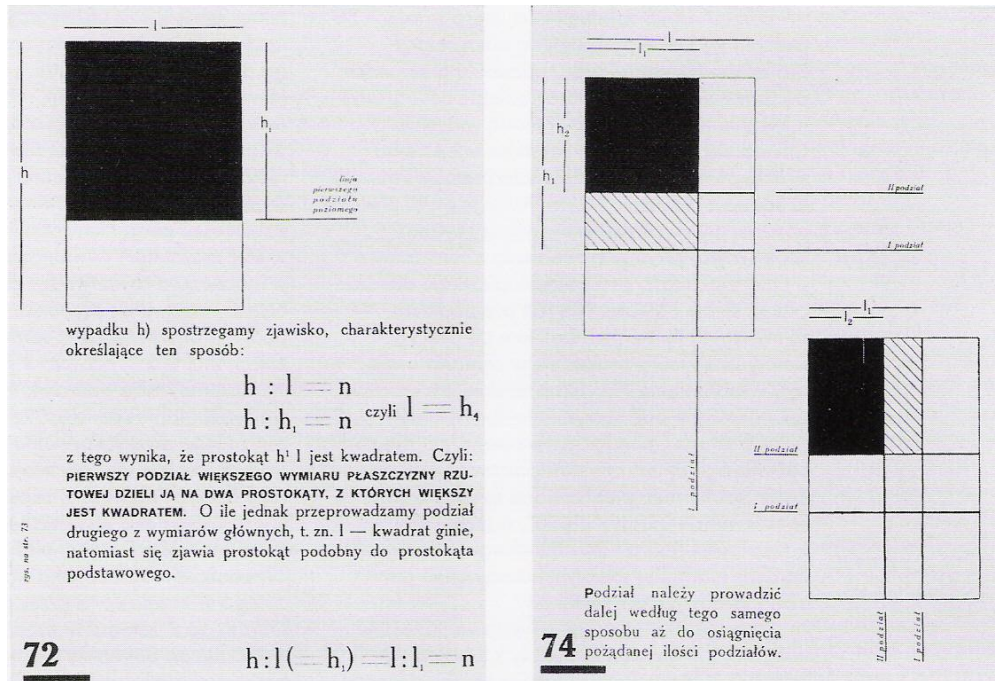


Fig. 41 Władysław Strzemiński. *Rules of the architectonic composition.* Illustration in *Composition of Space*, Łódź 1931.

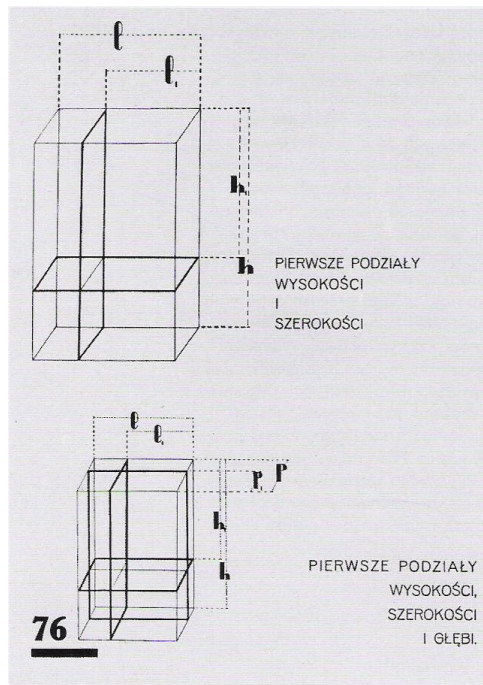


Fig. 42 Katarzyna Kobro. *First divisions of height and width of a volume.* Illustration in *Composition of Space*, Łódź 1931.

