THE LEGACY OF CONSTRUCTIVISM IN POLAND:

GEOMETRIC ABSTRACTION BEFORE AND BEHIND THE IRON CURTAIN

by

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Abstract

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This dissertation situates the legacy of Constructivism in Polish painting during the 1920s and in the mid-1950s, both before and behind the Iron Curtain. The material and ideological conditions of geometric abstract art are examined within the context of the East and West and across the pre- and postwar divide. I address the troubled reception of Constructivism through the prism of the artist Henryk Stażewski (1894-1988), one of the key contributors to the history of Polish art before and after World War II. If during the prewar years Stażewski attempted to invest painting with collective, universal, and international force, in the postwar period he choreographed the process of reception by exhibiting his works at home. I argue that Stażewski was aware of the ambivalent status and depoliticization of geometric art rooted in Constructivist aesthetic, and wanted to restore its socially constructive and political dimension by – paradoxically – isolating himself in an already isolated state.

While geometric abstract art can be defined and interpreted in many different ways, I examine it in Eastern Europe's specific historical circumstances and anlayze how it became a symbol of resistance and dissent against totalitarian regime. Since abstract art was perceived as "autonomous," and thus unrelated to contemporary social and

political events, geometric abstraction, in contrast to the politically engaged Socialist Realism, signified not only a certain kind of freedom but also political opposition during the years of Stalinism. Despite the official hostility and frequent critical denunciation of geometric abstraction as both outmoded and apolitical, this art was in fact a powerful vehicle for affecting political change.

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Abbreviations

AAN	Archiwum Akt Nowych (Archive of New Documents)
AK	Armia Krajowa (Home Army)
a.r.	artyści rewolucyjni and/or awangarda rzeczywista (revolutionary artsts and/or the real avant-garde)
IPN	Instytut Pamięci Narodowej (Institute of National Remembrance)
IPS	Instytut Propagandy Sztuki (Institute of Art Propaganda)
KC	Komitet Centraly (Central Committee)
KKK	Klub Krzywego Koła (Crooked Wheel Club)
KOR	Komisja Obrony Robotników (Committee for the Protection of Workers)
K.P.	Komitet Paryski, or Kapiści (Paris Committee, or Kapists)
KPP	Komunistyczna Partia Polski (Polish Communism Party)
KPSS	Kommunisticheskaya Partiya Sovetskogo Soyuza (Communist Party of the Soviet Union)
KRN	Krajowa Rada Narodowa (State National Council)
KUL	Katolicki Uniwersytet Lubelski (Catholic University of Lublin)
MBP	Ministerstwo Bezpieczeństwa Publicznego (Ministry of Public Security); popularly referred to as bezpieka
MKiS	Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki (Ministry of Art and Culture)
MO	Milicja Obywatelska (People's Militia)
MWRiOP	Ministerstwo Wyznań Religijnych i Oświecenia Publicznego (Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment)
ND	Narodowa Demokrajca, or endecja (National Democracy)
NEP	Novaya Ekonomicheskaya Politika (New Economic Policy)

NKWD	Ludowy Komisariat Bezpieczeństwa Państwowego (Narodnyjj Komisariat Wnutriennych Diet); (People's Commissariat of National Security); after 1946, Ministry of Internal Affairs
PAN	Polska Akademia Nauk (Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences)
PKWN	Polski Komitet Wyzwolenia Narodowego (Polish Committee of National Liberation)
PPR	Polska Partia Robotnicza (Polish Workers Party)
PPS	Polska Partia Socjalistyczna (Polish Socialist Party)
PSL	Polskie Stronnictwo Ludowe (Polish Peasant Party)
PRL	Polska Republica Ludowa (Polish People's Republic)
PZPR	Polska Zjednoczona Partia Robotnicza (United Workers' Party of Poland)
ROP	Rada Obrony Państwa (Council for Defense of the Nation)
SB	Służba Bezpieczeństwa (Office of Security), after 1956
SED	Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands (Socialist Unity Party of Germany)
TOSSPO	Towarzystwo Szerzenia Sztuki Polskiej Wśroód Obcych (Society for the Dissemination of Polish Art Abroad)
UB	Urząd Bezpieczeństwa (Office of Security), until 1956
USSR	Union of the Soviet Socialist Republics
ZPAP	Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków (Union of Polish Visual Artists)
ZPL	Związek Literatów Polskich (Union of Polish Writers)
ZZPAP	Związek Zawodowy Polskich Artystów Plastyków (Trade Union of Polish Visual Artists)

INTRODUCTION

> The self-containment of a work of art is therefore the reflection of the process of life in motion and in concrete dynamic context.
>
> Georg Lukács[1]

> I hear you say: "With our tubes of oils and our pencils, we can only reproduce the colors and lines of the things, nothing more." This sounds as if you were modest men, honest men, without pretenses. But it sounds better than it is. A thousand examples prove that one can say more about things with tubes of oils and pencils, that one can communicate and expound more than simple solids with lines and colors.
>
> Bertolt Brecht[2]

This dissertation situates the legacy of Constructivism in Polish painting during the 1920s and in the postwar period during the period of destalinization known as the Thaw, both before and behind the Iron Curtain.[3] I explore, in part, whether the term "Polish Constructivism" accurately describes the geometric abstract tendencies, defined by the use of geometric forms as a symbol of social thought and organization, practiced by several groups of experimental artists during the interwar period of the 1920s as well as the ones that emerged during the 1950s when the Iron Curtain separated East from West. One of the key contributors to the history of Polish art had been Henryk Stażewski (1894-1988). A member of several important artistic groups in pre-World War II Poland, he also played a significant role in the artistic culture of the Thaw. The term

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[1] Georg Lukács, "Art and Objective Truth" (1954), in *Writer and Critic and Other Essays* (New York: The Universal Library, 1971), 37.

[2] This comes from Brecht's Notebooks (1935-1939); see Bertolt Brecht, "On Non-Objective Painting," in *Marxism and Art: Writings in Aesthetics and Criticism*, ed. Berel Lang and Forrest Williams (New York: David McKay Company, 1972), 424.

[3] My topic was initially to be the reception of Polish Constructivism after World War II. During the course of my research, however, it became apparent that the history of Polish Constructivism during the 1920s remains largely unfamiliar, especially for audiences west of Berlin. I use the Cold War terminology of "East" and "West" throughout the text for the sake of brevity.

"Constructivism" was first used by Polish artists in 1924 in reference to the Soviet artistic developments known as Russian Constructivism. This movement was articulated in the spring of 1921 to identify the artistic practices of a group of Moscow artists committed to experimentation in form and structure in close relationship with industry as well as with the new ideology of post-Revolutionary Russia. "Polish Constructivism" was given scholarly weight, and an identity separate from its Russian relative, when it was popularized by the Polish art historian Andrzej Turowski in the 1980s.[4] Although scholarship in art history seems to privilege Russian Constructivism over any other "Constructivism," the Polish version of this geometric abstract tendency demands further scrutiny, because many aspects of its history both before and behind the Iron Curtain remain unexamined. A number of crucial questions inform my study: Why were Polish artists, especially Stażewski, interested in geometric abstract art? Why was this interest linked to Russian Constructivism, despite the artists' interests in the art of the West such as that of Theo van Doesburg and Piet Mondrian? How did geometric abstract art inspired by the prewar Constructivism fit into the totalitarian culture of the mid-1950s and early 1960s?

Since much work has already been done on the history of Russian Constructivism and its export, especially its dissemination in Germany, I focus on the spread of Constructivism in Poland, in particular, its metamorphosis into what came to be known in

[4] The term Russian Constructivism is multifaceted and difficult to define as it includes many "Constructivisms." The term was first used by the First Working Group of Constructivists, founded in March 1921, and was visually defined in the *Third Exhibition* of the Society of Young Artists, known as OBMOKhU, in Moscow in 1921 (Fig. 4). The term first appeared in print in the catalogue for the exhibition *Constructivists: K. K. Medunetskii, V. A. Stenberg, G. A. Stenberg,* which took place at Moscow's Poets' Cafe in January 1922. On the use of the term "Constructivism" by Polish artists, see various articles in the journal *Blok* 6/7 (1924), and Andrzej Turowski, *Konstruktywizm Polski: próba rekonstrukcji nurtu 1921-1934* (Wroclaw: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1981).

the 1920s as International Constructivism.[5] The ways in which Polish artists, specifically Stażewski, were informed by the ideas of Russian artists (such as Kazimir Malevich and El Lissitzky), and were inspired by Western geometric abstraction (by Mondrian, among others) shapes my discussion of how political structures influenced this art and the artists who produced it. Since Russian Constructivism was linked with the ideologies of post-Revolutionary Russia, the reception of this art in the postwar period was not only problematic but also limited in scope. In Western Europe and the United States, the art of what Michel Seuphor termed "the malignant fever. . . called abstract expressionism" incited the most scholarly attention in the 1950s; in contrast, in postwar Communist Europe, it was Socialist Realism that elicited the highest official approval.[6] It is, therefore, important to analyze the reemergence of geometric abstraction, in this case, in the context of Poland after the death of Stalin in 1953 during the Thaw.

Central to my study is the examination of the troubled legacy of Constructivism in Poland, which is contrasted with its fate in Soviet Russia. The artistic culture of the Thaw in Poland was unique in its response to the new political climate of destalinization, initiated by Nikita Khrushchev's "Secret Speech" denouncing Stalin in March 1956 and Władysław Gomułka's return to power in October of that year, and was shaped by social unrest and uprisings in both Poland and Hungary. The reception of earlier

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[5] The term was coined by Stephen Bann in *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), xxv. It is important to note, however, that Lissitzky, who argued for "constructive art, whose task is not to adorn life, but to organize it," called all art international – "All art is today international" – and referred to "the new collective, international style" in 1922; see "The Blockade of Russia is Coming to an End," in *Vesch Objet Gegenstand* 1/2 (March/April 1922): 2.

[6] Michel Seuphor, "The Idea of Construction: Notes and Reflections," *Construction and Geometry: From Malevich to 'Tomorrow'* (New York: Galerie Chalette, 1960), n.p. This exhibition traveled to the Contemporary Art Center, Cincinnati; the Arts Club, Chicago; and the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis.

Constructivism constituted an important part of the pictorial output of this period, which came to be known as the Thaw after the novel of the same title by Ilya Ehrenburg, the famous co-editor with Lissitzky of the prewar international publication *Vesch Objet Gegenstand*.[7]

While geometric abstract art can be defined and interpreted in many different ways, rooted in Eastern Europe's specific historical circumstances it became a symbol of resistance and dissent against the totalitarian regime. Abstract art was perceived as "autonomous," as unrelated to contemporary social and political events, in contrast to the politically engaged Socialist Realism, and as such signified not only a certain kind of freedom but also political opposition during the years of Stalinist oppression. Despite the official hostility and frequent critical denunciation of geometric abstraction as apolitical, this art was in fact a powerful vehicle for affecting political change. My examination of the different national responses to past artistic traditions questions the assumptions about Constructivism as an art form jettisoned in Soviet Russia, contested in Poland, and depoliticized in the United States.

The very terms used to describe geometric abstract tendencies have their own set of problems. One such issue involves the use of the concept of the "neo-avant-garde" in relation to Polish geometric abstract art during the 1950s and 1960s. This concept was famously theorized by Peter Bürger in his 1974 *Theory of the Avant-Garde* to designate artistic practices in Western Europe and the United States during the 1950s and 1960s. According to Bürger,

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[7] Ilya Ehrenburg, *Oteplenie* (Moscow: Sovetsky Pissatel, 1954).

> the neo-avant-garde institutionalizes the *avant-garde as art* and thus negates genuinely avant-gardiste intentions. . . . Neo-avant-gardiste art is autonomous art in the full sense of the term, which means that it negates the avant-gardiste intention of returning art to the praxis of life.[8]

For Bürger, the neo-avant-garde staged "for a second time the avant-gardiste break with tradition" and became "a manifestation that is void of sense" and that permitted "the positing of any meaning whatever."[9] Drawing on Bürger's arguments, Benjamin Buchloh later explored the "complex and ever-changing relationships between the historical avant-garde of the 1915-1925 period and the neo-avant-garde during the reconstruction period in New York and postwar Europe from 1945 to 1975."[10] In examining the relationship of Polish Constructivism in the 1920s and its reemergence in the 1950s, I question whether the application of Western terminology, specifically the theory of the neo-avant-garde, is useful for interpreting geometric abstract art, because the social and political context in postwar Poland presented radically different conditions under which this art was produced and received.

I explore this question by analyzing the history of Polish Constructivism during the 1920s and its fate in the 1950s and early 1960s. As I mentioned, the term "Polish Constructivism" was popularized by the Polish art historian Andrzej Turowski in his

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[8] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (1974; repr., Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 58. Bürger applies the concept of the historical avant-garde primarily to Dada and Surrealism, but also to the Russian avant-garde after the Revolution, making his category a narrow one, because it does not address a number of significant art movements, such as, to take one example, Expressionism. I use the term avant-garde in the sense of Bürger's "historical avant-garde," although in a broader context, which includes Polish artistic groups (such as Blok). See Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 109n4.

[9] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 61.

[10] Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition of the Neo-Avant-Garde," *October* 37 (Summer 1986): 41-52; Buchloh, *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art From 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), xxii.

invaluable *Konstruktywizm Polski* (*Polish Constructivism*), which, although written in 1969, was not actually published until more than a decade later.[11] The beginnings of Polish Constructivism can be traced to an early exhibition, which took place in December 1921 at the Polonia Hotel in Warsaw, and which included Henryk Stażewski and Mieczysław Szczuka (1898-1927). Another, and more crucial, public appearance of seven artists, soon to be known as Constructivist, took place in Vilnius in May 1923 at the *Exhibition of New Art*.[12] However, it was the first issue of the magazine *Blok*, subtitled "the publication of the avant-garde," that announced and officially defined the program of the Polish Constructivists as experimental art. This inaugural exhibition included Stażewski, Szczuka, Władysław Strzemiński, Strzemiński's wife Katarzyna Kobro, and Teresa Żarnower.[13] After the dissolution of *Blok* – both the group and the magazine – the Polish Constructivists founded the publication *Praesens*, which

[11] Andrzej Turowski, *Konstruktywizm Polski: próba rekonstrukcji nurtu, 1921-1934* (Wroclaw: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1981). The book was revised and expanded two decades later; see Andrzej Turowski, *Budowniczowie Świata: z dziejów radykalnego modernizmu w sztuce polskiej* (Krakow: Universitas, 2000).

[12] The artists included Stażewski, who lived and worked in Warsaw; Szczuka, who lived and worked in Warsaw until his tragic death in the Poland's Tatra Mountains in 1927; one of the organizers of the exhibition, the Vilnian Vytautas Kairiukstis (1890-1961), who, it is important to note, died in 1961 in Vilnius, which was by then part of Soviet Russia; Karol Kryński (1900-1944), who was born in Warsaw and lost his life during the Warsaw Uprising; Władysław Strzemiński (1893-1952), who was born in Belarus, who had just returned to Poland with his wife Katarzyna Kobro in 1921, and died in Lodz; Teresa Żarnower (1895-1950), also known as Żarnowerówna, who was born in Warsaw and died in obscurity in New York City; and Maria Puciatycka, whose biography is unknown. At the seventieth anniversary of the Vilnius exhibition, the Lodz Museum issued a facimile of the exhibition catalogue with commentary; see *The 70th Anniversary of the New Art Exhibition: Vilnius 1923* (Lodz: Muzeum Sztuki, 1993).

[13] It is important to note that only the sixth issue of *Blok* in September 1924 featured the manifesto “Co to jest konstruktywizm” ("What is Constructivism"), but artists associated with the magazine did not use the term “Constructivism” frequently; in fact, the term "constructivism" was used interchangeably with the term "avant-garde," which was itself used first in the March 1924 issue of *Blok* and after to identify experimental artistic practices.

popularized the term "modernism" in Polish criticism.[14] This publication was edited by Stażewski and the architect Szymon Syrkus (1893-1964).[15] Increasingly dissatisfied with the functionalist aesthetic of Syrkus and *Praesens*, as well as the journal's excessive focus on architecture, Stażewski, Strzemiński, and Kobro left the group in 1929 and founded *a.r.* (revolutionary artists, or the real avant-garde). One of the central concerns of this study is the legacy of Polish Constructivism during the 1950s, and more specifically, how formal painterly procedures function in the process of signification when they are employed during the 1920s, such as in Stażewski's *Abstract Painting II* of 1928 (Fig. 1), and when similar formal language is used in the context of Communist Poland, as in his *Abstract Composition* of 1950 (Fig. 2).

The critical issues surrounding Russian Constructivism were originally formulated by scholars in the West. The 1962 publication of Camilla Gray's *The Great Experiment*, although belated and influenced by the political climate of the Cold War, prompted an increased interest in the Russian avant-garde by American art historians.[16] A few years later, the artist George Rickey, who did not pay attention to political context, focused on Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner in his important, although not very well known *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution*.[17] A decade after Gray's study, Stephen Bann published the first English-language anthology of texts by Constructivist artists in *The Tradition of Constructivism.*[18] And yet, no substantive study on the subject had

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[14] The Polish critic Stefania Zahorska defined modernism as not only modern forms and geometries but as a different relationship with the world: "these new forms and their organization." See Stefania Zahorska, "Krytyka wobec modernizmu," *Praesens* 1 (1926): 41.
[15] Other artists associated with Praesens included Kairiukstis, Strzemiński, Kobro, Szczuka, Żarnower, and Henryk Berlewi (1894-1967), among others.
[16] Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art, 1863-1922* (New York: Abrams, 1962).
[17] George Rickey, *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution* (George Braziller: New York, 1967).
[18] Stephen Bann, ed. *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974).

been published for another decade until Christina Lodder's *Russian Constructivism* appeared in 1983.[19] Enriched by archival material and meticulously documented, Lodder's book focused on the productivist, utilitarian phase of Constructivism and explored the social context of the movement. Soon after, a number of American museums organized several major exhibitions in response to Lodder's landmark work including – to name just a few – *El Lissitzky* at Harvard's Busch-Reisinger Museum (1988); *Art into Life* at the Henry Gallery in Seattle (1990); *The Great Utopia* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (1992); *Aleksandr Rodchenko* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York (1998); and two separate exhibitions dedicated to the art of Kazimir Malevich at the National Gallery in Washington DC (1991), and the other at the Guggenheim Museum in New York (2003).[20] More recently, the activities of Gabo outside of Soviet Russia have been explored by Lodder and Martin Hammer in *Constructing Modernity,* and the issue of artists' political engagement during the 1920s and the early 1930s has been revisited in *Situating El Lissitzky*.[21] However, the most explored version of Constructivism is what has been termed "Lissitzkean" or "bourgeois constructivism," in which the specific political context – its historical condition – is glossed over in favor of formal issues. [22] Eastern European Constructivists, especially

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[19] Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).
[20] Peter Nisbet, ed., *El Lissitzky, 1890-1941* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Art Museum, 1988); *Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914-1932* (Seattle: Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington; New York: Rizzoli, 1990); *The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992); Magdalena Dabrowski, Leah Dickerman, and Peter Galassi, eds., *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998); *Kazimir Malevich, 1878-1935* (Los Angeles: Armand Hammer Museum; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1990); *Kazimir Malevich: Suprematism* (New York: Guggenheim Museum and Harry N. Abrams, 2003).
[21] Martin Hammer and Christina Lodder, *Constructing Modernity: The Art and Career of Naum Gabo* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000); Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed, eds. *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003).
[22] *Constructing Modernity*, 115.

outside of Russia, have for the most part failed to emerge as the subject of inquiry. However, more marginal artists involved in the internationalization of Constructivism are discussed in *Konstruktivistische, internationale, schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft* as well as *Central European Avant-Gardes*, both of which are extremely valuable sources of factual and visual information.[23] Polish Constructivism largely remains the work of Polish art historians, although Western European museums have mounted some exhibitions, including *Des précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne* at Galerie Denise René in Paris in 1957, *Constructivism in Poland* at the Kröller-Müller in Otterlo in 1973 (curated by Ryszard Stanisławski, who during his twenty-five-year directorship of the Lodz Museum effectively adhered to the museum's original purpose of promoting geometric abstract art); and *Présences polonaises* at the Centre Pompidou in Paris in 1983.[24] One often cited exception is an essay by the French-born art historian Yve-Alain Bois on the work of Władysław Strzemiński and the sculptor Katarzyna Kobro, which concluded that without the contribution of this husband and wife team "the Polish movement would have been little more than a regional variant of international

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[23] Bernd Finkeldey, ed., *Konstruktivistische, internationale, schöpferische Arbeitsgemeinschaft, 1922-1927: Utopien für eine europäische Kultur* (Stuttgart: G. Hatje, 1992); Timothy Benson, ed. *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910-1930* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

[24] *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne* (Paris: Galerie Denise René, 1957); Ryszard Stanisławski, ed., *Constructivism in Poland, 1923-1936: Blok, Praesens, a.r.* (Otterlo: Rjiksmuseum Kröller-Müller, 1973); *Présences polonaises: l'art vivant autour du Musée de Lodz: Witkiewicz, constructivisme, les contemporains* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1983). It is important to note that the Spring 1990 issue of *Art Journal*, edited by Steven A. Mansbach and dedicated to "the suppressed avant-gardes of East-Central and Eastern Europe during the early twentieth-century: from Leningrad to Ljubljana," makes no mention of the art from Poland. However, Mansbach's important volume *Modern Art in Eastern Europe, From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890-1939* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999), does include a thorough chapter on Polish art in the early twentieth century.

Constructivism," thus ignoring the contributions of other Polish artists.[25] Such dismissiveness is an example of the scholarly bias in the West that demands to be addressed.

During the 1950s, geometric abstract art was relegated to the backwaters of Western art historical discourse and was in effect perceived as an outdated mode of abstraction. The relationship between geometric abstraction and Abstract Expressionist painting, and more important, the relationship of art and politics was debated at the *Hot Paint for Cold War* symposium at the University of British Columbia in 1986, and in the essays subsequently published in *Reconstructing Modernism*.[26] In his introduction to this volume, Serge Guilbaut aptly concluded that "it has been difficult to discuss anything in the art culture of the 1950s but Abstract Expressionism" because of its key role in the cultural politics of the Cold War.[27] I suggest that more specifically this unpopularity stemmed from the ambivalent and politically motivated reception of Constructivism, especially Russian Constructivism, in the West. In his essay "Cold War Constructivism," Benjamin Buchloh convincingly argued that Constructivism had become part of the Western canon only after being sufficiently depoliticized. In an effort to restore the political dimension to Constructivist art, Buchloh discussed the transition of Gabo "from avant-garde to neo-avant-garde."[28] Earlier Rickey had also claimed that "the pioneer work of the early Constructivists established a base from which many of the diverse and inventive non-objective tendencies of the decade 1957-1967 have sprung," and

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[25] Yve-Alain Bois, "Polarization," *Art in America* 72 (April 1984): 152. See a later version of this essay in Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990), 123-55.
[26] Serge Guilbaut, ed., *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945-1964* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990).
[27] Guilbaut, "Introduction," *Reconstructing Modernism*, xiii.
[28] Buchloh, "Cold War Constructivism," *Reconstructing Modernism*, 85.

positioned Gabo as a leading Constructivist by referring to the "Realist Manifesto" written by the Russian artist in 1920 as "in fact, a *constructivist* manifesto."[29] The problem with Buchloh's analysis is its focus on Gabo, an artist who spent much of his life in self-imposed exile and thereby was both removed from the constraints of Stalinist censorship and unaffected by its eventual relaxation. Based on an artist who lived and worked in England and the United States, Buchloh's critique fell prey to the same depoliticization that he decried. In fact, the Western commercialization and depoliticization of the revolutionary aesthetic of Russian Constructivism so unnerved the Russian-born Jewish artist Alexander Brenner that in 1997 he painted a green dollar sign on Malevich's white *Suprematist Painting* (dated before 1928) while visiting the Stedelijk Museum (Fig. 3) and as a consequence spent nearly a year in a Dutch prison.[30]

If geometric abstract art is an infrequent subject in Western studies, in recent years contemporary art from East and Central Europe has received an increased amount of attention. A 1995 volume of essays edited by Laura Hoptman considered recent photographic and installation practices from Slovenia, Hungary and Poland, among others.[31] *Body and the East,* edited by Zdenka Badovinac probed issues related to performance art including Czech, Russian, and Slovenian artists.[32] Both collections explored the relationship between art and politics but dealt with works produced after the fall of Communism, thus overlooking geometric abstract art of the 1950s and 1960s. Comparably, the catalogue of the 1999 exhibition *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post*

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[29] Rickey, *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution*, xi, 25.
[30] Andrzej Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie: rekonstrukcje i symulacje* (Krakow: Universitas, 2004), 353.
[31] Laura Hoptman, ed., *Beyond Belief: Contemporary Art from East Central Europe* (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1995).
[32] Zdenka Badovinac, ed., *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1998).

Communist Europe was both extensive in scope (it examined art from twenty-one countries) and expansive in terms of subject matter, yet it left the circumstances of geometric abstraction largely unexamined as it focused on the new predicament of Eastern European art within the broader international or Western context.[33] *After the Wall* focused on the post-Berlin Wall art from East and Central Europe, situating it within the "narratives of normalization" with the West.[34] Similarly, studies addressing the period of the Thaw, such as the extremely valuable *Odwilż* (*The Thaw*), edited by the Polish art historian Piotr Piotrowski, dealt with the proliferation of various forms of lyrical abstraction – *koloryzm* (Colorism) – but did not discuss geometric abstract art in great detail.[35] Indeed, anthologies of documentary material such as *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since 1950s* referred to geometric abstract art only in passing.[36]

If the geometric abstract art of Eastern and Central Europe is an infrequent subject in Western studies, the scholarship in Eastern Europe poses a different set of problems. In Poland, an important attempt to situate geometric abstraction in the postwar period has been carried out by Piotrowski in *Znaczenia Modernizmu* (*The Meanings of Modernism*). Although only one chapter of his book was devoted to what the author termed *neokonstruktywizm* (neoconstructivism), it is an extremely valuable contextual

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[33] Bojana Pojić and David Elliott, eds., *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post Communist Europe*, 2 vols. (Stockholm: Moderne Museet, 1999). The exhibition also traveled to Budapest and Berlin.

[34] The contemporary critical apparatus often posits narratives of normalization in reference to the art from post-Communist Europe; see Bojana Pejić, "The Dialectics of Normality," *Art and Culture in Post-Communist Europe* (Stockholm: Moderne Museet, 1999).

[35] Piotr Piotrowski, ed., *Odwilż: Sztuka ok. 1956* (Poznan: Muzeum Narodowe, 1996).

[36] Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospilysz, eds., *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002).

investigation of the reemergence of Constructivist aesthetic during the 1960s.[37] Piotrowski located the most critical articulation of the postwar Constructivist legacy in the 1964-1965 exhibition *Bienale Form Przestrzennych* (*Biennale of Spatial Forms*) in the city of Elbląg. Piotrowski argued that Stażewski abandoned his prewar view of art as a direct reflection of social processes because of the historical conditions of World War II and the reign of Communism in Poland.[38] When Stażewski's ideas about the early-twentieth-century utopia were compromised, he turned to geometry not as an escape from the Communist reality but as a reaction against it.[39] The discourse of geometry, Piotrowski continued, carried different connotations behind the Iron Curtain: it indicated if not "the freedom of art then [freedom] in art."[40]

If the geometric vernacular carried different connotations in the West, its reception also varied in the countries behind the Iron Curtain. For example, the Russian-born historian Boris Groys also argued that Soviet Russia not only remembered its Constructivist past "as a shameful disease that has fortunately been cured and is best not mentioned in public," but also that the post-Stalinist rebirth of the prewar avant-garde was "retrospective, conservative, elitist, 'antipopular'."[41] The Russian avant-garde's alliance with the Bolshevik Revolution, Groys explained elsewhere, still today presents

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[37] Piotrowski, *Znaczenia Modernizmu: W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku* (Poznan: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, 1999), 117-46. While Piotrowski situated the postwar Polish but also Eastern European art within historical, political, and social context, he did not address in great detail the reemergence of geometric abstraction in the 1950s and 1960s or Stażewski's oeuvre. See also Piotr Piotrowski, *Awangarda w Cieniu Jałty: Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945-1989* (Poznan: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, 2005).
[38] Piotrowski, *Znaczenia Modernizmu*, 123, 129.
[39] Piotrowski, *Znaczenia Modernizmu*, 131.
[40] Piotrowski, *Znaczenia Modernizmu*, 132.
[41] Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalin: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 31, 79.

serious ethical dilemmas for Eastern European art historians.[42] I argue that not all geometric abstract art, especially not Stażewski's, supported post-Stalinist regimes. This is the crux of the fate of the Constructivist heritage in postwar Poland. The meaning and significance of geometric abstraction changed according to the changing political climate: if geometric abstraction seemed revolutionary before the Thaw, because it opposed the Socialist Realist dogmas, then in the post-Thaw period, it seemed "conservative," because it did not overtly critique the post-Stalinist regime. In addition, the status and import of this art metamorphosed according to the needs of the regime; namely, while abstraction was disallowed during Stalinist years, it was endorsed by the "liberal" post-Stalinist regime in order to repair its fatigued image.

The troubled reception of Constructivism in the field of art history in part resulted from the appropriation of this radical pictorial output by the Communist regimes both before and behind the Iron Curtain. For example, the role of Bertold Brecht in the German Democratic Republic "has always been a contradictory one," according to David Bathrick.[43] During the early 1950s – as Bathrick explained in another context – Brechtian formalism (understood as 'cosmopolitanism'. . . . a form of "American cultural barbarism" which, when practiced in the new society leads to a "rupture with art itself, a destruction of national consciousness and an indirect support to the war policies of world imperialism") was seen as indirectly undermining "the state as a bearer of a humanist-democratic tradition."[44] In the period of the cultural revolution of the Thaw, however, "the constructivist traditions of the Soviet Union and the political-cultural avant-garde of

[42] Groys, "On the Ethics of the Avant-Garde," *Art in America* 81 (May 1993): 110-13.
[43] David Bathrick, "The Dialectics of Legitimation: Brecht in the GDR," *New German Critique* (Spring 1974): 92.
[44] David Bathrick, "Affirmative and Negative Culture: the Avant-Garde Under Actually Existing Socialism – the Case of GDR," *Social Research* 47 (Spring 1980): 170-71.

Weimar" were called upon to critique "the socioeconomic failures of the "construction years."[45] Bathrick concluded that such fluctuations resulted in a neutralization of the avant-garde not through repression but through "repressive tolerance"; in the case of Brecht, his formal strategies (including montage and estrangement) "have been integrated into the theoretical and practicing life of socialist art."[46] This oscillation between traditional art and more radical modernism has been addressed in recent accounts of postwar East and Central European art. Dubrovka Djurić, for example, argued that in Yugoslavia there had been an ongoing battle between trends aiming to "preserve national values (most often defined as a struggle against the corrupting influence of the West) and an inclination to choose economic, political, and artistic strategies aimed at integrating local culture into Western cultural trends."[47] As I will argue in Chapters 1 and 2, Poland was also engaged in such debates, especially during the twenty-year period of independence, between 1918 and 1939.

In the postwar period the world of art seemed to have become fatigued with geometric abstraction and instead welcomed a gestural, lyrical abstract painting both east and west of Berlin. Andrzej Turowski rightly insisted that post-Stalinist Poland was

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[45] Bathrick, "Affirmative and Negative Culture," 171.

[46] Bathrick, "Affirmative and Negative Culture," 172, 173. "Repressive tolerance" is Herbert Marcuse's term from a 1965 essay "Repressive Tolerance," in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, ed. Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr., and Herbert Marcuse (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). Marcuse wrote that tolerance is the most successful model of oppression: the government "tolerates opposition within the framework determined" by the authorities (p. 95). Although his thesis involved capitalist democracies which, he argued, have totalitarian aspects, the concept can be applied to post-Thaw Communism in Eastern Europe, because the illusion of freedom of expression (literary or artistic) was just that, an illusion. In other words, the "freedom" of the Thaw was under constant surveillance.

[47] Dubrovka Djurić, "Concrete and Visual Poetry in the Avant-garde and Neo-avant-garde," in *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-Gardes, Neo-Avant-Gardes, and Post-Avant-Gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991,* ed. Dubrovka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2003), 80.

afflicted by an intense proliferation of what in Poland is known as *koloryzm* (Colorism) of imported painterly forms.[48] Turowski and other Polish art historians argued that this type of French-inspired Art Informel and Tachisme was politically neutral. While Art Informel was ubiquitous in Poland, it was also – interestingly – the dominant mode at the second *Documenta* exhibition in 1959.[49] In contrast to Turowski's conclusions, Jost Hermand noticed that while in West Germany, Constructivism of the early 1920s was transformed or ideologically distorted into a pictorial form devoid of political significance, Art Informel signified freedom.[50] Turowski's conclusions in the East and Hermand's in the West corroborate my premise that willingly or not art is subject to the political conditions of a specific time and place, and that – as Bathrick noticed – judgments about the political integrity of any art "can be made only in relation to its function within a particular social order."[51] This dissertation inspects the Cold War rhetoric in relation to geometric abstract art in Poland both before and behind the Iron Curtain.

Chapter 1 takes the reception and historiography of Polish Constructivism as its focal point. The critical discourse on Constructivism in Poland, a term first used by Polish artists in 1924, is fairly belated, as it began to flourish only in the early 1980s. I begin my discussion with various events that shaped the cultural and political climate in Poland in 1981. Among these are the publication of the enormously influential book *Polish Constructivism* by Turowski; the Solidarity movement strikes at the Lenin Shipyard in Gdansk, which resulted in the imposition of martial law on 13 December

[48] Andrzej Turowski, "Dyskurs o Uniwersalizmie," *Magazyn Sztuki* 5 (January 1995): 85-95.
[49] Jost Hermand, "Modernism Restored: West German Painting in the 1950s," *New German Critique* 32 (1984): 36.
[50] Hermand, "Modernism Restored," 30.
[51] Bathrick, "Affirmative and Negative Culture," 187.

1981; and the Centre Pompidou's planning of an exhibition of Polish art, *Présences polonaises*, which was postponed because of martial law. Interestingly enough, although the 1980s were marked by turbulence in the world of politics, most discussions of geometric abstract art focused purely on formal issues, leaving the social and political context ignored. This chapter traces the critical discourse on Constructivism in postwar Poland and includes a brief discussion of the reception of Russian Constructivism in Western and Polish scholarship. I concentrate on the relationship between art, criticism, and sociopolitical context in which this art functioned, and argue that the troubled reception of Constructivism stemmed from the appropriation of its pictorial output by the Communist regimes.

Chapter 2 critically evaluates the art of Polish Constructivism in the two decades before World War II. This chapter traces the ways in which Constructivism was disseminated across Europe during the 1920s in an attempt to define the parameters of the phenomenon known as International Constructivism. I concentrate on Henryk Stażewski, whose output is significant not only because he was an integral part of Blok, Praesens, and a.r., but also because he continued to produce art into the 1950s and 1960s when the status of geometric abstract art became more and more precarious.[52] I analyze the art of Constructivism in the historical and political context of General Józef Piłsudski's (1887-1935) interwar Poland. The avant-garde publications such as *Blok* that featured the "What is Constructivism" and exhibitions under the auspices of the group provide background for my discussion of the specific politics of display. Before the outbreak of World War II, Polish Constructivists – in the true spirit of internationalization – successfully

[52] Stażewski's Warsaw apartment was bombed in September 1939, which is why the first part of the dissertation often relies on reproductions of the early works in publications such as *Blok*.

promoted their art outside of Poland. Yet, after the war Polish Constructivism still remained peripheral, despite these efforts to promote it, due to the Cold War.

Chapter 3 focuses on the changes in the officially accepted art forms between 1947, the year that marked the beginning of Stalinism in Poland, and 1956, which instituted the process of destalinization. I discuss the complex transformation of artistic culture from relative freedom to Socialist Realist dogmas to subsequent "repressive tolerance." An analysis of official decrees and officially sponsored exhibitions reveals the ambivalent responses toward geometric abstraction. Despite such restrictions as the 1959 edict of the Ministry of Art and Culture, which allowed for no more than 15 percent abstract works in any one exhibition, geometric abstract art was nonetheless exhibited and hotly debated. Geometric abstraction was included in major art exhibitions, such as the 1948 *Nowocześni* (*Moderns*) and the 1955 *Arsenał* (*Arsenal*). I also discuss alternative and semi-unofficial venues for exhibiting art such as Klub Krzywego Koła (Crooked Wheel Club) and Galeria Krzywego Koła (Crooked Wheel Gallery). This chapter discussing the social history of geometric abstraction sheds new light on the nature of the regime's interference into the matters of art and culture and the different national responses to that interference.

Chapter 4 examines the postwar oeuvre of Stażewski, whose work allows for an examination of the questions of continuity and/or rupture of Constructivist art and thought. Stażewski was important in this regard because he not only survived Stalin but also continued to produce geometric abstraction until his death in 1988. Although he had many opportunities to travel and exhibit internationally, Stażewski voluntarily remained in Communist Poland. I believe that his choices not only attest to his moral and

personal integrity but also show a gesture of dissent against the country in which obtaining a passport could be seen as potentially collaborative, as one had to contact the detested Office of Security (pejoratively known as *bezpieka*), the Polish secret police equivalent of the East German Stasi and the Russian KGB. Stażewski's pictorial output and artistic activities thus provide an ideal case study for analyzing the function of the post-Stalinist cultural policies of "repressive tolerance." This chapter focuses on the art criticism relating to the work and exhibitions in which Stażewski took part between 1955 and 1964. This chapter also explicates the nature of postwar Constructivism by addressing Buchloh's idea of "cold war constructivism" and Piotrowski's model of "neoconstructivism." The focus on Stażewski's art expands upon existing scholarship involving questions of regionalism and marginalization, and the specifics of the art market and Cold War rhetoric in relation to geometric abstract art.

PART ONE

THE FATE OF EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY CONSTRUCTIVISM

CHAPTER ONE

THE CONSTRUCTIVIST INTERNATIONAL

1981

Wroclaw – Andrzej Turowski's seminal *Polish Constructivism* appears in print more than a decade after it was written in 1969.

Lodz – Ryszard Waśko's exhibition *Construction in Process* launches the first of a series of exhibitions closely linked with the Polish labor movement under the patronage of and dedicated to Henryk Stażewski.

Warsaw – General Wojciech Jaruzelski, a Communist political and military leader, becomes the Party's national secretary and prime minister of Poland.

Gdansk – In response to the strikes at the Lenin Shipyard in August 1980, under the leadership of Solidarity's chairman Lech Wałęsa, General Jaruzelski declares the state of martial law on 13 December.

Cannes – Andrzej Wajda, the famous director, receives the Palm d'Or for his film *Człowiek z Żelaza* (*Man of Iron*). The sequel to the 1977 *Człowiek z Marmuru* (*Man of Marble*), it documented the Solidarity movement strikes and was shown at the Cannes Film Festival in a roughly finished state, before it could be censored and banned by the Polish government.

Paris – The Centre Pompidou begins planning an exhibition of the Polish art to be titled *Présences polonaises*, which due to the imposition of martial law in Poland, would take place only two years later in 1983.

