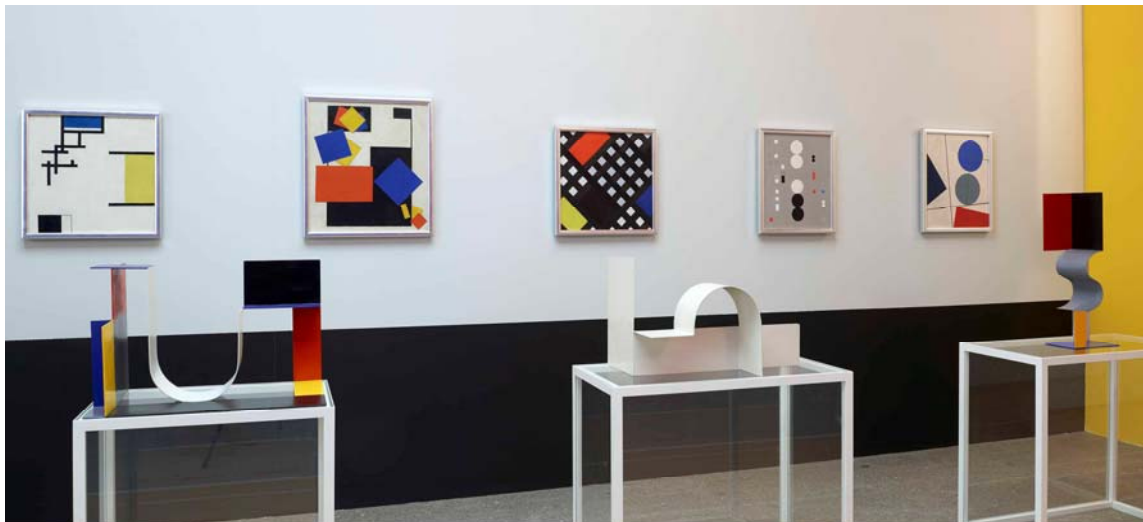


Kobro y Strzemiński. Avant-Garde Prototypes



Vista de sala de la exposición **KOBRO & STRZEMINSKI. Prototipos vanguardistas**, en el Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2017

Fotografía: Joaquín Cortés/Román Lores. Archivo fotográfico del Museo Nacional Reina Sofía

DATES: April 25, 2017 – September 18, 2017

PLACE: Museo Reina Sofía. Sabatini building, 3^o floor

ORGANIZATION: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía and Muzeum Sztuki de Lodz

CURATORSHIP: Jaroslaw Suchan

COORDINATION: Gemma Bayón

RELATED ACTIVITIES: Lecture series *The utopia of form. Abstraction and construction between Latin America and Eastern Europe* May and June Nouvel Building, Auditorium 200 and Sabatini Building, Auditorium. 7:00 p.m.

With the collaboration



Active from the late 1910s until the early 1950s, Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński produced work that was especially consistent with modernist avant-garde ideas. Touching on various disciplines, including painting, sculpture, architecture, and industrial and graphic design, their oeuvre anticipated new trends that were to reach their plenitude in the practices of later generations, such as minimalism, the Zero movement, and reductionist art.

Two premises articulate the production of both artists. The first is the conviction that the artwork must be constituted in consonance with the principles inherent to it in order to attain internal coherence. The second is the conception of art as an experiment in pure form, though this does not imply the absence of a social dimension. Indeed, these artists saw artistic practice as developing abstract models of organization that could



KATARZYNA KOBRO
Construcción suspendida (2), 1921-22/1971-79 (reconstrucción de Janusz Zagrodzi y
Bolesław Urban)
Metal
26,2 x 39,6 x 28,6 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

be applied to industrial design, architecture, or engineering. The ultimate purpose of art is therefore not the manufacture of beautiful objects but a substantial transformation of the world on the basis of creative experimentation. The artistic ideas of Kobro and Strzemiński in fact included a constant demand for experiment that manifested itself in the continual manufacture of prototypes, seeking and testing various

solutions for each problem encountered in a process that embraced the material and structural organization of both the artwork and society, and in later years even the phenomenon of vision itself.