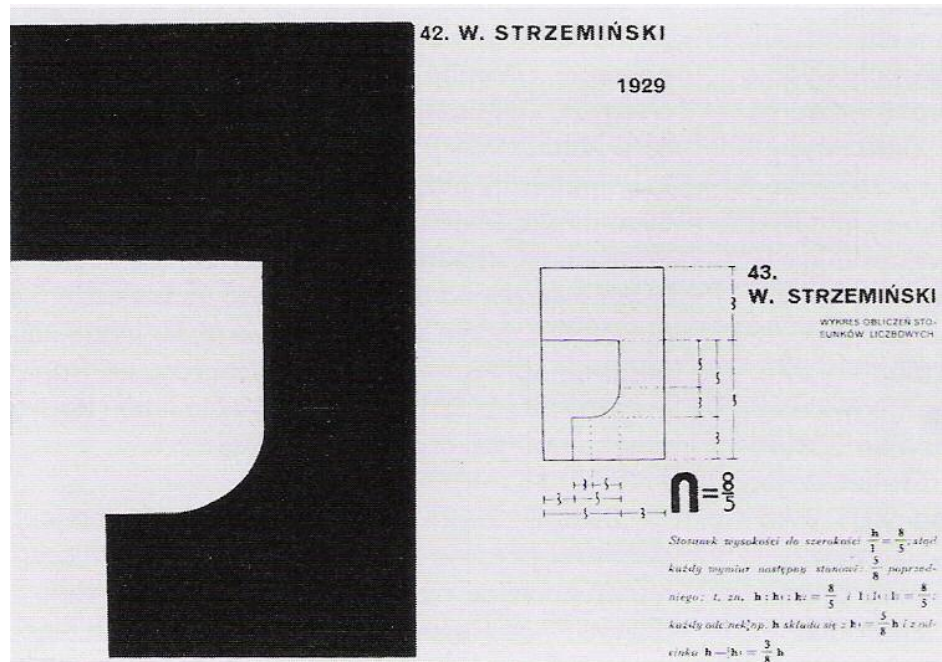


Fig. 43 Władysław Strzemiński. *Rules of the architectonic composition: calculations of numerical ratios.*
 Illustration in *Composition of Space*, Łódź 1931.

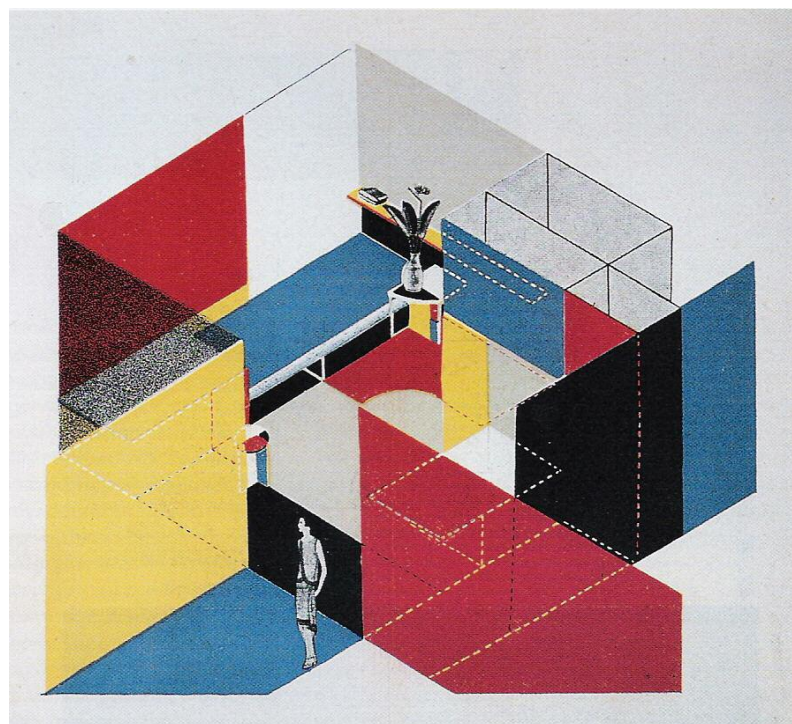


Fig. 44 Władysław Strzemiński. *Project of an interior design.*
 Illustration in *Composition of Space*, Łódź 1931.