The year 1981 in Poland was significant both politically and culturally, as is evident in the events outlined above, but most important, because it was a harbinger of the changes that would come with the fall of Communism eight years later. The focus of this chapter is the reception and historiography of Polish Constructivism, and secondarily of Russian Constructivism, in the political climate of the postwar period. I discuss this late period in order to shed light on the later articulations of different "Constructivisms." While the discourse on Constructivism in Poland did exist before, it only flourished in tandem with the political changes at the beginning of the 1980s, years after the art work was actually produced. In fact, the mark Russian Constructivism left on the Western European artistic landscape was also belated and coincided with the political climate of the Cold War. In one of the few English language discussions of the movement, Yve-Alain Bois argued that Polish Constructivism had been condemned to a double oblivion: first, being sequestered within the Stalinist regime; and second, being ignored by artists and critics in the West despite the cultural Thaw of the 1950s and the subsequent availability of visual and written material on the subject.[53] Additionally, when the Russian avant-garde was received in the West with interest and sympathy, as a casualty of the ideological struggles and consequences of the Bolshevik Revolution, the Polish avant-garde was all but forgotten. While I do not disagree with Bois that the mere rehabilitation of this art today is bound to bear little fruit, I would offer a counterargument in the words of the Italian historian, Enzo Traverso, who cautioned against two opposed but complementary traps of a critical perspective: “on the one hand,

[53] Yve-Alain Bois, “Strzemiński and Kobro: In Search of Motivation,” *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990), 123.

an apologetic historicization and, on the other, a summary denunciation pronounced from the pulpit of a retrospective 'wisdom' as arrogant as it is belated."[54]

[54] Enzo Traverso, *Understanding the Nazi Genocide: Marxism After Auschwitz* (London: Pluto Press, 1999), 27.

Constructivism and Cold War

This section reviews the literature on Russian Constructivism, in particular studies dealing with the question of Constructivism's relationship to the political climate and exploring its political dimension. While to date, the literature on virtually every aspect of Russian Constructivism is quite extensive, it is well known that the reception of Russian art in this country was initiated only belatedly, by Camilla Gray's famous 1962 *The Great Experiment: Russian Art*. The book spanned the period between 1863 and 1922 and was, at the time, the most extensive survey of Russian art on hand.[55] However, as Christina Lodder pointed out "in opening a new area of research it was perhaps inevitable that there would be inaccuracies and confusions."[56] The next important but largely overlooked account of Constructivism appeared a few years later in 1967. George Rickey's profusely illustrated study gave precedent to Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner.[57] Although Gabo had written that his return to Russia from Norway in 1917 was determined by the revolution that "nothing except the revolution could have induced [him] to interrupt [his] work," the Russian artist's account of Constructivism was highly

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[55] Camilla Gray, *The Great Experiment: Russian Art, 1863-1922* (New York: Abrams, 1962). Gray's book, according to Nakov, was supported by Alfred Barr – the legendary director of the Museum of Modern Art, who traveled to Moscow in 1927 and described his journey in his diary; see "Russian Diary 1927-8," *October* 7 (Winter 1978): 10-51. See Andrei Nakov, "The Last Exhibition Which was the 'First'," in *The 1st Russian Show: A Commemoration of the van Diemen Exhibition Berlin 1922* (London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 1983), 43. Gray herself was a victim of the Cold War in her personal life. While in Moscow, Gray met Oleg Prokofiev, the son of the famous Russian composer, whom she was to marry. The two were not allowed to see each other immediately, and, tragically, Gray died after two years of marriage in 1971.

[56] Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 1.

[57] George Rickey, *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution* (George Braziller: New York, 1967). Rickey understood Constructivism mostly in terms of three-dimensional constructions, included essentially no women artists, and was at times inaccurate, as when he ascribed the first use of the term "Constructivism" to Vladimir Tatlin.

subjective and, most importantly, devoid of politics.[58] This type of study, which has been termed "Lissitzkean" or "bourgeois constructivism," in which specific political context – its historical condition – is dispensed with in favor of formal issues, long remained the most explored version of Constructivism.[59] Rickey discussed Constructivism in terms of "the later Western art influenced by it," and defined it "in the terms of 'decorative values' of a picture or strictly speaking as 'geometric abstraction."[60] What resulted from Rickey's study was a narrative of Constructivism, in which the differences between the prewar and postwar versions of geometric abstract art all but disappeared as did those between Constructivism and neoconstructivism, between Constructivism and Productivism, and between the different oeuvres of artists as diverse as Malevich and Mondrian. Another important aspect, which I discuss in more detail in Chapter 2, is that by equating geometric abstract art with the purely decorative values of painting, Rickey did not take into account, or perhaps even negated, the convictions of Constructivists (such as Władysław Strzemiński or Henryk Stażewski) for whom geometric abstraction was socially constructive and instrumental in the shaping of the new society, if not overtly political.

It was only with the publication of Christina Lodder's now classic *Russian Constructivism* that the key critical issues of Russian Constructivism were presented. The term "Constructivism" was first used by the First Working Group of Constructivists, which was founded in March 1921, and was visually defined in the Third Exhibition of

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[58] Alexei Pevsner, *A Biographical Sketch of My Brothers Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner* (Amsterdam: Augustin and Schoonman, 1964), 14. Martin Hammer and Christina Lodder, *Constructing Modernity: The Art and Career of Naum Gabo* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 53.
[59] *Constructing Modernity*, 115.
[60] Piotr Piotrowski, "Utopias of the Revolution," *Polish Art Studies* 3 (1982): 278.

the Society of Young Artists (OBMOKhU) in Moscow in 1921 (Fig. 4). In print, the term appeared in the catalogue for the exhibition of *Constructivists: K. K. Medunetskii, V. A. Stenberg, G. A. Stenberg,* which took place at Moscow's Poets' Cafe in January 1922. Lodder argued that the first use of the term was meant to denote "the concept of the merging of art and life through mass production and industry" and should not be applied to works of art produced before the Russian Revolution.[61] Similarly, Maria Gough recently argued that by April 1921, the Constructivists had abandoned "their inquiry into the nature of art as a mode of production and entered the realm of industrial production itself."[62] Lodder's study pioneered in the restoration of the utilitarian, social and political dimension to this early twentieth-century group. Lodder's focus on Vladimir Tatlin and Aleksandr Rodchenko revealed that the "first hand" accounts by Gabo, for example, gave undue credit to his role in the development of Constructivist art and thought. By focusing on the specific historical and political context of the movement, she distinguished the group of Russian artists from their Central and Eastern European counterparts such as – to give one prominent example – László Moholy-Nagy, whose model of a socially constructive art, although politically leftist, remained outside active political involvement.[63] The resistance to political propaganda was also characteristic of Polish

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[61] Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 2-3.

[62] Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 8.

[63] On Moholy-Nagy, see Eleanor M. Hight, *Picturing Modernism: Moholy-Nagy and photography in Weimar Germany* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1995). This study argued that, although for Moholy-Nagy art was an agent in the process of the renewal of perception, his oeuvre cannot be seen exclusively in terms of formalism. Moholy's Constructivism brought together elements of Russian Constructivism and De Stijl, and by replacing the spiritual basis of art with the scientific one, came to terms with the concept of the "machine." At the same time, the author acknowledged a certain reluctance toward active political involvement on the part of the artist (and other members of the Ma group, including Lajos Kassák), who left his native Hungary after the fall of the Council of Soviets in August 1919.

Constructivism. Although Lodder did not deal with the nuances of the political engagement of individual artists, she opened up the issue for examination by others. Not surprisingly, Lodder's study was followed by a sudden critical interest in Russian Constructivism, which in turn resulted in an extraordinary arrival of the movement on the visual map of museums in the West.[64] But, as Éva Forgács noticed, while this art was "becoming hot and coveted, there was neither time, nor particular interest, in exploring the local narratives."[65]

The question of political engagement, we now know, has been a relevant motif in the history of the reception of Russian Constructivism and – as will become apparent in this dissertation – of Polish Constructivism as well. The issue of the Russian avant-garde's relationship to politics, however, has attracted interest only in the past couple of decades. John Bowlt, one of the early historians of the Russian avant-garde, agreed that this art was rediscovered during the 1960s but asserted (mistakenly, in my view) that

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[64] For example, Harvard's Busch-Reisinger Museum exhibited the art of El Lissitzky. Curator Peter Nisbet traced the artist's early experiences as architecture student in Germany through the revival of Jewish culture in Russia around the time of Revolution, his conversion to geometric abstraction and invention of PROUNS, his role as the bridge between Germany and Russia in the early 1920s, as founder of modern typography, visionary architect and finally an entrusted propagandist of the Soviet Union in 1930. See Peter Nisbet, *El Lissitzky, 1890-1941* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Art Museum, 1988). The Busch-Reisinger show was followed by *Art Into Life* at Seattle's Henry Art Gallery (*Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914-1932* (Seattle: University of Washington, and New York: Rizzoli, 1990), followed by the Guggenheim Museum's extensive *The Great Utopia* (*The Great Utopia: The Russian and Soviet Avant-Garde, 1915-1932* (New York: Guggenheim Museum, 1992). The Guggenheim show featured items ranging from monumental sculptures to teacups. It is interesting to note that simultaneous there was a retrospective of Henri Matisse on view at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. See the review of the two shows by Linda Nochlin, "Matisse" and Its Other," *Art In America* (May 1993), 88-96. Only in 1998 did the Museum of Modern Art mount a show of Russian Constructivism as versioned by Aleksandr Rodchenko; see Magdalena Dabrowski, Leah Dickerman, and Peter Galassi, eds. *Aleksandr Rodchenko* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1998). On Rodchenko see also Selim Khan-Magomedov, *Rodchenko: The Complete Work* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1987).

[65] Éva Forgács, "1956 in Hungary and the Concept of East European Art," *Third Text* 2 (March 2006): 185.

"most of the key members of this group – Kandinsky, Malevich, Popova, Tatlin – were apolitical," perhaps taking at face value Lissitzky's and Ehrenburg's claim in the journal *Vesch* in 1922 that Russian artists stand "apart from all political parties."[66] The inherent paradox of Russian Constructivism is that its appeal revolves around its involvement with the post-Revolutionary ideology of Soviet Russia, yet it is precisely this relationship and its later equation with the Stalinist version of Communism that seems to be the problem. The reluctant scholarly reception of Russian Constructivism in the United States, for instance, parallels the progress of Clement Greenberg's modernist aesthetic, which having grown out of Marxist ideology in the late 1930s was to take shape as an acutely apolitical formalism by the 1960s. Writing in the 1990s, Paul Wood responded to this charge of the neglect of political context when he wrote that

> the academic researcher. . . would do well to remember that Aleksandr Rodchenko, El Lissitzky, Varvara Stepanova, . . . and the rest, working in conditions of privation to begin with and harsh censorship later, were all, without exception, explicitly committed to working-class revolution – out of which a new order of international socialism would arise.[67]

Despite the fact that a quick glance at any volume of collected writings by Russian avant-garde artists and theoreticians offers a strong testimony to the persistently articulated commitment to the Revolution and to Communism, the question of the political convictions of the avant-garde has been enveloped in silence. Wood placed the blame

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[66] John E. Bowlt, "Art in Exile: The Russian Avant-Garde and the Emigration," *Art Journal* (Fall 1981): 215. It is important to note an interesting but little known article by J.-CA. Marcadé, who wrote that after his 1927 European trip, Malevich was not only imprisoned but tortured as well and argued that the Russian artist camouflaged his opposition to the *dékoulakisation* (Soviet campaign of political repressions against affluent peasants) through the use of color in paintings of peasants, which related to the national polychromy of Russia (white, blue, red) and his native Ukraine (blue and yellow) and suggested resistance to the Soviet symbology of red. See J.-CA. Marcadé, "Malévitch face á Staline," *L'Oeil* no. 494 (1998): 58-65. See also El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, "The Blockade of Russia is Coming to an End," *Vesch Objet Gegenstand* 1/2 (March/April 1922): 2.

[67] Paul Wood, "The Politics of the Avant-Garde," 1-2.

within "the collective academic psyche in the liberal-bourgeois educational institutions of the late-capitalist West," and distinguished three stages of historical accounts on the Russian avant-garde.[68] First, the "severance" thesis posited that the relationship with leftist politics and ideology – if present – is not central to any understanding of the Russian avant-garde (this thesis, according to Wood, is characteristic of Eastern European historians such as Vasilii Rakitin); second, "revisionist" stage viewed the avant-garde as victims of the Revolution because of the eventual official preference toward Realism as well as its presumed popularity and accessibility by the masses "as an expression of the people's unschooled interests and as a conduit for the Party's preferred messages" (here Wood included Lodder and Bois); [69] third, most recently emergent was that of "complicity": "conservatively inflected histories which play upon a claimed complicity with Stalinism as part of a wider project of burying affirmations of social revolution" (this stage is exemplified by Boris Groys and Igor Golomstock as well as the field of cultural history and its interest in the culture of the Stalin period).[70]

Bois offered another account pertinent in this context in an essay on Lissitzky, Mondrian, and Strzemiński for the 1991 New Museum of Contemporary Art exhibition *Cadences: Icon and Abstraction in Context*.[71] This essay, focusing on the relationship between political utopia and abstract art, is compelling and is – to my knowledge – the only analysis that addressed Russian, Dutch, and Polish artists within the same context. Geometric abstraction of the 1920s performed its political mission, according to Bois, by

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[68] Wood, "The Politics of the Avant-Garde," 2.
[69] Wood, "The Politics of the Avant-Garde," 4.
[70] Wood, "The Politics of the Avant-Garde," 3, 8.
[71] Yve-Alain Bois, "Lissitzky, Mondrian, Strzemiński: Abstraction and Political Utopia in the Twenties," in *Cadences: Icon and Abstraction in Context* (New York: New Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991), 81-105.

assigning art the role of awakening, a pedagogical one, through experimentation. The Soviet avant-garde and de Stjil advocated an ethical role for art to promote progress and a "collective" society in which art would essentially dissolve into life, and geometric abstract art "was the essential means of achieving this goal."[72] If for Mondrian, as Bois wrote, "painting was a model for action," Strzemiński too believed in socially motivated art achieved through experimentation: "An abstract painting has no other *raison d'être* then 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."[73] Bois concluded that out of the three artists, Strzemiński was the most utopian. I also agree with Bois's conclusion that, faced with such barbarity as Nazism and Stalinism, there was "no other solution, signified by Strzemiński, than to continue to believe that one can believe."[74] However, in a review of *Présences polonaises*, Bois praised the art of Strzemiński (Fig.56) and Kobro (Fig. 5) as the beacons of Polish Constructivism, yet denounced the Expressionist art of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (1885-1939), who prefered to be called Witkacy:

> Were it not for his [Strzemiński's] texts and works – and those of his wife, sculptor Katarzyna Kobro (1898-1951) – the Polish movement would have been little more than a regional variant of international Constructivism. This does not imply that the other members of the avant-garde are entirely negligible, simply that their work, however beautiful or interesting it may be, does not alter our view of Constructivism in general.[75]

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[72] Bois, "Lissitzky, Mondrian, Strzemiński," 94.
[73] Bois, "Lissitzky, Mondrian, Strzemiński," 97; Strzemiński, "Our Visual Potential" (1934); in Bois, "Lissitzky, Mondrian, Strzemiński," 102.
[74] Bois, "Lissitzky, Mondrian, Strzemiński," 103.
[75] Yve-Alain Bois, "Polarization," *Art in America* 72 (April 1984), 152-53. The versions of this essay appeared in Janusz Zagrodzki, ed. *Władysław Strzemiński In Memoriam* (Lodz: Sztuka Polska, 1988); and Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990), 123-55.

Bois's dismissal of Expressionism is not surprising given his continued interest in the formal issues of abstract art. Yet his dismissal of the work of all other Polish Constructivists (such as Stażewski) is a bias that needs to be addressed.

Présences polonaises, which took place in the Summer of 1983 at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, was probably one of the largest shows of Polish art to-date in Western Europe.[76] Organized in collaboration with the Lodz Museum of Art, *Présences polonaises* occurred in the wake of a series of exhibitions focusing on Paris as an important center of artistic and cultural exchange: Paris-New York in 1977, Paris-Berlin in 1978, and Paris-Moscow in 1979.[77] Like the previous shows, *Présences* displayed a wide range of artistic production, including painting, sculpture, architecture, literature, music, and cinema. Unlike the previous shows, however, *Présences* emphasized the process of artistic and cultural exchange between two institutions: the Pompidou Center and the Lodz Museum – between West and East, between center and periphery.[78] Despite being one of the most important centers of the Polish avant-garde since the early 1930s, and also in the postwar period, Lodz is often seen as peripheral to Warsaw, the Polish capital and also the "center." Thus, the show doubly embodied the issues of center and periphery.

The exhibition of Polish art at the Pompidou Center consisted of two sections, prewar and postwar. The prewar section juxtaposed the prolific artistic production of

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[76] *Présences polonaises: l'art vivant autour du Musée de Lodz: Witkiewicz, constructivisme, les contemporains* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1983).
[77] *Paris-New York* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1977); *Paris-Berlin: rapports et contrastes, France-Allemagne* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1978); *Paris-Moscow, 1900-1930* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1979).
[78] The nature of the cultural exchange is also suggested in the subtitle of both the exhibition and the catalogue, "l'art vivant autour du Musée de Lodz."

Witkacy with that of Polish Constructivism.[79] Since the story of Polish Constructivism is the subject of Chapter 2, I briefly discuss the largest subsection of the exhibition devoted to Witkacy (which included 546 items). A painter, photographer, playwright, and philosopher, Witkacy, who changed his name from Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz to distinguish himself from his artist father, was raised in a stimulating intellectual environment in the Russia-occupied part of Poland. After the suicide of his fiancée Jadwiga Janczewska, Witkacy famously traveled with his friend, the anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski (1884-1942), who became well-known for his study of the culture of New Guinea. Having heard about the beginning of war in 1914, Witkacy returned to Poland and enlisted in the Russian Army. Witkacy's photograph of five men dressed in Russian uniform dates to 1914 (Fig. 6). Upon closer inspection, we realize not only that it is the same man who appears in the photograph five times but also that this man is Witkacy himself. If Witkacy's photographic oeuvre is formally innovative, often likened to Duchamp, his copious written works, characterized by a sense of gutteral imagery of catastrophic doom, are frequently brought up in relation to Antonin Artaud. Witkacy's painterly oeuvre, on the other hand, is Expressionist in character with elements of Polish Symbolism (akin to the formal language of Art Nouveau). Interestingly, Witkacy renounced his artistic activities (except writing), when he founded his commercial portrait painting firm (Firma Portretowa) in 1924. According to its many regulations, the

[79] A small part of the prewar section was devoted to the writer and artist Bruno Shultz (1892-1942). Shultz was born to a Jewish family in Drohobycz in the Austria-occupied part of eastern Poland, known as Galicia (in today's Ukraine). Shultz spent his life in relative isolation and is best known for the *Sklepy Cynamonowe (The Cinnamon Shops*), which he wrote and illustrated in 1934, as well as *Sanatorium pod Klepsydrą (Sanatorium under the Sign of Hourglass*) of 1937. Under the Nazi occupation of Poland, Shultz was "protected" by a Gestapo officer Felix Landau, in whose house the Polish artist produced a series of frescoes. Uncovered long after World War II, parts of the "Landau" mural were removed in 2001 and transfered to Yad Vashem in Jerusalem.

firm produced each portrait (Fig. 6) – painted by Witkacy – under the influence of narcotics such as peyote or cocaine (in practice, these "narcotics" mainly consisted of cigarettes, coffee, and alcohol). Bois wrote that Witkacy's countless portraits "would undoubtedly be treated as delicacies by a Western art market that swallows late Picabia as if it were Communion bread."[80] At the beginning of World War II, in order to escape the Nazi invasion of Poland, Witkacy, like many others, traveled to the east. However, when the Red Army crossed the Polish border on 17 September 1939, he took his own life.

Présences polonaises was a significant show on many levels. It was a testimony of the historically privileged reception of Polish art, including literature and cinema, in France. Polish Constructivists, Stażewski specifically, maintained a close relationship with the prewar Parisian groups of *Cercle et Carré* and *Abstraction-Création*. In the postwar period, Denise René offered an uprecedented forum for exhibiting works of Polish artists, as in the 1957 *Des précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne*.[81] Moreover, the Pompidou exhibition was significant, because chronologically it paralleled the turbulant political climate of Poland. The exhibition was postponed for nearly two years due to the strikes at the Lenin's Shipyard in Gdansk. The strikes were led by Lech Wałęsa, the legendary leader of *Solidarność* (Solidarity), which was founded in August 1980 and was the first independent labor union in the Soviet bloc. The nationwide strikes

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[80] Bois, "Polarization," 152.

[81] The Polish Constructivist artist Henryk Berlewi (1894-1967), who had lived in Paris since 1928, was actively involved in promoting the art of Polish Constructivism in France. In addition, part of the French reception of Polish art can be linked to the increased interest in the Russian avant-garde in France. For example, *Macula,* an annual journal published between 1976 and 1979 – co-founded and edited by Bois – was devoted to critical issues, including Russian Constructivism as well as the translation of a great number of texts from both sides of the Atlantic. In this chapter, see my discussion of Bois's "Lissitzky censeur de Malévitch?" (*Macula* 3/4 (1978): 186-201), which addressed Lissitzky's translation of Malevich. On Galerie Denise René, and specifically *Des précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne*, see my discussion in Chapter 3.

and demonstrations that followed the events in Gdansk ultimately resulted in the imposition of martial law in December 1981. By the time, the show did take place two years later, the image of the Polish People's Republic (PRL) abroad was, once again, fatigued.[82] Judging by the fact that the postwar section of *Présences polonaises*, in comparison with the historical part of the show, did not adequately illustrate developments in contemporary art in Poland (suffice it to say that it included the artist Krzysztof Wodiczko who left Poland for the United States in 1975), I would argue that the authorities employed the art of Polish Constructivism in order to export the notions of Socialist democracy and freedom to Western Europe.

My claim is further substantiated by the fact that the image of the Polish People's Republic was severely compromised by Andrzej Wajda's film *Man of Iron* (*Człowiek z Żelaza*), shown at the Cannes Film Festival in 1981. *Man of Iron*, which documented a series of events that led to the Gdansk strikes of 1980, was advertised with posters that utilized the formal language of Solidarity's symbolically powerful logo characterized by the national palette of red and white (Fig. 7). The film was a sequel to Wajda's 1976 *Man of Marble* (*Człowiek z Marmuru*), a story of how Polish history of the 1950s was perceived by the younger generation in the mid-1970s (Fig 8). The plot follows a story of a young filmmaker, played by the actress Krystyna Janda, who set out to uncover the circumstances of the fall of a celebrated bricklayer Mateusz Birkut, whose brilliant career came to an abrupt end sometime around 1952. Wajda continued the fictional story of the Birkut family in *Man of Iron* with the use of documentary footage and interviews. Both films provide a powerful testimony to the political issues of Communist Poland, and as

[82] Under the Communist regime between 1945 and 1989, Poland was known as the Polish People's Republic (Polska Republica Ludowa, or PRL), in contrast to the Third Republic of Poland (Trzecia Rzeczpospolita Polska), instituted after the fall of Communism.

such both were censored and destined for minimal distribution. However, if in the mid-1970s, when *Man of Marble* takes place, it was possible to address the "mistakes" of Stalinist years, *Man of Iron* dared to critique the contemporary political context. As such, it was destined to be "shelved." Although the film reached Western audiences, no palpable reprecussions were felt in in Poland. The powerful, although today too nostalgically patriotic song, performed by Janda at the closing credits of *Man of Iron* sadly concluded that "the world found out [about strikes, deaths, and massacres], but said nothing at all" ("świat się dowiedział, nic nie powiedział"). Similarly, *Présences polonaises,* as one reviewer noticed, "remained virtually empty while the crowds queued outside the Grand Palais to see Monet."[83]

If the political underpinnings of Constructivism in the 1920s presented a sensitive and complex conundrum, during the 1950s most geometric abstract art was relegated to the backwaters of Western art historical discourse and was in effect perceived in the West as an outdated mode of abstraction. The relationship between geometric abstraction and Abstract Expressionism, and more important, the relationship of art and politics, was debated at the "Hot Paint for Cold War" symposium, held at the University of British Columbia in September 1986, and in the essays subsequently published in *Reconstructing Modernism*, edited by Serge Guilbaut.[84] In his introduction to the volume, Guilbaut concluded that "it has been difficult to discuss anything in the art culture of the 1950s but Abstract Expressionism," because of the key role of American Abstract Expressionism in the cultural politics of the Cold War.[85] As I mentioned earlier, the unpopularity of

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[83] Paul Overy, "Opposite Poles," *Studio International* 196/1004 (1984): 27.
[84] Serge Guilbaut, ed., *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945-1964* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990).
[85] Guilbaut, "Introduction," in *Reconstructing Modernism*, xiii.

Russian Constructivism stemmed from its ambivalent reception in the West. In his essay for *Reconstructing Modernism*, Benjamin Buchloh argued that Constructivism had become part of the Western canon only after being sufficiently depoliticized. In an effort to restore the true political dimension to Constructivist art, he discussed the transition of Gabo "from avant-garde to neo-avant-garde" artist, and pinpointed Clement Greenberg and the American suspicion of all things Soviet for the failure of Russian Constructivism to reenter Western European and American discourse.[86] In order to claim the aesthetic products of Constructivism, the critical apparatus had to formulate a number of strategies for a reorganization of its history.[87] One such strategic move was to wipe these "radical aesthetic goods" (Buchloh's term) clean of their political dust.[88] Sufficiently depoliticized, conventionalized, and oriented toward what Buchloh called the aesthetic autonomy concept of modernism, Russian Constructivism could be reclaimed. The problem with this analysis, however, is its focus on Gabo, an artist who spent much of his life in self-imposed exile and so was thereby removed from the constraints of but also unaffected by the relaxation of Stalinist terror. By taking as his case study an artist who lived and worked in England and the United States, Buchloh's critique fell prey to the same depoliticization he decried.

It has been argued that the Russian avant-garde's attempt to conform to particular ideological obligations was initially motivated by its allegiance to the Bolshevik Revolution, but later by self-preservation as well. Pamela Kachurin, for example, argued that the notion that the artists associated with the avant-garde were sympathetic to the Bolshevik regime is a myth and that radical artistic institutions "were sites of compromise

[86] Buchloh, "Cold War Constructivism," in *Reconstructing Modernism*, 85.
[87] Buchloh, "Cold War Constructivism," 90.
[88] Buchloh, "Cold War Constructivism," 91.

and retreat as early as 1919."[89] It is a general consensus that the two figures instrumental in the export of new Soviet art to Germany were Lissitzky and Gabo, that is to say that both artists were also responsible for the "public" image of Constructivism abroad. For example, Bois argued that the first text by Malevich to be published in the West "Lenin," translated by Lissitzky in 1924 to appear in the journal *Das Kunstblatt*, was the least effective presentation of Suprematism for Western audiences.[90] Bois suggested that Malevich's text opposed both the New Economic Policy (NEP) and "the rapid evolution of Soviet power after the death of Lenin."[91] As the cultural attaché to Germany, Lissitzky had to be careful about a critique of Soviet power structure and, according to Bois, made two important translation and editorial decisions: he eliminated the most politically pointed and the most obscure passages from Malevich's text.[92] Both Lissitzky and Gabo had an extremely active role in the artistic culture of Germany during the 1920s, thus positioning their careers at the very center of Western art and culture. Both made claims for their significant input into the originality of the Russian avant-garde but – as has been argued – both were also responsible for its depoliticization.[93] Recently, scholars have reexamined the ramifications of this process in *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow.*[94] For example, Lodder believes that Lissitzky, not Gabo, was "the key figure in the initial formulation of what is now commonly called *international*

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[89] Pamela J. Kachurin, *One Step Forward, Two Steps Back: The Retreat of the Avant-Garde in the Early Soviet Era* (Ph.D. diss., University of Indiana, 1998), 2.
[90] Bois refers to Malevich's article entitled "Lenin," *Das Kunstblatt* 10 (1924): 289-293. See Yve-Alain Bois, "Lissitzky censeur de Malévitch?"
[91] Bois, "Lissitzky censeur de Malévitch?" 193. My translation from the French.
[92] Bois, "Lissitzky censeur de Malévitch?" 201.
[93] See Lissitzky's translation of Malevich above. See also, Stephen Bann "Russian Constructivism and Its European Resonance," *Art Into Life,* 213-14.
[94] Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed, eds., *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow* (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003).

constructivism: that is Western constructivist theory and practice as opposed to that of the original Russian movement."[95] Although Lissitzky publicly maintained his distance from any political affiliation, as is evident in his and Ehrenburg's proclamation that "*Vesch* stands apart from all political parties, since it is concerned with problems of art and not of politics," the fact of his frequent and unencumbered travels suggests that Lissitzky was on very good terms with the Soviet leadership.[96] In contrast, Malevich was allowed to leave Russia only once in 1927, and was subsequently imprisoned (and tortured) for almost three months by the People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) on suspicion of being a German spy.[97] Turowski has also argued that the notion of the internationalization of Constructivism, which assumed a cosmopolitan and universal character, was closely knitted together with the new Soviet foreign policy, which, "in the attempt to come out of the crisis after the Polish-Bolshevik War, sought out possibilities of international cooperation."[98]

Two recent studies also addressed the Russian avant-garde's entanglement with politics, more specifically with the implications of revolutionary art after the Revolution and the politics of the NEP; namely, Maria Gough's *The Artist as Producer* and Christina

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[95] Lodder, "El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism," in *Situating El Lissitzky*, 28.
[96] Lissitzky and Ehrenburg, "The Blockade of Russia is Coming to an End," *Vesch Objet Gegenstand* 1/2 (March/April 1922): 2. The next sentence of reads: "But that does not mean that we are in favor of art that keeps on the outside of life and is basically apolitical." See also Lodder, "El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism," in *Situating El Lissitzky*, 36; Nancy Perloff, "The Puzzle of El Lissitzky's Artistic Identity," in *Situating El Lissitzky,* 1-23.
[97] See David Elliott's "The End of the Avant-Garde," in *Art and Power: Europe Under Dictators, 1930-1945*, ed. Dawn Ades (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995), 195. Elliott wrote that this happened in 1930 after Malevich traveled to Poland and Germany, based on the entry in Pavel Filionov's diary for 4 November 1932; n3. See also J.-CA. Marcadé, "Malévitch face á Staline," *L'Oeil* 494 (1998): 58.
[98]Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie: rekonstrukcje i symulacje* (Krakow: Universitas, 2004), 105. All translations from the Polish are mine.

Kiaer's *Imagine No Possessions.*[99] Both Gough and Kiaer analyzed the complex debates about the NEP in Soviet Russia, which – faced with economic hardships caused by War Communism – intended to privatize some, although not all, aspects of its economy between 1921 and 1928. It is perhaps fitting that the discussion about the Russian avant-garde artists' desire to be at the frontier of the political and cultural transformations is framed in terms of the "object." Kiaer offered a critique of commodity fetishism and the development of the new socialist object, and argued that this new object was not a commodity but "almost animate participant in social life," in fact, it was "object-as-comrade," and as such allowed the "elimination of a possessive relationship to objects."[100] Gough, who focused on an artist in the Revolution (Karl Ioganson), approached the Soviet object in a different way: "not only [as] physical artifacts, but also lexical inventions, theoretical principles, and polemical tracts."[101]

In contrast to earlier studies, such as Lodder's *Russian Constructivism*, which viewed the NEP as the beginning of the end of Constructivism, and Wood's "The Politics of the Avant-Garde" that located the "failure" of Constructivism in "the failure of the October Revolution itself," these recent studies situate the revolutionary art within the context of debates involving the NEP. Thereby they also challenge the existing historiography of Constructivism and its pronouncements about the failure of Constructivist project.[102] For example, Kiaer explicitly suggested that the NEP should be understood not as defeat but "as a circumstance that forced [Constructivist] ideals. . .

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[99] Maria Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Christina Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions: The Socialist Object of Russian Constructivism* (Cambridge, Massachussets: MIT Press, 2005).
[100] Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 1, 7.
[101] Gough, *The Artist as Producer*, viii.
[102] Lodder, *Russian Constructivism*, 185, 295n5; Wood, "The Politics of the Avant-Garde," 5.

.to take a different. . . path."[103] There is likewise more to be said about the different paths taken by Constructivist artists.

There are two aspects that I find perhaps most compelling in these books. First, Gough's emphasis on the fact that "what [Russian Constructivist] artists and theoreticians share as a group is less a set of formal procedures or political imperatives per se than an unrelenting drive to determine the role and efficacy of the vanguard artist in the revolution."[104] Second, Kiaer's claim that Constructivists managed to invent "a new model of political art that reconceptualized the material practices of everyday life according to their diverse concepts of what socialism meant, rather than through centralized party politics."[105] One implication is that the similarities in "formal procedures and political imperatives" do not overdetermine the significance of an artistic production, as can be seen in a comparison between Stażewski (Fig. 100), who is the central figure of my study, and the Hungarian-born Victor Vasarely (1906-1997), who spent most of his life in France (Fig.102).[106] Another implication is that Constructivist artists reconceptualized their own reality through "diverse concepts" of how artistic form functions as an agent for the organization of social life. This implication, as I see it, enables us to view Stażewski as an artist who managed to redefine his work in a way that reconciled the formal aspects of his own prewar Constructivism with political content under the historical condition of Stalinism and later the Thaw in Poland. These are two historical periods that – much like the NEP in Soviet Russia – shaped artistic discourse as

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[103] Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 25.
[104] Gough, *The Artist as Producer*, viii.
[105] Kiaer, *Imagine No Possessions*, 275n50.
[106] The career of Stażewski (1894-1988) chronologically paralleled that of Vasarely (1908-1997), who was born in Hungary in 1908 and emigrated to France in 1930.

well as Stażewski's "unrelenting drive" to determine the role of geometric abstract vernacular in the ever-changing historical and political context.

Perhaps a testimony to how Stażewski's work informed and inspired the way for politically motivated art is the 1981 exhibition *Construction in Process* (*Konstrukcja w Procesie*). The first in a series of large international and collaborative undertakings, organized by the artist Ryszard Waśko (b. 1949), was a two-week long event housed in the construction plant "Budrem" in Lodz that involved fifty artists from different countries, including Sol LeWitt, Richard Serra, Carl Andre, Richard Long, Dan Graham, Ed Ruscha.[107] Waśko later remembered that "the spirit and philosophical base of *Construction in Process*" came out of "our tradition, out of Polish Constructivism," which is why he "invited Stażewski to join the honorary committee" (Fig. 9).[108] Because it was seen as the "symbol of change. . . of liberation," Waśko also lobbied to have members of the Lodz chapter of Solidarity to participate in the creative process.[109] Thus, the 1981 *Construction in Process* combined the artistic patronage of Stażewski with that of the workers recently united by Solidarity. Despite the fact that initially workers appreciated neither the status nor the importance of the presence of American artists in Lodz, ("who was Joseph Kosuth or Richard Serra to the workers of Poland?"), they ultimately rallied and contributed to the artistic undertaking and "worked. . . without pay"

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[107] The precedent of housing art exhibitions outside of museum/gallery space in the Polish context can be traced both to the 1923 exhibition of the nascent Constructivists in the Corso cinema theater in Vilnius, and to the first 1924 exhibition of Blok, which was housed in an automobile salon in Warsaw, and, in the postwar period, to the Elbląg *Biennale of Spatial Forms* in late 1964, for which factory workers collaborated with artists in production of art works. See my discussion in Chapter 2 and Chapter 4.

[108] Lily Wei, "Constructing the Process: Ryszard Wasko Looks Back," *Art in America* 89 (March 2001): 62.

[109] Wei, "Constructing the Process," 62.

to bring the exhibit to fruition.[110] Two days after the opening of the 1981 *Construction in Process*, a general strike began in Lodz on 28 October, at which time factory employees invited the international artistic community to attend. Finally, in a poignantly symbolic gesture, all the work produced during the two week event was given to Solidarity. While the subsequent Construction in Process events, also organized by Waśko, were both international and collaborative (for example, in 1985 *Construction in Process* took place in Munich, and in 1995 in Mitzpe Ramon amidst the Israeli desert), the first one in 1981 was a distinct phenomenon in which art and life did come together in a combined "cry for freedom."

Stażewski faced opposition to his pictorial output during the Stalinist years, but during the Thaw Polish criticism was no longer dominated by figuration-abstraction debates. Rather, the discussion involved Colorism ('lyrical' abstraction formally akin to Art Informel and Tachisme, for example, see Fig. 22 and Fig. 111), which was seen as devoid of political content, and geometric abstraction rooted in prewar Constructivism, which was still seen as imbued with the utopian leftist ideals. However, when geometric abstract art was appropriated by the Polish "liberal" Communists soon after the Thaw, it was perceived by critics not only as derivative but also politically mute. The definition of geometric abstract art shifted away from the political toward more formalist concept of decorative values of painting such as in Vasarely's *Teke* of 1956 (Fig. 10), whose geometry was meant to create optical illusion. As I discuss in detail in the second part of the dissertation, in his "soft-edged" geometry of the late 1950s (Fig. 116), Stażewski attempted to redefine the relationship between geometric art and society, and can thus be seen to have roots in earlier debates about the role of the artist in the East.

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[110] Wei, "Constructing the Process," 63.

Geometric Abstraction Before and Behind in Los Angeles

Geometric abstraction has not been the most popular subject both east and west of Berlin. After the fall of Communism, the interest in art from East and Central Europe involved more contemporary art practices that sidestepped the ambiguous position of geometric abstract art during periods of intense Stalinism and its relaxation during the Thaw.[111] The two exhibitions discussed in this section illustrate the issues raised in this study, because one addressed the "historical" avant-garde art from Eastern Europe, and the second involved the artistic reception of the legacy of abstract art rooted in Constructivist aesthetic in the postwar period.

The *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation* can serve as an illustration of a different critical reception of this art on either side of the Atlantic.[112] Organized by Timothy E. Benson for the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the show also traveled to Munich and Berlin, and included three hundred works by ninety artists from fourteen cities. The concentration on cities, as opposed to countries, as centers of art production offered a new approach, one which took into account specific geographical locations and thereby their cultural, national, historical peculiarities, but also focused attention on the fact that regional and national differences in that part of Europe in the early twentieth-century were very fluid, and that cross-cultural dialogue was much more significant than the designation East and Central Europe implies. The show elicited remarkably different kinds of responses in Europe and the United States.

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[111] See Hoptman, *Beyond Belief*; Badovinac, *Body and the East*; and Pojić and Elliott, *After the Wall*.

[112] See Timothy O. Benson, ed. *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910-1930* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002). See also Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács, eds., *Between Worlds: a Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910-1930* (Los Angeles: County Museum of Art; Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002).

Benson himself noticed that "America reacted enthusiastically to the exhibited objects while Europe was more interested in the methodology of exposition. . . .The world economic crisis. . . .prevented the show from traveling to the countries of Eastern Europe. . . .[But] it would be very interesting to observe the different reception of the show in Budapest or Warsaw."[113] As far as I know neither Budapest nor Warsaw had a chance to offer such an extensive viewing, and so to-date exposure to the early twentieth-century avant-gardes in those cities remains accessible only to the initiated few.