The careers of Kobro and Strzemiński begin in 1918, a key moment in the history of 20th century art. This was the tumultuous period of the October Revolution, when both artists frequented left-wing artistic circles and became actively involved in a movement whose goal was a radical transformation of art into a tool for social change. Together, first in Moscow and later in Smolensk, they collaborated closely with Vladimir Tatlin, El Lissitzky, Antoine Pevsner and, above all, Kazimir Malevich, whose suprematism provided both of them with a starting point for their own artistic theories and practices. Owing to the increasingly hostile attitude towards modern art in the Soviet Union at the end of 1921 and the start of 1922, Kobro and Strzemiński left secretly for Poland, where they went on to lead the avant-garde art movement. Among other activities, they promoted the first exhibition of Polish constructivism (Vilnius, 1923), and cofounded the

country's most important avant-garde groups, Blok (1923–1926), Praesens (1926–1929) and a.r. (1929–1936). They also formed an international network, establishing contact with such leading representatives of the European avant-gardes as Piet Mondrian, Theo Van Doesburg, Georges Vantongerloo, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti,



THEO VAN DOESBURG
Composició amb quadrats negres
Oleo sobre llenzo
50 x 50 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Lodz

Hans Arp, and, once more, Malevich. Moreover, they joined the Parisian group Abstraction-Création after collaborating with its precursor, Cercle et Carré. The most important result of these relations was the birth, under the auspices of the a.r. group, of the International Collection of Modern Art, housed in what was then the Municipal Museum of Łódź (now the Muzeum Sztuki). From 1929 to 1939, this collection grew with donations from artists such as Arp, Alexander Calder, Van Doesburg, Max Ernst,

Jean Hélion, Fernand Léger, Pablo Picasso, Enrico Prampolini, Kurt Schwitters, and Sophie Taeuber-Arp.

Where their artistic language is concerned, Russian constructivism provided an initiatory experience or both Kbro and Strzeminski that found confirmation in their earliest works. After settling in Poland, however, they began to feel attracted by the Western European avantgarde, especially neoplasticism and the Bauhaus. From then on, their work was closely engaged in dialogue with these trends, and in the second half of the 1920s they produced novel approaches to sculpture, painting, and later also architecture and graphic design.

In the early 1920s Strzeminski developed the theory of unism, which held that “the plastic artwork neither expresses anything nor is the sign of anything.” The pictorial image is thus a flat surface delimited by the frame and covered with paint, constituting an “exclusively visual phenomenon.” All that falls outside this definition, such as motion, time, threedimensionality, and external references of a mimetic, psychological, or symbolic nature, perturbs the logic of the “image in itself” and must therefore be rejected. These ideas materialized in his *Kompozycje architektoniczne* (Architectural Compositions) and in a series of unist paintings dating from the years 1924 to 1934. Though apparently formalist, unism in fact had a political sense for its inventor, since the results of pure form obtained in the laboratory could be used afterward as models for a more rational organization of society.



WLADYSLAW STRZEMINSKI
Composición arquitectónica 5b, ca. 1928
Óleo sobre lienzo
96 x 60 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

At the same time, Kbro developed her own theory of sculpture based on some radical ideas formulated through study of the materials used and on a concept of sculpture as a functional life model. The artist maintained that “sculpture is the formation of space,” and the solid mass therefore contradicts its essence. She went on to argue that sculpture and space are united by a universal rhythm, understood as an orderly sequence of spatio-temporal phenomena, and that the goal of sculpture is to represent this rhythm, in pursuit of which it dematerializes itself and assumes a regulatory function for these phenomena.

According to this definition, sculpture serves as a prototype for architectural or urbanistic solutions that organize the body’s movement, facilitating a rational articulation of labor on the pragmatic plane and favoring harmony between human beings and their environment on the transcendental plane. These theories found their manifestation in the pieces Kbro produced from 1924 to 1933, *Rzez’ by przestrzenne* (Spatial Sculptures) and *Kompozycje przestrzenne* (Spatial Compositions), regarded as the crowning achievements of constructivist sculpture. With their phenomenological treatment of the relationship between object, space, and body, they also anticipate the thinking that would later give rise to minimalism.