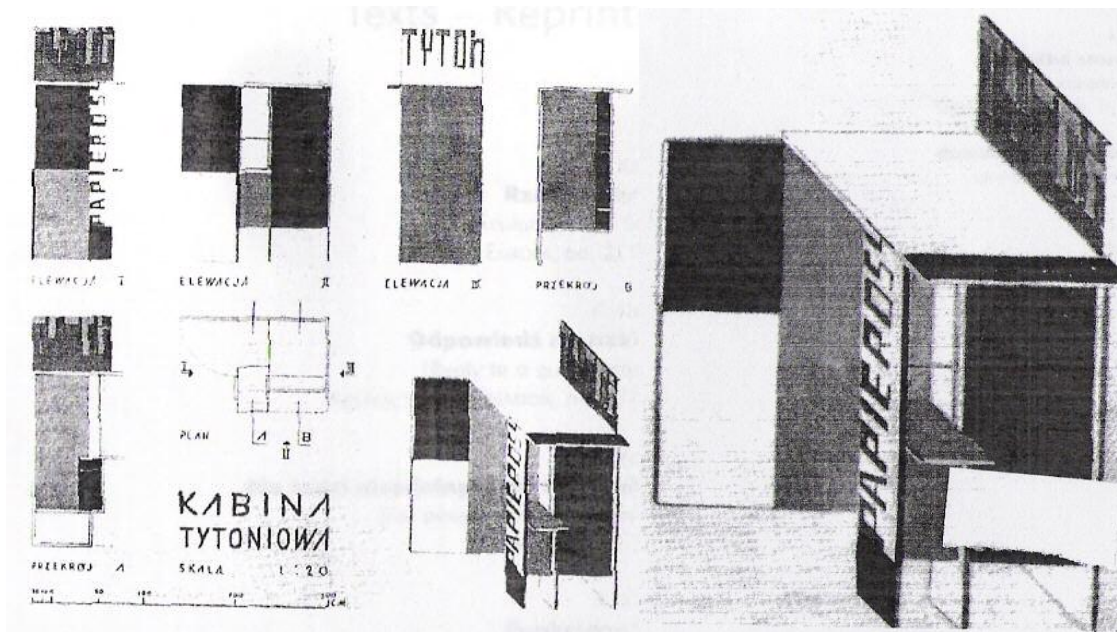


Fig. 45 Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro.
Design for a tobacco kiosk, Dec. 1927 – Jan. 1928.



Fig. 46 Władysław Strzemiński. Neo-Plastic Room. 1948.
 Exhibition Room in Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.



Fig. 47 Władysław Strzemiński. Cover page for *Z Ponad [From Above]* by Julian Przyboś, 1930.



Fig. 48 Photo of Julian Przyboś, Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro.



Fig. 49 Władysław Strzemiński. Cover page for *Śruby* [Screws] by Julian Przyboś, 1925.

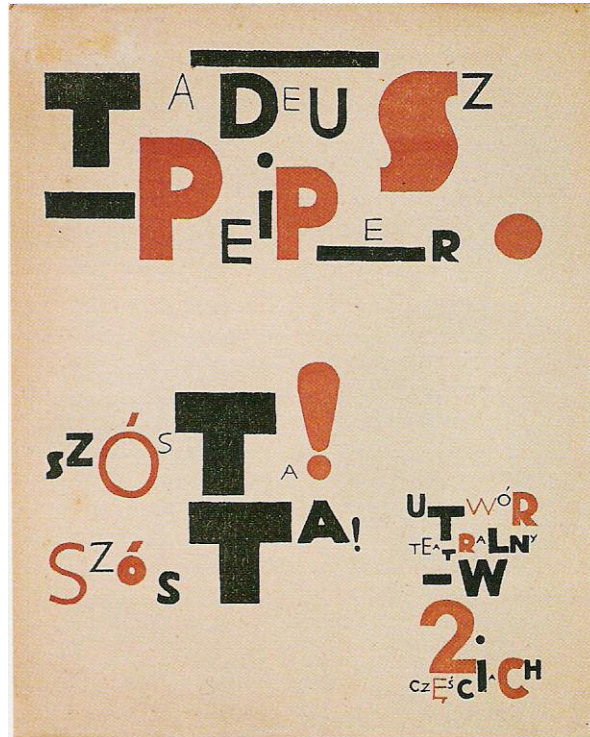


Fig. 50 Władysław Strzemiński. Cover page for *Szósta, Szósta* [Six! Six!] by Tadeusz Peiper, 1926.