An exhibition that addressed the legacy of geometric abstract art beyond Constructivism, also organized at the Los Angeles County Museum, examined "the use of radically simplified form and systematic strategies in the development of vanguard art" in the postwar period.[114] This show, *Beyond Geometry*, curated by Lynn Zelevansky, was extremely relevant, because it attempted to call attention to the simultaneity of geometric artistic practices in Europe and the Americas. It also highlighted the fact that "the term "geometric abstraction," associated with Europe, was objectionable to many in the North American vanguard," because while many artists held Russian art of the 1910s and 1920s in high regard, geometric abstract art "brought to mind the looming presence of Piet Mondrian" and was merely synonymous with carefully orchestrated issues of pictorial composition.[115] The show was immense in scope, including a nearly unprecedented number of artists from different continents, ranging from Barnett Newman to Hélio Oiticica. Yet, the show that set out to connect "artistic practices

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[113] T. O. Benson to L. Głuchowska, 12 February 2003; cited in Lidia Głuchowska, "Z laboratorium "Nowej Wspólnoty" *!Awangardy! w Europie Srodkowej, 1910-1930.* Wymiana i transformacja," *Ikonotheka* 17 (2004): 231-39.
[114] Lynn Zelevansky, ed., *Beyond Geometry: Experiments in Form, 1940s-1970s* (Los Angeles: County Museum of Art, 2004), 9.
[115] Zelevansky, *Beyond Geometry*, 10.

sharing a common morphological and/or conceptual horizon but divided by the institutional structures of power that underwrite the production of history and the characteristic operations of canon formation" surprisingly overlooked some important artists.[116] What is of interest to us here is the choice of artists from Poland. *Beyond Geometry* included the Polish artists Wojciech Fangor (b. 1922) (Fig. 11 and Fig. 105), Roman Opałka (b. 1931) (Fig. 12), and Stanisław Dróżdż (b. 1939) (Fig. 13) – all of whom represent a very important chapter in the history of Polish postwar art production, which was often inspired and informed by (Polish) Constructivism. However, the show neglected the work of Stażewski entirely. While Stażewski is not exactly an art world household name, his influence on the younger generation of artists, such as Fangor or Zbigniew Gostomski (b. 1932) (Fig. 14), should have guaranteed that his postwar work be included, especially so because the Hungarian-born Victor Vasarely, who was largely active in France, was amply represented. The morphology of the two artists' work is often similar (Fig. 100 and Fig. 102), as is the fact that both were represented by Galerie Denise René in Paris. Yet in this case the marginal position of postwar geometric abstraction from East Central Europe is emphasized by the exclusion of the Polish artist working behind the Iron Curtain.

[116] Monica Amor, "Minimal Geometries and Other Concerns," *Art Journal* 64 (Fall 2005): 123.

Recent Reception of Russian Constructivism in Poland

Polish art historians have tried to tackle the question of the relationship between art and politics of Russian Constructivism, even if this same question has not been extensively investigated when it comes to Polish Constructivism.[117] This discrepancy can perhaps be explained by the complex and often ambivalent attitude toward Communism in Poland not only during the 1920s but also, for obvious reasons, during the postwar period. Piotr Piotrowski explored the relationship between art and politics in his 1993 *Artysta między rewolucją a reakcją: stadium z zakresu etycznej historii sztuki awangardy rosyjskiej* (*An Artist Between the Revolution and Reaction: A Study of the Ethical History of Art of the Russian Avant-Garde*).[118] He wrote that Lissitzky "combined pure painting with its social (agitational) function" in his belief that Constructivism in art and Communism in politics would "lead the world to a pure state of perfection."[119] Piotrowski's observation contradicts Wood's claim that in general Eastern European historians believe that leftist politics and ideology were not central to Constructivist artists (what Wood called the "severance" thesis), but it does support his "complicity" paradigm (involving "histories which play upon a claimed complicity with Stalinism as part of a wider project of burying affirmations of social revolutions.")[120] For Piotrowski,

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[117] One exception is Stanisław Czekalski's "Political Photomontage in Poland, 1924-1938, Americanism, Bolshevism, and Proletarian Trends," in *Art and Politics* (Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki PAN, 1999): 127-39. Czekalski (138) focused on photomontage produced by such artists as Mieczysław Szczuka and concluded that "the avant-garde photomontage of Constructivism had indirect political implications, since it was closely connected with advertising and dedicated to the utopian ideas stemming from the technocentric and communitarian ideology of Taylorism and Fordism, a political rival of the theory of class struggle developed by Marxism."

[118] Piotr Piotrowski, *Artysta między rewolucją a reakcją: stadium z zakresu etycznej historii sztuki awangardy rosyjskiej* (Poznan: Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza, 1993).

[119] Piotrowski, *Artysta między rewolucją a reakcją*, 61.

[120] Wood, "The Politics of the Avant-Garde," 8.

Lissitzky's relationship with Communism was experienced on three different levels. First, Lissitzky agreed with the emphasis Bolsheviks placed on the utilitarization of art. Second, the inspiration for this new art included the machine as a product of industrial society, geometric shapes as an expression of anti-romantic tendencies, and color as an articulation of material not emotion. Third, dynamism was seen as an expression of the contemporary, developing society.[121] The new art, here equated with the Productivists' rejection of easel painting, contributed to and was an integral part of the construction of the new Bolshevik state. Through their artistic and social activities, artists supported the totalitarian regime, and, for this reason their art needs to be positioned within that particular historical framework.[122] The publication of Piotrowski's book was preceded by a few studies of the Polish historian Andrzej Turowski, who dealt extensively with the conditions of Polish and Russian Constructivism. The publication of these studies was itself indicative of the changing political climate. Turowski's *Wielka Utopia Awangardy* (*The Great Utopia of the Avant-Garde*), which addressed Russian art produced between 1910 and 1930, was published in 1990, eight years after it was written.[123] His anthology of the collected writings of the artists and theoreticians of the Russian avant-garde, *Między Sztuką a Komuną* (*Between Art and Communism*), waited more than fifteen years for its publication.[124] Turowski's *Konstruktywizm Polski* (*Polish Constructivism*), written in 1969, but appeared in print only in 1981 a few months before martial law was instituted. However, it lacked a discussion of the socio-political context. The book was

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[121] Piotrowski, *Artysta między rewolucją a reakcją*, 63.
[122] Piotrowski, *Artysta między rewolucją a reakcją*, 170-71.
[123] Andrzej Turowski, *Wielka Utopia Awangardy: artystyczne i społeczne utopie w sztuce rosyjskiej, 1910-1930* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1990).
[124] Andrzej Turowski, *Między Sztuką a Komuną: Teksty Awangardy Rosyjskiej, 1910-1932* (Krakow: Universitas, 1998).

extensively revised and expanded in *Budowniczowie Świata* (*The Builders of the World*) in 2000.[125] The publishing delays of Turowski's studies indicate that geometric abstraction and its history was perceived as potentially threatening, a testimony of the repressive cultural policies as late as the 1980s. Turowski was interested in the entanglement of the avant-garde in the ideological struggles of the system, which he termed *ideosfera* (ideosphere) and defined as the uncompromising subordination of art to the Communist system and its power.[126] Both Piotrowski and Turowski were interested in the conditions of the artist and the avant-garde in the specific historical moment of Revolutionary and Soviet Russia and its subordination to the totalitarian politics of the Party.[127] Boris Groys, the Russian historian working in Germany, believed that the "majority of avant-garde artists and writers immediately declared their full support for the new Bolshevik state," but by idealizing and mystifying it, they lost touch with reality.[128] Ultimately, the Russian avant-garde's alliance with the Bolshevik Revolution was responsible for its dual isolation from both the state and its opposition. In the context of the Western museum, Groys wrote, the Russian avant-garde is regarded as one original phenomenon among others, "but in the Soviet Union its claims to exclusiveness and its almost realized ambitions to destroy traditional cultural values have not been forgotten."[129]

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[125] See Turowski, *Konstruktywizm Polski*. See also Turowski, *Budowniczowie Świata: z dziejów radykalnego modernizmu w sztuce polskiej* (Krakow: Universitas, 2000).
[126] Turowski, *Między Sztuką a Komuną*, 501.
[127] Turowski, *Między Sztuką a Komuną*, 503.
[128] Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 20.
[129] Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism*, 31.

Polish Constructivism Behind the Iron Curtain

Two recent studies maintain that postwar art historical discussions were dominated by and privileged the art of Polish Constructivists. The claim was that the disproportionate attention to Constructivism resulted in a scholarly neglect of other artistic groups active in interwar Poland, including Formiści (the Formists) and Rytm (Rhythm).[130] Rytm, illustrated here by the sculpture of the same title by Henryk Kuna (Fig. 15), was influenced in part by Formiści, which held its first exhibition in 1921 in Warsaw and was most active between 1922 and 1923.[131] Rytm is considered to have been the only reaction to the naturalism and symbolism of the Młoda Polska (Young Poland) movement, which was active at the turn of the twentieth-century. The Young Poland was epitomized by the work of Stanisław Wyspiański (1869-1907), whose *Motherhood* (*Macierzyństwo*) is one of the most well-known images in Poland (Fig. 16), and Jacek Malczewski (1854-1929), whose *Portrait of Edward Raczyński* (*Portret Edwarda Raczyńskiego*) illustrates the symbolist tendencies of the movement (Fig. 17).[132] Often criticized for cosmopolitanism and following foreign influences, Rytm had strong ties with the rightist government, *Sanacja*, led by General Józef Piłsudski and active

[130] See, for example, Katarzyna Nowakowska-Sito, ed., *W kręgu Rytmu: Sztuka Polska Lat Dwudziestych* (Warsaw: Muzeum Narodowe, 2006); Marek Bartelik, *Early Polish Modern Art: Unity in Multiplicity* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2005). The name Formiści (Formists) refers to the members of the group known as Formizm (Formism).
[131] The first version of Kuna's sculpture, made out of ebony, was shown in the Polish Pavilion at the Paris Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in 1925. If compared with Melnikov's Russian Pavilion, the Polish pavillion appeared extremely conservative. Unveiled in 1929, a brass and bronze version, can be seen in Warsaw's Skaryszewski Park.
[132] On Young Poland, see the classic volume by Tadeusz Dobrowolski, *Sztuka Młodej Polski* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1965).

between 1926 and 1939.[133] *Sanacja* was meant to facilitate national healing after the 1918 independence, and was famous for instituting economic stability and infamous for the prosecution of Communist Parties.[134] The fact that groups such as Rytm did not receive sustained critical reception until nearly the end of the twentieth-century can be explained by the fact that they were associated with General Piłsudski's interwar Poland, whose history (including the 1920 Polish-Bolshevik War) remained taboo until the fall of Communism.[135] In contrast, the Constructivists' interest in both Socialism and Communism, while disallowed during the height of Stalinism, was revived and appropriated by the regime of the 1956 Thaw in order to legitimize the "improved," post-Stalinist version of Communism.[136] In addition, geometric abstract art generally did not critique the totalitarian regime directly, and as such did not pose a direct threat.

Two extremely influential historians, who were responsible for the shaping of the discourse of art history and often cultural policy in postwar Poland, were Julian Starzyński and Mieczysław Porębski. Julian Starzyński (1906-1974), an art historian who founded and directed the Institute of Art History of the Polish Academy of Sciences, also taught at the University of Warsaw and was remembered as the professor whose lectures involved modern art, a debatable and controversial subject under a totalitarian

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[133] See Renata Piątkowska, "Ugrupowanie Rytm w zwierciadle krytyki prawicowej," *W kręgu Rytmu,* 153–66.

[134] The name *Sanacja* was taken from the Latin *sanatio*, which means healing.

[135] As I discuss in Chapter 2, during the years of Stalinism but also under Gomułka's Thaw and after, the interwar Polish Republic was denounced as bourgeois and capitalist, and remained a neglected topic until the fall of Communism. An important account dealing with this period is Richard M. Watt's *Bitter Glory: Poland and Its Fate, 1918-1939* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979). It was translated into Polish as *Gorzka Chwała: Polska i jej los 1918-1939* and published only in 2005. Until then, no Polish publisher was able or willing to print it, because it dealt with the "forgotten" part of Polish history, including the 1920 Polish-Bolshevik War and the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939, both of which remained taboo until very recently.

[136] For example, in his conversations with a former student, Krystyna Czerni, in 1986 and 1987, Porębski claimed that members of a.r. were all Communists. See Krystyna Czerni, *Nie tylko o sztuce: rozmowy z Mieczysławem Porębskim* (Wroclaw: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1992), 32.

regime. This under the repressive climate in the education, which can best be illustrated by academic curricula, one of which proposed that topics for the final, gymnasium maturity examination (*matura*) should deal with issues of "the decadent formalism and bankruptcy in the art of the capitalistic downfall: cubism, surrealism, abstractionism," "the struggle of philosophical systems as class struggle," and "the role of socialist realism in conquering the antiquated capitalistic human consciousness."[137] Mieczysław Porębski (b. 1921), a prominent historian and critic, was on the faculty of the Academy of Fine Arts at the Warsaw University during the 1950s and later Jagiellonian University in Krakow. Porębski, who was a participant of major artistic events during his long career, is an exquisite case study of the sensitive position of an intellectual under totalitarianism. Having outlived Communist Poland, he was able to give an account of the events of the 1950s. As I will discuss in Chapter 3, the Nieborów conference of February 1949, marked the end of any illusions of postwar freedom and the beginning of the official Socialist Realism doctrine. Polish intellectuals and apologists for experimental art, including Porębski, were forced to function in a particularly sensitive kind of context. Porębski, who was one of the curators of the late 1948 exhibition of experimental art *Nowocześni* (*Moderns*), switched gears and endorsed Socialist Realism after the Nieborów conference. Questioned later by his former student Krystyna Czerni, Porębski explained that, after his visit to Paris in 1949, he was convinced that the future of art lay

[137] Klimek, "Pytania Maturalne," undated, AAN, MKiS Classified p.2 cz.1 t.2 cz.1, 269, 270. "dekadencki formalizm i bezideowość w sztuce kapitalistycznego rozkładu, walka systemów filozoficznych walką klasową, rola sztuki socjalistycznej w przezwyciężeniu przeżytków kapitalistycznej świadomości ludzkiej."

in realism.[138] In 1949, the Polish historian could not yet predict how stifling the recipe for Socialist Realism would become.

Particularly significant is a text Porębski wrote in October 1949 entitled "Dwa Programy (z problematyki formalizmu w plastyce polskiej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego)" (Two Programs (On the Problem of Formalism in Art in Poland of the Twenty-Year Interwar Period), which discussed the conditions of the Polish avant-garde of that time.[139] The author began his discussion with Formiści, a group of artists initially known as Polish Expressionists, which held its first exhibition in November 1917 in Krakow. In fact, the poster by Tytus Czyżewski for this first show recalls formal strategies characteristic of German Expressionism (Fig. 18). The third exhibition of the Formists in 1919 signaled a considerable change from the first. The group's major theoretician and proponent, Leon Chwistek (1884-1944), introduced a new name in an attempt to distance the group from any associations with German artists. Liberated from the influence of German Expressionism, Chwistek, who was also a painter, now employed Futurist-inspired vibrant forms as in his well-known *Fencing* (*Szermierka*) of 1919 (Fig. 19). The members of Formizm (Formism), who were active as a group until 1922, also established their own periodical in Krakow as well as a Free Art Academy in the mountain resort of Zakopane, which was humorously celebrated in a drawing by

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[138] Porębski in conversation with Czerni; Czerni, *Nie tylko o sztuce*, 50.

[139] This text was presented and published in many versions. Originally, it appeared in a Czech publication; a revised version was presented at the 1948 Krakow *Nowocześni* exhibition. It was then published in 1950 as "Dwa Programy (z problematyki formalizmu w plastyce polskiej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego)" ("Two Programs (On the Problem of Formalism in Fine Arts in Poland of the Twenty-year Interwar Period") (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1950). The final version, completed in 1955, appeared in *Sztuka Naszego Czasu (The Art of Our Time)* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sztuka, 1956).

Chwistek (Fig. 20).[140] Writing at the height of Stalinism, Porębski defined the interwar Polish avant-garde as inherently opposing the ideology of bourgeois capitalism, imperialism, and – of course – formalism.[141] In doing so, Porębski used Picasso as his bargaining chip.[142] Picasso's work was acceptable to the regime on account of the Spaniard's association with the Communist Party. This connection was fresh in collective memory, because Picasso attended the 1948 Peace Conference in Wroclaw, a major city in southwestern Poland also known as Breslau that inititated the global dissemination of his dove as the symbol of peace, which was even used in the Soviet postage stamp (Fig. 21). Porębski positioned Picasso within and against the context of an earlier generation of French artists including Manet and Cézanne, both of whom the author considered to be generally "well-situated bourgeoisie for whom others did the work."[143] This maneuver allowed the art historian, who had recently moved to Warsaw from Krakow, to explain the quest for formal innovation as an inevitable consequence of the struggle for a better future, because "intertwined into the system of capitalist practices, the lost artist could not find any other way to manifest his protest but through the most radical formal risks and portentous impertinence of imagination."[144] He was now able to identify the origins of Formizm, as a group born out of stagnation in reaction

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[140] Stażewski's first public apearance took placed with the Formists in Warsaw in 1922. According to Porębski, the term 'Formists,' denoting an interest in form, was suggested by the literary critic Emil Breiter; *Dwa Programy*, 5. It is the general consensus, however, that the term first appeared in the text by Chwistek; Bartelik, *Early Polish Modern*, 28. Other Expressionist groups included Pozań Expressionists, Young Yiddish, and Futurists. See Bartelik for an excellent discussion of Polish Expressionist groups; *Early Polish Modern Art*.

[141] Porębski, *Dwa Programy*, 8.

[142] See recent, both extremely timely and useful discussion of the reception of Picasso behind the Iron Curtain between 1945 and 1970 in Eastern Europe by Piotr Bernatowicz, *Picasso za Żelazną Kurtyną: recepcja artysty i jego sztuki w krajach Europy Srodkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945-1970* (Krakow: Universitas, 2006).

[143] Porębski, *Dwa Programy*, 6.

[144] Porębski, *Dwa Programy*, 9, 10.

to the unfulfilling condition of overall backwardness at the revolutionary moment identified with the Bolshevik Revolution.[145] In addition to Rytm and Formizm, Porębski's trajectory also followed Constructivist groups such as Blok (Fig. 40 and Fig. 41) and Praesens (Fig. 49). While all of these groups were radical in the sense of breaking free from tradition at the enthusiastic moment of the newly regained independence, they could not survive long, because their "enthusiasm for the city, the masses, and the machine was artificial in our [rural] condition."[146] By the mid-1930s, Constructivism was on the wane not only in Soviet Russia but also in Germany.[147] Paris had become the geographical center for "constructive art" with the launching of such groups as *Cercle et Carré*, founded by Michel Seuphor and Torrés-Garcia in 1930, and *Abstraction Création,* initiated by Georges Vantongerloo and Auguste Herbin in 1932.[148]

Porębski's article functioned in a complex territory. The first version was delivered as a lecture at the Krakow *Nowocześni* exhibition in late 1948, shortly before the official tenure of Socialist Realism in Poland began. This version attempted to present, if not reconcile, the Constructivist aesthetic with that of Surrealism. By 1950,

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[145] Porębski, *Dwa Programy*, 10. "Jak widzimy formizm nie rodził się w atmosferze wrzenia ale zastoju, był reakcją na pustkę i zacofanie. Powstawał w środowisku peryferyjnym i spóźnionym, które pod wpływem wieści dochodzących zza wojennych kordonów budziło się do nowego, jak się zdawało, życia."

[146] Porębski, *Dwa Programy*, 18.

[147] One should remember that the 1934 Soviet Writers' Congress debated Modernism and Socialist Realism, with the latter prevailing as the official doctrine for years to come, and that its ideological import differed from that of the emerging totalitarian systems in the East (Stalinism) and the West (Fascism).

[148] The 1971 exhibition at Galerie Denise René in New York mounted an exhibition entitled *Masters of Early Constructive Art*, which included such different artists as Arp, Moholy-Nagy, Herbin, and Stażewski, among others, under the umbrella term "constructive art." See Margit Staber, *Masters of Early Constructive Abstract Art* (New York: Galerie Denise René, 1971), n.p.

Porębski revised the essay to conform to the prevailing doctrine of Socialist Realism, and by 1956 he supported the work of the Koloryści (the Colorists).[149]

In its prewar version, this group was formally known as Kapizm (Kapism) – the name derived from the Polish pronounciation of the abbreviation of the term Komitet Paryski or KP (the Paris Committee) – the members strove for grants and fellowships to travel and study in Paris and were primarily concerned with issues of painting and emotion in works with a neutral subject matter (still life, landscape, and portrait), which was apolitical. The work of Jan Cybis (1897-1972), one of the group's co-founders, exemplifies both prewar Colorism, as in his *Green Jug and Fruit* (*Zielony Dzban i Owoce*) of 1930, and its postwar version, in *Park in Nieborów* (*Park w Nieborowie*) of 1953 (Fig. 22).[150] While Kapizm was most active from 1922, after the formal disintegration of Formism, until 1934, the group was also ubiquitous in postwar Poland. Porębski defined the group as rejecting modernist painting in order to take inspiration from nature but not its likeness. They were solely concerned with the "painterly resolution of the canvas," corresponding to the experiences of the artist on one hand, and on the other, to the rules of "plastic relationships."[151] Whatever their differences and affiliations, all abstractionists regarded modernity not only in terms of the new style but

[149] Koloryści (Colorists) were artists associated with the tendency in Polish painting known as Koloryzm (Colorism).

[150] Jan Cybis was a student of Józef Pankiewicz (1866-1940), who inspired a whole generation of colorist painters at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts. Cybis spent the years between 1924 and 1931 in Paris. While he was appointed a professor at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in 1948, he was prevented from teaching during the years of Socialist Realism years, and was reinstated only in 1957.

[151] Porębski, *Dwa Programy*, 19. "Kapiści wyrzekają się "obrazów" modernistycznych czy innych, oświadczają, że malują "z natury," że nie chodzi im jednak o podobieństwo, ale jedynie o "malarskie rozstrzygnięcie płótna," odpowiadające przeżyciu artysty z jendej strony, regułom "gry stosunków i działań plastycznych" z drugiej."

also a "new form of art and life."[152] Regardless of their ideologies and convictions, artists turned away from descriptive subject matter and content toward formal innovation so that a work of art was subject only to the rules and conventions of plastic composition. What is of great significance here is that in contrast to the leftist tendencies of Constructivism, Kapizm and Colorism were by definition politically neutral, which is why – as will become apparent in the second part of the dissertation – the Colorists would occupy nearly all the positions in Poland's fine arts academies and would enjoy a great amount of exhibiting freedom in the postwar period.

In order to further legitimize the developments of art practices of the Polish interwar period, Porębski now needed to define the subtly different types of formalism. He argued that formalism was generally understood as a disregard of, or indifference toward content. To justify an interest in formal innovation by artists of the interwar period, the Polish historian remapped the concept of "content" by putting to use Lenin's theory of the reflection of reality in art ("teoria odbicia rzeczywistości w sztuce"):

> According to the reflection theory, the only possible content of a work of art is reality, and form is a tool with which reality can be reflected in a work of art. If we follow this differentiation consistently, we have to agree that the function of form which translates the language of reality into the language of art will include not only such factors as, for example, the painterly technique, color, composition, surface construction but also thematic conventions resulting from different painterly types and genres. The formal problem, with which reality presents the artist, will thus be the same as, for example, the problem of creating a new type of portrait painting and the problem of the color harmony of the surface on the canvas. If the aim of the formal problem in each of these instances is to show the essential contents of reality, which is in a constant state of development and change, and the creation of new conventions for each of reality's new facets, being revealed during the historical and social process – we will be able to speak about realistic tendencies. If the formal problem, however, is limited to the autonomous, internal dialectic of form, to this or another "stylization" of accepted conventions without a deeper justification of content – then we must speak about a formalist tendency. The achievements of the Polish interwar years are formalist

[152] Porębski, *Dwa Programy*, 25.

> not because of its use of certain formal conventions including composition, color, subject, but because the revealed content was meager and one-sided, because our modern art did not show the essence of modernity's relationship to object, matter, man.[153]

While it is true that the author dismissed the work of the prewar avant-garde, he did argue for a certain degree of artistic freedom and formal experimentation. Porębski's text illustrates the precarious condition of writing art history and art criticism in Stalinist Poland. Speaking years later about his work from this period, Porębski exclaimed: "Well, frightening, frightening. . . It is difficult to explain, one can only forewarn against something like this. The greatest negative experience."[154] Mainly during the 1950s but also later, critical essays were written with the use of a truly Aesopian language, veiled and riddled. However, it is important to note, the audiences were very-well trained in deciphering this language and reading between the lines. "This is how we formulated our texts, if we had to write something," Porębski said, "but spoken language was a bit

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[153] Porębski, *Dwa Programy*, 26, 27. "Zgodnie z teorią odbicia, jedyną treścią dzieła sztuki jest rzeczywistość, formą – zespół środków, za pośrednictwem których rzeczywistość ta w dziele się odbija. Idąc konsekwentnie po linii tego rozróżnienia, będziemy musieli się zgodzić, że do zakresu formy tłumaczącej język rzeczywistości na język sztuki, należeć bedą nie tylko takie czynniki, jak np. technika malowania, kolor, kompozycja płaszczyzny, konstrukcja przestrzenna, ale również konwencje tematowe oraz konwencje, wynikające z rozróżnienia malarskich rodzajów i gatunków. Problemem formalnym, który rzeczywistość stawia wobec artysty, będzie w tym samym stopniu problem stworzenia np. nowego typu portretowego, co problem barwnej harmonizacji powierzchni płótna. Jeżeli celem problematyki formalnej w każdym z tych wypadków będzie ujawnienie istotnych treści rzeczywistości, która wciąż się rozwija i zmienia, stworzenie nowych konwencji dla nowych jej aspektów, odkrywających się w przebiegu procesów historyczno-społecznych – będziemy mieli prawo mówić o tendencji realistycznej. Jeżeli natomiast problematyka formalna ograniczy się do autonomicznej, wewnętrznej dialektyki form, do takiego czy innego 'stylizowania' konwencji przyjętych bez głębszego treściowego uzasadnienia – mówić trzeba będzie o tendencji formalistycznej. Osiągnięcia sztuki polskiej dwudziestolecia międzywojennego nazywam formalistycznymi nie dlatego, że stosowała ona takie czy inne konwencje formalne – kompozycyjne, kolorystyczne, tematowe – ale dlatego, że ujawnione przez nią treści były ubogie i jednostronne, że nasza sztuka nowoczesna nie pokazała istoty nowoczesnego stosunku do przedmiotu, materii, człowieka."

[154] Porębski in conversation with Czerni; Czerni, *Nie tylko o sztuce*, 77.

different."[155] Both writers and artists often produced the barest required minimum. In 1951, Stanisław Murzanko, who reviewed theoretical texts on contemporary art for the Ministry of Art and Culture, wrote that art criticism "does not keep up with the developments in painting – it drags on and on, from time to time reluctantly recording a plastic event or two."[156] For Murzanko, contemporary art meant Socialist Realism, which was not enthusiastically embraced by many artists. Murzanko also criticized Porębski, who led the Modern Art Department at the Art Institute in Warsaw, chastising him for not having provided any serious work on the subject.[157] Maintaining one's profession meant that a minimum of official requirements had to be fullfilled, but it also meant that the smallest gesture could often be perceived as dissent.

If Porębski's text was plagued by Stalinist rhetoric, Juliusz Starzyński's 1953 *Na Stalinowskiej Drodze (On the Stalinist Way)* is a testimony to an even tighter grip of the regime on art writing.[158] Starzyński began his text with a reference to Stalin, whose *The Economic Problems of Socialism in the USSR* was published in Warsaw in 1952. The dictator's great importance was emphasized by the phrase the "Great Leader and Teacher" (capitalized), which proclaimed that the Stalinist epoch increased the role of the arts and sciences to the position of the most important values of social life.[159] Starzyński wrote that this work of Stalin (which would be his last), summarized the successful passage from Socialism to Communism, which supplied all workers of culture with new

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[155] Porębski in conversation with Czerni; Czerni, *Nie tylko o sztuce*, 77.
[156] Stanisław Murzanko, "Uwagi krytyczne dotyczące krytyki współczesnej sztuki plastyczej w Polsce," 27 August 1951, AAN MKiS 814, 1.
[157] Murzanko, "Uwagi krytyczne," 2.
[158] Juliusz Starzyński, *Na Stalinowskiej Drodze* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Sztuki, 1953).
[159] Starzyński, *Na Stalinowskiej Drodze*, 5. "do rzędu naczelnych, kierowniczych wartości życia społecznego."

and increasingly more important tasks.[160] The "Great Leader's" version of Marxism-Leninism emphasized the superior role of writers primarily, and artists secondarily, as the "engineers of the human soul," a well-known and often repeated slogan. Starzyński's text, with its honorific references to the "Great Leader," exemplifies the kind of writing about art that would soon become extinct. This does not mean, however, that self-imposed censorship would disappear as well. As I mentioned before, what ensued was a kind of Aesopian language, which earned the Polish critics a bad name at the time and continues to be difficult to penetrate by an uninitiated reader, but the development of this veiled language resulted in the rise of a sophisticated reader. An anecdote about reading newspapers in the East and West comes to mind: if the Eastern European readers do not believe one printed word, their Western counterparts think it all true.

If discussions about Constructivism were thought to dominate the critical literature in postwar Poland, it should be apparent now that too often these discussions were biased and distorted. Some twenty years after the publication of the bankrupt eulogy to Stalin in *Na Stalinowskiej Drodze*, Starzyński devoted an entire chapter to Polish Constructivism in *Polska Droga do Samodzielności w Sztuce* (*The Polish Way to Independence in Art).*[161] This 1973 text opened up a discussion about the troubled relationship between Poland and Russia, fueled in the early 1920s by the Polish-Bolshevik conflict. As I argue in detail in Chapter 2, the Polish-Bolshevik War, or what has been called the Miracle on the Vistula was one of the most enforced taboos until the fall of Communism in the 1990s, and so it is most remarkable that Starzyński addressed it

[160] Starzyński, *Na Stalinowskiej Drodze*, 5. "Wskazana w ostatniej pracy Stalina perspektywa przechodzenia od socjalizmu do komunizmu wytycza pracownikom kultury nowe, jeszcze wyższe zadania."
[161] Juliusz Starzyński, *Polska Droga do Samodzielności w Sztuce* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1973).

at all. The relationship between the Russian and Polish avant-garde was by no means uncomplicated, as it included different and changing attitudes toward Communism, which was itself complicated by the patriotic and nationalist rhetoric of the newly independent Poland.[162] The very recent history of the century-long foreign occupation of Poland still inspired fears associated with the loss of newly regained independence, but also a great deal of distrust against the powerful neighbor's interference into matters of art and culture. As the Czech-born writer Milan Kundera noticed in retrospect, there were reasons for such fears, as the Polish nation "was subjugated to a two-hundred-year rule of the Russians and given to the process of russification, which was as patient as it was relentless."[163] Starzyński made another important but often overlooked point (explored later by Turowski in *Malewicz w Warszawie* (*Malevich in Warsaw*) and by Benson in *Central European Avant-Gardes*), namely that the interwar avant-garde in what is referred to as East-Central Europe flourished in a geopolitical condition in which national borders as well as concepts of ethnicity and nationality were constantly fluctuating (Fig. 23). Starzyński argued that the specifically Polish context, which had not been fully explored, was fundamentally significant to the development of the Polish avant-garde.[164] The Hungarian-born art historian Éva Forgács wrote that the term "East-European Art" was invented "in Germany, and, in the wake of 1968, in Paris," and that it

[162] The Communist Party of Poland (KPP) was founded in December 1918, one month after Poland became an officially independent country, with the purpose of infiltrating Polish intelligence in order to impede the success of the Polish state. Because of its support for Soviet Russia during the Polish-Bolshevik conflict and because its headquarters were located in Moscow, which was prohibited by the Polish Constitution, the KPP was delegalized in 1919. Nearly a decade later, Stalin dissolved the KPP for its Trotskist sympathies. The KPP was rehabilitated in 1956.

[163] Milan Kundera, "Zachód Porwany Albo Tragedia Europy Środkowej," *Zeszyty Literackie 5* (Paris: Winter 1984): 17. "ojczyzna [cześć ojczyzny Polaków] – z wyjątkiem krótkiego okresu międzywojennego – od dwu stuleci była podporządkowana, Rosji i przez cały ten czas poddana rusyfikacji tyleż cierpliwej, co nieubłaganej."

[164] Starzyński, *Polska Droga do Samodzielności w Sztuce*, 72.

"overarches the cultures of a region that had, throughout history, been divided by national and ethnic tensions, conflicts, and rivalries, making the validity of such a unifying cultural concept questionable."[165]

The context of national and ethnic issues remains peripheral in discussions of Russian and Polish Constructivism for various reasons. Perhaps a major motivation was the dissent against the Soviet imposition of "brotherly love" in the region during the Cold War. Forgács put it succinctly when she wrote that "if [artists] related at all to being East European, it was with aspiration to overcome that tag. They thought of themselves as Polish, or Czech, or Slovakian, or Hungarian, or Romanian. . . .and, ultimately, as *European* artists."[166] For example, the analysis of Strzemiński and Kobro by Bois discussed earlier neglected this national context entirely, as well as the artists' relationship and claims to nationality. Kobro met the wounded Strzemiński (a grenade, which had taken out his arm and leg nearly entirely blinded his left eye) when she was a hospital volunteer in 1916.[167] They married in 1921 and lived in Smolensk until they moved to Vilnius. Both held Russian citizenship, but since Strzemiński's mother had settled in Vilnius, the couple had a legal basis to obtain Polish citizenship.[168] When the art group the Affirmers of the New Art, known as UNOVIS, ceased to exist in 1922, Malevich moved from Vitebsk to Petrograd, Lissitzky and Kandinsky both left for Germany, and Strzemiński began to convince his wife to leave Russia illegally for Poland, with the ultimate goal of reaching Paris.[169] After they returned to Poland, Strzemiński – to his wife's great surprise – made a point of over-emphasizing his

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[165] Éva Forgács, "How the New Left Invented East-European Art," *Centropa* 3 (May 2003): 93.
[166] Forgács, "How the New Left Invented East-European Art," 93.
[167] Nika Strzemińska, *Katarzyna Kobro* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1999), 16.
[168] Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie,* 380n247.
[169] Strzemińska, *Katarzyna Kobro*, 18.

"Polishness."[170] To take another example, Malevich who was born to Polish parents in russified Poland and spoke a somewhat imperfect Polish, as early as 1922 tried to arrange a foreign journey with a possibility of staying in Poland permanently. In the same issue of *Zwrotnica* (Switch) that first printed Strzemiński's article "O sztuce rosyjskiej" ("Notes on Russian Art"), Tadeusz Peiper wrote an editorial, which described how he "proceeded to give Malevich's case to the Department of Culture and Arts."[171] This action did not result in success, even if "from the administrative and legal point obtaining Polish citizenship was difficult but realistic."[172] Malevich finally came to Poland in 1927, on his way to Germany, but his trip was cut short because of the Polish government's (*Sanacja's*) suspicion of Malevich's relationship with the Bolshevik Revolution and Communism.[173] The changed political environment after World War I required a new type of national ideology that would support the construction of an independent modern state. In early 1920s Poland, issues of national identity revolved around a strong tide of nationalism. This was a consequence of a multitude of historical and economic factors.[174] As Turowski stated, "if we write the history of the 20th century avant-garde from the perspective of the newcomer. . . .then the cognitive horizon of our reflection will be determined by the issue of identity."[175]

Multiculturalism has been an integral part of the East and Central European artist and

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[170] Turowski, *Budowniczowie Świata,* 28.
[171] See *Zwrotnica* 3 (November 1922): 9. See also Strzemiński's "O Sztuce Rosyjskiej Notatki 1," *Zwrotnica* 3 (November 1922): 79-82; and "O Sztuce Rosyjskiej Notatki 2," *Zwrotnica* 4 (February 1923): 110-14.
[172] Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie,* 111.
[173] Janusz Zagrodzki, "Malewicz w Polsce," *Projekt* 3 (1975): 39.
[174] Among others, Piotr Piotrowski argued that these included the Polish-Soviet War, the Silesian Uprising, and Polish-Lithuanian conflicts as well as the economic crisis intensified by social tensions and the polarization of power elites. See Piotrowski, "Modernity and Nationalism: Avant-Garde Art and Polish Independence, 1912-1922," in *Central European Avant-Gardes*, 318.
[175] Andrzej Turowski, "The Phenomenon of Blurring," in *Central European Avant-Gardes*, 363.

the creative biographies of the lives of these artists provide the base for shaping the concept of cultural identity:

> The avant-garde discourse in Central Europe – and it was probably for this reason that it differed from Italian Futurism and Russian Constructivism – was born "on the ruins of the world," in the madness of civilization. . . .[176]

While Starzyński's 1973 *Polska Droga do Samodzielności w Sztuce* (*The Polish Way To Independence in Art*) was insightful and included a chapter entitled "O polskim konstruktywizmie" ("About Polish Constructivism"), the first meticulously documented analysis of Polish Constructivism was carried out by Andrzej Turowski in *Konstruktywizm Polski* (Fig. 24). Turowski did for Polish Constructivism what, in this country, Lodder had done for Russian Constructivism. Turowski, who popularized the term Polish Constructivism, did not address the cultural, social, and political motivations of the movement or its position vis-à-vis the October Revolution, an issue discussed and contested among Polish artists.[177] However, in the more recent *Budowniczowie Świata* (*The Builders of the World*), Turowski set the utopias of the Polish artists within a cultural, political, and social grid, which was inscribed in the dense weave of the catastrophe of the twentieth-century.[178] Turowski's "Great Builder," a central figure of the study and of Constructivism, was a protagonist in the discourse of progress, whose dream to construct the New World was inscribed in political ideologies and technological

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[176] Turowski, "The Phenomenon of Blurring," 363, 367.
[177] According to Lodder, Turowski first used the term "Polish Constructivism" in *W Kręgu Konstruktywizmu* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1979). See her "Art Into Life: International Constructivism in Eastern and Central Europe," in *Central European Avant-Gardes*, 197n52. Turowski used the term a decade earlier, although Lodder may not have been aware of this, because his book was published in 1981. It is important to note as well that Starzyński used the term "Polish Constructivism" in his 1973 *Polska Droga do Samodzielności w Sztuce*.
[178] Turowski, *Budowniczowie Świata*.

myths of the epoch.[179] While Turowski's study is both thorough and extensive, the central figure in his narrative is Strzemiński, whose status as a venerated artist, theoretician, and pedagogue is legendary. Strzemiński is credited with introducing the art of Russian Constructivism to Polish artists, especially that of Malevich.[180] Strzemiński's utmost respect for his one-time teacher was memorialized by Jarosław Modzelewski (b. 1955), an artist associated with Gruppa, a group of new Expressionists working between 1982 and 1992, in *Strzemiński Weeping for Malevich* (*Strzemiński Opłakujący Malewicza*) of 1985 (Fig. 25). Strzemiński's prominent status was celebrated as soon as the period of the Thaw permitted such gestures, specifically in the 1956 exhibition at the Lodz Museum devoted to the artist and his wife, Katarzyna Kobro, who had both died several years earlier, at the height of Stalinist terror.[181] The small catalogue (Fig. 26) that accompanied the show, in part organized by Stażewski, was valuable on many levels. It contained important illustrations; Strzemiński's theoretical writings, including his last work entitled *Teoria Widzenia* (*The Theory of Vision*), which circulated unofficially among students and intellectuals until its publication in 1958; as well as articles by Julian Przyboś and Stefan Wegner.[182] The exhibition was also significant on a symbolic level. The show rehabilitated the reputations of an artistic couple, who having separated after

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[179] Turowski's studies remain the most important accounts of Polish Constructivism to date. There have been numerous exhibition catalogues and studies devoted to artistic groups and individual artists. The only other study dealing with Polish Constructivism is very brief and cursory. See Stanisław Stopczyk's *Pod Znakiem Konstruktywizmu* (Warsaw: Krajowa Agencja Wydawnicza, 1987).