Together with painting and sculpture, design also formed part of the activity of Kbro and Strzemiński from practically the beginning. They had produced propaganda posters in Russia, and in Poland they took charge of the graphic design of publications by their poet friends, as well as of several art magazines. They also worked on projects for furnishings, textiles, theatrical stage sets, and architecture, both for the interiors of dwellings and for public spaces.

In the late 1920s and early 1930s, they managed to integrate design, painting, and sculpture within the theoretical system of unism. The unist proposition was that each of these arts must be based on its own principles, organic unity being common to them all. In architecture, this unity implied fusing the building with its context and harmonizing the rhythm of human activity through the architectural structure itself. In graphic design, on the other hand, unity of form and content were achieved by

obtaining a correspondence between the means employed and the aim pursued, which was the maximum legibility of the text.

In this respect, Strzeminski's key work is the *Sala Neoplastyczna* (Neoplastic Room), designed in 1947 for exhibiting the pieces in the International Collection of Modern Art.

Installed in a late 19th century palace that was converted at the end of World War II into the new seat of the Art Museum of Łódź, its design evokes



Vista de sala de la exposición KOBRO & STRZEMINSKI. Prototipos vanguardistas, en el Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía, 2017
Fotografía: Joaquín Cortés/Román Lores. Archivo fotográfico del Museo Nacional Reina Sofía

both the neoplasticist aesthetic and that of Kobra's *Spatial Compositions*. The colored surfaces of the simple geometric forms that cover the walls, ceiling, and floor of the room, arranged in a strict mathematical order, were intended by the artist to guide the movements of visitors and regulate the rhythm of their gaze over the works on display.

Once the doctrine of unism was formulated and the objective of transferring it to artistic practice had been accomplished, Kobra and Strzeminski embarked on new projects. Kobra, absorbed in the task of bringing up her daughter, left the art world for a few years, eventually resuming her sculpture in the second half of the 1940s. Her experiences during the war and the painful years that followed led her to reject constructivist principles, evolving toward a more intimate and existentialist language. From 1948, she created several nudes in a severe post-cubist aesthetic, a long way from that of her *Spatial Compositions* and the utopian optimism which inspired them.



WŁADYSŁAW STRZEMIŃSKI
Paysage marin
Tempera sobre cartón
20 x 25 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

From the beginning of the 1930s, Strzeminski turned his attention from the construction of the image, which had occupied him previously, to the phenomenon of vision. The seascapes he painted from 1931 to 1934, which he described as "recreational paintings," show he was reflecting on the ways in which reality presents itself to the eye of the beholder. Although Strzeminski initially regarded vision as a mere optical phenomenon,

he soon noticed its quality as a process involving the participation of the body, another phenomenon immersed in history that is transformed as its living conditions change. Strzeminski puts forward these ideas in his *Teoria widzenia* (Theory of Vision), written

in the 1940s and published posthumously. His ideas find their most outstanding pictorial manifestation in the so-called “after-images” or, as the artist called them, “solar paintings,” dating from 1948 and 1949, with which he tried to reproduce the post-vision effect of the after-image. Finally, mention should be made of the works he produced during the World War II and immediately afterward, which form a separate chapter in his career. Most are drawings on tracing paper where, with semiabstract forms, he represents the cruelty of the conflict and the profound crisis of the humanist ideal. This reaches its greatest intensity in the series entitled *Moim przyjaciołom Żydom* (To My Jewish Friends, ca. 1945), which focuses on the crimes perpetrated by the Nazis against the Jewish people.

This exhibition dedicated to the work of both artists takes visitors on an itinerary through their different phases and means of expression, revisiting some of the lesser-known pages of the history of modern art and the Central European context of the first half of the 20th century. In this respect, the work of Kbro and Strzeminski, with which they transgressed and radicalized many of the beliefs of the avant-gardes, also allows us to question some of the most widespread ideas on modernism, pointing us toward its possible declinations and the vanishing points on its horizon.

For further information:

PRESS OFFICE

MUSEO REINA SOFÍA

prensa1@museoreinasofia.es

prensa3@museoreinasofia.es

(+34) 91 774 10 05 / 06

www.museoreinasofia.es/prensa