20 kg

TA WALIZA JEST KAŁETA, KTÓRA ZMIEŚCI TYLE

ILE ŁASKA

7

głębym
cigiar upadł
ręce ostygły,
ale
to — jeszcze pięć stopni, jeszcze trzy, jeszcze
jeszcze dwa — a dwa złote w kalecie umieszczę,
jeszcze dwa, a... droga się uprości
i... dwa, i... w bramę, —
dwadzieścia !!

KIEDYŻ RĘCE BĘDĄ WAŻYĆ TYLE ●

— I L E ?

— Ilo łaśka jęgomości... ●●●

ILE WAŻĄ SAME

Fig. 51 Władysław Strzemiński. Typographical design for Poem 20 kg by Julian Przyboś, 1930.

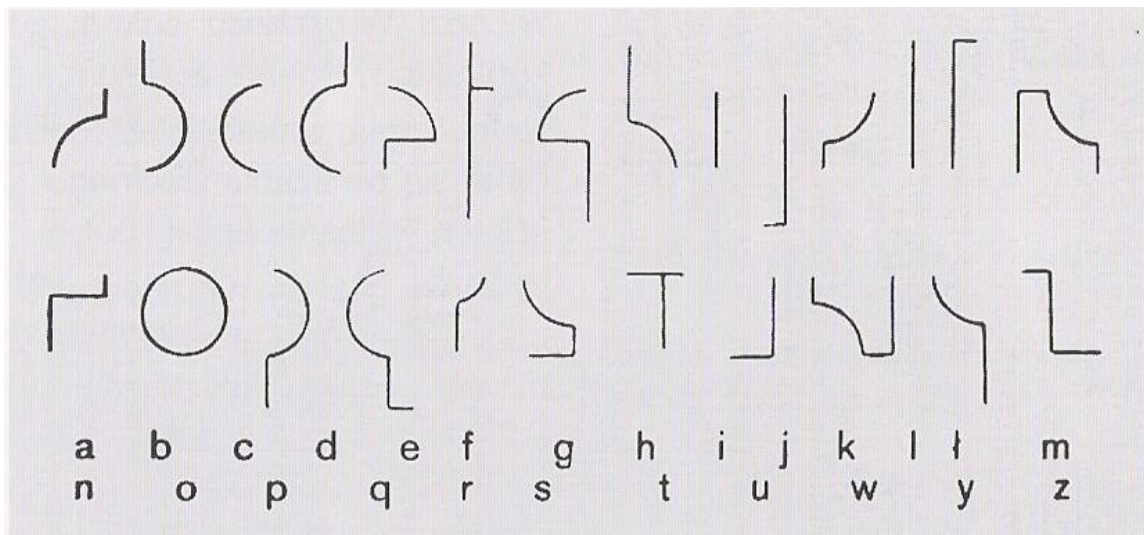


Fig. 52 Władysław Strzemiński. Design of alphabet. Komunikat "a.r." 2, Łódź, 1932.



Fig. 53 Władysław Strzemiński. Typographical design for Poem *Murarze* [Masons] by Julian Przyboś, 1930.