[180] Strzemiński wrote the first essay about Russian Constructivism in 1922; "O Sztuce Rosyjskiej Notatki 1," *Zwrotnica* 3 (1922); and "O Sztuce Rosyjskiej Notatki 2," *Zwrotnica* 4 (1922).

[181] *Katarzyna Kobro Władysław Strzemiński* (Lodz: Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, 1957).

[182] Julian Przyboś (1901-1970), a leading Polish poet, literary and art critic, associated with the Krakow avant-garde, literary and art critic, a longtime friend and colleague of Strzemiński. Stefan Wegner (1901-1965), was a painter, and a longtime friend and colleague of Strzemiński and Kobro.

World War II, were shunned by the authorities and forced to live and die in extreme poverty. In doing so the show managed to raise the bruised morale of the artistic culture and community, which held the legacy of the husband and wife team in great esteem. Such rehabilitation also served the purpose of repairing the image of the regime damaged by the Stalinist repressions and purges. It was successfully achieved by the Lodz Museum, which since its inception in 1931 has been instrumental in promoting geometric abstract art. Yet, literature on the art of the Polish avant-garde is scant, even today. For example, Irena Jakimowicz's belated *Witkacy Chwistek Strzemiński* appeared only in 1978, a collection of essays entitled *Władysław Strzemiński: In Memoriam* was published in 1988, and essays accompanying an exhibition celebrating the centennial of the artist's birth were written in 1994.[183] The inadequate number of studies illustrates that the period of the Thaw, although extremely important, was brief and swiftly curbed by the regime.

Strzemiński's oeuvre in particular has received the most attention in both Polish and foreign scholarship, to the detriment of other artists associated with Polish Constructivism.[184] The work of Kobro was not embraced in Communist Poland, and has

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[183] Irena Jakimowicz, *Witkacy Chwistek Strzemiński: Myśli i Obrazy* (Warsaw: Arkady, 1978); Janusz Zagrodzki, ed., *Władysław Strzemiński In Memoriam* (Lodz: Sztuka Polska, 1988); *Władysław Strzemiński: w setną rocznicę urodzin, 1893-1952* (Lodz: Muzeum Sztuki, 1994). The Lodz Museum exhibition was supplemented by a volume of essays from the symposium, which accompanied the show. Strzemiński continues to be the subject of great interest in Polish scholarship. In a past few years, in addition to numerous articles, three new studies were published: Leszek Brogowski, *Powidoki i Po: Unizm i Teoria Widzenia Władysława Strzemińskiego* (Gdansk: Słowo Obraz Terytoria, 2001); Krzysztof Smoczyk, Grzegorz Sztabiński, Agnieszka Grochulska, eds., *Władysław Strzemiński: Uniwersalne Oddziaływanie Idei* (Lodz: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych, 2005); and Grzegorz Sztabiński, ed. *Władysław Strzemiński: Wybór Pism Estetycznych* (Krakow: Universitas, 2006).

[184] For example, in addition to exhibition catalogues, Berlewi's work was examined by Andrzej K. Olszewski in his *Henryk Berlewi* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Artystyczno-Graficzne, 1968); and the poet and critic Anatol Stern (1899-1968) studied the work of Szczuka in his *Mieczysław Szczuka* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1965). To my knowledge, there is no major study on the art of Teresa Żarnower.

since secured less attention than that of her husband.[185] While the literature on Stażewski consists of a great number of exhibition catalogues, more detailed analyses of his oeuvre is also scant.[186] The earliest substantial discussion was carried out in 1965 by Hanna Ptaszkowska-Krasińska (also known as Anka Ptaszkowska), who was then a young critic from the prestigious Catholic University in Lublin (KUL).[187] Another analysis, written by Bożena Kowalska, was published two decades later.[188] Both books provide extremely important discussions of Stażewski's oeuvre both before and after World War II, but both authors stayed away from discussions of the historical and political climate in which this work was produced and received. Another decade passed before a large exhibition of Stażewski's work was mounted at the Lodz Museum at the occasion of the centennial of

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[185] The Lodz Museum mounted an exhibition at the centennial of the artist's birth. See *Katarzyna Kobro w Setną Rocznicę Urodzin, 1898-1951* (Lodz: Muzeum Sztuki, 1999). The artists' daughter made available biographical materials about the relationship between her parents. See Nika Strzemińska's *Miłość, sztuka i nienawiść* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1991) and *Katarzyna Kobro* (Warsaw: Scholar, 1999). These two positions are biographical accounts, by their nature subjective, of the private and artistic lives of the two artists. The books unraveled the story of Strzemiński's cruelty toward his wife, including submitting petitions to prevent Kobro from receiving an academic appointment at the Lodz Academy of Fine Arts after the end of World War II. Nika Strzemińska's account was received by Polish scholars with respect and much interest. Perhaps the fact that Nika Strzemińska was able to place a copy of her mother's own sculpture on Kobro's grave in Lodz only in 1990 is an indication of the artist's fate. Strzemińska's books are also interesting in light of the fact that – to my knowledge – no comparable account exists on the subject of other famous Constructivist husband-and-wife team of Rodchenko and Stepanova. Kobro's art has received some attention in the West. In addition to the exhibitions of the movement as a whole, Bois deals with her sculptural output in *Painting as Model*. Three of Kobro's sculptures were shown at the Guggenheim's *Planar Dimensions* in 1979. See Margit Rowell, *The Planar Dimension: Europe, 1912-1932* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 1979).

[186] See, for example, *Wystawa Prac Henryka Stażewskiego.* (Warsaw: Związek Literatów Polskich, 1955); *Mondrian de Stijl and Their Impact* (New York: Marlborough Gallery, 1964); *Peinture Moderne Polonaise. Sources et Recherches* (Paris: Musée Galliera, 1969); *Henryk Stażewski: reliéfy z let 1967-69* (Prague: Národni Galerie, 1970); Gregory Battcock, *Paintings by Henryk Stażewski* (New York: Gruenbaum Gallery, 1976); *Henryk Stażewski: Rilievi e dipinti 1958/1987* (Rome: Spicchi dell'Est, 1991); *Henryk Stażewski: Malarstwo i Przyjaźń/Painting and Friendship* (Warsaw: Galeria Kordegarda, 1994).

[187] Hanna Ptaszkowska-Krasińska, *Henryk Stażewski* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Artystyczno-Graficzne, 1965).

[188] Bożena Kowalska, *Henryk Stażewski* (Warsaw: Arkady, 1985).

his birth, which was accompanied by a volume of valuable essays dealing mostly with the early part of his long career.[189] Most recently, Warsaw's Foksal Gallery, which Stażewski helped found in 1966, in collaboration with the more recently established Foksal Foundation, published a valuable study of the artist's career. The book, *Henryk Stażewski: Ekonomia Myślenia i Postrzegania / The Economy of Thought and Perception* is extremely important as it is profusely illustrated, and includes English translations of Stażewski's writings as well as essays by Joanna Mytkowska and Andrzej Turowski (both translated).[190] The publication of the book coincided with a 2007 conference, *Avant-garde in the Bloc: Aspects of the Oeuvre and Studio of Henryk Stażewski and Edward Krasiński*. The conference, which took place in Warsaw, was meant to inaugurate the opening of the studio (or rather an apartment which also served as a studio) that had been occupied between 1969 and 1988 by Stażewski and the painter Edward Krasiński (1925-2004), who became famous for his signature "blue line," executed with the help of blue scotch tape placed at the height of 1 meter and 30 centimeters but of undetermined lenght (Fig. 27). This last event paying homage to Stażewski's art and life is significant, because it acknowledged the influence of his art on the younger generation of artists, such as Krasiński.

[189] *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988: W Setną Rocznicę Urodzin* (Lodz: Muzeum Sztuki, 1995).
[190] See Małgorzata Jurkiewicz, Joanna Mytkowska, and Wiesław Borowski, eds., *Henryk Stażewski: Ekonomia Myślenia i Postrzegania / The Economy of Thought and Perception* (Warsaw: Fundacja Galerii Foksal and Galeria Foksal, 2005).

CHAPTER TWO

IN-BETWEEN: POLISH CONSTRUCTIVISM, WEST OF VITEBSK, EAST OF BERLIN

Chapter 2 evaluates the art of Polish Constructivism from the period before World War II. This chapter traces the mechanisms of dissemination of the art of Russian Constructivism during the 1920s across Europe in an attempt to define the parameters of the phenomenon known as International Constructivism. The term International Constructivism was coined by Stephen Bann in 1974 to denote the dissemination of Russian Constructivism outside of Soviet Russia, especially in Germany. Later, Christina Lodder refined the term to denote "Western constructivist theory and practice as opposed to that of original Russian movement."[191] Since Lodder refers to the Western reception of Russian Constructivism, I propose to extend this definition to include art from East-Central Europe, including, but not limited to, Poland. Henryk Stażewski, then, plays a central role in this examination. His output is significant not only because it was an integral part of Blok, Praesens, and a.r, artist groups that helped to internationalize the Polish version of Constructivism, but also because he resumed the practice of geometric abstract art in the postwar period during the period of Stalinism but also the later Thaw, when its status became more and more precarious. Stażewski's work is therefore a superb

[191] Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1974), xxv. It is important to note, however, that Lissitzky referred to "the new collective, international style" in an article entitled "Die Blockade Russlands Geht Ihrem Ende Entgegen" ("The Blockade of Russia is Coming to an End"), which also appeared in French and Russian in *Vesch Objet Gegenstand* 1/2 (March/April 1922): 2. Christina Lodder, "El Lissitzky and the Export of Constructivism," *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow*, ed. Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003), 28.

example for an analysis of art production outside of the Western canon and opens up the discussion of the reception of Constructivism in the 1950s.

The discussion begins with an analysis of experimental art groups in the historical and political context of General Józef Piłsudski's interwar Poland. The early exhibitions of Polish Constructivists such as *Wystawa Nowej Sztuki* (*Exhibition of New Art*) in Vilnius in 1923 and those organized by the art group Blok provide background for my discussion of the specific politics of display. The group's periodical *Blok* featured the "What is Constructivism" manifesto in September 1924 and popularized both the term "Constructivism" and "avant-garde," which were often used interchangeably by artists and critics both before and behind the Iron Curtain. The later periodical *Praesens*, the quarterly of modernists, is also a key publication not only because it was first edited by Henryk Stażewski, but also because it illustrates the relationship between art and architecture.[192] Yet only three years later, dissatisfied with the functionalist aesthetic of the architect Szymon Syrkus (1893-1964) and Praesens's overemphasis on architecture, the three members of Praesens Stażewski, Strzemiński and Kobro, founded a.r. (revolutionary artists, or the real avant-garde).[193] My discussion of *a.r.* helps to elucidate the process by which Polish Constructivism was disseminated on the artistic map of Europe, but also the impending decline of the Constructivist aesthetic in the 1930s, which took place not only in Poland but in all of Europe. Finally, I address the attempts of the Polish avant-garde to disseminate their work in a wider context. Before the outbreak of World War II, Polish Constructivists struggled for the reception of their work in the

[192] Other artists associated with Praesens included Kairiukstis, Strzemiński, Kobro, Szczuka, Żarnower, and Berlewi, among others.
[193] a.r. also included the poet and critic Julian Przyboś (1901-1970) and Jan Brzękowski (1903-1983).

international context by maintaining a strong presence in the Parisian groups of Cercle et Carré and Abstraction-Création. While Polish Constructivists were well known in the artistic European context before World War II, in its aftermath, Polish artists were relegated to a peripheral position due to the political climate of the Cold War.

Independence: General Józef Piłsudski's Interwar Poland

The history of the newly independent country of Poland, known as the Second Republic of Poland dates to November 1918 (Fig. 28).[194] For over a century, Poland (or the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, as it was known before being finally dismembered in 1795).[195] The vast territory of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth was politically, culturally, and geographically divided under foreign rule from 1772 to 1918 (Fig. 29).[196]

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[194] Rzeczpospolita is Polish for 'republic' or 'commonwealth,' taken from Latin *res publica*, which means 'public affair.' The term had been used in a sense of commonwealth during the First Republic of Poland between 1505 and 1795 (because it was a monarchy). In the Second Republic of Poland, during the interwar years, the term is understood as 'republic.' Trzecia Rzeczpospolita Polska (Third Republic of Poland) dates from the fall of Communism in 1989 until the present.

[195] A very popular account dealing with Polish history in English is Norman Davis' two-volume work entitled *Boże Igrzysko: Historia Polski* (*God's Playground: A History of Poland*) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), which was translated into Polish by Elżbieta Tabakowska in 1988 and published again in 1998; I reference the 1998 edition. It is important to note that during the years of Stalinism but also under Gomułka's Thaw and after, the interwar Polish Republic was denounced as bourgeois and capitalist, and was not discussed in literature until the fall of Communism in 1989. An important account dealing with this period is Richard M. Watt's *Bitter Glory: Poland and Its Fate, 1918-1939* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1979), translated into Polish as *Gorzka Chwała: Polska i jej los 1918-1939* (Warsaw: A.M.F., 2005). Until then no Polish publisher was able or willing to print it, because it dealt with the 'forgotten' and taboo part of Polish history, including the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1920 and the Nazi-Soviet Pact of 1939. Until recently, many studies dealing with the twentieth-century history of Poland had been written by foreign authors, or at best published by presses outside of Poland, especially France and Britain. Such studies include Peter D. Stachura, ed., *Poland Between the Wars, 1918-1939* (New York: St. Martin Press, 1998); Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, *A Concise History of Poland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001). In Polish, the most useful studies include Wojciech Roszkowski's *Historia Polski: 1914-2004*, 10th edition (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2005) and Andrzej Paczkowski's *Pół Wieku Dziejów Polski,* 5th edition (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2005).

[196] The founding of the Commonwealth dates to the Union of Lublin of 1569 until 1795. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth included territories of what is today Poland, Lithuania, Belarus, large parts of Ukraine and Estonia, as well as parts of Russia. The changing of geographical borders brought about a great deal of conflict well into the twentieth century as well as a great ambivalence and outright hostility toward Russian control of the territory. The evidence of hostility, on one hand, but also a great degree of camaraderie in the struggle for independence was seen in the nationwide Polish support for the Ukrainian Orange Revolution

During that period, it had been partitioned between three of its more powerful neighbors, Russia, Prussia, and Austria. The first partition took place in 1772, the second in 1793, and the third in 1795. The violations of Polish rights that occurred under foreign rule included the abandonment of the Polish education system (the prestigious Krakow's Jagiellonian University, founded in the mid-fourteenth century was transformed into a German-Latin institution), the institution of censorship, including the suppression of the Polish language in schools, imposition of military service, and the strict supervision of the Roman Catholic Church. Generally, the development of nationalism in the Western part of the world dates to the disintegration of centuries old feudal structures of social organization and is thus associated with modernity. In Poland, however, which adapted a modern society later than other European nations, the notion of nationalism "was understood as the discourse of the nation only after it was understood as ethno-linguistic nationalism."[197] Meaning that whatever the hardships and the strictness of the censorship, Poland's ethnic linguistic-national identity was firmly in place throughout the partition years, as evidenced by the influential Romantic tradition of poet Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855) and the patriotic one of the Nobel Prize author Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846-1916).[198] The history of the partition years is crucial to understanding the fluid channels of the exchange of information during the 1920s as well

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during late 2004 and early 2005 as well as the present support of the Freedom for Belarus campaign.

[197] Piotr Piotrowski, "Od nacjonalizacji do socjalizacji Polskiego modernizmu, 1913-1950," *Artium Quaestiones* 14 (2004): 101-02.

[198] Adam Mickiewicz is considered one of the greatest Polish epic poets. Little-known outside of Poland, he emigrated from his native land first to Rome and then Paris, where he authored his masterpiece *Pan Tadeusz* (*Mister Tadeusz*) recounting the nuances of the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth on the eve of Napoleonic War with Russia in 1812. Henryk Sienkiewicz authored historical novels such as the widely known *Quo Vadis* (1896), as well as trilogy dealing with Polish history: *Ogniem i Mieczem* (*With Fire and Sword*) (1884); *Potop* (*The Deluge*) (1884); and *Pan Wołodyjowski* (*Mister Wołodyjowski*) (1888). Sienkiewicz was a recipient of the 1905 Nobel Prize for literature.

as the national identification of individual artists. After the Poles, the largest ethnic group in Poland was that of the Ukrainians, and Jews made up ten percent of the population of interwar Poland. For example, Kazimir Malevich was of Polish descent, yet is considered a Russian artist. Katarzyna Kobro was born of German parents in Russia, but is considered a Polish artist because she lived in the city of Lodz for most of her adult life. The legacy of partition years is also extremely crucial, because at the beginning of the twentieth-century major cities were under different foreign rule: Krakow and Lublin under the Austrian command in a region known as Galicia; Warsaw, Lodz, and Vilnius under Russian dominion; and Poznan and Gdansk belonging to Prussia.

After more than a century of hopelessness associated with foreign occupation, a new era emerged with the founding of the Second Republic of Poland in November 1918, although not without diplomatic difficulties and complications. General Józef Piłsudski, who was repeatedly imprisoned for his support of Polish reunification, was instrumental in securing independence in 1918. Not entirely in keeping with the laws of the occupying powers, Piłsudski mobilized a small army he called Legiony Polskie (Polish Legions) immediately after the beginning of the World War I in 1914. By 1915, it had grown to twelve thousand people. Piłsudski then established a National Government in Warsaw in 1915 and served as the Chief of State from 1918 to 1921. The founding of Poland in 1918 was not without difficulties on the international scene. The Entente Powers (the United States, Britain, and France) formally confirmed Poland's independence at both the Paris Peace Conference and the Versailles Treaty, both in 1919. While the Versailles Treaty instituted peace with Germany and shaped the Polish-German border, what was troubling was the fact that Poland's eastern border was not firmly established, which

resulted in the later Polish-Soviet and Polish-Lithuanian conflicts. Although Britain proposed that the eastern border follow the so-called "Curzon Line" (the border between Prussia and Russia during the third partition), Poland rejected that proposal as it would have left large parts of historically Polish territory to Russia. Between 1918 and 1921, ethnic conflicts and economic hardships resulted in no less than six wars.[199]

In particular, the Polish-Bolshevik War of 1920 carried significant consequences. Unrelated to the contemporaneous Russian Civil War, this war was fought to maintain the independence of the non-Russian regions of the Tsarist Empire. General Piłsudski "sought to create in the east something akin to the old Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, a confederation of the smaller eastern states under Poland's overall leadership," which would provide "the most efficacious barrier against the threat to their independence from Russia."[200] Historians have argued that Lenin's government wanted to rebuild the Tsarist Empire in the image of the socialist state in order to ensure the long-lasting effects and success of the Revolution.[201] The war began in February 1919, when German forces vacated the eastern frontier separating Russia from Poland.[202] The Polish-Bolshevik conflict was a war fought mostly in isolation as the little foreign assistance that Poland simply purchased was seriously delayed by the German dockers in the northern city of Gdansk and in the south by the Czech railway workers.[203] The apogee of the conflict took place at the Battle of Warsaw in the summer of 1920, when "no fewer than five Soviet armies, twenty divisions in all. . . stood only a few miles from the Polish

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[199] Davis, *Boże Igrzysko*, 431-32.
[200] Stachura, "The Battle of Warsaw, August 1920, and the Development of the Second Polish Republic," *Poland Between the Wars,* 44.
[201] See, for example, Davis, *Boże Igrzysko*, 432; and Stachura, "The Battle of Warsaw," 44.
[202] Davis, *Boże Igrzysko*, 432.
[203] Davis, *Boże Igrzysko*, 434.

capital."[204] And yet, in what has somewhat derogatorily been termed the 'Miracle on the Vistula,' the Soviet army was defeated.[205] Isaac Babel (1894-1940), a Jewish Russian journalist, who kept the events of the summer of 1920 in the public eye in his half-fiction half-truth stories, described the moments after the battle:

> Five thousand men, our whole division, poured down the slope with no one in pursuit. The enemy stayed on the hill, unable to believe their illogical victory and muster their wits to set out in pursuit after us. That is why we survived and went bounding into the valley unharmed.[206]

Later Stachura summed it up when he wrote that "the unthinkable had happened; they put country before class," much no doubt to Lenin's chagrin.[207] Lenin was forced to propose a peace offer culminating in the 1921 Riga Tract. Count Maurycy Zamoyski, a Polish diplomat in Paris, was overjoyed that the Polish victory rescued the country "from the possibility of having to accept Soviet solutions sanctioned by Lloyd George, which equaled the de facto renunciation of independence in favor of Russia and Germany."[208] The Polish-Bolshevik war mobilized the Polish society in an unprecedented way. The heightened sense of patriotism and nationalism was a result of the fear of losing the still fragile independence, but it would also shape the mood of the interwar period. During the 1920s, Bolshevism, like Tsarist Russia earlier, was linked with repression and

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[204] Stachura, "The Battle of Warsaw," 45.
[205] Wisła (Vistula) is the longest river in Poland that cuts through essentially the entire country (including Warsaw, Krakow, Gdansk) from the Carpathian Mountains in the South to the Baltic Sea in the North.
[206] Isaac Babel, a Jewish-Russian writer, published the Red Cavalry stories (fictional stories set against historical background) in magazines and newspapers between 1923 and 1926. Officially, Babel was well known and respected until his arrest in 1939 for participation in anti-Soviet activities. He was sentenced to death by firing squad in 1940. His work was rehabilitated in 1954. See "After the Battle" (1920), in *The Complete Works by Isaac Babel*, ed. Nathalie Babel (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2002), 324.
[207] Stachura, "The Battle of Warsaw," 49.
[208] Maurycy Zamoyski, undated letter, AAN, Embassy of Poland in Washington, t. 233; cited in ed., Marian Marek Drozdowski *Zwycięstwo 1920: Warszawa wobec agresji bolszewickiej* (Paris: Editions Dembinski, 1990), 15.

destruction of "an alien ideology and political system."[209] The war also had resonance in the wider European context, because "it questioned the power of Bolshevism and its global expansion."[210] The war was also significant for Soviet internal affairs, as it was followed by the institution of the NEP in 1921, which resulted in "a definite attempt to clean up and reorganize culture as subservient to political power."[211]

While it ended the war, the Riga Treaty did not repair the strained relationship between Poland and Russia. Piłsudski, who since his early youth had promoted Socialism, found his most zealous political opponent in Roman Dmowski (1864-1939), who co-founded the National Democracy, referred to as *endecja* from the Polish pronunciation of its abbreviation N.D.. The National Democratic Party, active until 1939, was a right wing, nationalistic organization often criticized for its anti-Semitism, which believed that Poland should agree to a semi-autonomous position within the larger Russian Empire. Piłsudski's faction, also nationalistic in character, advocated for full Polish autonomy. General Piłsudski's extreme distrust of Russian foreign politics was so intense that he helped to delegalize the Polish Communist Party (KPP), which, it was believed, wanted to demobilize the independent Polish state.

One of the key issues involved in the conflict was the relationship of Jews living in Poland to the concepts of nationalism and Communism. Many Jews were opposed to an independent Poland. For example, these views were expressed at the Paris Conference of 1919. Some agreed with Dmowski's program of a semi-autonomous state. Yet others agreed with Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), who not only opposed an independent Poland

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[209] Stachura, "The Battle of Warsaw," 49.
[210] Zamoyski, undated letter.
[211] Andrzej Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie: rekonstrukcje i symulacje* (Krakow: Universitas, 2004), 99.

but thought it was a utopian fantasy (a position, we may note, contrary to that of Marx).[212] Many Poles resented the Jewish support of the Bolsheviks, who, although officially the war ended, were still considered a tremendous threat to the newly instituted Republic. The need to maintain Polish independence overshadowed all other issues of the time and influenced the fate of the Communist Party but also reverberated in the art world of interwar Poland.

Because of its leftist tendencies, the Constructivist movement was perceived as Bolshevik and anti-Polish. Strzemiński complained in 1925 that the new art had been described as "communist subversion."[213] Later, during the 1932 ceremony at which Strzemiński received an achievement award from the city of Lodz, the rowdy audience demanded that "the poisoners of Polish art" be put down; and that the Lodz Museum of Modern Art founded by Strzemiński in 1931, the bastion of Jewish Bolshevism, disparagingly called *judeo-commune* (*żydokomuna*), be destroyed.[214] A perfect illustration of the precarious situation of Marxist intellectuals both before and behind the Iron Curtain is embodied in the figure of Aleksander Wat (1900-1967), the Polish Communist futurist poet. Wat was first imprisoned in Poland in 1932, then in Lvov in 1940 (his wife Ola and young son were exiled to Kazakhstan the same year), and then again in 1943 when he too was deported to Kazakhstan. When Czesław Miłosz interviewed Wat in Berekely between 1964 and 1965, the Polish poet made a distinction

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[212] See, for example, Rosa Luxemburg, "The Polish Question at the International Congress in London" (1896); in Horace B. Davis, *The National Question: Selected Writings by Rosa Luxemburg* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976), passim.
[213] Władysław Strzemiński to W. Ziółkowski, 8 December 1925; reprinted in Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie,* 489.
[214] Stefan Wegner, "Wspomnienia Biograficzne," Janusz Zagrodzki, ed., *Władysław Strzemiński In Memoriam* (Lodz: Sztuka Polska, 1988), 36.

between those who became Communists in the 1920s and those who joined the Party in the 1930s:

> Why was our group [during the 1920s] so much destroyed by history and communism? Why did communism destroy the lives of those people, and why did the people who joined the communists in the mid-thirties make such careers for themselves? . . . What are the reasons behind the pronounced difference, which is almost the stuff of tragedy? . . .As if it were still possible to write tragedies in the twentieth-century.[215]

Wat was interested in "questions of worldview, ideology, conscience, the cause of social justice" and not in political manipulations of reality.[216] He believed the pre-Stalinist Communists, especially in Poland, were united by "the unmistakable predominance of ideological, philosophical, and social motives over the political."[217] As I will argue later, the fate of Communists in postwar Poland was also precarious. To take one prominent example, Władysław Gomułka (1905-1982), the Chief Executive of the United Workers' Party of Poland (PZPR) from 1945 to 1948, was imprisoned by 1951 for being a rightist-nationalist deviationist and rehabilitated in 1954, and became First Secretary of PZPR in 1956, which signalled the beginning of the Thaw.

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[215] The memoirs, typed by Miłosz, were first published in London in 1977. Aleksander Wat and Czesław Miłosz, *My Century: The Odyssey of a Polish Intellectual* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 16. On the history of the fate of Marxist Polish writers see Marci Shore, *Caviar and Ashes: A Warsaw's Generation's Life and Death in Marxism, 1918-1968* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006).
[216] Wat and Miłosz, *My Century*, 17.
[217] Wat and Miłosz, *My Century*, 17.

Polish Constructivists at the Warsaw School of Fine Arts

Polish experimental art groups including Constructivism were active in the historical and political context of interwar Poland described above. For example, many of the future members of Blok were educated at the Warsaw School of Fine Arts, which was an important formative experience. These artists included Stażewski, Szczuka, Żarnower, Kryński, Aleksander Rafałowski (1894-1980), Maria Nicz-Borowiakowa (1896-1944), and Jan Golus (1895-1964).[218] Stażewski's life spanned nearly a century and his career had a tremendous impact on the development of Polish art both before and after World War II, yet surprisingly little is known of his biography. He was born on 9 January 1894 in Warsaw, the son of a metal workshop owner.[219] Most likely, Stażewski attended the School of Fine Arts from 1913 to 1920.[220] He was a student of Professor Stanisław Lentz (1861-1920), a fairly conservative portrait painter who at times produced works that addressed social issues (Fig. 30).[221] Both Stażewski and Szczuka, who studied with another conservative painter, Miłosz Kotarbiński (1854-1944), belonged to the prized and privileged group of students who each supervised a workshop, an honor which meant that both studied free of charge.[222] An artist and critic, Wilhelm Mitarski (1897-

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[218] On the history of the Warsaw School of Fine Arts, see Ksawery Piwocki, *Historia Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie 1904-1964* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 1965), 44. On the history of the Academy between 1902 and 1920, see anina Tarkowska, ed., *Warszawska Szkoła Sztuk Pięknych, 1902-1920* (Warsaw: Zeszyt Naukowy ASP,1995).
[219] See Janina Ładnowska, "Kalendarium życia i dzieła Henryka Stażewskiego," in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988: w setną rocznicę urodzin* (Lodz: Muzeum Sztuki, 1995), 104.
[220] Accounts differ slightly regarding the years of Stażewski's enrollment. In the archive of the Warsaw School of Fine Arts, Stażewski is listed as a student from 1913 to 1920. Ładnowska gives 1913-1919 as the dates of his attendance in "Kalendarium życia i dzieła Henryka Stażewskiego," in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988*, 104. The Archive of New Documents (AAN) is in possession of a form filled by the artist, who dated his attendance at the School of Fine Arts between 1914 and 1920; Kwestjonariusz, MWRiOP 7063, 166-169.
[221] Lentz was a director of the Warsaw School of Fine Arts between 1909 and 1920.
[222] Joanna Sosnowska, "Czego w Warszawskiej Szkole Sztuk Pięknych nauczyła się awangarda," in *Polskie Szkolnictwo Artystyczne: dzieje, teoria, praktyka,* ed. Maria Poprzęcka (Warsaw:

1923) wrote in 1918 that the workshop of Professor Lentz represented the artistic elite of the school, and that Stażewski's work was "a testimony not only of talent but also the degree of dexterity and technique . . . . that surely entitle to beautiful hopes for the future."[223] Stażewski and Szczuka seem to have received awards frequently. Upon viewing Stażewski's work, the head of the Department of Painting and Sculpture within the Ministry of Art and Culture, Eligiusz Niewiadomski (1869-1923), also a painter who would become well-known for the assassination of the first President of Poland, approved a stipend based on the merit of the young artist.[224] Due to the planned restructuring of the school, Stażewski and Szczuka received notice to vacate their workshops.[225] The notion of the restructuring of the School into the Higher School of Applied Arts was widely debated and opposed. First in 1920 and a year later in December 1921, students wrote memoranda addressed to the authorities requesting that the school retain its academic character.[226] The student letters are interesting because of the strong belief and confidence they expressed on behalf of the faculty. Yet, later, Stażewski who spent five years in Lentz's workshop, not only minimized but outright negated his formal training.[227]

The 1920 Battle of Warsaw and the wave of patriotism and nationalism it inspired had a tremendous impact not only on the political but also on the cultural and artistic

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Stowarzyszenie Historyków Sztuki, 2005), 209. Stażewski, for example, received the Jan Matejko Prize at the exhibition concluding the 1920 academic year.

[223] Wilhelm Mitarski, "Wystawa w szkole sztuk pięknych," August 1918, AAN, MWRiOP 7011, 55. Szczuka received a favorable mention in this article as well. There is another document in the same folder that mentions the undoubtable talent of Stażewski and of Szczuka, p. 51.

[224] Eligiusz Niewiadomski, Sprawozdanie, April 1919, AAN, MKiS 7064, 428.

[225] On the restructuring of the Warsaw School of Fine Arts from city to federally-owned, see Piwocki, *Historia Akademii,* 40-43.

[226] "Księga protokółów posiedzeń Rady Pedagogicznej Warsawskiej Szkoły Sztuk Pięknych z lat 1904-1920," Archives of the Academy of Fine Arts, Warsaw, 103/260 I; cited in Sosnowska, "Czego w Warszawskiej Szkole Sztuk Pięknych nauczyła się awangarda," 208.

[227] Sosnowska, "Czego w Warszawskiej Szkole Sztuk Pięknych nauczyła się awangarda," 208.

scene in Poland. Yet even today the consequences of this historic episode on the art culture of the 1920s is engulfed in silence. The Polish art historian Joanna Sosnowska has been the only one to notice that in the "past sixty years, writing about the exhibitions of 1920 and the beginning of next year, no one even mentioned that nearby a bloody war and intense political battles were going on."[228] Mostly destroyed by the war, the archives at the Warsaw School of Fine Arts now contain only scant evidence on the engagement of students in the actual battle. It is safe to assume, however, that the "bloody war" on the bank of the river Vistula charging through the center of Warsaw had an impact on the artistic scene and likely influenced the later political sympathies of those who were enrolled at the School of Fine Arts around this time. For example, the Council for Defense of the Nation (ROP), founded in July 1920, issued a call to the academic youth for voluntary enlistment in the Polish Army. The General Academic Conference also encouraged students to comply with the request with such slogans as

> Friends! Today is no time for recklessness, laziness, or egoism. Only a great and widespread effort can and will give us victory. To arms! To defend our borders, for the wholeness and independence of Poland.[229]

While such passionate calls to arms are no testimony to the effects it had, photographs depicting voluntary enlistees provide some evidence of the mobilization of civilians in the defense of Warsaw (Fig. 31). Describing the political atmosphere in Warsaw during the summer of 1920, the writer Jan Maurycy Borski wrote that the ranks of the regular and voluntary armies were filled with figures of the "worker, academic, student, [and]

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[228] Sosnowska, "Czego w Warszawskiej Szkole Sztuk Pięknych nauczyła się awangarda," 209.
[229] "Koledzy i koleżanki! Nie czas dzisiaj na lekkomyślność, lenistwo i egoizm. Tylko wielki i powszechny wysiłek dać nam może i da nam zwycięstwo. Do broni! W obronie naszych granic, za całość i niepodległość Rzeczypospolitej!" "Odezwa "Do młodzieży akademickiej" – Konferencji ogólnej akademickiej z wezwaniem do ochotniczej służby w Wojsku Polskim," (6 July 1920); reprinted in Drozdowski, ed., *Zwycięstwo 1920,* 29.

peasant."[230] According to the archives of the School of Fine Arts in Warsaw, if they did not take part in the 1920 war, students were required to give a reason such as a doctor's notice. In fact, university students unanimously voted to enlist in the Academic Legion. The Academic Legion was a right wing organization, founded on 11 November 1918 (the date of the Compiègne tract signaling the end of World War I on the western front and celebrated by the Poles ever since as Independence Day). In fact, the school's faculty passed a decree not to enroll in the school any men who did not voluntarily enlist in the Army.[231] A 1919 photograph of the Academic Legion depicts students equipped with rifles outfitted with bayonets, two of which frame the figure of Stażewski (Fig. 32). Rafałowski, who studied with Stażewski, Berlewi, Szczuka, and Żarnower, and was later a member of Blok, wrote that in 1920 "the so called academic command to mobilize was in fact a compulsory army service. 1920. The year when I joined the Party was also the year I was mobilized."[232] In addition, Professor Miłosz Kotarbiński wrote letters requesting stipends for students returning from their serivce in the army (including Stażewski and Szczuka).[233] There is some evidence, then, suggesting that students who were enrolled at the School of Fine Arts also participated, directly or indirectly, in the 1920 Polish-Bolshevik War.

The political milieu of the early 1920s must have had an influence on the worldview of artists who were then coming-of-age. During his membership in the Academic Legion, Stażewski produced a series of colorful sketches of camping

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[230] Jan Maurycy Borski, "Warszawa," *Robotnik,* 31 July 1920, 1.
[231] See Piwocki, *Historia Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie*, 44. Stażewski was enrolled in the Legion in 1920; see Ładnowska, "Kalendarium życia i dzieła Henryka Stażewskiego," 105.
[232] Aleksander Rafałowski, *I Spoza Palety: Wspomnienie* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1970), 23.
[233] Miłosz Kotarbiński to MWRiOP, 12 January 1921. AAN, MWRiOP 7046, 214-215.

soldiers.[234] He referenced ideas of anarchism in the work called *The Anarchists* (*Anarchiści*) shown in the exhibition of the Formists in 1921.[235] The origin of Stażewski's active political involvement dates to his collaboration with the Worker's Stage (Scena Robotnicza) associated with a leftist organization the People's University (Uniwersytet Ludowy) that was committed to the dissemination of socialist culture to the masses. The Worker's Stage and Club on Obożna Street in Warsaw was the hub of propaganda for workers' ideology and culture. In 1922, it boasted of such activists as Jan Hempel (1887-1937) and Witold Wandurski (1891-1934).[236] After the publication of the first issue of *Blok*, Hempel commended the artists for the closeness of their political inclinations to those of the Communist Party, which resulted in a closer collaboration between artists and activists.[237] In 1923 Stażewski produced stage designs in Lodz for Wandurski, along with the Polish Constructivist Karol Hiller (1891-1939).[238] Later, he was involved with a production of *Róża* (*Rosa*) by the Polish writer Stefan Żeromski

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[234] Stażewski produced a series of works depicting soldiers. Two undated, small works – one oil and one pencil sketch – were deposited in the collection of the Regional Museum in Kutno by the family of Stanisław Kurman, an artist and cultural activist.

[235] I have not been able to locate this work. There is a reference to the painting (but no reproduction) in Mieczysław Wallis, *Sztuka Polska Dwudziestolecia: Wybór Pism z lat 1921-1957* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Arkady, 1959). Andrzej Turowski mentions the work in *Budowniczowie Świata: z dziejów radykalnego modernizmu w sztuce polskiej* (Krakow: Universitas, 2000), 133n233, but does not indicate its location. According to Sosnowska, this work has not been located; Sosnowska, "Czego w Warszawskiej Szkole Sztuk Pięknych nauczyła się awangarda," 209.

[236] Jan Hempel was an activist in the Polish workers' movement who joined the Communist Party in 1921. He was first imprisoned in 1931 and finally executed in 1937. Witold Wandurski was a Polish poet who first translated Mayakovsky and directed the workers' theater in Lodz during the 1920s. Wandurski was executed in 1934 for being a Polish nationalist.

[237] Henryk Stażewski in conversation with Andrzej Jakimowicz, "Kronika Polskiej Awangardy, 1912-1957," *Przegląd Artystyczny* 1 (1958): 19.

[238] Turowski, *Budowniczowie Świata,* 132. I have not found any sources discussing these productions.

(1864-1925).[239] The title refers to Rosa Luxemburg, a Marxist activist and revolutionary, who was executed in 1919 with the activist Karl Liebknecht. Żeromski's play dealt with the 1905 revolution, which motivated writings by Luxemburg. The 1905 revolution was precipitated by the events of the "bloody Sunday" massacre of the demonstrating workers in Saint Petersburg, and involved mass manifestations of workers and peasants demanding political and economic reforms. Rafałowski described the performance in his memoir:

> The motto "proletarian art": kindled our spirit. The term was viewed differently at different times. Our chief goal was to introduce art to the masses. Dissemination of the worldview with the use of art seemed the least perceptible and the most constructive.
> We plan to offer Żeromski's *Róża*, directed by Edward Wodzicki, for "the first fire." The large but poorly adapted space causes difficulties for both the actors and decorators. The actors are ready. The design and decoration of the stage in progress. The factories are willing to provide the audience. Impatiently we await the opening night. The theatre is filled to the rim when the curtain goes up. . . . . The performance was well received. One more took place, which was also the last. The authorities march in and the theatre is shut closed.[240]

Rafałowski's detailed recollection, if perhaps biased (he taught at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw from 1946 continuously until 1965 with no seeming interruptions even during most turbulent years of Stalinism) is rare and valuable in light of the fact that the

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[239] Aleksander Rafałowski in conversation with Jakimowicz, in "Kronika Polskiej Awangardy, 1912-1957," 20. Żeromski's *Róża* was first published in Krakow in 1909 under the pseudonym Józef Katerla.

[240] Rafałowski, *I Spoza Palety*, 33. "Przyświecało nam hasło "sztuki proletariackiej." Zmiennie się ten termin w różych okresach kształtował. Naszym naczelnym zadaniem i dążeniem było w świat sztuki wciągnąć rzesze robotników. Przemycanie światopoglądu poprzez sztukę wydawało się najbardziej niezauważalne, jednocześnie skuteczne. Na pierwszy ogień planujemy wystawić *Różę* Żeromskiego w reżyserii Edwarda Wodzickiego. Duża wprawdzie, ale nie przystosowana sala nastręcza wiele trudności, zarówno dla aktora, jak i dekoratora. Zespół aktorski jest skompletowany. Dekoracje i przeróbka sali w toku. Zakłady pracy, do których dotarliśmy gotowe zapełnić widownię. Niecierpliwie oczekujemy uroczystego dnia premiery. Przy szczelnie zapełnionej sali unosi się kurtyna. W roli Azelma występował Jawitz. Niestety, nazwisk pozostałych aktorów nie pamiętam. Przedstawienie przyjęte zostało serdecznie. Odbyło się jeszcze drugie, ale zarazem ostatnie. Wkraczają władze - teatr zostaje zamknięty."

standard volume on Polish theatre between 1918 and 1965 by the historian Marczak-Oborski does not even mention the People's University Workers' Stage.[241] There is no evidence for how long Stażewski was involved with the Workers' Stage. Before World War II, titles of most of his paintings avoid direct references to history or, in this case, to the worker's culture. The exception was *Róża Luksemburg* (Fig. 33), a 1952 work depicting the gesticulating Communist revolutionary surrounded by, judging by their clothing, a group of workers. Turowski claimed that Stażewski's political sympathies were very close to those of Szczuka, who was a right wing nationalist until he met Hempel and became a Communist activist.[242] Stażewski, who never actually joined any Party either before or after the war, recalled that when his brother joined the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) in the 1920s, he advised him that he should have joined the Communist Party of Poland (KPP).[243] This anecdote confirms that Stażewski, who identified with universal and international tendencies, opposed the nationalistic nature of PPS in favor of the revolutionary ones of the KPP. One cannot forget that the KPP was first delegalized by Piłsudski and nearly a decade later by Stalin. Like Strzemiński, Stażewski believed in international social activism and opposed the direct subordination of art to politics.

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[241] Stanisław Marczak-Oborski, *Teatr Polski w latach 1918-1965* (Warsaw: Polska Akademia Nauk Instytut Sztuki, 1985).
[242] See Turowski, *Budowniczowie Świata,* 131; and Rafałowski, *I Spoza Palety*, 16.
[243] Henryk Stażewski, "Brat mój przed wojną" (1984). Handwritten manuscripts (Fig. 112); Marek Stażewski, private archive. See also Lodz Museum, Special Collections.

Society and Art Patronage in Independent Poland

Polish artists, who strongly believed in a socially relevant art that can shape society, found themselves in a difficult situation: namely a society, ravaged by the effects of war and economically destitute, which needed to integrate people, institutions, and traditions of three regions occupied by foreign powers for over a century. According to the 1921 Polish government census, twenty five percent of people inhabited cities and seventy five percent lived in rural areas.[244] This unequal distribution of the population unfortunately equaled a high percent of illiteracy. During the interwar years, Warsaw was a city of manual laborers and petit-bourgeoisie, made up of the least affluent members of both social groups.[245] In 1927, a working class family in Warsaw was able to spend only an average of 1,91 Polish zloty on both books and newspapers per month, a sum insufficient for the purchase of books but allowing a purchase of the least expensive newspaper daily.[246] Speculating that an average Warsaw family had an income higher than other city and country dwellers, perspectives for the rest of the country were quite grim. These statistics illuminate the problematic situation that the nascent artists of the Polish avant-garde, who aimed to integrate art into life, faced.

Art patronage also changed after 1918. In addition to private patronage, the government would also support the arts with the help of the Ministry of Art and Culture (MKiS), established in 1919. By 1921, MKiS was reduced and became a Department of Art within the Ministry of Religious Denominations and Public Enlightenment (MWRiOP). This is not to say that government patronage of visual arts was sufficient.

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[244] Davis, *Boże Igrzysko*, 448.
[245] Andrzej Paczkowski, *Prasa Codzienna Warszawy w latach 1918-1939* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Wydawniczy, 1983), 42.
[246] Paczkowski, *Prasa Codzienna*, 44. In 1927, only 15.9 percent of the population of Warsaw belonged to a political party; the city of Lodz boasted 20 percent.

Jan Skotnicki, the long time director of the Department of Art in MWRiOP, claimed the department's nineteen ministers found it very surprising that matters concerning art should be as important as matters concerning the nation.[247] Although visual arts were crucial in maintaining the ethnic-national identity during the partition years, in the interwar Poland many deemed it a bourgeois luxury. Between 1920 and 1930, two important organizations were founded in Warsaw. The Union of Polish Visual Artists (ZPAP) was associated with the conservative circle of the Zachęta Gallery. Established in 1860 Zachęta, which literally means 'encouragement,' is one of the oldest exhibition spaces in Warsaw until today, which historically tended to be more old-fashioned and conservative. The Trade Union of Polish Visual Artists (ZZPAP), on the other hand, united experimental leftist artists from the Warsaw School of Fine Arts and supported such artistic groups as Formizm and Praesens. In addition, the dealer Czesław Garliński opened a gallery across the street from Zachęta in 1922. Garliński Salon, as it was commonly known, was a rival institution, which like the Trade Union of Polish Visual Artists supported the more radical artistic practices.[248]

In interwar Poland, the interference of the government in matters of art and culture was generally not as vigorous as in the Soviet Union, if at all. There seemed to have been little interaction between the activities of Communist politicians and artistic circles. The right wing National Democracy was also not interested in censorship of the arts during the early 1920s. It was only after the May coup d'état of 1926 that the newly

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[247] Maria Rogoyska, "Z dziejów mecenatu artystycznego w Polsce w latach 1918-1930," in *Materiały do studiów i dyskusji z zakresu teorii i historii sztuki, krytyki artystycznej oraz badań nad sztuką* (Warsaw: Państwowy Instytut Sztuki, 1954), 135.

[248] The activities of Czesław Garliński are discussed in Hanna Garlińska-Zembrzuska, "Działalność wystawowa salonu Czesława Garlińskiego w latach 1922-1939," in *Z zagadnień plastyki polskiej w latach 1918-1939*, ed. Juliusz Starzyński (Wroclaw: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1963), 309-61.

created *Sanacja* government became more involved in regulating art and culture.[249] For example, at that time the Society for the Dissemination of Polish Art Abroad (TOSSPO) was created to raise the status of the arts by emphasizing its propaganda values.[250] Under the direction of Mieczysław Treter, the organization propagated art with folkloristic and national characteristics. Such folklore and nationalism inspired art was exhibited in international venues such as the Polish pavilion at the 1925 Paris Exposition Des Arts Décoratifs. Although Polish Constructivism was not part of the 1925 Paris Exposition, Treter bought half of the copies of the first edition of *Praesens* for distribution abroad.[251] Another state-sponsored institution, the Institute of Art Propaganda (IPS) was established only in 1930.[252] Its first exhibition featured traditional and folklore art that aspired to influence the development of artistic life in Poland. But it did not specify the type or style of art it intended to propagate. In fact, it was opposed only to those artists who regularly exhibited at Zachęta.[253] On one hand, IPS promoted art works that addressed the most recent Polish history such as General Piłsudski and his Legion. On the other hand, it hosted exhibitions of works of the Group of Modern Artists in 1933, and of artists associated with Kapizm (K.P.), a year later.[254] Even if they were not extremely

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[249] The name *Sanacja* was taken from the Latin *sanatio*, which means healing. Active between 1926 and 1939, Piłsudski's *Sanacja* was meant to facilitate national healing after the 1918 independence. *Sanacja* was famous for instituting economic stability and infamous for its hostility toward Communist Parties.

[250] On TOSSPO, see Katarzyna Nowakowska-Sito, "TOSSPO – Propaganda Sztuki Polskiej za Granicą w Dwudziestoleciu Międzywojennym," in *Sztuka i Władza,* ed. Dariusz Konstantynow, Robert Pasieczny, and Piotr Paszkiewicz (Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, 2001), 143-54.

[251] See Rafałowski, *I Spoza Palety*, 47.

[252] On the history of ISP, see Joanna Sosnowska, ed., *Materiały z dziejów Instytutu Propagandy Sztuki (1930-1939)* (Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki PAN, 1992).

[253] Sosnowska, *Materiały z dziejów Instytutu Propagandy Sztuki*, 4.

[254] Sosnowska, *Materiały z dziejów Instytutu Propagandy Sztuki*, 4.

popular with the general public, the avant-garde artists in Poland were not censored by the authorities as were their colleagues in Soviet Russia.

Before Constructivism

The Second Republic of Poland boasted the nearly simultaneous formation of three radical artistic groups: Formizm (referred to early on as Polish Expressionism), active in Krakow, Lvov, and especially Warsaw; Bunt (Rebellion or Revolt), formed in Poznan; and Young Yidish, which first exhibited their works in Lodz.[255] Between 1917 and 1919, Expressionism in Poland was not a specific art formation but rather an attitude equated with "new art" that opposed official artistic endeavors.[256] The first Expressionist exhibition, which took place on 4 November 1917 in the Palace of Arts in Krakow was generally characterized by paintings inspired by Cubism but also included elements of traditional and national art. This exhibition was nearly completely passed over by the press. The second exhibition held on 29 June 1918 in Krakow was again formally inspired more by French Cubism than German Expressionism and elicited mostly negative reviews. After the first two exhibitions, Polish artists shifted from understanding "Expressionism as an original artistic formation to equating it with German Expressionism and rejecting it as foreign to Polish tradition."[257]

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[255] In addition, late in 1918, the Polish Futurists formed simultaneously in Krakow and Warsaw. However, it was primarily a literary group, influenced by Italian and Russian Futurism as well as Dada, which criticized art in general as well as the Romantic tradition of Young Poland.
[256] Marek Bartelik, *Between Spirituality and Nationalism: Expressionism in Polish Art, 1917-1922* (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2000), 28, 37. The first Expressionist exhibition was brought to Poland in 1913 by Herwarth Walden and included Alexey van Jawlensky, Wassily Kandinsky, Oscar Kokoschka, Ludwig Meidner, and Bohumil Kubista. The exhibition had a tremendous influence on the Formists. The original Formist artists included Tytus Czyżewski (1880-1945), Leon Chwistek (1884-1944), Zbigniew Pronaszko (1885-1958), and Andrzej Pronaszko (1888-1961), as well as Tymon Niesiołowski (1882-1965) and Witkacy.
[257] Bartelik, *Between Spirituality and Nationalism,* 35.

The group Bunt, active until 1922, was centered around the magazine *Zdrój* (the Spring).[258] The cover of the first issue of *Zdrój* in October 1917, illustrated by the artist and group's spokesman Jerzy Hulewicz (1886-1941), still betrayed the Art Nouveau and symbolist stylistic tendencies of the Young Poland movement. However, the exhibition poster of the second Bunt show in 1918 by the painter Stanisław Kubicki (1889-1842) revealed the inspiration of German Expressionism (Fig. 34). The Poznan Bunt propagated the idea of politically engaged or "activist" art, which was opposed to the right-wing and nationalistic politics of *endecja* (the National Democrats). Bunt later influenced the ideology of Szczuka and Żarnowerówna.

In addition to Bunt, Young Yidish, active in Lodz between 1918 and 1922, was engaged in the search for the expression of cultural identity, which was often visually articulated by the Chagall-inspired style of "Jewish Expressionism" (Fig. 35). Artists working in Lodz, some of whom such as Karol Hiller were soon to become part of Polish Constructivism, would combine the Expressionist aesthetic with Constructivist form.[259]

While earlier artistic groups associated with Expressionism were still active, the beginning of the 1920s witnessed an increase in formal experimentation. One of the first exhibitions of the future Constructivists took place in December 1921 at the Polonia Hotel in Warsaw included Szczuka and Stażewski. Because the catalogue of the show was not printed, there is no record of which works were actually exhibited. Press reports of the show described Szczuka's work as the first radicalization of artistic production announced by spatial and mechanical constructions as well as "new" materials, including

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[258] On Bunt, see Jerzy Malinowski, "Zrzeszenie Artystów Bunt," in *Co robić po kubizmie? Studia o sztuce europejskiej pierwszej połowy XX wieku* (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1984), 127-49.

[259] Jaromir Jedliński, "Lodz," in *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910-1930*, ed. Timothy O. Benson (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 360.

wood, glass, and iron, and found deformation and rhythmic reduction of form in paintings by Stażewski.[260] These new experiments were very likely, among other things, influenced by Lissitzky, who was hosted by Henryk Berlewi in his studio on Senatorska Street during the Russian artist's 1921 visit to Warsaw.[261] A more influential public appearance of the artists soon to be known as Constructivists, took place in Vilnius in May 1923. The *Exhibition of New Art* was organized by Vytautas Kairiukstis who also produced the cover for the catalogue (Fig. 36). The seven participating artists chose to display their work at the cinema theatre *Corso* in Vilnius, which at this moment was part of the multinational Republic of Poland.[262] Stażewski was represented by two paintings, possibly including *Still Life with Jug* (*Martwa Natura z Dzbankiem*) (Fig. 37).[263] In his review of the exhibition, Strzemiński described Stażewski's work as "almost exclusively Purist in character," supplemented by elements informed by Cubism, and exhibiting "a high standard of painterly culture."[264] Kairiukstis, whose *Suprematist Composition* (*Kompozycja Suprematyczna*) of 1922 was also part of the show (Fig. 38), wrote in the catalogue that "the basis of art – *sine qua non* – is construction" and that "painting

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[260] Turowski, *Budowniczowie Świata*, 57.

[261] Andrzej K. Olszewski also argued that Lissitzky's visit was a turning point for Polish Constructivist artists; Andrzej K. Olszewski, *Henryk Berlewi* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Artystyczno-Graficzne, 1968), n.p. Olszewski wrote that the breakthrough in Berlewi's art dated to 1921 and 1922 due to Lissitzky's visit in Warsaw. See also Jerzy Malinowski, *Grupa "Young Yidish" i żydowskie środowiska "Nowej Sztuki" w Polsce 1918-1923* (Warsaw: Polska Akademia Nauk, Instytut Historii Sztuki, 1987), 108.

[262] The seven artists included Kairiukstis, Kryński, Stażewski, Strzemiński, Kobro, Szczuka, Żarnower, and Puciatycka. At the seventieth anniversary of the Vilnius exhibition, the Lodz Museum issued a facimile of the exhibition catalogue with commentary, *The 70th Anniversary of the New Art Exhibition: Vilnius 1923* (Lodz: Muzeum Sztuki, 1993).

[263] Janina Ładnowska, "The participants: who were they, who were they to become?" in *The 70th Anniversary of the New Art Exhibition, Vilnius 1923*, n.p.

[264] Strzemiński, "Wystawa Nowej Sztuki," *Zwrotnica* 6 (1923): 193.

without construction is not art but illustration."[265] Strzemiński, who having returned from Russia now lived in Vilnius, was represented by his *Synthetic Composition* (*Kompozycja Syntetyczna*) of 1923 (Fig. 39). This painting was meant to illustrate the artist's belief in art as "the unity of organic form, which because of its organicity parallels nature. Reproduction of forms existing in the world is just that reproduction; it is not creativity, and therefore not art."[266] The choice of the cinema as a venue was itself indicative of the artists' focus on the technological advances and dynamism of contemporary society and culture. In the catalogue, Żarnowerówna wrote that

> an artist finds the most VERSATILE form of expression in CINEMATIC performances, where particular branches of art (painting, sculpture, poetry, music, cinema, dance) are supplemented by excellent technical advances (such as electricity). Elements introduced by the NEW ART eliminate chance and provide MONUMENTALITY, which is conditioned by CONSTRUCTION.[267]

The changing nature of the "new art" was signaled not only by the emphasis on the internal construction and organization of the work, and the non-traditional exhibition space, but also by the fact that dispersed among paintings and sculpture, the artists included colorful postcards "for those who look for beautiful landscapes in art."[268] This early stage of Polish Constructivism is characterized by the use of new materials as well as the relationship of art to technological advances and social organization.

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[265] Kairiukstis, "Wystawa Nowej Sztuki" (1923); quoted in Jaromir Jedliński, "Genealogie," in *The 70th Anniversary of the New Art Exhibition: Vilnius 1923*, n.p.
[266] Strzemiński, "Wystawa Nowej Sztuki" (1923); quoted in Jedliński, "Genealogie," n.p. "Określam sztukę jako twórczość jendości formy organicznej przez organiczność swą równoległych z naturą; nie zaś z twórczością, nie jest przeto sztuką."
[267] Żarnowerówna, "Wystawa Nowej Sztuki" (1923); quoted in Jedliński, "Genealogie," n.p. "NAJWSZECHSTRONNIEJSZE pole do wyrażania się znajduje artysta w widowiskach KINOTEATRALNYCH, gdzie łączy elementy poszczególnych odłamów sztuki (malarstwo, rzeźba, architektura, poezja, muzyka, kino, taniec) poparte doskonałością środków technicznych (wyzyskanie energii elektrycznej). Środki, jakie wprowadza NOWA SZTUKA, usuwają przypadkowość, dając MONUMENTALNOŚć, która, jest uwarunkowaną przez KONSTRUKCJE."
[268] Ładnowska, "The participants: who were they, who were they to become?", n.p.

Definitively Constructivism: *Blok*

The origin of Polish Constructivism dates to 1924, when the first issue of *Blok* was published. Blok was both an art group and a publication subtitled "a publication of the artistic avant-garde" (Fig. 40).[269] This official inauguration of Polish Constructivism was celebrated by the *Exhibition of the Block of Cubists, Suprematists and Constructivists* (*Wystawa Bloku Kubistów, Suprematystów i Konstruktywistów*), which took place in Warsaw on March 15 that year in the automobile salon of Laurin and Klement in Warsaw.[270] While the term *konstrukcja* (construction) had been used by Polish artists frequently by 1924, the term *awangarda* (avant-garde) first appeared in print in the March issue of *Blok*. It officially defined the program of Polish Constructivism as experimental art informed and inspired by the structure and goals of Russian Constructivism, including the art of Malevich, as well as the art of van Doesburg and Mondrian. However, differences among individual artists associated with Constructivism in Poland were articulated immediately, as evidenced by the exhibition of the works by Henryk Berlewi. Berlewi opened his own solo exhibition in Warsaw in the automobile salon of Austro-Daimler one day before the Blok exhibit took place (Fig. 41). The two simultaneous exhibitions ended in a physical conflict, a duel fought with pistols. Berlewi's notion of *mechanofaktura* (mechanofacture), which defined painting in terms of precision and geometry achieved through principles of technology, was criticized by the poet Antoni Słonimski as *mechano-bzdura*, "bzdura" meaning nonsense or

[269] *Blok* was published in Warsaw between 1924 and 1926.
[270] The exhibition included works by eight artists including Strzemiński, Kobro, Stażewski, Szczuka, and Żarnowerówna.

absurdity.[271] After reading Słonimski's article, Szczuka, who stood in defense of Berlewi, publicly slapped the writer across the face and thus ignited a duel fought with pistols between the two.[272]

The conflict between Berlewi and members of Blok involved the question of originality. Berlewi, who was one of the initiators of Blok, purposely organized his exhibition of *mechanofaktura* paintings to open twenty-four-hours prior to the Blok exhibition. He had choreographed the event carefully and made sure that, clad in a fashionable suit, he was photographed surrounded by his works and, of course, an automobile. In contrast, none such photograph exists for the Blok group. Having recently returned from Germany, Berlewi was probably influenced by the 1922 *Congress of International Progressive Artists* in Düsseldorf. This exhibition, it is important to note, took place not in a museum or gallery space but in the department store of Leonhard Tietz designed by Joseph Maria Olbrich.[273] The *Exhibition of New Art* in Vilnius the previous year also chose a venue that was previously uncharacteristic for exhibiting art, and as I will argue later defined the exhibition practices of artists such as Stażewski in the postwar period. Upon his return to Warsaw in late 1922, Berlewi somewhat viciously summarized the state of art in Poland:

> Stażewski was still stuck with Cubism. Szczuka was still oscillating between pure abstraction and anecdote, and Żarnowerówna still had not emerged out of the

[271] Berlewi's brochure *Mechanofaktura* was published by Wydawnictwo Jazz in Warsaw in 1924. See also Antoni Słonimski, "Mechano-bzdura," *Wiadomości Literackie* 13 (1924): 3.
[272] Such an antiquated way of resolving a conflict, according to Andrzej Turowski, provided a dramatic and spectacular entry into the discourse of modernism. See Andrzej Turowski, *Konstruktywizm Polski: próba rekonstrukcji nurtu 1921-1934* (Wroclaw: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1981), 54. See also Turowski, *Budowniczowie Świata*, 69.
[273] I thank Prof. Rosemarie Haag Bletter for bringing this fact to my attention.

> haziness of Expressionism. Among my Warsaw friends, no one had yet been able to radically break with objectness.[274]

During the 1920s, questions of originality were addressed, from a different perspective, by an experimental poet, writer, and critic, Tadeusz Peiper (1891-1969), who edited the magazine *Zwrotnica* (Switch) between 1922 and 1927. Peiper wrote that "even if it appears that we looked to Russia, for example, at the same time it is evident that Russia looked at France. . . . Only the thoughtless see similarities, the thoughtful see differences."[275] In one of his letters to the poet, Julian Przyboś, Strzemiński wrote that he, his wife Kobro, and Stażewski were doing that which "is not done abroad, that which is a result of the development of visual art abroad, which is connected with these developments, but it co-creates, does not replicate."[276] In another letter to Przyboś, he expressed extreme outrage at photographs that Vantongerloo sent to one of the Polish publications: "In 1929, he is doing what my wife [Kobro] was doing in 1926."[277] This, what can be called a complex of repetitiveness, was a result of a very hostile attitude toward the new art by both artistic and lay audiences, as the critic Mieczysław Wallis noticed in 1927 when he wrote that "the members of Blok had to endure all kinds of

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[274] Henryk Berlewi, "Międzynarodowa Wystawa w Düsseldorfie," *Nasz Kurier*, no. 19 (1922): 2. See also Berlewi, "Nieco o dawnej awangardzie (Kilka uwag z powodu artykułu p. Andrzeja Wata o "Bloku")" *Plastyka* (1957): 5.

[275] "Jeśli nawet okaże się, że u nas czerpano np. z Rosji, to również okazało się, że Rosja czerpała z Francji, Włoch i Niemiec, że Włochy czerpały z Francji. . . . Upośledzeni widzą jedynie podobieństwa; przenikliwi dostrzegają różnice." Tadeusz Peiper, "Odpowiedzi," *Zwrotnica* 4 (1929): 91; cited in Anatol Stern, "Mieczysław Szczuka na tle swoich czasów," in *Ze studiów nad genezą plastyki nowoczesnej w Polsce,* ed. Juliusz Starzyński (Wroclaw: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich, 1966), 17.

[276] Strzemiński to Julian Przyboś (1930); reprinted in Andrzej Turowski, ed., "Listy Władysława Strzemińskiego do Juliana Przybosia," *Rocznik Historii Sztuki* 9 (1973), 235.

[277] Strzemiński to Julian Przyboś (February1930); reprinted in "Listy Władysława Strzemińskiego do Juliana Przybosia," 232.

unpleasantries caused by their artistic beliefs."[278] Anatol Stern also observed that the pioneers of new artistic forms had to defend themselves against the opinions of uneducated masses.[279] The uneducated masses that Stern referred to must have been conservative critics hostile to the new art and most likely not the lay public, which was largely unaware of the new developments in plastic arts. We can assume that the general public was not aware of the magazine, based on the fact that only approximately 500 copies of the first issue of *Blok* were printed and distributed at the Kresy and Ziemiańska cafes.[280]

Blok articulated the agenda of the Constructivist artists against individualism and historicism, its allegiance to collectivism and objectivism, and promoted rational and systematic efforts in art production. The exhibition at the Laurin and Klement salon, as well as the pages of subsequent issues of *Blok*, placed works of art among automobiles and were formally indebted to the typography of the earlier *Vesch Objet Gegenstand* (Fig. 42).[281] The proximity of art and machine was meant to emphasize the "constructed" morphology of art ascribing to art production the same scientific logic and precision as that which produced cars. This concept recalls both Berlewi's theory of painting, defined as the relationship of geometry and principles of the machine, and Peiper's journal *Zwrotnica*, which also promoted a close relationship between man and technology. The second issue of *Blok*, edited by Stażewski, Żarnowerówna, and Szczuka, claimed that

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[278] Mieczysław Wallis, "Sztuka Polska," *Robotnik,* 18 August 1927; reprinted in Wallis, *Sztuka Polska Dwudziestolecia*, 216.
[279] Stern, "Mieczysław Szczuka na tle swoich czasow," 17.
[280] Turowski cites a later interview with Stażewski who claimed that the number was 500 and not, as we find in various other sources, 1000. See Turowski, *Konstruktywizm Polski,* 55-56.
[281] I thank Rose-Carol Washton Long for bringing this similarity to my attention.

> BLOK represents people, joined in a combatant group devoted to the concept of absolute construction. However, within the group, differences in artistic direction are exemplifed by the individual contributors to the magazine.[282]

The major difference in approach pitted Strzemiński, who inspired by Malevich would develop his own theory of painting called *unizm,* and Stażewski, who was informed by Malevich and Mondrian, against Szczuka and Żarnowerówna, who were the closest in the group to Productivism and its rejection of easel painting. These differences are illustrated in Żarnowerówna's use of typography in the 1924 *Red and Brown Composition* (*Kompozycja Czerwona i Brązowa*) (Fig. 43) and Szczuka's use of photomontage in the book cover design for Anatol Stern and Bruno Jasieński's *Earth to the Left* (*Ziemia na Lewo*) (Fig. 44).

The April issue of *Blok* carried the manifesto entitled "Co to jest konstruktywizm?" ("What Is Constructivism?") and claimed that

> Constructivism does not strive to develop a
> style, as an unchangeable template,
> based on once discovered
> and accepted forms – but undertakes the
> issue of **CONSTRUCTION**, which may
> and must undergo constant changes
> and improvements under the influence
> of new and increasingly more
> complicated requirements of
> the overall development.[283]

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[282] *Blok* 2 (April 1924), n.p. "BLOK reprezentuje ludzi, związanych w bojową grupę hasłem bezwzględnej konstrukcji. W łonie grupy jednak zachodzą różnice kierunków, których przedstawicielami są poszczególni współpracownicy pisma."

[283] "Konstruktywizm nie dąży do stworzenia
stylu, jako niezmiennego szablonu,
opartego na raz wynalezionych
i przyjętych formach – lecz podejmuje
zagadnienie **BUDOWY**, która może
i musi ulegać ciągłym przemianom
i doskonaleniom pod wpływem coraz
to nowych i coraz bardziej
skomplikowanych wymogów jakie

The manifesto was not signed by individual artists but by the magazine's editorial body. The board for the April issue consisted of Mieczysław Szczuka and Teresa Żarnower, and it is often suggested that it was written mainly by Szczuka.[284] While the notion of *konstrukcja* (construction) was not only used frequently, but was also instrumental in the development of new, abstract painting, the term "Constructivism" was not used very much either before or after this manifesto. In fact, the term *awangarda* (avant-garde) seems to have been used most frequently when describing the activities of experimental artists. The second issue of *Blok*, which claimed that Blok was a group of artists united by the slogan of "absolute construction" but who differed in their individual approach described the self-definition of the Polish avant-garde artists more accurately. The activities of Blok in 1924 crystallized the position of Constructivism, as is evident in the works reproduced on the pages of journal. For example, Stażewski's work evolved from the cubist-purist aesthetic shown in the first two issues (Fig. 40) to the simplified geometry characteristic of constructivist abstraction shown in the eight issue of *Blok* (Fig. 45).

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narzuca ogólny rozwój." "Co to jest Konstruktywizm?" *Blok* 6/7 (September 1924), n.p Above translation by the author. For the English translation of the full text, see Stephen Bann, ed., *The Tradition of Constructivism* (New York: Viking Press, 1971), 103-06.

[284] Stażewski was an editor of the earlier issues.

Early Dissemination of Russian Constructivism

Because Polish artists were active on the international art scene during the 1920s and learned about Constructivism from Germany, it is important to briefly sketch the process by which Russian Constructivism was delivered to Western European audiences. After the blockade following the Civil War of 1920 and a complete collapse of communication between Russia and Western Europe, the exportation of Russian Constructivism to the West began in earnest in 1921. The economic hardships during the winter of 1920/1921 forced the Soviets to turn to the West, and to Germany in particular, for "trade, credits, recognition," which in turn resulted in the signing of a trade agreement in May 1921.[285] In the first issue of *Vesch Objet Gegenstand*, written in Russian, French, and German, Lissitzky and Ehrenburg, who were then in Berlin, wrote in an editorial entitled "The Blockade of Russia is Coming to an End" that

> The appearance of Vesch (Object) is another sign that the exchange of practical knowledge, realizations, and "objects" between young Russian and West European artists has begun. Seven years of separate existence have shown that the common ground of artistic aims and undertakings that exists in various countries is not simply an effect of change, a dogma, or a passing fashion, but an inevitable accompaniment of the maturing of humanity. Art is today international, though retaining all its local symptoms and particularities. [286]

A few months later during the fall of 1922, a truly exceptional and international exchange took place between Russia and the West at the *Erste russiche Kunstaustellung*, also in Berlin.[287] In a foreword to the catalogue, David Shterenberg wrote that "during the

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[285] Peter Nisbet, "Some Facts on the Organizational History of the van Diemen Exhibition," in *The 1st Russian Show: A Commemoration of the van Diemen Exhibition Berlin 1922* (London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 1983), 68-69.

[286] El Lissitzky and Ilya Ehrenburg, "The Blockade of Russia is Coming to an End," *Vesch Objet Gegenstand* 1/2 (March/April 1922): 1.

[287] What followed were the *Exhibition of Russian Painting and Sculpture* at the Brooklyn Museum in 1923; the Russian Pavilion at the fourteenth Venice Biennale in 1924, which included Malevich, Popova, Rodchenko as well as more figurative works from the Museum of the Red

blockade Russian artists tried to keep in touch with their Western counterparts by issuing proclamations and manifestoes. But it is only with the present exhibition that the first step has been taken to bring the two groups together."[288] The dissemination – or what I have been calling the export – of Russian art to the West, which was precipitated by the economic and political situation of Soviet Russia, had thus begun.[289]

While the year 1922 was marked by an unusual magnitude of interest in Russian art, the dissemination process began at least two years earlier. The knowledge of Russian post-revolutionary art was brought to Germany, unofficially, by individuals such Ivan Puni, who arrived in Berlin in the early 1920s.[290] But one of the first interpretations came with the publication of Konstantin Umanskii's 1920 *Neue Kunst in Russland*.[291] Because it was hailed as the first serious study of Russian art between 1914 and 1919, Umanskii's book had enormous ramifications. Umanskii found the art of Tatlin objectionable, tolerated Malevich only because of a perceived compatibility between Suprematism and the mysticism of traditional Russian values, and deemed the Expressionist trend associated with Kandinsky as the paramount in Russian art. Umanskii's study may have obscured the radical novelty of new Russian art in Germany.[292] This may have been a

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Army in Moscow; and *Exposition internationale des arts décoratifs et industriels modernes* in Paris in 1925, which included Rodchenko's model for a Workers' Club, Tatlin's later version of the *Monument to the Third International*, as well as Popova's theater models and costume designs.

[288] David Shterenberg, foreword to the *Erste russiche Kunstausstellung* (Berlin: van Diemen Gallery, 1922); translated by Nicholas Bullock, in Bann, *The Tradition of Constructivism,* 70, 71.

[289] Władysław Strzemiński was included in this exhibition; Andrei Nakov, "The Last Exhibition which was the 'First'," in *The 1st Russian Show: A Commemoration of the van Diemen Exhibition Berlin 1922* (London: Annely Juda Fine Art, 1983), 26

[290] Nisbet, "Some Facts," 68.

[291] Konstantin Umanskii, *Neue Kunst in Russland: 1914-1919* (Potsdam: Gustav Kiepenheuer, 1920). See also Stephen Bann, "Russian Constructivism and Its European Resonance," in *Art Into Life: Russian Constructivism, 1914-1932* (Seattle: The Henry Art Gallery, University of Washington; New York: Rizzoli, 1990), 214.

[292] See Bann, "Russian Constructivism and Its European Resonance," 215.

result of the kind of work that was shown in Germany during the pivotal year of 1922. Berlewi, who was in close contact with members associated with Jewish Expressionism in Poland as well as the Warsaw Futurist poets (including Anatol Stern and Aleksander Wat), complained that Russia was somewhat misrepresented at the *Congress of International Progressive Artists* held in Düsseldorf in May 1922. Berlewi wrote that what was missing was "the Suprematist Malevich, Tatlin, and others. Those whose works are exhibited belong to the center and represent the so called 'aestheticism of the object:' Ivan Puni, Boguslawskaia."[293]

One of the more fascinating early accounts of Russian art was published in 1925 in the United States by Louis Lozowick.[294] Lozowick's book was supported by Alfred Barr and Katherine Dreyer, both of whom became interested in Russian art after viewing the *Erste russiche Kunstaustellung* at the van Diemen Gallery in Berlin. Lozowick's *Modern Russian Art* is a detailed study based not only on his viewing of the Berlin show but also on having spent time in Moscow. He perceptibly addressed the issue of the social and aesthetic revolution when he wrote that "the Soviets assumed power. . . . Looking about for aid they at once found obvious allies in the radical artists."[295] He characterized Russian art as being overly preoccupied "with social theory, an attempt to stress the obvious parallel between the political and artistic revolutions."[296] The book is divided into separate parts discussing the art of the Cubists (including Aleksandra Exter

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[293] Henryk Berlewi, "Międzynarodowa Wystawa w Düsseldorfie," *Nasz Kurier*, no. 19 (1922): 2. "Rosja: lubo nie jest na tej wystawie należycie reprezentowana. Brakuje np. Suprematysta Malewicz, Tatlin i inni. Ci którzy na tej wystawie figurują, należą raczej do centrum i reprezentują kierunek tzw. "przedmiotowego estetyzmu: Ivan Puni, Boguslawskaja."
[294] Louis Lozowick, *Modern Russian Art* (New York: Museum of Modern Art and Société Anonyme, 1925).
[295] Lozowick, *Modern Russian Art*, 5.
[296] Lozowick, *Modern Russian Art*, 6.

and Nadezda Udaltsova), the Suprematists (including Malevich, Puni, Lissitzky, and Rodchenko), the Constructivists (including Rodchenko, Lissitzky, and Tatlin), as well as the Expressionist trend (including Chagall and Kandinsky). Lozowick made an important distinction between Suprematism and Constructivism. He argued that "the basic principles of Suprematism are economy in the choice of pictorial means, rhythm in their interrelation, universality in their appeal," but that the Constructivists, who "consider their work strictly utilitarian," remained the most typical of the Revolution.[297] Illustrated mostly with works from the Société Anonyme purchased by Dreyer at the van Diemen exhibition, the book concluded that the inauguration of the NEP and an increased privatization "had a decided effect on the radical artists in various ways . . . Compelled to shift for themselves the less resolute among the radicals have either turned to other fields or have gone abroad to join the modernists' ranks in Berlin, Paris, Prague. Not a few, however, are still at their posts, certain that the present crisis in art is only temporary."[298] It is puzzling that this early important publication resulted in such minimal reception of the Russian avant-garde in the United States.

[297] Lozowick, *Modern Russian Art*, 18, 30.
[298] Lozowick, *Modern Russian Art*, 60.