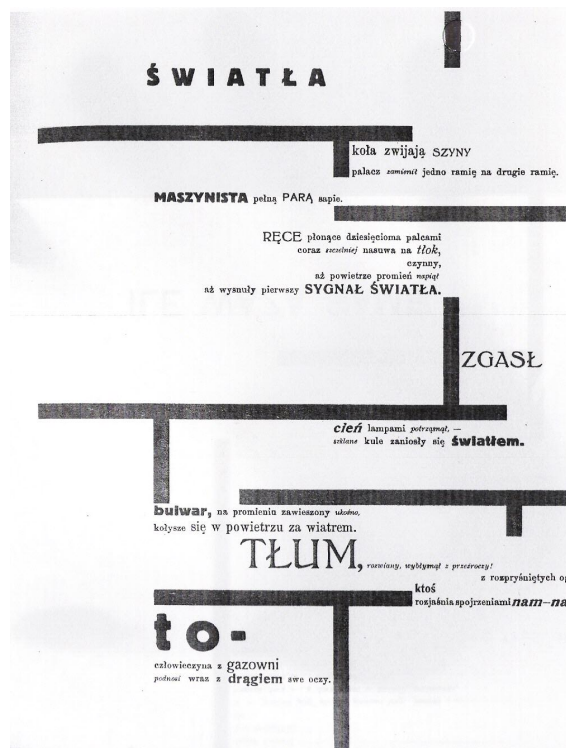


Fig. 54 Władysław Strzemiński. Typographical design for Poem *Światła* [Lights] by Julian Przyboś, 1930.

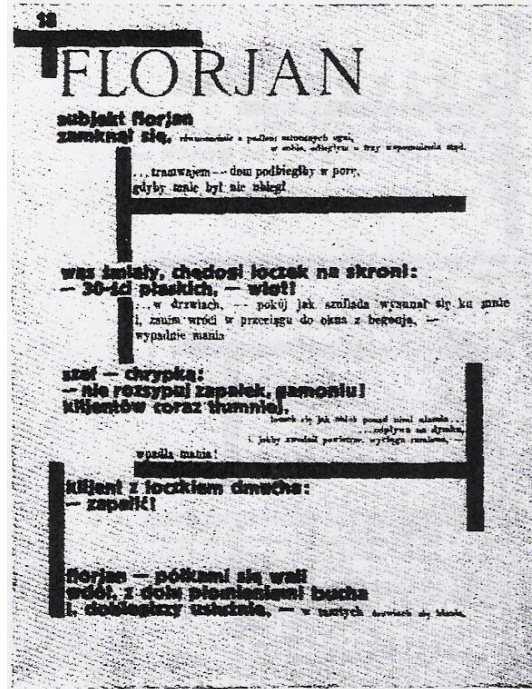


Fig. 55 Władysław Strzemiński. Typographical design for Poem *Florian* by Julian Przyboś, 1930.

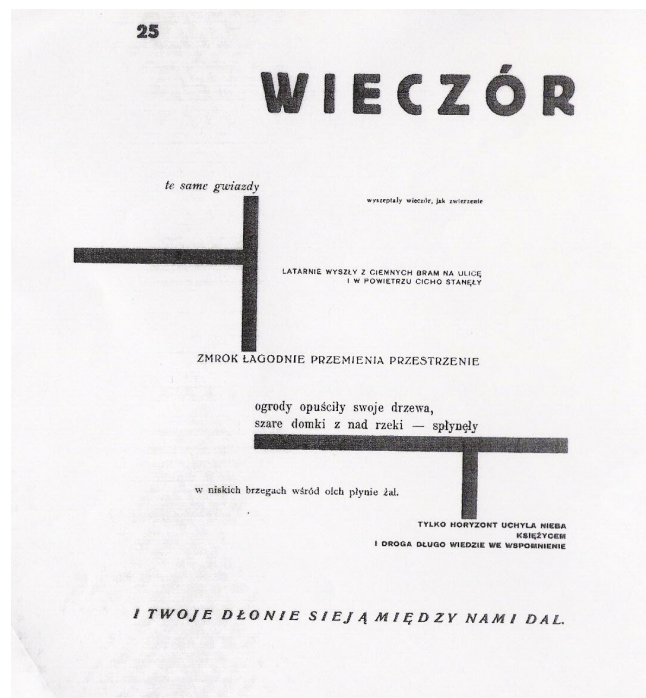


Fig. 56 Władysław Strzemiński. Typographical design for Poem *Wieczór* [Evening] by Julian Przyboś, 1930.