Russian Constructivism in Poland

The art and thought of Russian Constructivism reached Poland by way of both East and West, via Germany and Soviet Russia. The critic Szymon Bojko argued that the most remarkable resonance of Russian art in Poland happened in 1933 with the March opening of the *Exhibition of Soviet Art* in the building of the Institute of the Propaganda for the Arts (IPS). He based his argument on the fact that during its five week run, eighteen thousands visitors attended this well-received show.[299] I should like to make the case that Russian art was familiar to Polish artists as early as 1918, because Jewish artists in Poland, especially Berlewi, had been in steady contact with Russian artists since 1918 and most certainly by 1921.[300] Other factors also attest to the earlier exchange between Russian and Polish artists. Lissitzky came to Poland in the fall of 1921 on his way to Berlin at the invitation of the Warsaw chapter of the Jewish Cultural Organization "Kulture-Lige," an organization devoted to the modernization of Yidish culture.[301] In Berlewi's studio on Senatorska Street, Lissitzky met with Warsaw artists to discuss the developments in Russia. Later Berlewi, who lived in Berlin between 1922 and 1923, made contacts with László Moholy-Nagy, Hans Richter, and Herwarth Walden, among others, thus providing another channel for the exchange of information.[302] Although Berlewi thought the *International Exhibition of Progressive Artists* in Düsseldorf was far from perfect, especially because Malevich and Tatlin were not represented adequately, he

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[299] Szymon Bojko, "Recepcja grafiki radzieckiej w Polsce w dwudziestoleciu międzywojennym," in *Sztuka XX wieku* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1971), 236.
[300] See Malinowski, *Grupa "Young Yidish,"* 149-50.
[301] "Kulture-Lige" was founded in 1918 in Kiev, and later moved to Berlin and Warsaw.
[302] Malinowski, *Grupa "Young Yidish,"* 149-50; Turowski, *Budowniczowie Świata*, 48.

provided a peek into the nature of the art of Rodchenko, Lissitzky, and others, to Polish artists.[303]

Another vehicle for the new artistic ideology in Poland as well as the early dissemination of Russian Constructivism was the Krakow based *Zwrotnica* (Switch), beginning with its first issue in May 1922 (Fig. 46). *Zwrotnica*, edited by Tadeusz Peiper, was devoted to rationalism and functionalism. Peiper's article entitled "Miasto. Masa. Maszyna." (City. Masses. Machine.) articulated the magazine's basic tenets, which, as is evident in the title, favored technology, urbanism, and mass culture.[304] Peiper argued for a precise and logical construction of a work of art. He juxtaposed these with the art of Matisse and Picasso, who were engaged in what he called "farbowana geometria" ("painted geometry").[305] He favored art that followed the laws of "organicity [which would] become a model for the construction of a work of art. [So that] individual parts of a work. . . .remain in close functional relationship with each other."[306]

As I mentioned, the pages of *Zwrotnica* published the first exegesis of the Russian avant-garde by Strzemiński, who had recently returned from Russia where, according to Nakov, he was often a guest in the Moscow apartment of Malevich (Fig. 47).[307] Like

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[303] The reception of the show was polarized among Polish artists. Margarete and Stanisław Kubicki refused to participate in the show, which for them represented "'a selfish, partisan standpoint' and not the 'interests of the greater national community." See Kubickis ca. 1922; cited in Monika Król, "Collaboration and Compromise: Women Artists in Polish-German Avant-Garde Circles, 1910-1930," in *Central European Avant-Gardes*, 343.
[304] Tadeusz Peiper, "Miasto. Masa. Maszyna.," *Zwrotnica* 2 (July 1926): 26-27.
[305] Peiper, "Miasto. Masa. Maszyna.," 26.
[306] Peiper, "Miasto. Masa. Maszyna.," 26.
[307] See Andrei Nakov, *Abstrait/concret. Art non-objectif russe et polonais* (Paris: Transéditions, 1981), 241. Nakov cited the 1973 reminiscences of Anna Leporska, who claimed that in the winter of 1918, Strzemiński was a guest at Malevich's Moscow apartment where the Russian artist's mother run a private cafeteria for the students of Svomas (First State Free Art Studios), later known as Vkhutemas (Higher Artistic and Technical Workshops). In addition, Strzemiński

Umanskii, Strzemiński had a particularly low opinion of Tatlin: "Tatlin, a man not particularly cultured, had seen Picasso's reliefs but understood their importance only in terms of the juxtaposition of different materials."[308] "Tatlinism" represented to him an impoverishment of Cubism, and the Russian artist's contribution was valuable only in so far as he raised the value of materials not previously used in art. But, a contribution such as that of Tatlin, for Strzemiński, served the role "of a social activist or critic rather than that of the artist."[309] The road toward abstract and Constructivist art was paved by Malevich, whose theory of Suprematism included an absolute objectlessness and color forms defined by geometry. Before Suprematism, the pictorial form was based on the puncturing of the canvas in order to bestow three-dimensional qualities to a flat, two-dimensional surface: "a desire to falsify painting into sculpture!!"[310] Painterly values, Strzemiński emphasized, require a decisive shift toward an understanding of form in terms of its inherent flatness.[311]

Malevich's work was exhibited in Warsaw, for the first time outside of Russia, in 1927, at the Hotel Polonia, when the Russian artist was on his way to Germany (Fig. 48). Yet, the impact of Russian Constructivism can be seen in Poland much earlier. For

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and Kobro organized the Smolensk branch of UNOVIS (Affirmers of the New Art) and were in close contact with Malevich as well as Lissitzky and Chagall in nearby Vitebsk; Nika Strzemińska, *Katarzyna Kobro* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1999), 17.

[308] Strzemiński, "O Sztuce Rosyjskiej Notatki 1," *Zwrotnica* 3 (November 1922): 80. "Tatlin, człowiek mało kulturalny, widział w pracowni Pikassa jego reliefy, lecz zrozumiał tylko tyle, że zawierają zestawienia różnych materiałów."

[309] Strzemiński, "O Sztuce Rosyjskiej Notatki 1," 81. "Zasługą zaś Tatlina pozostanie iż podniósł on wartość materjałów dotąd w sztuce nieużywanych i wskazał iż drogę ku dalszemu rozwojowi sztuki stanowi nadanie im właściwej formy. Lecz to zasługa raczej działacza społecznego lub krytyka, niż artysty."

[310] Strzemiński, "O Sztuce Rosyjskiej Notatki 2," *Zwrotnica* 4 (February 1923): 110. "Ujęcie formy wszystkich przed suprematyzmem powstałych kierunków oparte było na 'dziurawieniu' płótna; silono się na to ażeby płaszczyznie dwuwymiarowej nadać właściwości objętości trójwymiarowej (pragnienie przefałszowania obrazu na rzeźbę!!)"

[311] Strzemiński, "O Sztuce Rosyjskiej Notatki 2," 110. "Podniesienie wartośći ściśle malarskich wymaga przejścia do ujęcia formy o charakterze wybitnie płaskim."

example, Strzemiński's two-part article on the art of the Russian avant-garde appeared in 1922, and *Blok* reproduced the Russian artist's work, in its first and second issues. One of the more influential studies, however, was carried out by Stefania Zahorska in a lengthy article entitled "Kubizm i jego pochodne" ("Cubism and its derivatives").[312] The direct translation of the title from the Polish is somewhat misleading, it should perhaps read "Cubism and after," because the author understood Constructivism as complementing the development of Cubism, or as its fulfillment.[313] Zahorska distinguished two trends in contemporary art: one based on irrationality and emotion, which ultimately led to Expressionism; the other, rooted in rationality and intellect resulted in Cubism. Cubism and art forms informed by its developments, including Constructivism, Purism, and Suprematism, were original, according to Zahorska, because they broke away from Expressionism:

> Cubism and its artistic consequences became a catalyst for expressing those factors, which, rooted in the psyche and modern reality, so far did not find their expression in art. It is not Cubism but trends borne out of it that allowed its manifestation in the purest form.[314]

An interesting aspect of Zahorska's essay is her emphasis on technology and the collective organization of social life through Communism and Socialism, while in art she

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[312] Stefania Zahorska, "Kubizm i jego pochodne," *Południe* 1 (1924): 31-51. Zahorska (1890-1961) was an influential art critic who turned to film criticism and novel writing. She emigrated to Great Britain in 1940. Her writing about art during the 1920s, although influential, has not been studied in great detail. Among the few studies are Piotr Rudzinski's "Między konformizmem a awangardą. O krytyce Stefanii Zahorskiej," in *Sztuka Dwudziestolecia Międzywojennego* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1982), 93-101; Anna Clarke's "Stefania Zahorska and her world," in *The Polish Review* 45 (2000): 417-33; and more recently, Anna Pilch's *Symbolika form i kolorów: o krytyce artysytcznej Stefanii Zahorskiej* (Krakow: Księgarnia Akademicka, 2004).

[313] Zahorska, "Kubizm i jego pochodne," 46.

[314] Zahorska, "Kubizm i jego pochodne," 35. "Kubizm i płynące z niego konsekwencje stały się momentem wyzwalającym dla tych własnie czynników, które tkwiąc w psychice i w całem nowoczesnym życiu, nie znalazły dotąd swego odpowiednika w sztuce. Nie tyle w kubizmie samym, ile w pochodzących od niego kierunkach znalazły one swe ujście i swój najczystszy wyraz."

argued for the notion of individualism. It is important to note that Stażewski and Strzemiński were opposed to the notion of individualism in art.

Zahorska's embrace of abstraction was not mainstream. For example, Zachęta Gallery, which was managed by the Society for the Ecouragement of Fine Arts since 1860, promoted more conservative and traditional art forms. Stażewski's fellow student and one time member of *Blok*, Rafałowski remembered how outraged the artists were about the quality of art exhibited at Zachęta:

> There were thirteen of us. We decided to oppose these artistic events. The visit to Zachęta took place on Sunday, the day of the greatest public attendance. At a given signal, we started taking down paintings. Nearly immediately, medium size paintings were on the floor. Larger paintings were taken down with the help of a 'human' ladder: a stronger friend carried another on his back. . . .The visiting public is tense. Some are clapping, others protest loudly, offer juicy epithets. 'Zachęta' was closed, the police arrived.[315]

While experimental art was not discouraged in interwar Poland, the newly independent and extremely nationalistic country also encouraged art, which searched for and tried to define a national style. Bartelik, among others, argued that at the time, Polish national identity was defined in terms of "Polish language and culture and the Roman Catholic faith, which were believed to guarantee the survival of Poland in the future."[316] Writing in 1924, Zahorska was informed by current artistic and political debates and opposed Constructivism because its

> conceptions of the organization of social life, which developed in the nineteenth century, are transposed onto the arena of artistic life almost verbatim as if reciting a well-learned lesson.
>
> General enunciations of Constructivism reveal that orthodox Marxist historical materialism is at the center of its view on life and art. In this dependence of

[315] Rafałowski, *I Spoza Palety*, 17-18.
[316] Bartelik, *Early Polish Modern Ar*t, 54.

> artistic phenomena on material factors, economic basis, and production, we can see the undeniable faults of this artistic method.[317]

Zahorska placed a strong emphasis on the formal innovation and functionalism of Constructivism (in which she included Russia, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Hungary), but saw its emphasis on form as an agent for the organization of social life as its biggest fault.[318] To transfer the socialist-communist tradition onto the field of art, according to Zahorska, was to do away with the idea of an individual, autonomous artist and also to jettison the notion of (artistic) cooperation.[319] Zahorska opposed the notion of collectivism, because its focus on the economy of production and the machine resulted in "the ideally antiseptic atmosphere of worldview and reason, cleansed of all emotional bacteria."[320] The crux of Zahorska's position is that she would not allow the break from easel painting and the passage into Productivism, or as she called it "the applied arts" of Rodchenko (who "in addition to cars, is involved especially with advertisement and book publishing") or Tatlin (who "sews shoes and overcoats").[321] Zahorska struggled with the notion of modernism understood in terms of the autonomy and originality of a work of art, its autonomous function as art and not applied art in the form of a utilitarian object.

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[317] Zahorska, "Kubizm i jego pochodne," 47. "I równocześnie w tymże samym konstruktywizmie przejawiają się z dosłownością, graniczącą z recytowaniem lekcji, koncepcje organizacji życia społecznego, powstałe w XIX i przeniesione żywcem na teren życia artystycznego. Prawowierny, marksistowski materjalizm historyczny leży na dnie całego sposobu patrzenia na życie i sztukę, sposobu ujawniającego się w ogólnych enuncjacjach konstruktywizmu. W tem uzależnieniu zjawisk artystycznych od czynników materialnych, od podłoża ekonomicznego i od produkcji, widać niezaprzeczalne piętno tej metody."

[318] Zahorska, "Kubizm i jego pochodne," 42.

[319] Zahorska, "Kubizm i jego pochodne," 48. "W wielkiem zagadnieniu stosunku indiwiduum do zbiorowośći. Socjalistyczno-komunistyczne tradycje, przeniesione na teren sztuki, kazały z lekkomyślną jednostronnościa odrzucić wogóle pojęcie indywiduum, jako autonomicznego twórcy i zaprzepaściły w tej jednostronności słuszny zresztą postulat współpracy."

[320] Zahorska, "Kubizm i jego pochodne," 43.

[321] Zahorska, "Kubizm i jego pochodne," 44.

She understood modernism as having a certain potential, in which the most significant works were

> not these or those squares, not this or that geometry but an internal change, a different attitude toward the world and oneself, which searches for expression through new forms and a new way of their organization. Modernism is not only the modern forms but the modern man, and perhaps, today, modern man more than forms.[322]

Zahorska was clearly distrustful of the consequences of the Bolshevik Revolution and the subjugation of art in its service, which resulted from the interwar political context of Poland and its distrust of Communism.

During the 1920s, geometric abstract art was popular only within a few circles. As early as 1920, the new art exemplified disorganization and anarchy, and was equated with Bolshevism, according to popular opinion.[323] In 1922, Peiper conveyed a sense of fatigue with geometric abstraction on the pages of *Zwrotnica*, which was not only sympathetic to but also promoted experimental art:

> The question is whether there is a possibility of an artistic form that without an unnecessary reliance on the increasingly monotonous geometry, could nevertheless become a principle of the precise and logical construction of a work of art.[324]

The public distaste of the Polish avant-garde's claim to universalization and internationalization came to a spectacularly tragic turn when the first president of the Second Republic of Poland, Gabriel Narutowicz (1865-1922), was assassinated in

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[322] Stefania Zahorska, "Krytyka wobec Modernizmu," *Praesens* 1 (1926): 41. Modernizm "poza tym czym jest dzisiaj, jako suma konkretnych osiągnięć, jest jeszcze pewna potencja. I najbardziej w nim są istotne nie te czy inne kwadraty, nie ta czy inna geometria, ale przestawienie się wewnętrzne, odmienny stosunek do świata i do siebie samego, który szuka sobie wyrazu poprzez nowe formy i nową ich organizacją. Modernizm to nie są tylko nowoczesne formy, ale nowoczesny człowiek, a może nawet – przynajmniej dziś – bardziej jeszcze człowiek niż formy."
[323] Zwir, "Formiści," *Dziennik Ludowy*, 20 May 1920; cited in Ireneusz J. Kamiński, *Trudny Romans z Awangardą* (Lublin: Wydawnictwo Lubelskie, 1989), 48.
[324] Peiper, "Miasto. Masa. Maszyna.," 26. "Zachodzi pytanie, czy jest możliwa forma ładu artystycznego, któryby nie opierając się na coraz bardziej nudzącym geometryzmie, mógł pomimo to stać się zasadą ścisłej i logicznej budowy dzieła sztuki."

December 1922 while attending an annual salon at Zachęta. Narutowicz's assassin, Eligiusz Niewiadomski, a painter who would be executed in January 1923, belonged to *endecja* (National Democracy), which opposed the liberal ideologies of politicians such as Narutowicz. The writer Maria Dąbrowska encapsulated the increasingly nationalistic mood of interwar Poland when she recalled Narutowicz's assasination:

> The law was respected. The secret assasin was sentenced to death....But, in reality this crime remained unpunished, because only the 'blind sword,' instead of 'the hand' that guided it, was punished. Even more this crime was glorified. The assasin's tomb was not covered by weeds of forgetting, [but] his tomb turned into a place for pilgrimages of crowds no smaller than those that [accompanied] Narutowicz's casket.[325]

By 1924 the conservative mood did not disappear. *Blok* was accused of duplicating the developments in France, Germany, and Russia.[326] The ambivalent reception of the new art was summed up by Strzemiński, who wrote that: "It is always how it is: in Moscow, the Bolsheviks disparage the new art as rotten and bourgeois, and in Vilnius. . . . the new art is [seen as] a Communist subversion."[327] Bartelik argued that, dismayed by the lack of interest in Constructivism by the public, Strzemiński blamed earlier twentieth-century artists for creating a gap between Impressionism and abstraction, because of "our predecessors' laziness."[328] Indeed, Ładnowska later wrote that Stażewski remembered that Constructivism was generally dismissed in favor of "state sponsored decorativism and Colorism."[329] During the 1930s, as I mentioned earlier,

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[325] Maria Dąbrowska, "Zabójstwo prezydenta Gabriela Narutowicza," in *Dzienniki 1914-1932* (Warsaw: Czytelnik, 1988), 382-83; quoted in Bartelik, *Early Polish Modern Art*, 53.
[326] See *Tygodnik Ilustrowany*, 29 April 1924; cited in *Blok* 2 (April 1924), n.p.
[327] See Strzemiński to W. Ziółkowski, 8 December 1925; reprinted in Turowski *Malewicz w Warszawie,* 489.
[328] Strzemiński, "Bilans Modernizmu," *Europa* 1 (1929); quoted in Zofia Baranowicz, ed., *Pisma: Władysław Strzemiński* (Wroclaw: Ossolineum, 1975), 120. Bartelik, *Between Spirituality and Nationalism*, 22.
[329] Ładnowska, "Sztuka wolnego ładu," in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988,* 20.

the Lodz Museum, which was founded in 1931 to promote and advance geometric abstract art, was hailed by the public as the bastion of Jewish Bolshevism, which should be destroyed.[330] During the ceremony for the Artistic Award of the City of Lodz, which was given to Strzemiński in 1932, a brawl broke out with shouts of "down with Bolshevism in art!" and "down with the poisoners of Polish art!"[331] After World War II, this rhetoric changed and the Museum's collection was baptized as "the rotten West."[332]

[330] Wegner, "Wspomnienia Biograficzne," in *Władysław Strzemiński In Memoriam*, 36.
[331] Nika Strzemińska, "Strzemiński Man and Art," Donajski Gallery website http://www.ddg.art.pl/ Strzemiński/manandart.html (accessed November 2006). See also Wegner, "Wspomnienia Biograficzne," 35-36.
[332] Wegner, "Wspomnienia Biograficzne," 36.

Praesens

The conflicts between the different factions within Blok eventually led to its disintegration and the subsequent birth of the group and periodical *Praesens* in June 1926. Stażewski, Kobro, and Szczuka were the founding members from the start. Strzemiński joined during the *Praesens* exhibition in September, which took place at Zachęta and was divided into different sections including painting, sculpture, architecture, interior and stage design. Stażewski, Strzemiński, and Kobro left *Praesens* three years later, but the group remained active until the outbreak of World War II in 1939. Like *Blok,* which along with reviews of the new art from Romania and Czechoslovakia, had printed writings by Malevich and van Doesburg, among others, *Praesens*, too, featured the writings of Malevich, van Doesburg, J. J. P. Oud, and Le Corbusier, often in both Polish and French.[333] Unlike *Blok*, however, it placed a strong emphasis on collaboration between painters and architects.[334] It was clear from the first issue of *Praesens*, for which Stażewski designed a cover (Fig. 49), that the group focused on architecture and functionalism.

Stażewski, who was the editor in charge of painting and whose paintings were reproduced in the first issue of *Praesens* (Fig. 50), wrote that

> New plasticism, abstract, is liberated from 'descriptiveness' and has one goal: to express *the equilibrium of plastic elements.* . . .New plasticism points to

[333] See, for example, "Nowa Sztuka w Rumunii," *Blok* 3/4 (June 1924), n.p.; *Blok (Kurjer Bloku)* 6/7 (September 1924): n.p.; "List z Czechosłowacji," *Blok (Kurjer Bloku)* 6/7 (September 1924), n.p.

[334] The majority of the group's members included students and graduates of the Department of Architecture at the Warsaw Polytechnic with the principal figure of Szymon Syrkus. *Praesens* was to become the official organ of functionalism in architecture and the Polish liaison to the Congrés Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (CIAM). Polish architects joined CIAM at the invitation of Siegfried Giedion after they submitted a proposal for the competition for the Palace of the League of Nations in Geneva. On East European architecture, in English see Wojciech Leśnikowski, ed., *East European Modernism: Architecture in Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Poland Between the Wars, 1919-1939* (New York: Rizzoli International Publications, 1996).

> abstraction as a possibility of articulating universal elements shaping the contemporary collective style. . . . The demand for aesthetics based on the tenets of collective construction does not diminish nor does it preclude 'individuality' but derives at most universal values, common to all people, and cleanses plasticism of non-plastic elements by expressing *relationships and proportions*. The contemporary problems of form, shaping today's style, are solved mainly by architecture. Painting and sculpture with no relation to architecture are unthinkable and have no reason to be. The union of painting and sculpture was achieved through an awareness of the elements of space, color, and materials as inseparable. [335]

In the above article entitled "Styl Współczesności" ("Contemporary Style"), Stażewski articulated his understanding of Neoplasticism as the new plasticism, which brings to mind Mondrian's emphasis on the equilibrium of form and color. But, in addition, Stażewski's emphasis on the relationship between painting and architecture recalls van Doesburg's commitment to an architectural environment. Stażewski's work seems faithful to the principles of the stabilization of form and its dynamic equilibrium characteristic of Mondrian, although the Polish artist was interested in neither Neoplatonism nor theosophy.[336] His work can be characterized as a fusion of the ideas inspired by Malevich and Mondrian, which also separates him from Strzemiński whose theory of *unizm* sprang from ideas of Malevich. The plastic elements of *Abstract*

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[335] Henryk Stażewski, "Styl Współczesności," *Praesens* 1 (June 1926): 2. "Nowa plastyka, abstrakcyjna, wyzwala się od "opisowości" i ma na celu jedynie wyrażanie równowagi stosunków elementów plastycznych. . . . Nowa plastyka wskazuje na abstrakcję jako na możliwość wyrażania pierwiastków uniwersalnych, kształtujących współczesny styl kolektywny. . . . Potrzeba estetyki, opartej na zasadach konstrukcji kolektywistycznej, nie pomniejsza i nie neguje "indywidualności" – dociera jedynie do wartości najbardziej *uniwersalnych*, wspólnych wsztyskim ludziom, oczyszczając plastykę od wszelkich elementów nie-plastycznych przez wyrażanie tylko *równowagi i proporcyj*. Nowoczesne problemy formy, kształtujące dzisiejszy styl, rozwiązywane są przedewszytskiem przez architekturę. Malarstwo i rzeźba bez związku z architekturą są dziś nie do pomyślenia i nie mają najmniejszej racji bytu. Zbliżenie malarstwa z architekurą nastąpiło przez uświadomienie sobie nierozdzielności prawa przestrzeni, koloru i materjału."

[336] Stażewski seems to have made no distinction between the work of Mondrian and van Doesburg, although it was the latter who introduced the diagonal into his art around 1924. On Stażewski's relationship to de Stijl, see Joanna Kleiverda, "Stażewski i de Stijl," in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988*, 42-51.

Painting II (*Obraz Abstrakcyjny II*) painted between 1928 and 1929 (Fig. 1) are nearly monochromatic except the deep red rectangle in the lower right corner. While the subtly varied color forms are inscribed within the framework of the grid, they are simultaneously softened by the introduction of the curve. For this Polish artist, art was "a continuous struggle" and its theme was the dynamism of modern life.[337] "The real inspiration for creativity," he noticed in an article " Nowa Sztuka a spuścizna epok minionych" ("New Art and the tradition of epochs past"), written in 1933, "is the fast pace of urban life, the street, the machine, the warehouse, fashion."[338] The main painterly motivation was always geometry and geometric forms functioned as a symbol of social thought.[339]

Stażewski occupies a remarkable, if ambiguous position, in the history of Polish art. While Strzemiński has been hailed as the only radical artist of Polish Constructivism, Stażewski's legacy seems much more conflicted. Although he lived and worked until 1988 and influenced a great number of artists, including Edward Krasiński with whom he shared an apartment (studio) for nearly twenty years, Stażewski was never offered an academic position. Przyboś wrote in 1959 that Stażewski did not "develop a radical theory of abstraction, did not formulate such ultimate vision as Neoplasticism or unism. . . . [but] introduced charm to the world of classic abstraction."[340] His artistic output has been positioned in between "constructivism, purism and neoplasticism, determinism and possibility, Minimal Art and conceptualism, rationalism and poetry," or between "*Esprit*

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[337] Stażewski, 1980s; quoted in Jaromir Jedliński, "Najprostsze formy w sztuce," in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988,* 13.
[338] Stażewski, "Nowa Sztuka a spuścizna epok minionych," *Pion* 5 (1933): n.p.
[339] Stażewski, "Sztuki plastyczne jako streszczenie życia kulturalnego," *Europa* 3 (1929): n.p. This text was also published in French as "L'art plastique comme résumé de la vie culturelle," *Abstraction-Création* 1 (1932).
[340] Cited in Jedliński, "Najprostsze formy w sztuce," in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988,* 11.

Moderne and *Unizm*."[341] "Stażewski was never situated within the Polish avant-garde as independently as Strzemiński or Szczuka," wrote one unsympathetic critic, and "the surviving works speak of an artist whose avant-garde style was watered down."[342] Yet, it is my belief, that without Stażewski's persistent attempts to redefine and reconceptualize the language of geometric abstraction, the significance of the geometric vernacular in postwar Poland would be confined to purely formal developments with no connection to contemporary social, historical, and political context.

For Stażewski, "abstraction was a result of an all-inclusive inquiry and analysis," and pure art could be approached only through the elimination of objectness.[343] The search for art's meaning was achieved through the creative process, which allowed new painting to express its ultimate goal: "the expression of the laws governing objects and beings."[344] Ładnowska argued that for Stażewski the essence of painting was to make the process of its making visible.[345] For Stażewski, form and content constituted an organic, irreducible entity situated in the context of the concrete situation of man in industrial society. The struggle for objective elements, he noted in a talk on "Zagadnienia konstrukcji w sztuce nowoczesnej" ("Issues of Construction in Contemporary Art"), was softened by the curve, or more specifically sinusoid as well as the introduction of color hues.[346] The relationship of line and color can be seen in the now lost *Composition* (*Kompozycja*) of 1932, reconstructed in 1956, (Fig. 51). The painting formally recalls the

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[341] Ładnowska, "Sztuka wolnego ładu," 26; Turowski, "Dyskurs o Geometrii, Wolności, i Rozumie," in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988,* 29.
[342] Andrzej Osęka, "Gra w nic," *Kultura* 5 (January 1966): 9.
[343] Henryk Stażewski, "O sztuce abstrakcyjnej," *Blok* 8/9 (1924): n.p.
[344] Stażewski, "O sztuce abstrakcyjnej," n.p.
[345] Ładnowska, "Sztuka wolnego ładu," 19.
[346] Stażewski, "Zagadnienia konstrukcji w sztuce nowoczesnej," lecture delivered at the Institute of Art Propaganda, Lodz, 13 Februrary 1932; reprinted in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988,* 68.

Abstract Painting II of 1928 (Fig. 1), although it appears more dynamic due to the sinusoid that makes up the side of the otherwise straight-angled red form in the central lower part of the canvas.[347] Next to line and color, contemporary painting was characterized by a redefined notion of chiaroscuro, which now functioned as an intermediary of light and dark areas rather than an agent of illumination.[348] Stażewski's painting was also informed by Strzemiński's theory of *unizm* (discussed later). The greater possibility for the unification of form and surface was achieved by the means of factural undifferentation as well as the use of curved line, which, in turn, resulted in the tautening of the interlaced planes.[349] But Stażewski was more interested in textural variations of pictorial surface. He wrote that *faktura* (facture) expressed itself in the very proximity of differentiated surfaces: "smooth, coarse, coniferous, grainy, and others, achieved by appropriate application of paint or the use of other materials such as glass or metal."[350] If in the past *faktura* was used to signal the textural differences between the depicted objects, it now became liberated from its descriptive function to a purely structural element.[351] In the second issue of *Komunikat Grupy a.r.* (the *Communiqué of the Group a.r.*), Stażewski wrote that

> the origin of form is contrast – sharpness and condensation of form is achieved by FACTURAL DIFFERENTIATION of form.
> the system of contrasts is a system of UNDERSTANDING OF FORM and thus determines not construction but the nature of form.
> the harmony of the work of art is achieved by the correspondance of all its parts. the basis out of which the unity of a work of art springs is the CALCULATION OF PARTICULAR AESTHETIC ELEMENTS.

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[347] Stażewski, "Zagadnienia konstrukcji w sztuce nowoczesnej," 68.
[348] Stażewski, "Nowa Sztuka a spuścizna epok minionych."
[349] Stażewski, "Epigoni modernizmu i krytycy-rutyniści," *Wiadomości Literackie* 32 (1933): 4. Reprinted in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988,* 76.
[350] Stażewski, "Nowa Sztuka a spuścizna epok minionych."
[351] Stażewski, "Nowa Sztuka a spuścizna epok minionych."

the goal of art is organicity and the harmony of autonomous work of art.[352]

According to the artist, the flatness of *unizm* was not possible in Neoplasticism, in which the flatness of particular planes never amounted to the flatness of the entire surface (because of the dependence of the composition on color contrasts). However, this flatness was possible with the use of *faktura*, as can be seen in Stażewski's paintings reproduced in the first issue of *Praesens* (Fig. 50) and, later, in such works as *Faktura Composition* (*Kompozycja fakturowa*) of 1930 (Fig. 52).[353] If such paintings as the 1929 *Composition* (*Kompozycja*) (Fig. 53) still reveal Stażewski's interest in Neoplasticism, then the achromatic surface of the *Composition* (*Kompozycja*) of 1932 (Fig. 54) seems to signal the end of this interest. The white painting no longer depended on contrasts of color and form but on the harmony of textural differentiation. Later Ładnowska wrote that "the smooth central patch forms the work's focal point and centers the eye like the multilayered membrane of the retina focuses sight. It is real with its own reality, *lui-même*."[354] In white compositions, Stażewski was, according to Turowski, sublimating the state of reason in which the contrast of form lost its raison d'être, like Hegel

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[352] Stażewski, [untitled], *Komunikat Grupy a.r.* 2 (1932): n.p.

źródłem formy jest kontrast - ostrość występowania formy i jej kondensację osiąga się przez KONTRAST ZESTAWIENIA fragmentów formy.

system kontrastów jest systemem UJECIA FORMY i dlatego decyduje nie o budowie, lecz wyłącznie o characterze formy.

harmonję dzieła sztuki osiąga się przez współmierność wszystkich jego części - podłożem, z jakiego wynika jednolitość dzieła sztuki, jest OBLICZENIE JEDNORODNYCH ELEMENTÓW ESTETYCZNYCH.

celem sztuki jest organiczność i harmonja jedności dzieła sztuki.

[353] Stażewski, "Epigoni modernizmu i krytycy-rutyniści," *Wiadomości Literackie 32* (1933), 4. Reprinted in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988,* 76.

[354] Ładnowska, "Sztuka wolnego ładu," 19.

attempting to identify being with reason by ascribing characteristics of being to thought.[355]

[355] Turowski, *Budowniczowie Świata,* 282.

a.r.

Because Strzemiński was instrumental in the founding of the group a.r, it is important to briefly sketch his theory of *unizm*. Strzemiński began to formulate his theory of painting in 1924 in an article entitled "B=2," a later version was titled *Unizm w Malarstwie* (*Unism in Painting*) (Fig. 55).[356] Painting was for Strzemiński an autonomous structure in the service of giving shape and form to future society. Bereft of this function and symbolic value, it would come dangerously close to a utilitarian object without sustaining its utilitarian value. Strzemiński traced a history of art from the Baroque period (which for the author culminated in the art of Cézanne) to the present which, of course, was *unizm*. He understood the development of the new art as a passage from the drama of the Baroque toward a concept of painting as a painterly organism subject to the "laws of organicity."[357] *Unizm* was predicated on a harmony of all formal and natural elements. Since these elements included flatness, the finished work needed to consist of a uniformly flat, often monochromatic surface. The fundamental premise of the theory of *unizm* is the painterly issue of representation and illusion, which for Strzemiński (in practice) developed gradually. In his earlier works, such as *Architectonic Composition 9c* (*Kompozycja Architektoniczna 9c*) of 1929 (Fig. 56), the painterly surface was rendered dynamic by the use of primary colors. In other works, biomorphic forms vibrated on the surface ever so slightly with the use of soft, only slightly differentiated hues such as in *Composition Unism 7* (*Komozycja Unistyczna 7*) of 1929 (Fig. 56). Finally the theory of *unizm* was materialized in the flat, monochromatic,

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[356] Strzemiński, "B=2," *Blok* 8/9 (November/December 1924): n.p. The second version, called "Dualizm and Unizm," appeared in a monthly *Droga* in the summer of 1927. It was finally published as *Unizm w Malarstwie* (Warsaw: Bibljoteka Praesens, 1928).
[357] Strzemiński, *Unizm w Malarstwie*, passim.

slightly factured surface of such works as *Composition Unism 12* (*Kompozycja Unistyczna 12*) of 1932 (Fig. 56). The specificity of the theory of *unizm* resides in the fact that it never allowed a break from easel painting. In this respect, it differed fundamentally from the theories of both Rodchenko and Lissitzky. In its insistence on the uniformly flat, monochromatic surface of the canvas, *unizm* anticipated various monochrome adventures of the 1960s in Western Europe and the United States. But even at the moment of the fractured monochromatic surface, even at the moment of the complete break up of the black rectangle (Fig. 57), Strzemiński was not willing to give in to the concept of an 'artist-engineer' and was not willing to move to Productivism, for to do so was not only to become the tool of politics and propaganda but, most importantly, to betray painting and divest it of its organicity.[358] Strzemiński opposed the proclamations about the end of art and believed in a continual foundation for art, its historical existence and development in the future.[359] In 1929, he wrote that "proletariat art impeded the development of art, because as agitational art, it aimed to stabilize form. It [was] an enemy of form, because form complicates and obstructs agitation."[360]

a.r. was founded in 1929. Unlike Blok and Praesens, a.r. was a very small group consisting of Strzemiński, Kobro, Stażewski, Przyboś, and Jan Brzękowski. The latter was a poet and critic who had lived in Paris since 1928 and who would become the editor

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[358] It is important to note that in practice Strzemiński's theory was utilized for only a brief moment. In the mid-1930s, he faltered and reverted to semi-abstract painting. When he lost his teaching position in 1950, Strzemiński was forced to earn his living by designing window displays, an activity, which, according to Stefan Krygier, could show that an artist can produce work that is communicative and yet new and creative, without compromising his theory. See Stefan Krygier, "Władysław Strzemiński – artysta, pedagog. Wspomnienia," in *Władysław Strzemiński In Memoriam*, 46.

[359] Turowski, "Utopia Awangardy," *Artium Quaestiones* 8 (1979): 159.

[360] Strzemiński to Przyboś, 27 June 1929; reprinted in "Listy Władysława Strzemińskiego do Juliana Przybosia," 225.

of *L'Art Contemporain – Sztuka Współczesna*, published in Paris between 1929 and 1930. Strzemiński founded a.r. mainly as a reaction to Praesens, which was, in fact, its competitor. In a letter to Przyboś, he wrote: "it seems that my wife and I will break away from Praesens and organize a new group, which would combine modernity: poetry, art, architecture."[361] Generally, in the literature a.r. is explained as an acronym for "real avant-garde" or "revolutionary artists."[362] In 1930, Strzemiński wrote to Przyboś that "a.r does not mean anything; it is an abstract name."[363] However, Turowski, who collected and edited letters between Strzemiński and Przyboś, argued that Strzemiński's statement may be a bit confusing. Strzemiński claimed that on one hand, a.r. had a strong position in Warsaw, and, on the other, that "a.r. does not mean anything." For Turowski this statement "suggests an indifference of federal administration to artistic affairs," not that it meant nothing to its founders.[364] Turowski's statement can, in turn, be confusing unless we remember that while during the early 1920s the state tended not to interfere in the matters of culture, after the May coup d'état of 1926, the newly created *sanacja* government became more involved in issues of art and culture. In addition, Przyboś, who was a member of a.r., used the term *awangarda rewolucyjna* (revolutionary avant-garde) in his essay for the 1957 exhibition *Katarzyna Kobro Władysław Strzemiński*.[365]

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[361] Strzemiński to Przyboś, 27 June 1929; reprinted "Listy Władysława Strzemińskiego do Juliana Przybosia," 225.
[362] See for example, Zofia Baranowicz, "Grupa "*a.r.*" w świetle korespondencji," *Rocznik Historii Sztuki* 9 (Warsaw: PAN, 1973): 285; and Piotr Piotrowski, "The avant-garde instituionalized? The 1932 City Lodz Art Prize Awarded to Władysław Strzemiński," *UMĚNÍ* 3 (2003): 211.
[363] Strzemiński to Przyboś, 26 April 1930; reprinted in "Listy Władysława Strzemińskiego do Juliana Przybosia," 240.
[364] Turowski, "Listy Władysława Strzemińskiego do Juliana Przybosia," 241n1.
[365] Julian Przyboś, *Katarzyna Kobro Władysław Strzemiński* (Lodz: Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, 1957), 8.

In contrast to the large groups such as Blok and Praesens, the smaller a.r. did not have sufficient funds for a large publication, and instead issued its agenda in form of a communiqué. The first *Komunikat Grupy a.r.* (*Communiqué of the Group a.r.*), issued in 1931 (Fig. 58), proclaimed that

> CONTEMPORARY IS NOT
> JUST ONE MORE STYLE.
> CONTEMPORARY ART
> IS A NEGATION OF ALL THAT
> HAPPENED BEFORE IT.
> CONTEMPORARY ART IS A
> REVOLUTION IN OLD
> WAYS OF EXPRESSION.
> CONTEMPORARY ART CHANGES THE
> RELATIONSHIP OF MAN TO ALL
> ACHIEVMENTS OF HIS HAND.[366]

The second *Komunikat Grupy a.r.*, published a year later (Fig. 59 and Fig. 60), proclaimed that the mass culture ubiquitous not only in Russia "results in a by-product of pseudo-culture."[367] It is important to remember that *a.r.* was founded in opposition to *Praesens*, which symbolized "the by-product of pseudo culture" in its architectural and design projects. In a letter to Jan Tschichold, German theoretician, book designer, and typographer, Strzemiński wrote that "in Poland, there has been no avant-garde journal

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[366] *Komunikat Grupy a.r.* 1 (1931): n.p.
SZTUKA NOWOCZESNA NIE JEST
TYLKO JESCZE JEDNYM STY-
LEM. SZTUKA NOWOCZESNA
JEST ZAPRZECZENIEM TEGO
WSZYSTKIEGO, CO BYLO PRZED-
TEM. SZTUKA NOWOCZESNA
JEST REWOLUCJA DOTYCHCZA-
SOWYCH PODSTAW ODCZUWA-
NIA. SZTUKA NOWOCZESNA ZMIE-
NIA STOSUNEK CZŁOWIEKA DO
WSZYSTKICH DZIEŁ JEGO REKI.

[367] *Komunikat Gurpy a.r.* 2 (1932), n.p. "masowy skok ku kulturze, widoczny nietylko w rosji, ale i - w zwężonym zakresie - w państwach powstałych po wojnie, daje jako produkt uboczy swojej gwałtowności i przejściowości, **objaw półkultury**."

since the second issue of *Praesens*" and blamed it on the fact that members of *Praesens* became too commercial in order to make money.[368] *a.r.* was created to critique both the productivist-utilitarian tenets of the Russian Constructivists (as embodied in the ideological position of Szczuka) and the fetishization of architecture by *Praesens*.

The relationship of art and politics was a significant point of difference not only between Polish and Russian Constructivism but also among the Polish Constructivists themselves. The agitational role of art was in fact the most contested subject among the artists associated with *Blok.* This conflict eventually led to the disintegration of the group in 1926. Further, the social function of art was the theme of most vehement disagreements between Strzemiński and Szczuka. Szczuka's utilitarian model emphasized the necessity of incorporating art into social life. If in theory artistic production, equaled active political engagement, in practice, it resulted in the production of typographical and interior designs, but most important agitprop. For Szczuka, easel painting lost its legitimacy. The tradition of easel painting was, as is well known, renounced in 1921 with Rodchenko's three monochrome panels entitled *Primary Colors*. This renunciation was reiterated with the publication of Osip Brik's 1921 *Art into Production* and, two years later, of Nikolai Tarabukin's *From Easel to the Machine*. Strzemiński expressed his hostility toward the active political engagement on the pages of *Zwrotnica*. He believed that the Bolshevik support of the new art was a myth propagated further by a few careerists such as Osip Brik and Ivan Puni, who were given a task of "creating long theories on the subject of the new art (2000 words per minute; 25 articles

[368] Strzemiński to Jan Tschichold, 6 May 1930. Special Collections, 930030, Box 7. Getty Center, Los Angeles. Author's translation from German.

per week)."[369] For Strzemiński, the state of the new art before Bolshevism was on the way toward the radical abstraction which was objectless and constructivist.[370] But by 1931, according to Strzemiński, Communism had a stifling effect on art not only in Russia, where Communism was a fact of life, but in other countries, as well, "where it is an enemy not only of the new but all art in general."[371] Strzemiński as well as Stażewski directed their polemics against the proclamations about the end of art, specifically, easel painting, and argued rather in defence of art and its development in the future.

While a.r. as a group seemed not to be interested in the kind of collective exhibitions characteristic of Blok and Praesens, its focal point was instead to be the founding of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Lodz, in central Poland, which eventually became the true legacy of the group as the first museum devoted to abstract art in Europe (Fig. 61). Strzemiński proposed that the institution was to function not as a traditional museum but rather as an experimental, educational, and artistic institution. Stażewski was instrumental in securing works for the museum due to his international contacts. He frequently traveled to Paris and belonged to international groups. Two of these groups were *Cercle et Carré*, founded by Michel Seuphor and Torrés-Garcia in 1930, and *Abstraction Création*, initiated by Georges Vantongerloo and Auguste Herbin in 1932.[372] Stażewski, aided by Michel Seuphor and Jean Arp, was able to procure sixty works for the museum's founding collection. These included works by Strzemiński and

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[369] Strzemiński, "O Sztuce Rosyjskiej Notatki 2," 111.
[370] Strzemiński, "O Sztuce Rosyjskiej Notatki 2," 110.
[371] Strzemiński to Przyboś, 11 December 1931; reprinted in "Listy Władysława Strzemińskiego do Juliana Przybosia," 256.
[372] On *Cercle et Carré*, see, for example, *Arte abstracto, arte concreto: Cercle et Carré, Paris 1930* (Valencia: IVAM Centre Julio Gonzáles, 1990). See also *Abstraction Création, 1931-1936* (Munster: Westfälisches Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, 1978).

Kobro as well as five of his own paintings, and those by van Doesburg, Vantongerloo, Fernand Léger, Arp, and Sophie Tauber.

Contrary to the position offered by Yves-Alain Bois that the works of the Polish avant-garde did not circulate very widely, Polish artists, in fact, put a lot of energy into the exportation of Polish art abroad.[373] a.r. was instrumental in this process. Henryk Berlewi, as I discussed earlier, took part in the *International Congress of Progressive Artists* in Düsseldorf in 1922; had a solo exhibition at Berlin's Sturm Gallery in July 1924; and published his manifesto in *Der Sturm* in September. Artists associated with Bunt, especially Margarete and Stanisław Kubicki, were in very close contact with German artists, and in fact lived in Germany for long stretches of time. There is correspondence between Strzemiński and Tschichold, Stażewski's with Torrés-Garcia and van Doesburg, as well as Peiper's with Tristan Tzara.[374] In fact, the bilingual *L'Art Contemporain – Sztuka Współczesna* was devoted to "circulating achievements and works of the Polish avant-garde abroad."[375] This international journal was published and financed by Nadieżda Chodasiewicz-Grabowska (1904-1983), a Polish born painter who moved to France in 1924 and after marrying Léger in 1932 was known as Nadja Léger. The first issue of *L'Art Contemporain – Sztuka Współczesna* reproduced recent paintings by Stażewski (Fig. 52). Similarly, the publication put out by the members of *Abstraction Création* regularly included Polish artists.[376] However, despite these many efforts to

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[373] Bois, "Strzemiński and Kobro: In Search of Motivation," *Painting as Model*, 123.
[374] See, for instance, Stażewski to Torrés-Garcia, 12 June 1930. Special Collections, Torrés-Garcia, 960087, Box 1. Getty Center, Los Angeles. See also correspondence between Strzemiński and Jan Tschichold, Special Collections, Jan Tschichold, 930030, Box 7. For a copy of *Zwrotnica* in possession of Tzara signed by Peiper, see Special Collections 86-S77.
[375] Jan Brzękowski, *L'Art Contemporain – Sztuka Współczesna* 2 (1929/1930): 79.
[376] See *Abstraction Création* 1 (1932): 34-35, for works by Stażewski and Strzemiński; *Abstraction Création* 2 (1933): 42, 44, for works by Stażewski and Strzemiński; *Abstraction*

circulate their art widely, the art of Polish Constructivism remains little known, which, as I argue in the following chapters, was a direct result of the historical and political circumstances of the Cold War.

Création 4 (1935): 19, 29, for works by Kobro and Strzemiński; *Abstraction Création* 5 (1936): 15, 26, for works by Kobro and Strzemiński.

PART TWO

INTO THE GRIP OF TOTALITARIAN REGIME

CHAPTER THREE

ART IN THE VELVET PRISON

The political situation in postwar Poland changed dramatically in 1947, a year which marked the beginning of Stalinism, sealed with the 1948 founding of the United Workers' Party of Poland (PZPR), a party that combined the Polish Workers Party (PPR) with the Polish Socialist Party (PPS). After the death of Stalin in 1953, the period of the Thaw was initiated in 1956 by Nikita Khrushchev's so-called "Secret Speech" denouncing Stalin in March and Władysław Gomułka's return to power in October, and was shaped by the social unrest and uprisings in both Poland and Hungary. Within the sphere of art and culture, the context changed abruptly from relative freedom of artistic expression in postwar Poland to the rise of Socialist Realism and the subsequent "repressive tolerance," which helped maintain the repressive tactics of the government in the "velvet prison."[377] While during the late 1940s and early 1950s abstraction was forbidden, the reemergence of

[377] Herbert Marcuse's term from a 1965 essay entitled "Repressive Tolerance," in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, ed. Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, Jr., and Herbert Marcuse (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). Marcuse wrote that tolerance is the most successful model of oppression: the government "tolerates opposition within the framework determined" by the authorities (p. 95). Although he argued that capitalist democracies have totalitarian aspects, the model can be applied to post-Thaw Communism in Eastern Europe, because the illusion of freedom of expression (literary or artistic) was just that, an illusion. In other words, the "freedom" of the Thaw was under constant surveillance. See also David Bathrick, "Affirmative and Negative Culture" *Social Research* (Spring 1990): 170; and Miklós Haraszti, *A Cenzúra esztétikája* (1986), trans. Katalin and Stephen Landesman, *The Velvet Prison: Artists Under State Socialism* (New York: Basic Books, 1987). Haraszti, a Hungarian dissident discussed the state control of artistic culture, the nature of censorship, and the phenomenon of the voluntary cooptation of intellectuals many years before his book was first published unofficially in Hungary in 1986. Like the Polish writer Czesław Miłosz in the 1951 *Zniewolony Umysł* (*The Captive Mind*), Haraszti explored the complex situation of an intellectual under the totalitarian regime who, coopted by the regime – sometimes willingly – would become part of the existing political elite.

abstraction during the Thaw was not only a direct response to but also a consequence of the fight against the socialist realist culture.[378]

Reflecting this changing political climate, this chapter deals with changes in the officially accepted art forms between late 1940s and late 1950s. This change is manifested in a series of historical events that instituted the stifling program of Socialist Realism. The palpable change in the cultural politics was embodied in the highly publicized event of the *National Exhibition of Young Art* (*Ogólnopolska Wystawa Młodej Plastyki*) in the building of the Warsaw *Arsenał* (the Arsenal) in July, coloquially refered to as *Arsenał*. The exhibition reached almost mythological dimensions in the histories of postwar art, because it was an expression of the new, more liberal nature of cultural politics. While 1955 unquestionably marked a more relaxed atmosphere and freedom in the artistic culture, the year 1956 was also often – perhaps paradoxically – seen as the beginning of the end of the Thaw. Whatever the subsequent restrictions, however, the effects of the Thaw and the Khrushchev-led commitment of the Communist Party for reparations after the years of Stalinist terror could not be stopped completely.

In Gomułka's Poland, the Thaw resulted in a renewed commitment of the artistic community to debate and exhibit abstraction, which now – even if officially disallowed – could not be completely silenced. The mid-1950s witnessed the explosion of the Colorist type of abstract painting, characterized by its focus on color rather than form and content that developed out of the prewar art of the Kapizm group, to the detriment of the

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[378] Surveys of Polish postwar art include Bożena Kowalska, *Polska Awangarda Malarska, 1945-1970* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1975); Alicja Kępinska, *Nowa Sztuka: sztuka polska w latach 1945-1978* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1981); Janusz Bogucki, *Sztuka Polski Ludowej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1983); Piotr Piotrowski, *Znaczenia Modernizmu: W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku* (Poznan: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, 1999); Wojciech Włodarczyk, *Sztuka Polska, 1918-2000* (Warsaw: Arkady, 2000); and Anda Rottenberg, *Sztuka w Polsce, 1945-2005* (Warsaw: STENTOR, 2005).

"Constructivist abstraction of the intellectual type once represented by *Blok,*" which at the moment did not have many representatives.[379] In the West as well, geometric type of abstract art was not a predominant style. Notice, the extensive literature on Abstract Expressionism in comparison with the dearth of writing on geometric abstraction, on the latter topic scholarly treatments include classic works – even if now dated – by Michel Seuphor and George Rickey.[380]

The discussion of the legacy of Constructivism before and after the Thaw provides the necessary background for the analysis of Stażewski, whose postwar oeuvre may appear chronologically delayed from the Western perspective, but whose contribution was unprecedented in the postwar evolution of geometric abstract art (or neoconstructivism). This tendency, which having been born out of the prewar Constructivist aesthetic, morphologically advanced the restrained pictorial surface of geometric form, line (straight, curved, or diagonal), and spatial form directly opposed to that "malignant fever" called Abstract Expressionism in the United States, Informel in France, and Colorism in Poland.[381] It is important to remember that all museum and gallery exhibitions in Poland were state sponsored and thus could not take place without the approval of those "who supervised art and culture."[382] Before the Thaw, many artists chose to exhibit their work officially only at the barest minimum – participation in at least three exhibitions annually –

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[379] Janusz Bogucki, "Obraz wewnętrzny czyli na śladach nowej awangardy," *Struktury* 5 (1959): 6.
[380] For "malignant fever," see Michel Seuphor, *Dictionnnaire de la peinture abstrait* (Paris: F. Hazan, 1957); *Construction and Geometry: From Malevich to 'Tomorrow'* (New York: Galerie Chalette, 1960); and *Art abstrait constructif international* (Paris: Galerie Denise René, 1961). See also George Rickey, *Constructivism: Origins and Evolution* (George Braziller: New York, 1967).
[381] Michel Seuphor, "The Idea of Construction: Notes and Reflections," in *Construction and Geometry*, n.p.
[382] Zbigniew Dłubak, "Od Klubu Młodych Artystów i Naukowców do Krzywego Koła," interview by Barbara Askanas, in *Galeria Krzywe Koło*, ed. Janusz Zagrodzki (Warsaw: Muzeum Narodowe, 1990), 31.

required by the authorities, or not at all. A large percentage of artistic production thus took place outside of public view and behind the closed doors of the artist's studio. This is why the founding of Klub Krzywego Koła and Galeria Krzywe Koło (the Crooked Wheel Club and Gallery) in 1955 was so important, as it provided a forum for exhibiting art in a space that was not subsidized by the government. The Crooked Wheel Gallery and Club was more than a significant improvement in the politics of exhibiting art after years of silence, which began in late 1949 with the closing of public forums for discussing and showing art forms other than the officially sanctioned Socialist Realism. The activities of the Crooked Wheel Club and Gallery reverberated forcefully even after the dissolution of the club (in 1962) and gallery (in 1965) as they symbolized the relative freedom of the Thaw. In addition, the Crooked Wheel Gallery can be seen as a precursor of the Foksal Gallery founded in 1966, also in Warsaw, by Henryk Stażewski and others. The Foksal Gallery symbolized the development and relative freedom of the Polish avant-garde under unacceptable political conditions which lasted until the early 1990s. There were other important art galleries in Poland, including the Lodz Museum, which carried the torch of geometric abstract art with unprecedented consistency. Yet, the focus here is on the artistic culture of Warsaw, not only because it was (and continues to be) the capital city and the center of Stażewski's activities, but also because the influence of Russian Constructivism was present more in Warsaw than in Krakow, which leaned more toward Expressionism and Surrealism. In addition, Warsaw museums and galleries frequently showed important exhibitions as was the case with *Katarzyna Kobro Władysław Strzemiński*, which traveled from the Lodz Museum to Zachęta.[383]

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[383] *Katarzyna Kobro Władysław Strzemiński* (Lodz: Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, 1957).

Between Liberation and Oppression

Under the duress of the war years, the activities of Polish cultural and academic institutions were severly hindered. Mieczysław Porębski, who was barely 18 at the beginning of World War II and would be incarcerated in a concentration camp by 1944, remembered the mood of the early war days:

> Everyone imagined that this war would be like the previous one, that is, there would be an occupation, but institutions would continue to function. Our poor professors had similar thoughts and deemed the opening of the [Krakow's Jagiellonian] University as their foremost obligation. And so they started to do so – but we all know how it ended. I had time to register for a few lectures for the academic year 39/40 but none of them took place, instead what happened was the transport of the faculty to [the concentration camp at] Sachsenhausen.[384]

But even during the war, underground exhibitions were organized whenever possible. For example, the 1943 show, organized in part by the Polish artist, Tadeusz Kantor (1915-1990), was organized in the private apartment of Ewa Siedlecka. Due to space considerations, the exhibition included mostly small works on paper. Generally, however, art production was stifled. A great deal of art work was lost or destroyed. For instance, Stażewski's prewar production was lost almost entirely in occupied Warsaw, when his apartment was bombed during the September 1939 campaign.[385] Because of this loss, we know his early works mainly through illustrations in publications such *Blok* and *Praesens*. Stażewski moved to the small town of Szczekocin in 1943, but returned to Warsaw in May 1945.

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[384] Krystyna Czerni, *Nie tylko o sztuce: rozmowy z Mieczysławem Porębskim* (Wroclaw: Wydawnictwo Dolnośląskie, 1992), 24.

[385] Janina Ładnowska, conversations with author, February 2006. See also Janina Ładnowska, "Kalendarium," *Henryk Stazewski, 1894-1988: w setną rocznicę urodzin* (Lodz: Muzeum Sztuki, 1995), 125.

In addition, the prewar archives of the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw were destroyed by the Nazis. The works of Kobro were thrown out into a city garbage dump, and she was able to retrieve them only in great danger to herself. Strzemiński's works were miraculously saved in their apartment, which during the war was occupied by a German family unaware that "Forbidden Art" was kept hidden under the kitchen floor. Tragically, after the war, the destitute Kobro was forced to burn her wooden sculptures for food and warmth, when the production of dolls and burlap bags was not sufficient to support her family.[386] Many artists experienced tremendous hardships, and many perished. These privations would literally become engraved on their faces, as exemplifed by a photograph of Kobro taken in 1944 (Fig. 63). Yet in spite of those extreme personal setbacks, the immediate postwar period had an extreme urgency to resume artistic activity. The artistic traditions of Colorism of the 1930s were the most ubiquitous, but after the liberation artists also looked back to the neoromantic and symbolic or expressionist visual rhetoric of the earlier twentieth-century. This is not to say that the prewar avant-garde associated with Blok, whatever was left of it, did not resume its activities. Rather, after the war, numerous groups resurfaced, including the Krakow Group, which was criticized for its leftist tendencies in the prewar period but was prosecuted by the Nazis during the war; in Lodz, artists of the radical social-political Strzemiński circle; and in Warsaw, Stażewski and other artists.[387]

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[386] See the account by the artist' daughter, Nika Strzemińska, *Katarzyna Kobro* (Warsaw: Scholar, 1999), 30. See also her *Miłość, sztuka i nienawiść* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1991).

[387] Although Poland is a relatively small country and distance between Warsaw and Krakow today takes about 3,5 hours, and between Warsaw and Lodz about 2 hours, traveling in the immediate postwar period was lengthy and dangerous. Porębski recalled that a trip to Warsaw was extremely long and risky because of the guerilla fighters and bandits inhabiting the forests. See Czerni, *Nie tylko o sztuce*, 53. See also Marek Świca, "Rozmowy z Mieczysławem

It is not possible to provide an exhaustive account of the situation of Poland during World War II, but a brief discussion should illuminate the circumstances that compelled many Polish intellectuals to embrace Communism, which many would later renounce. The German aggression against Poland during the early morning of 1 September 1939 inaugurating the atrocities of World War II was extremely swift.[388] Only five days later, the Polish government began its retreat from Warsaw, and the next day the Polish military moved beyond the Vistula-San rivers line in the east.[389] But Soviet Russia set in motion its own invasion based on the secret agreement on non-aggression with Germany, the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact, signed on 23 August 1939.[390] Once again, as General Piłsudski predicted in the 1920s, Poland was faced with two enemies embodied in her powerful eastern and western neighbors. Mass terror followed the September campaign. By 1941, nearly half a million people, mostly Poles and Jews, were deported to Siberia. The People's Commissary of National Security (NKVD), established in the USSR in 1934, was responsible for murdering over twenty thousand Polish officers, civil servants, and policemen, including the infamous massacre of four thousand officers at Katyń in 1940, an incident which was denied by the Russians and was not talked about openly until the 1990s. For every German killed in occupied Poland

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Porębskim," in *I Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej: pięćdziesiąt lat później* (Krakow: Gallery Starmach, 1998), 18.

[388] For chronological accounts of the history of Poland, see Wojciech Roszkowski, *Historia Polski: 1914-2004* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2005); Andrzej Paczkowski, *Pół Wieku Dziejów Polski* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN, 2005). In English, see Norman Davis, *Boże Igrzysko: Historia Polski* (*God's Playground: A History of Poland*) (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981); and Jerzy Lukowski and Hubert Zawadzki, *A Concise History of Poland* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006). For the postwar history of Poland, see also Andrzej Friszke, *Polska: losy państwa i narodu, 1939-1989* (Warsaw: Iskry, 2003).

[389] France and Britain declared war against the Third Reich on 3 September, but both countries decided against active military offensive.

[390] The Red Army crossed Polish borders on 17 September and Warsaw surrendered ten days later.

a hundred hostages were executed, frequently obtained in the so-called *łapanka*, the Polish term for the Nazi practice of a random and unexpected gathering of a large number of people on city streets or markets to be killed or transported into concentration camps.[391] If, at the beginning of 1941, Jews and Gypsies were 'merely' forbidden to move about freely and were contained in special camps, by mid-1942 the liquidation of the Jewish Ghetto by the Nazis in Warsaw began in earnest.[392] In fact, the situation of the occupied country worsened considerably after Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union in June 1941. Attempts at resistance, such as the Warsaw's Jewish Ghetto Uprising between April and May of 1943, or the Warsaw Uprising of 1944, were not successfull. The largest underground military faction in Poland, the so-called Home Army (Armia Krajowa, or AK), was fiercely persecuted by the Soviet Army, which viewed the activities of the Polish resistance as conspiracies of the enemy. The rapidly deteriorating Soviet-Polish relations disintegrated completely after the Warsaw Uprising, which powered mainly by the Home Army, began in August 1944 and lasted a little over two months. The Red Army was stationed across the Vistula River and remained there during its duration, idly watching a complete destruction of the city (Fig. 64).[393] Stalin had no obligation to aid the uprising, because he had broke off all diplomatic relations with Poland by April 1943. His move was precipitated by the fact that when Germans discovered the mass graves with bodies of Polish officers in Katyń in 1943, General

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[391] For example, between October 1943 and July 1944, in Warsaw alone, eight thousand people lost their lives in public executions. The construction of Auschwitz began in 1940.
[392] Half a million Polish Jews lost their lives in ghettos and camps and more than two million were murdered in concentration camps; nearly three million Soviet and other European Jews were also murdered, in addition to the unaccounted ones who perished in the vast areas of the USSR.
[393] On propaganda during the Polish People's Republic (PRL) involving the Warsaw Uprsing see, for example, Jacek Z. Sawicki, "Wymazać pamięć powstania. Kilka uwag o stosunku propagandy PRL do powstania warszawskiego," in *Propaganda PRL. Wybrane Problemy,* ed. Piotr Semków (Gdansk: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2004), 55-60.

Sikorski, the Chief Commander and Prime Minister of Polish Government in Exile between 1939 and 1943, had requested the Red Cross to investigate the Soviet involvement in the massacre. This way, not only was Stalin free to refuse help to the Uprising, but was also able to declare anyone even minimally associated with the Home Army, which was severely persecuted during the entire tenure of PRL, as the number one enemy of the Polish Committee of Polish Liberation (PKWN, also known as the Lublin Committee). The Lublin government, which was established in July 1943 as a provisional government under the direction and auspices of Moscow, was violently opposed to the Polish Government in Exile in London, led by Stanisław Mikołajczyk (after General Sikorski's controversial death in a plane crash in 1943).[394] Finally, the Yalta conferenece in the Crimea in February 1945 granted the Soviet Union control over Poland (Fig. 65)

[394] PKWN was established under the direction of the State National Council (Krajowa Rada Narodowa, or KRN) – a parliament-like political body created by the Polish Communists that was the seed of the postwar Stalinist regime.

The Freeze before the Thaw

Historically, the period between 1945 and 1949 was characterized by the reconstruction of the war-ravaged country and represented officially by visual images of bricklayers whose smiling faces adorned city streets (Fig. 66 and Fig. 8). Although the extreme sovieticization of Polish art and culture began in earnest after New Year's Eve of 1948, when the Polish Workers' Party (PPR) and the Polish Socialist Party (PPS) joined and metamorphosed into the United Workers' Party of Poland (PZPR), by 1947 many of the oppressive tactics of the regime were already in place. Bolesław Bierut (1892-1956), a Polish Communist, was 'elected' President in February 1947 (there was only one candidate prosposed by the *Sejm*.[395] In March, a few months before its metamorphosis into PZPR, the Central Committee of the Polish Workers' Party instituted a decree that required all members of the Party to subscribe to the Party-sanctioned daily press, and in May, the newly founded Press Committee ensured the Party's ideological domination over the press.[396] After he took office, Bierut announced the government control over the matters of art and culture. In the national radio address, he declared that

> It is necessary for our contemporary artists to remember that their work should shape, seize, and educate our nation. . . . Art and culture ought to mirror the great decisive moment experienced by the nation. It ought to be, although it is not yet. . . . Let's take a critical look at our sciences, arts, literature, and culture. What is the state of research, what is shown in the cinema, what songs do poets give the nation, what tone and mood express the works of writers? Do we find, often enough, the joy of liberation, the zeal to work, the faith in the fruitfulness of action? And yet, these requirements are put forth by the highest social and

[395] Bierut was a member of KPP, which was dissolved by Stalin in 1938, and became President of Poland between 1947 and 1952, and then Prime Minister until his death. *Sejm* is a lower chamber of the Polish Parliament.

[396] For an account of chronological political and cultural events in Poland between 1944 and 1981 see Marta Fik, *Kultura Polska po Jałcie: Kronika Lat 1944-1981* (London: Polonia Book Fund, 1989).

> national needs . . . . the nation has the right to voice its demands to the creators . . . . the nation must shape the makers of its culture by accepting or rejecting their endeavors, with criticism or honors.[397]

The way the nation shaped the makers of its culture was, of course, with the help of intricate strategies of censorship. Next to terror and propaganda, censorship constituted the most important "pillar of the Communist system."[398] While new publications such as *Nowe Drogi* (*New Paths*) faithfully represented the ideology of the PZPR, others such as *Gazeta Ludowa* (*The People's Newspaper*) were increasingly oppressed. *Gazeta Ludowa*, founded in November 1945, was the official organ of the Polish Peasant Party (PSL). It was the only influential political party in opposition to the Communist government, and as a consequence its paper was the only independent daily paper. Kazimierz Bagiński, one of the founders of PSL, who emigrated to the United States in 1947, remembered later that by March 1946, the newspaper was informed that its circulation could not exceed 62,000 (at the time, the circulation neared 200,000), and because the paper was printed in a state-owned shop, these numbers were strictly enforced.[399] The censor acted as a "co-editor" who crossed out lines and eliminated text in an attempt to delay the arrival of newspapers at newsstands and operated "according to unlawful methods forcing the reader to buy pro-regime publications."[400] In April 1947,

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[397] Bolesław Bierut, speech given at the opening of the Wroclaw radio station (1947); quoted in Bożena Kowalska, *Polska awangarda malarska, 1945-1970* (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1975), 45.
[398] Łukasz Kamiński, "Struktury Propagandy w PRL," in *Propaganda PRL. Wybrane Problemy,* ed. Piotr Semków (Gdansk: Instytut Pamięci Narodowej, 2004), 10.
[399] Kazimierz Bagiński, "Cenzura w Polsce. Trudności Wydawnicze," *Zeszyty Historyczne* 8 (1966): 131.
[400] Bagiński, "Cenzura w Polsce," 133. See also Marta Fik, "Cenzor jako współautor," in *Literatura i Władza,* ed. Bożena Wojnowska (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Instytutu Badań Literackich, 1996), 135.

the editor of *Gazeta Ludowa*, Zygmunt Augustyński, was convicted of espionage and sentenced to fifteen years in prison; the publication itself was terminated in 1949.

With the founding of the United Workers' Party of Poland (PZPR) in 1948, the new cultural policy, which had begun to take shape in 1947, was set in full motion. Historians agree that the meeting of the Union of Polish Writers (ZLP) in the north-western city of Szczecin in January 1949 firmly established the Socialist Realist doctrine in literature. The April session of the Central Committee of the United Workers' Party of Poland (KC PZPR) advanced that ideological offensive even further with the help of prominent Party members. For example, the April 1949 issue of *Nowe Drogi* ran an article by the poet and journalist Jerzy Putrament (1910-1986) that severely criticized formalism and cosmpolitanism in art, its inadequate relationship with the masses, as well as excessive and unfounded fascination with the West.[401] In the same issue, the philospher and Communist politician Adam Schaff (1913-2006), whose Marxist orthodoxy would give way to "a mild communism, of an armchair kind" after the events of March 1968, repeated the now familiar mantra of the fight against cosmpolitanism and against imperialist ideologies.[402] Although the regime paid more attention to the written word, the visual arts did not go unscathed.[403] The state took control over artists' unions

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[401] Jerzy Putrament, *Nowe Drogi* 2 (April 1949); cited in Fik, *Kultura Polska*, 117.

[402] Adam Schaff, *Nowe Drogi* 2 (April 1949); cited in Fik, *Kultura Polska*, 117. Schaff propagated conservative Marxist ideology and uncritically promoted Stalinism in Poland. He had been chair of the Marxist Philosophy Department at the Warsaw University since 1948. He became a revisionist after 1956 and was dismissed from KC PZPR in 1968 as a result of the events of March of that year. Schaff's infamous proposal of Wojciech Jaruzelski, the Polish Communist general, who instituted martial law after strikes in the Gdansk shipyard, for the Nobel Prize did not endear him to the public. See also Stefan Kisielewski, *Diaries* (Warsaw: Iskry, 2001), 112.

[403] The declassified files of the Ministry of Art and Culture include a 1952 mandate for libraries instructing all to "clean up" their collections of works that had "no value, were politically harmful and not current." See "Wytyczne w Sprawie Oczyszczania Księgozbiorów" (1952), AAN, MKiS, Classified, p.2 cz.2 t.2 cz.1, 47.

and associations, as well as museums, art and educational institutions.[404] Subjects most prized by the Party included contemporary heroes and leaders including Bierut, or Józef Cyrankiewicz (1911-1989), the Prime Minister between 1947 and 1952. Artistic production was expected to embrace themes of the nation's 'way toward building socialism,' a slogan frequently heard during the tenure of the Polish People's Republic until its demise in 1989. Specific institutions were established in order to enforce the "proper" functioning of art and culture, including the Central Office of Art Exhibitions, the Central Publishing Commission, and the Central Commission for Theater Repertoire. This way the administration guaranteed the centralization of the entire realm of the country's art and culture. The culmination of these changes was a joyfully festive celebration at the fitting occasion of Stalin's seventieth-birthday. Although propaganda was relentless, historian Andrzej Paczkowski argued that censorship within the realm of culture mostly involved "refraining from 'anti-state' declarations and maintaining neutrality, which was inevitably understood as an endorsement for the ruling."[405] But to understand "refraining from 'anti-state' declarations and maintaining neutrality" as an automatic endorsement of Party politics is to oversimplify the complexity of the situation, especially during the most oppressive periods of the regime. It is a fact that the Party was responsible for formulating and enforcing appropriate topics for creative work, including music, but writers and artists alike tried to manipulate these restrictions. When art historian Bożena Kowalska, who knew Stażewski personally, submitted her manuscript of *Polska Awangarda Malarska, 1945-1970* (*The Polish Avant-Garde, 1945-1970*) for

[404] On the Ministry of Art and Culture see Anda Rottenberg, "Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki" in *Polskie Życie Artystyczne w latach 1945-1960,* ed. Aleksander Wojciechowski (Wroclaw: Zakład im. Ossolińskich, 1992), 191.
[405] Paczkowski, *Pól Wieku*, 191.

review by the Ministry of Art and Culture before it was published in 1975, the manuscript was edited considerably to eliminate what was considered politically inciteful language. Unsure whether she should allow the changes, the young historian and critic spoke to Stażewski, who responded that under the present circumstances the author's obligation was to ensure that the art of the avant-garde carries on and its history is recorded, thus securing the publication of one of the first accounts of postwar Polish art.[406]

[406] Bożena Kowalska, conversation with author, Warsaw, 20 April 2006.

Formalist Deviations

The phrase *zwyrodnienie formalistyczne* (formalist deviation), attributed to Włodzimierz Sokorski, a longtime employee of the Minstry of Art and Culture, would become a routine slogan referring to any art that did not conform to the standards of Socialist Realism.[407] The *First Exhibition of Contemporary Art*, coloquially referred to as *Nowocześni* (*Moderns*) held in Krakow in late 1948, found itself on the cusp of the still-undisturbed development of postwar art and the progressively tightening noose of Socialist Realism.[408] The show, curated by the artist Tadeusz Kantor, who had recently returned from Paris and would become well-known for the happenings performed in *Cricot 2* Theatre founded in 1955, and the critic Mieczysław Porębski, brought together geometric-constructivist and surrealist-inspired abstract works (Fig. 67 and Fig. 68).[409] Since the official hostility toward abstract art was felt more and more, Kantor and Porębski recognized that there was a need to organize an exhibition that would consolidate various artists and shed light on their activities. The large undertaking,

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[407] Włodzimierz Sokorski in *Dziennik Polski* (January 1949); cited in Bohdan Mączewski, "Sztuka czy 'zwyrodnienie formalistyczne'?" *Echo Dnia* 28 (January 1949): 3.

[408] The *First Exhibition of Contemporary Art* opened on 18 December 1948 and closed on 19 January 1949 at the Palace of Fine Arts on Szczepański Place in Krakow. Fifty years later, the Starmach Gallery organized a reconstruction of the exhibition accompanied by an excellent catalogue entitled *I Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej pięćdziesiąt lat później* (*First Exhibition of Contemporary Art: Fifty Years Later*) (Krakow: Gallery Starmach, 1998/1999), which included interviews with the curators, critics, and participants of the original show – some previously unpublished – as well as press reviews. The catalogue for the original 1948/49 show, printed by the Military Geographical Institute in Warsaw – with the help of Stażewski who was employed there – was small and nearly all copies were destroyed when the exhibition was closed by the authorities. The original catalogue was republished in conjuction with the 1998/99 show. The Starmach exhibition was followed by an important publication addressing the relationship between *Nowocześni* (*Moderns*) and Socialist Realism. See *Nowocześni a Socrealizm* (Krakow: Gallery Starmach, 2000), which was supplemented by the proceedings of the Nieborów conference entitled *Nowocześni a Socrealizm: Nieborów 1949* (Krakow: Gallery Starmach, 2000).

[409] The spatial forms as well as photograms included in the show were destroyed and are known from photographs. In addition, part of the painting collection was lost. See Marek Świca, "Introduction," in *I Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej*, 10.

sponsored by the Ministry of Art and Culture, was innovative both in terms of the stylistic qualities of the exhibited works and the way they were displayed.[410] As can be seen in photographs of the installation, works were hung on different levels, piled one above another, in varying distances from the wall. Some were displayed on special cases placed diagonally on the floor, with chairs dispersed across the gallery space, which was also used for poetry readings and musical performances, lectures, and exhibition tours for workers (Fig. 69). This approach to the exhibition space was considered to be unique and original, because it stood in stark contrast to the traditional space of the museum. The exhibition was meant to be didactic in nature and to counter the attacks against abstraction as hermetic and socially isolated by attracting a large audience. The introduction to the small catalogue stated that

> the exhibition of Contemporary Art organized by the Artists' Club in Krakow is meant to be comprehensive. It is meant to illustrate in a wider sense than usually practiced, the direction of interests and work of contemporary painters in Poland.[411]

The show included thirty-seven artists mostly from Krakow, including Tadeusz Kantor, represented by the two 1948 works of the same title *Composition* (*Kompozycja*) (Fig. 70 and Fig. 71); Jerzy Nowosielski (b. 1923), who was Kantor's assistant early in his career and showed *House of Pigeons* (*Dom Gołębi*) of 1948 (Fig. 72); Andrzej Wróblewski (1927-1957), who exhibited *Spatial Model* (*Model Przestrzenny*) of 1948 (Fig. 73); Lodz

[410] According to Bohdan Mączewski, the Ministry contributed a half a million Polish zloty to the exhibition; "Sztuka czy 'zwyrodnienie formalistyczne'?" *Echo Dnia* 28 (January 1949): 3. On avarage, a painting at an exhibition would sell for up to sixty thousand Polish zloty. See Ryszard Matuszewski, "Jak żyją polscy artyści plastycy," *Polska Zbrojna,* July 1948, 6. In addition, in 1949 an average artist stipend amounted to twenty five thousand Polish zloty. In 1951, the highest stipend was one hundred and twenty thousand Polish zloty; Document of the Central Office of Art Exhibitions, 25 August 1949, and Protocol of the Ministry of Art and Culture, 27 August 1950, AAN, MKiS 464, 11.

[411] *Katalog I Wystawy Sztuki Nowoczesnej* (Warsaw: Wojskowy Instytut Geograficzny, 1949); quoted in Andrzej Jakimowicz, "Kronika Polskiej Awangardy 1912-1957," *Przegląd Artystyczny* 1 (January/February 1958): 30.

was represented by Stefan Wegner (1901-1965), the student of Strzemiński, who showed four paintings including *Boats* (*Łódki*) of 1948 (Fig. 74); and Alfred Lenica (1899-1977), whose *When Youth Finds Itself in the Wind* (*Kiedy młodość znajdzie się w wichrze*) of 1948 (Fig. 75) represented the city of Poznan. From the Warsaw group of the Club of Young Artists and Academics, Stażewski exhibited his 1948 *Composition* (*Kompozycja*) (Fig. 76).[412] Interestingly, while the Club of Young Artists and Academics became an ally of the Krakow circle, Strzemiński, declined an invitation to participate in the show, because he and Kobro (who was not invited) were negatively disposed both toward Surrealism and the theoretical program espoused by the Krakow show.[413] When Kantor met Strzemiński in Warsaw, the pioneer of Polish Constructivism told the younger artist: "They [Surrealists] are all mistaken."[414] This led Kantor to conclude that Strzemiński simply did not understand the Surrealist aesthetic. Stażewski was also sceptical about Surrealism, which he expressed in a letter to the artist Bogusław Szwacz (b. 1912) by asking if "*surrewolucjoniści* have the correct attitude toward politics" and "the evolution of form?"[415]

The critical reviews of the *Nowocześni* show ranged from exhilaration (mostly by the show's organizers and participating artists) to timidly apologetic to hostile. Jerzy Malina (1903-1989), an artist whose *Head* (*Głowa*) of 1948 was included in the show

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[412] The Club of Young Artists and Academics (Klub Młodych Artystów i Naukowców) was founded in May 1947 and operated in the old building of the Institute of Art Propaganda (IPS) in Warsaw until it was disbanded in 1949. The Club published a magazine, *Nurt* (2 issues were published), and had its own experimental theater, cabaret, and cafe. Marian Bogusz was the artistic director.

[413] Zofia Kosiorek, *I Ogólnopolska Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej, 1948-1949* (Ph.D. diss., Uniwersytet Mikołaja Kopernika, 1971); cited in Janusz Bogucki, *Sztuka Polski Ludowej* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Artystyczne i Filmowe, 1983), 38.

[414] Kosiorek; in Bogucki, *Sztuka Polski Ludowej,* 38.

[415] Stażewski's term *surrewolucjoniści* refers to Surrealists but can only be translated as "sur-revolutionists." See Stażewski to Bogusław Szwacz, April 1948; quoted in *I Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej*, 262.

(Fig. 77), wrote a very sympathetic review of the exhibition, which he said "occurred during the period of a violent campaign against the entirety of contemporary arts" and showed "an exemplary decisive moral stance and unequivocal views toward the social function of art." He noticed that critical debates surrounding the exhibition paid "no attention to the essential role and. . . .'the social sense' of the arts but clearly [postulated] its strictly 'functional' role – as the operation of the short-wave propaganda machine."[416] The exhibition was a testimony of the younger generation's commitment to the development of visual arts after the break caused by the war, but it seemed to lack the support of the older generation of artists (all except Stażewski), which, Malina speculated, was either "a strategy, indifference, or simply pettiness and opportunism."[417] On the other side of the spectrum, the writer and poet Witold Zechenter (1904-1978) grumbled that the art shown at the Palace on Szczepański Place was "detached from society" and as such ceased "to perform the role of art" and became "asocial and torn away from life and society."[418] Aside from this assessment, Zechenter did not actually focus on the art itself but on the show's infamous guest book, which mainly cataloged the complaints of the visiting public. The majority of entries in the book were insults against the exhibited work. The people writing these, Zechenter mused, could express their position only through epithets not fit to print.[419] Another reviewer, in order to calm her nerves after viewing the show contemplated, the iron stove-pipe in her room, and wondered if she should have sent it to the exhibition: "With sympathy, I again look at

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[416] Jerzy Malina, "Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej w Krakowie," (December 1948); cited in *I Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej*, 131.
[417] Malina, "Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej," 131.
[418] Witold Zechenter, "Sensacyjna książka zażaleń," *Polska Zbrojna,* 19 January 1947, 7.
[419] Zechenter, "Sensacyjna książka zażaleń," 134.

my stove-pipe, and I am grateful that it warms my interior and has no artistic aspirations."[420]

Both the general public and the critical apparatus were able to accept neither geometric abstraction nor surrealist inspired work, in spite of the fact that lectures and tours were given throughout the duration of the show in order to inititate the uninitiated. Nearly a decade later, after the Thaw, Aleksander Wojciechowski, then editor of *Przegląd Artystyczny* (*Art Review*), concluded that in 1949 it became clear what kind of artistic trends were going to be attacked and criticized, and which kind would be tolerated and praised by the official organs.[421] Zbigniew Dłubak, who participated in the show and delivered a talk at its opening, remembered in retrospect that he thought that "contemporary art was meant to be understood as one element in the progress of civilization." He argued that "if socialism refers to the notion of progress, then it should also take an interest in contemporary art."[422] The exhibition organizers intended to bring contemporary art closer to the public and to the authorities, but, as we now know, that goal was unrealized. All decisions on Polish art and culture increasingly came from the highest ranking Soviet officials, who would soon make events like the Krakow exibition entirely extinct. This exhibition, which was, in fact, closed prematurely by the authorities, was the last manifestation of contemporary (abstract) art until the Thaw.