Appendix – Polish Groups of the Constructivist Avant-Garde

A. Blok (1924-1926)

Blok was the first group of Polish Constructivists. Its emergence was marked by the publication of the first issue of the *Blok* magazine in March 1924 and by the exhibition of the group of artists in a Warsaw automobile showroom Laurin-Clement. The artists participating in the exhibition were the founding members of Blok and gathered together ‘Cubists, Constructivists, and Suprematists’. Among the members were the most progressive artists of the Polish avant-garde: Strzemiński, Witold Kajruksztis, Mieczysław Szczuka, Henryk Berlewi, Teresa Żarnower, and Henryk Stażewski. As the group defined itself, “Blok represents people united into a combat group by the slogan of absolute construction. However, within the group there are different directions, represented by the particular contributors of the magazine.” The group laid out the basis of the emerging Constructivist programme as well as the theories developed by its members. In all, eleven issues of the Blok magazine were published. They included not only the theoretical discourse of the members of Blok, but also illustrated texts written by the leading European modernists, such as Kazimir Malevich, Theo van Doesburg, Kurt Schwitters, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Eventually, the different views on art as presented by Szczuka and Strzemiński led to a divide in the group. Szczuka advocated utilitarian art subjected to the social needs, while Strzemiński proposed autonomous art able to dictate the social order. The difference of opinions led to the breakup of the group.

B. Praesens (1926-1939)

The Praesens group was founded on the initiative of Szymon Syrkus, and gathered a group of architects and painters. In June 1926, the group published the first issue of its magazine, of the same title *Praesens*. Among the members of the group were the architects Syrkus, Józef Szanajca, and Bohdan Lachert; painters and former members of Blok, Strzemiński and Stażewski; and sculptor Katarzyna Kobro. Syrkus outlined the programme of the group, “By way of experiment, the architectonic approach provides new opportunities, not only artistic as it might seem, but also social. For architecture changes the social pattern, as the social pattern changes architecture.” Similarly to the Blok group, Praesens published many articles of the international avant-garde in its journal. In 1926, the group opened its first exhibition in Warsaw. A year later, in 1927, the group co-organized the Machine Age Exposition in New York showcasing the works of its members, Stanisław Brukalski, Józef Malinowski, Strzemiński, Syrkus, Henryk Oderfeld, Lachert, Lech Niemojewski, Stażewski, and Szanajca. Just as in the Blok group, different views regarding art were upheld by the architects and by Strzemiński and his friends, Stażewski and Kobro. Strzemiński yet again dismissed the utilitarian basis of the architects’ programme and left the group in 1929. Stażewski and Kobro followed Strzemiński and also left the Praesens.

C. *a.r.* (1929-1936)

Upon leaving Praesens, Strzemiński organized *a.r.* as an alternative avant-garde group. *a.r.* gathered as its members artists including Strzemiński, Stażewski, and Kobro as well as the poets Julian Przyboś and Jan Brzękowski. The name of the group *a.r.* stood for ‘revolutionary artists’ as defined by Przyboś and for ‘real avant-garde’ as defined by Strzemiński. Through its members, the group merged the disciplines of visual arts and poetry. The common foundation eclipsing both disciplines was based on the idea of organic construction and the totality of existence. The artists also explored typographical design. The most important achievement of the group, however, was the collection of modern art. The International Collection of Modern Art came to life solely due to the initiative, enthusiasm, and perseverance of all five members of the *a.r.* group. The collection was deposited in the Art Museum in Łódź and marked an important cultural accomplishment, as it became one of the first museums of modern art in the world. Strzemiński initiated the idea of such a collection early in his career, but it was not until 1929 that the city council of Łódź granted the artist exhibition rooms within the city museum. As a result of close ties of the *a.r.* members with the leading figures of European avant-garde, they were able to acquire works by artists such as Arp, Gorin, Leger, van Doesburg, Ernst, Gleizes, Picasso, and Torres-Garcia and many others, as well as works of the most progressive Polish artists, without any financial support. The first exhibition opened on February 15, 1931. Unfortunately, during the war many works were lost or destroyed, but a large percentage of the collection still remains in the Art Museum in Łódź.

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