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[420] Anna Maślakiewicz-Brzozowska, "Wspomnienia z Wystawy Sztuki Nowoczesnej – Czyli dumanie nad rurą od pieca," *Echo,* 16 January 1949; cited in *I Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej*, 135.
[421] Aleksander Wojciechowski, "Młoda Plastyka Polska, 1945-1957," *Przegląd Artystyczny* 4/5 (August/October 1958): 18. *Przegląd Artystyczny* (*Art Review*), a monthly devoted to contemporary art, published its first issue in January 1946 in Krakow. The artist Eugeniusz Eibisch, who was associated with the Colorists, served on the editorial board. By 1950, the magazine was published in Warsaw under the guidance of Helena Krajewska and Juliusz Krajewski, among others, and mirrored the official reign of Socialist Realism when great attention was devoted to examples of this art coming from Soviet Russia. In 1952, the editorial board included Porębski, but the profile remained the same until it underwent radical changes in 1957 under the editorial eye of Wojciechowski.
[422] Dłubak, interview, in *Galeria Krzywe Koło*, 30.

The tightening of the Noose

The crucial year in Poland, 1949, was marked by a number of conferences that would shape and determine the form of visual arts for years to come. The program of Socialist Realism, which was now beginning to take shape, was understood as a creative method based on the nineteenth century realist tradition in Poland, combined with strictly prescribed themes and a strong emphasis on an optimistic outlook. The vice-Minister, and later Minister of Art and Culture, Włodzimierz Sokorski, described Socialist Realism as a creative method that was "not a dogma but a guiding principle for understanding a work of art as a conscious articulation of the processes of the development of life."[423] One of the first meetings to broach the topic was organized by the Ministry of Art and Culture in the small town of Nieborów in central Poland.[424] In his welcome remarks, Sokorski called the two-day conference a "purely friendly discussion" and described his role as the host "limited to organizing lunch and dinner or intellectual amusement."[425] The informal tone was meant to facilitate an open discussion in order to assess the mood of the artists, historians, and critics who attended the meeting. This is also the reason, it seems, that Sokorski did not once utter the phrase "Socialist Realism" (a fact which was brought up by Eibisch in a round table discussion).[426] Sokorski and Juliusz Starzyński were the key-note speakers at the conference. In his remarks, Sokorski articulated the official position on art in Poland with a call for "everyday battle for the new, deeply humanistic, and at

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[423] Włodzimierz Sokorski, "Nowa literatura w procesie powstawania," *Odrodzenie* 5 (1949): 1. Sokorski was the Minister of Art and Culture from 1952 to 1956.
[424] The Nieborów conference took place on 12 and 13 February 1949.
[425] Sokorski, minutes from the Nieborów conference, reprinted in *Nowocześni a Socrealizm: Nieborów 1949*, 17.
[426] Eibisch, minutes from the Nieborów conference; reprinted in *Nowocześni a Socrealizm: Nieborów 1949*, 36.

the same time deeply realistic painting and sculpture of our era."[427] Starzyński's comments, on the other hand, focused on the history of European art. To support his points, he gave an example of the tradition of Polish realism by referring to Antoni Brodowski (1784-1832), whose *Portrait of the Artist's Brother, Karol* (*Portret Brata Artysty, Karola*) of 1815 (Fig. 78) is characteristic of the Neoclassical style, and the realist Aleksander Gierymski (1850-1901), whose work, exemplified by the *Jewish Woman with Lemons* (*Żydówka z Cytrynami*) of 1881 (Fig. 79), inspired the Colorist painters. Kantor, as could be expected, violently opposed both speakers, calling Starzyński's talk eclectic and academic. He especially objected to the discussion of the idealizing painters Brodowski and Gierymski, and suggested that inspiration be taken instead from Cuba or Mexico.[428] Another voice, from the rather small pool of dissenting ones, came from Eibisch, who finally articulated the agenda of the conference, which had until then remained unspoken; namely that "the understanding between politicians and artists on the subject of art is" complicated and dangerous, especially if art was to function in the service of politics.[429]

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[427] Włodzimierz Sokorski, "O nowe oblicze naszej plastyki," *Trybuna Robotnicza,* 28 June 1949; cited in Rottenberg, "Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki," 190.

[428] Kantor, minutes from the Nieborów conference; in *Nowocześni a Socrealizm: Nieborów 1949*, 33, 34. Little did Kantor know that a few years later, in 1952, an exhibition of Mexican art was being discussed in the upper echelons of the Ministry of Art and Culture. The Archive of New Documents (AAN) is in possession of recently declassified files that contain documents refering to an exhibition proposed by David Siqueiros and Diego Rivera to be held in Poland. Officially, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as the Ministry of Art and Culture opposed the show because of its size, but in reality both wanted to include folk art and exclude modern art. See Monika Mirabel to the Ministry of Art and Culture, 22 April 1952; E. Drabienko to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 8 April 1952; E. Drabienko to the Central Department of Visual Arts Institutions, 28 February 1952; J. Kowalikowa to the Minister of Art and Culture, 22 February 1952; AAN, MKiS Classified p.2 cz.1 t.2 cz.1, 93-97.

[429] Eibisch, minutes from the Nieborów conference; in *Nowocześni a Socrealizm: Nieborów 1949*, 36.

The 'purely friendly' tone was soon to change. After the April session of the United Workers' Party of Poland, Sokorski's article entitled "O sztukę realizmu socjalistycznego" ("About Socialist Realist Art") appeared in *Nowe Drogi*. The article postulated that the only advanced form of art was that of Socialist Realism, as all others lead to the "conscious or unconscious deterioration into the degenerate art of the vanishing world."[430] A meeting of writers in January 1949 in Szczecin articulated the new socialist doctrine for writers. For visual artists, the same was instituted several months later during the meeting of the Union of Polish Visual Artists (ZPAP) in the industrial city of Katowice in southern Poland.[431] The Katowice conference is often given as the beginning of the official tenure of the Socialist Realist doctrine in the visual arts.[432] Its directives were announced in what now should sound as familiar rhetoric:

> Gradually artist-members of the Party begin to renounce the view that formalist experiments coming from the West express the 'revolutionary' aspects of our epoch and [finally] begin to deeply understand the ideological value of plastic arts.[433]

The Katowice conference was meant to define artistic practices in terms of Socialist Realism by declaring that

> Artists ought to take an active part in the struggle for the development of Polish Socialism and to make artistic talent available in the service of society and the victorious working class.[434]

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[430] Włodzimierz Sokorski, "O sztukę realizmu socjalistycznego," *Nowe Drogi* (April 1949); quoted in Fik, *Kultura Polska*, 117. The quotation in Polish reads "jest tylko świadomym lub nieświadomym staczaniem się na pozycje wyrodniejącej sztuki ginącego świata." It is an excellent example of the official Communist jargon.
[431] The ZPAP meeting took place from 27 to 29 June 1949.
[432] Aleksander Wojciechowski, "Młoda Plastyka Polska, 1945-1957," *Przegląd Artystyczny* 4/5 (August-October 1958): 17.
[433] "Trybuna Wolności," press release, 18 October 1949, AAN, MKiS 856, 79.
[434] "Nie można być tylko widzem," *Słowo Polskie,* 31 August 1949, 3.

The most vocal dissent to the offical Party line during this conference came from Kantor and Mieczysław Wejman, and both were severely criticized for voicing their concerns.[435] Some artists such as the husband-and-wife team Helena and Janusz Krajewski had already advocated Socialist Realism at the Nieborów meeting, and they would advance its tenets in their paintings, as in Helena Krajewska's the *Youth Brigade on the Accelerated Construction Site* (*Brygada młodzieżowa na szybkościowcu*) of 1950 (Fig. 80). Many others, such as the Krakow's Zbigniew Dłubak (who would soon be offically silenced), Maria Jarema, and Jonasz Stern actually were members of the Party but championed the freedom of formal experimentation in art believing that "Communism and formal experimentation were until now inseparable elements of the ideological position."[436]

Generally, early twentieth-century radical artistic groups, whether in Poland or in the West, were in one way or another associated with the political left, and so the official discrimination of abstraction in the 1950s seems all the more paradoxical. A number of artists chose to withdraw from official artistic life, and many were forced to lead a double life of minimal participation in the accepted style (in order to secure basic necessities) and conspiratorial art production behind the closed doors of the studio. This practice – on one hand, a protest against the required style and, on the other, basic self-preservation within the dictatorial regime – could ultimately also lead to conformism or cynicism.[437] In this context, Kantor's *Reconstruction* (*Rekonstrukcja*) and Stażewski's *Collaboration*

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[435] Wojciechowski, "Młoda Plastyka Polska," 17.
[436] Dłubak's essay from the Katowice conference was returned to the author with a note from the Central Committee of PZPR that the text was not suitable for publication. This was his last public appearance before the Thaw. Dłubak, interview, in *Galeria Krzywe Koło*, 32-33. See also Bogucki, *Sztuka Polski Ludowej*, 55.
[437] Wojciechowski, "Młoda Plastyka Polska," 24.

(The Crane) (*Współpraca: Dźwig*) (Fig. 81) should be viewed as work that conformed to the thematic requirements of the regime while employing experimental pictorial strategies of 'deformation.' Both works may seem chronologically delayed to the Western eye, but they should more correctly be seen as paving the way toward the creative freedom of formal experimentation and away from art's disintegration into the dogmatic forms of realism. Stażewski himself associated the development of art with social and political transformations; during the 1920s, this development was defined in terms of the artist as an active contributor to the building of the new world. Confronted with the atrocities of the "velvet prison," he was instrumental in promoting art that could retain its autonomous, free status but would also not conform to the state ideology.

The Krakow *Nowocześni* was the last art exhibition to be held before the official strategies gradually eliminated artistic experimentation; the circumstances of its closing marked the beginning of the persecution of formalism in art. As in Soviet Russia, in Poland the term "formalism" refered to art that did not conform to the state ideology, and included all modernist tendencies such as Cubism, Surrealism, or conceptual art. Any degree of formal deformation, including excessive attention to issues of form and color, would automatically imply an impoverishment of content and denote what Georg Lukács described as "formalist modernism, bereft of content, cut off from the mainstream of society."[438] Several months after the Krakow *Nowocześni*, the reception of the *Exhibition of Jewish Artists* reflected the changed direction of art production. The artist Henryk Hechtkopf offered a characteristic sentiment about the new style:

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[438] Georg Lukács, "Realism in the Balance" (1938); in *Aesthetics and Politics: Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno*, trans. and ed. Ronald Taylor (London and New York: Verso, 1977), 49.

> Gradually and systematically, we will defeat formalism, which is poisonous for artists. Motifs from the world of labor are closer to us now; we yearn to plastically express the toils of the world in rebuilding all that was destroyed by the war.[439]

In his mind, the critical reception hailed the show "an interesting example of the defeat of formalism and the beginning of contemporary realism."[440] An anonymous reviewer in the daily *Gazeta Robotnicza* (*The Workers' Newspaper*) noticed that contemporary art in "democratic countries" manifested a stronger inclination toward Realism:

> Breaking free from the noose of formalism, artists are getting closer to true art, where man – his life and struggle – are basic elements of a work of art. The antihumanist attitude of formalism led to the elimination of man from the artist's sight and mind. People – if at all were taken as a subject – appeared only as a decorative motif and not an active subject, as is the case in art that fulfills the postulates of realism. In order to create art for the masses, one must not only know life but must also have the know-how to translate it into the language of colors and shapes so that the masterpiece can speak to all.[441]

The Archive of New Documents (AAN) in Warsaw contains press releases and summaries of visual art exhibitions, art criticism, and the like that were prepared for the Ministry of Art and Culture. An unsigned 1949 memo protested that throughout that year "there were no articles about Socialist Realism – which is extremely neglectful."[442] Yet, magazine's such as *Odrodzenie* (*Revival*), for example, increasingly printed articles with titles refering to the "realist art in our epoch," "the tradition of realism in Polish painting," or "heroic realism."[443] By 1950, in order to advance the ideological offensive in the sphere of education and culture, the Ministry's "Plan for Cultural Exchange" called

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[439] "Odrzucenie formalizmu," *Słowo Polskie,* 16 October 1949, 4.
[440] "Odrzucenie formalizmu," *Słowo Polskie,* 16 October 1949, 4.
[441] W.K., "Na drodze do realizmu socjalistycznego w plastyce," *Gazeta Robotnicza,* 22 October 1949, n.p.
[442] Unknown, memorandum, summary of articles about visual arts in literary publications, [1949]; AAN, MKiS 826, 13.
[443] Włodzimierz Sokorski, "O realistyczną plastykę naszej epoki," *Odrodzenie* 2 (1949): 2; Juliusz Starzyński, "O realistycznej tradycji malarstwa polskiego," *Odrodzenie* 18 (1949): 6, 8; Janusz Bogucki, "Droga heroicznego realizmu," *Odrodzenie* 19 (1949): 3, 7.

for the "struggle for a socialist content of sciences, literature and art. . . .against cosmopolitanism, nationalism and formalism," the "pursuit of an absolute development of culture national in form and socialist in content" as well as the "pursuit of the wider dissemination and universalization of art and culture among the masses."[444] The national press was full of articles dealing with the circulation of art among the masses. Those included "Robotnik będzie mógł nabyć dzieła sztuki" ("Workers will be able to purchase works of art"), "Plastycy idą do fabryk" ("Artists go to factories"), and "Sztuka nowoczesna zbliża się do mas" ("Contemporary Art Gets Closer to the Masses"), all of which claimed that the reason modern and contemporary art remained hermetic is that "painting has been locked in museums and galleries and could not have any influence with the masses."[445] The success of such an agenda would be achieved only when

> the broadest masses of Polish society learn about the developments of arts and sciences in Soviet Russia. . . . [and] Polish scientists, artists, and art associations establish an immediate and close contact with Russian scientists and artists, through lectures or performances where they meet with the demanding audiences and critics in Soviet Russia, which will allow them to draw accurate conclusions about the shortcomings of their own fields and to incorporate experiences acquired in Soviet Russia.[446]

The rhetoric of this Plan For Cultural Exchange illustrates clearly that the position of an artist who wanted to produce geometric abstract was precarious in a country where the only art patronage was that of the government.

For Polish artists, the membership in the Union of Polish Visual Artists (ZPAP), which organized annual exhibitions and provided financial support, was mandatory. Evidence for this requirement has been presereved in the government archives. Letter

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[444] "Plan for Cultural Exchange for 1950," AAN, MKiS Classified, p.1 t.2, 1950, 164.
[445] Anonymous, “Robotnik będzie mógł nabyć dzieła sztuki," *Ziemie Pomorza* (October 1948): 4. Ir. Sch., “Plastycy idą do fabryk,“ *Słowo Polskie,* October 1948, 4. Ziemowit Szuman, “Sztuka nowoczesna zbliża się do mas," *Słowo Polskie,* July 1948, 19.
[446] "Plan for Cultural Exchange for 1950," 164.

from H. E. Michalski, director of the Department of Artistic Creativity within the Ministry of Art and Culture, urged artists to promptly complete official membership forms or else they would be denied any and all government assistance.[447] Without the support of ZPAP artists could not survive, and the dire financial situation of many is encapsulated in the fact that not only oil paints but also clothing and shoes were distributed to registered members.[448] Membership in ZPAP was obligatory, and those who did not conform to the state requirements encountered difficulties. Artists were obligated to attend ideological training sessions. For example, in 1952 Stażewski received a letter from the Director of Ideological Training, Bielecka-Tworkowska, urging him to attend one of a series of such lectures; the last sentence stated that "attendance is mandatory."[449] Strzemiński, to take another example, lost his position at the Lodz School of Fine Arts in 1950, because both his art and teaching were considered 'formalist.' In addition, the Sala Neoplastyczna (Neoplastic Room) at the Lodz Museum (Fig. 82), devoted to geometric abstract art by Strzemiński, Kobro, Arp, Mondrian, Stażewski, among others, which Strzemiński had designed two years earlier, was painted over. All paintings from the Neoplastic Room were placed in storage, forcing the artist (who was terribly wounded in World War I) to support himself by designing store windows, to the amusement of the gaping public who watched him hop around on one leg arranging props with his only hand. Within the same year, 1950, Stażewski produced such figurative

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[447] H. E. Michalski to ZPAP, 28 October 1948, AAN, MKiS 423, 212.
[448] H. Polański to Ministry of Art and Culture, 2 January 1945, AAN, MKiS 423, 140. Stażewski's name figures on the attached list. In a letter from Czesław Rzepiński to the Ministry of Art and Culture, (2 April 1946; in AAN, MKiS 410, 102-103), Kantor is listed as having received both shoes and clothing. On the difficult financial situation of artists, see Jan Cybis to the Ministry of Finance, 17 April 1945, AAN, MKiS 423, 147.
[449] I. Bielecka-Tworkowska to Henryk Stażewski, 5 March 1952, Marek Stażewski, private archive.

works as *On the regained territories* (*Na odzyskanych ziemiach*) (Fig. 83), which portrayed a forward-looking youth on a tractor and referred to the economic and agricultural organization of the territories reannexed to Poland after the Second World War, and an abstract *Composition* (*Kompozycja*) (Fig. 2), which was not shown outside of the artist's studio until the late 1950s. Yet, because he employed a degree of formal 'deformation' in the *On the regained territories*, Stażewski encountered financial difficulties, as he was never offered a teaching position and his stipends were infrequent. Increasingly, only the privacy of artist's studio provided the space for art discussion. Perhaps even more important, the decision to paint as little as possible in the official style and to continue producing works of abstraction became a defiant gesture against the regime. Berlewi, who lived in Paris, turned to figurative painting between 1947 and 1956, a move he called the "reintegration of the subject."[450] But what is interesting here is that living in Paris he met no external pressures that would prevent him from producing abstraction.

The defiant attitude toward the official, Socialist Realist tendencies could also be seen within the context of universities and art schools. For example, at the Krakow Academy of Fine Arts, when a delegation of artists from the Soviet bloc visited in April 1950, they were extremely unsympathetic toward the art of students and assessed the overall standard very negatively, because of what they called excessive attention to "color and form in relation to the theme of Socialist Realism."[451] The delegation also visited an exhibition of the Krakow group Sztuka (Art) and criticized most of the work "on account

[450] Andrzej K. Olszewski, *Henryk Berlewi* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Artystyczno-Graficzne, 1968), n.p.
[451] Jerzy Janczewski, "Sprawozdanie z pobytu delegacji plastyków w Krakowie," (Report on the Visit of the Soviet Delegation to Krakow), 21 May 1950, AAN, MKiS 816, 13.

of the low artistic standards as well as the practice and patronage of formalist tendencies."[452] On another occassion, a Russian delegation including the artist Aleksander Gerasimov (1881-1963), the first president of the Soviet Academy of Art, who was often refered to as Stalin's court painter, met with the reluctance of the faculty and students at the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow, if not with outright hostility. During a roundtable discussion, they reported, "there was no attempt to engage in any discussion by the Krakow professors" or to discuss issues "of the struggle with formalism in the USSR."[453] The Russian delegation rated the Krakow's Academy of Fine Arts negatively because of "its formalist approach to painting and drawing, as well as the lack of pedegogical approach to teaching," which really meant that the school was not adequately ideologically motivated.[454]

The year 1950 is remembered as the height of the Party's ideological offensive in the realm of visual arts. During that year, at the occasion of the *First National Art Exhibition*, several art historians were given the task of interviewing a number of artists. Irena Jakimowicz talked with Stażewski, who, when asked about the role and criteria of Socialist Realism in art production, replied that

> In the course of the history of art, there were many realisms. All essentially good art is realist, with the exception of medieval religious art, which was the least realist. . . . The meaning of realism is basically the notion of function. The different faces of realism were dependent upon the character of society that created it. . . .What today's realism looks like is not yet known. The wide spectrum of artistic directions is necessary in order to find the outcome, the search for realism.[455]

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[452] Janczewski, "Sprawozdanie z pobytu delegacji plastyków w Krakowie," 13.
[453] A. Łyżwianin, "Sprawozdanie z wyjazdu z delegacją radziecką plastyków do Krakowa, Poronina, Zakopanego, Wroclawia i Poznania," (Report on the Visit of the Soviet Delegation to Krakow, Poronin, Zakopane, Wroclaw, and Poznan), 20 April 1950, AAN, MKiS 816, 14-16.
[454] Łyżwianin, "Sprawozdanie z wyjazdu z delegacją radziecką plastyków," 14.
[455] Henryk Stażewski, interview by Irena Jakimowicz, 9 February 1950, Special Documents, Instytut Sztuki PAN, 73.

In this context, Stażewski's *Collaboration (The Crane*) (Współpraca (Dźwig)) (Fig. 81) can be interpreted as this artist's attempt to maneuver formal strategies within the imposed guidelines. Stażewski soon found out what the "search for realism" looked like as the *First National Art Exhibition* initiated the cycle of official art shows from which all of the experimental and abstract tendencies were eliminated.[456] In this atmosphere, the smallest gesture was an act of defiance. Jerzy Turowicz (1912-1999), a dissident essayist, who had edited *Tygodnik Powszechny* (*Universal Weekly*) on and off since 1951 and who defied the authorities by publishing anti-Communist articles on politics, culture, and religion with the famous dashes indicating text removed by the government, summarized the cultural and artistic life in Poland in these words:

> The consequence of the regime under which we live in Poland is politicization of the entirety of life. There are no events which are not in some form related to politics; there is no fact that does not have its political form. This politicization relates to the entire realm of art and culture. . . . If we protest against the "politicization" of culture, it does not mean that we postulate an "apolitical" or "neutral" position. . . . [But] it does not mean that culture can be subordinated to politics.[457]

[456] Wojeciechowski, "Młoda Plastyka Polska," 18.
[457] Jerzy Turowicz, "Kultura i Polityka," *Tygodnik Powszechny,* 21 January 1949; reprinted in *Nowoczesni a Socrealizm*, 406.

The Thaw

The death of Josef Vissarionovich Stalin on 5 March 1953 at ten minutes before ten o'clock in the evening Moscow time, did not bring immediate relief from his long regime. In September, Nikita Khrushchev (1894-1971), assumed his post as the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (KPSS), a position he held until 1964. Khrushchev was responsible for the arrest and the consequent execution of Lavrenty Beria (1899-1953), who was instrumental in Stalin's purges of the 1930s, and, after World War II, was the Chief of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. Khrushchev is credited with the destalinization of the Soviet Union characterized by instituting more liberal reforms in agriculture, industry, and culture. He was also responsible with the ultimate demise of the "Stalin cult," which followed "Stalin's second death, the political one" that came after Khrushchev's famous "Secret Speech" disclosing Stalin's crimes at the Twentieth Congress in February 1956.[458] In Poland, the impulse for change came in 1954 when Józef Światło (1915-1975), defected to the United States and soonafter began his radio series disclosing the criminal activities (including interrogations with the use of torture) of the Polish Ministry of Public Security (coloquially known as *bezpieka*) – the equivalent of the Soviet KGB and East German Stasi – on the Radio Free Europe.[459] Because Światło was a member of the upper echelons of *bezpieka*, his revelations

[458] See Tony Kemp-Welch in a useful article in English using new archival evidence entitled "Khrushchev's 'Secret Speech' and Polish Politics: The Spring of 1956," *Europe-Asia Studies* 48 (1996): 181.

[459] The subject of the Thaw in Poland has only began to be studied in the past two decades. See, for example, an excellent study by Paweł Machcewicz, *Polski Rok: 1956* (Warsaw: Mówią Wieki, 1993), as well as Andrzej Friszke, Dariusz Stola, and Jerzy Eisler, eds., *Kierownictwo PZPR w czasie kryzysów 1956, 1968, i 1970* (Warsaw: Instytut Studiów Politycznych PAN, 2000). For an account by leaders and participants of the Poznan October, see, for example, Stefan Bratkowski, ed., *Październik 1956: pierwszy wyłom w systemie* (Warsaw: Prószyński i S-ka, 1996).

resulted in a hysterical reaction within the ranks of the Polish Party. Radio Free Europe, founded by the U.S. in 1952 with a Polish section ran by Jan Nowak-Jeziorański, engaged able journalists and was one of the most important vehicles of getting information into the Soviet satellites and connecting with Polish émigrés. Another venue, it it important to note, was the extremly influential monthly *Kultura* (*Culture*) founded by Jerzy Giedroyć in 1947.[460] The Paris *Kultura*, as it is known, analyzed the political and economic situation in Poland and offered its pages to writers, essayists, and artists shelved in Poland for decades. Among these were Czesław Miłosz (1911-2004), who defected to the West in 1951 and shortly after authored *Zniewolony Umysł* (*The Captive Mind*), a first analysis of the influence of Stalinist Communism on the status of the intellectual elite.[461] Another was the influential writer, Witold Gombrowicz (1904-1969), who had moved to Argentina in 1939 (the last years of his life were spent in Paris) and published his *Dzienniki* (*Diaries*) in the Paris *Kultura.*[462]

The cultural repercussions of the loosening of the regime, or the effects of the Thaw in the visual arts, also happened gradually. When Andrzej Jakimowicz prepared the history of the Polish avant-garde for the newly reorganized *Przegląd Artystyczny* (*Art Review*), he noted no art events at all for 1950 and 1951, and for 1952 listed only the obituary for Strzemiński.[463] The *Third National Polish Art Exhibition* in 1953 gave rise to contrasting views about the nature of art in Poland:

> If a person living few hundred years from now, who was not familiar with our times and tried to reconstruct his opinion based on two art exhibitions, the present

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[460] *Kultura* was first published in Rome and soon thereafter in Maisons-Laffitte near Paris, where it remained until its last issue in October 2000, after Giedroyć's death in September.
[461] Czesław Miłosz, *Zniewolony Umysł* (Paris: Instytut Literacki, 1951).
[462] Witold Gombrowicz, *Dzienniki*, 3 vols. (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1997).
[463] Andrzej Jakimowicz, "Kronika Polskiej Awangardy, 1912-1957," *Przegląd Artystyczny* 1 (January-February 1958): 32.

> one and one of our prewar shows, [he/she would be] convinced and surprised. . . . in place of hopelessness and distrust in man and society, would see a living, working man . . . . He would see happy optimism.[464]

In an article copiously illustrated with figurative works of peasants, workers and laborers, paintings of the revolutionary past, portraits, and landscapes, Mieczysław Porębski revised his rhetoric of the previous year. Now he argued against the thesis that the test of a good work of art is its ability to influence and persuade.[465] Porębski, who was the co-curator of the 1948 *Nowocześni* exhibition, thought the 1953 show was much more neutral than the *First Exhibition*:

> The themes illustrating the main stages of the nation's way to socialism – the manifesto of the Polish Committee for National Victory (PKWN), the nationalization of industry, building the basis of socialist economy, discussions about the project for the Constitution of the People's Republic of Poland (PRL) and its enactment – were treated superficially and perfunctorily [in 1953].[466]

Although his writing is vague, Porębski was most likely extremely glad that the restrictions of the previous year were no longer strictly enforced.

Exactly one year later, on the occasion of the *Fourth National Art Exhibition*, Porębski wrote in an article entitled "Rosnące Horyzonty" ("The Rising Horizons"):

> The most recent condition of our visual arts was a struggle for Socialist Realism that occurred within the realm of undefeated formalist thinking, which manifested itself (and continues to do so) in the persistent conviction in such or other artistic recipes, in technique for its own sake, in the usefulness of old, yesteryear, and the day before forms to express new content, and in addition – impotence against naturalism, schematicism, insincerity. . . . I want to add that this situation was particularly difficult for the generation coming of age and maturity unsure of its position and role under such circumstances.[467]

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[464] S. Teisseyere, inaugural speech at the opening of the *Third National Polish Art Exhibition*, *Przegląd Artystyczny* 6 (1952); cited in Fik, *Kultura Polska po Jałcie*, 172.
[465] Mieczysław Porębski, "Z rozważań nad III Ogólnopolską Wystawą Plastyki," *Przegląd Artystyczny* 3 (1953): 16.
[466] Porębski, "Z rozważań nad III Ogólnopolską Wystawą Plastyki," 27.
[467] Porębski, "Rosnące Horyzonty," *Przegląd Artystyczny* 5/6 (1954): 46-47.

The *Fourth National Exhibition* demonstrated what Porębski called the notion of *programowość* (the program), which consisted of three elements. First, contemporary content or subject should not be incidental, as it had been so far, but should be expressed through "our own experiences and understanding of the hierarchy of issues and problems."[468] Second, material content should be inspired and defined by realism which, in turn, would lead to genuine emotional satisfaction and lyrical emotionality. Finally, a work of art should be defined by brave, comprehensive, and exhaustive formal decisions.[469] This article has a familiar obfuscatory tone. Such vagueness was pervasive at the time because it helped to smuggle otherwise unprintable issues into the text, such as the significance of the freedom of artistic technique. However, to promote "genuine emotional satisfaction and lyrical emotionality," was to promote the Colorist type of abstract art, which was perceived as politically neutral. Porębski noticed with pleasure that in 1954 there was a clear sense of bolder formal decisions, a fact he could not have mentioned a year before. It needs to be stressed that Porębski's article is indicative of the Thaw precisely because it fits into the larger trend of the rehabilitation of aesthetic values and personal experiences.

If 1954 was the year of examining the national and ideological consciousness, 1955 was ground breaking within the context of cultural issues. The palpable change in cultural politics was embodied in the highly publicized event of the *National Exhibition of Young Art*, which took place at the Warsaw *Arsenał* (Arsenal) in July. The exhibition reached almost mythological proportions in the histories of postwar art, because it was an

[468] Porębski, "Rosnące Horyzonty," 47.
[469] Porębski, "Rosnące Horyzonty," 46.

expression of the new, more liberal nature of cultural politics. For one, it is important to remember, however, that just because the state jettisoned the conventions of Socialist Realism, it did not mean that it relinquished control over artistic culture. *Arsenał*, as the exhibition was commonly referred to, was a large event propelled by the slogan "against war, against fascism" and illustrated with a frieze of posters on Warsaw's Marszałkowska Street, such as the one produced by Henryk Tomaszewski and Wojciech Fangor (Fig. 84). Many of these incorporated Picasso's famous Dove of Peace.[470] The concept for this international event was initiated at the Conference of Young Artists in January 1955 and was supported by the Party and youth groups associated with the Artists' Union. Zbigniew Dłubak, who was interviewed in the early stages of the show's preparation, recalled that the meeting took place at the apartment of Szymon Bojko, who was at the moment an instructor at the Central Committee Culture Department and would have a successful career in the United States after 1984.[471] From the start, it was clear that the exhibition was official in character; many artists, Bogusz and Stażewski among them, saw the endeavor as political manipulation and propaganda and chose not to participate.[472] The show was discussed in all the major art publications. It was seen as having "the natural variety of artistic positions, freshness, and authenticity."[473] The painting of the "youth" – most of the participants had been trained during the 1940s and 1950s – was described as "the protest against academicism, against naturalism and

[470] For an excellent and overdue analysis of the reception of Picasso behind the Iron Curtain, see Piotr Bernatowicz, *Picasso za Żelazną Kurtyną: recepcja artysty i jego sztuki w krajach Europy Srodkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945-1970* (Krakow: Universitas, 2006).
[471] Andrzej Turowski, "W czasie "odwilży": rozmowa ze Zbigniewem Dłubakiem;" in *Odwilż: Sztuka ok. 1956*, ed. Piotr Piotrowski (Poznan: Muzeum Narodowe, 1996), 140.
[472] Turowski, "W czasie "odwilży," 40.
[473] Bogucki, *Sztuka Polski Ludowej,* 104.

colorism, against the majority of art professors."[474] This discourse differed greatly from art criticism of the previous year. Although in 1955, one could write about "the authenticity and diversity of the search for formalist content" or "the ideological engagement of the *Arsenał* artists in issues of contemporaneity," the fact that many artists boycoted the exhibit speaks of its ideologically predetermined nature.[475]

The loudest critical outburst came when the Italian critic Paolo Ricci, wrote in an article entitled "Stare Młode Malarstwo" ("The Young Old Painting") that the question of realism was not adequately answered by the exhibition.[476] Ricci's article provoked a loud critical echo, because the definition of realism was a burning question during the era of Stalinist terror and was now being reexamined by the Party's new liberal face, called "the humanist socialism." In contrast, Julian Przyboś, a great supporter of Constructivism, openly criticized the art of Socialist Realim stating that "that the last five years . . . .were lost" and predicting that if at all "the idea of socialist painting should crystallize in the different competing artistic groups in Poland."[477] This text illustrates that although it was possible to discuss painting that exhibited formally experimental tendencies, the discussion was not unaffected by the pressures of the state. The *Arsenał* exhibition broke the silence that lasted for several years by allowing a display of different artistic positions. But many historians later argued that its success was overblown and "despite

[474] Jan Lenica, "Wystawa młodej plastyki," *Przegląd Artystyczny* 5/6 (1955): 130.
[475] Joanna Guze, "Malarstwo," *Przegląd Kulturalny* 31 (1955): 3; Marcin Czerwiński, "Dobre początki," *Przegląd Kulturalny* 31 (1955): 3.
[476] Paolo Ricci, "Stare Młode Malarstwo," *Przegląd Kulturalny* 35 (1955): 5.
[477] Julian Przyboś, "Wnioski i Propozycje," *Przegląd Kulturalny* 43 (1955): 3.

its artificial success in the press, it had no particular significance" for Polish art during the Thaw.[478]

Politically, the Thaw was marked by the "rehabiliation" of Gomułka at the end of 1954. Imprisoned in 1951 for being a rightist-nationalist deviationist, he was now seen as a politician who would distance Poland from Soviet politics.[479] Khrushchev's speech (which, in Poland was secret in name only as it was actually unofficially disseminated within the Communist Party), in addition to the obvious repercussions, was complicated further by the death of Bolesław Bierut, who was sometimes referred to as the Polish Stalin.[480] Bierut's death of a heart attack in Moscow, fifteen days after Khrushchev's speech (for which Bierut traveled to Moscow), was received with great suspicion. Various reports asked the question "why do activists always die in Moscow?," because a few years earlier the Bulgarian Stalinist leader Georgi Dmitrov had also died while visiting Moscow.[481] Bierut's funeral marked the end of an era and was the last mass manifestation in a purely Stalinist style.[482]

In April, Edward Ochab, Bierut's short-lived successor, informed the public of Gomułka's release. Khrushchev's speech set in motion a series of events that would come to be known as the Thaw in Poland but had repercussion in other Soviet satellites as well, most notably in Hungary. The crisis in Polish society was caused by the poor

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[478] Kowalska, *Polska Awangarda Malarska,* 67. Piotr Krakowski, "Rzut oka na nowe prądy w malarstwie polskim w latach 1945-1960," in *Sztuka Współczesna: Studia i Szkice*, ed. Józef E. Dutkiewicz (Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1966), 334.
[479] See, for instance, Paweł Machcewicz, *Władysław Gomułka* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwa Szkolne i Pedagogiczne, 1995).
[480] See, for example, Kemp-Welch, "Khrushchev's "Secret Speech," 189. Officially, it was published only in 1988 in the twenty third issue of *Polityka*.
[481] See reports from the Archive of New Documents, 237/VII/2755; cited in Kemp-Welch, "Khrushchev's "Secret Speech." 186.
[482] Friszke, *Polska: losy państwa i narodu*, 217.

economic conditions of the working class. The most important manifestation of the national mood was workers' strikes at the Stalin Factory in Poznan, in June 1956.[483] The demonstration turned into a bloody street fight, resulting in both causalities and fatalities. The culimination of these events occurred in the month of October, often referred to as the Polish October. In response to the increasing internal unrest, the Party decided to propose Gomułka's candidacy for the First Secretary of PZPR. On one hand, Gomułka was perceived by the Party as a seasoned Communist who would not contribute to the demise of the system. On the other hand, he was seen by the public as a Polish patriot whose opposition to Stalin cost him imprisonment. During the summer of 1956, the *People's Tribune* (*Trybuna Ludu*), a large circulation daily controlled by the Party, printed an editorial which expressed the prevailing public sympathies:

> The nation does not want Bolshevism, does not want sovieticization and collectivisation of the country. We want to advance our own way, the Polish way, the way traveled by Yugoslavia and its leader Tito. The comrade Władysław [Gomułka] must be rehabilitated and given due respect and honor. The unhappy situation of the country cannot be hidden behind empty slogans, manifestations, etc. There is no bread . . . . People are being tortured with excessive labor in inhumane conditions. . . . Away with Bolshevism and Moscow! Long live independent Poland and the true People's, not Bolshevik, Republic.[484]

Gomułka's public popularity was determined by the improvement in material and economic conditions in comparison to the immediate postwar years as well as the years of Stalinism.[485] But the decision of the Party to rehabilitate Gomułka and appoint him the

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[483] The events of what came to be known as *Czarny Czwartek* (Black Thursday) took place on June 28 and involved seven other plants and factories. The mass manifestation included about a million people, who were dispersed with the help of artillery and tanks. The funerals of the one hundred or so civilians occurred in secret at night with only one or two family members present. In contrast, the funerals of members of the People's Militia were celebrated with great honor and reverence.

[484] Anonymous letter, AAN, VI, 237/237/V-294, k.10-10a; cited in Machcewicz, *Polski Rok: 1956*, 71.

[485] Friszke, *Polska: losy państwa i narodu*, 308.

First Secretary was viewed by Moscow not only with great suspicion but with an immediate reaction. The Polish delegation was ordered to promptly visit Moscow. When the Poles refused, the Soviet army stationed in Poland began to move toward Warsaw, Soviet battle ships appeared in the Gdansk Bay, and Khrushchev himself unexpectedly arrived in the Polish capital. The insubordination of the Polish Party resulted in heated exchanges, but ultimately Khrushchev was forced to succumb. It was speculated at the time whether Moscow's approval was precipitated by the endorsement of Gomułka by the upper echelons of the Polish Party, by the objections of the Chinese against Soviet intervention in Poland, or by the Hungarian October Uprising (which started on 23 October and was crashed by the Soviet military power).[486] The consequences of the Polish October were not immensely revolutionary, but they were important nevertheless in reducing the ideological pressures on the Poles, which resulted in greater autonomy within the private sphere. This was extremely significant for the practice of art, as it allowed the artist studio (or apartment, as was more often the case) to become a forum for discussion and exhibiting art without direct, often fatal repercussions.

[486] Machcewicz, *Władysław Gomułka*, 41. See also Friszke, *Polska: losy państwa i narodu*, 223.

Krzywe Koło: the Club and the Gallery

One of the more significant sites of intellectual exchange during the Thaw was Klub Krzywego Koła (the Crooked Wheel Club). A summary of the activities of the club will provide the necessary context to illustrate the ambiguities of the intellectual and artistic undertakings under the totalitarian regime. The Club was began at the initiative of the Party in order to permeate intellectual circles and anticipate unsympathetic sentiments and moods against the regime. It was founded in the fall of 1955 in the private apartment of Ewa and Juliusz Garztecki on Crooked Wheel Street and later it met at the Staromiejski House of Culture in Warsaw's old town. According to the club member, Witold Jedlicki – who, after emigrating to Paris, wrote a history of the club that was widely, though illegally, circulated until its official publication in 1989 – the meetings of the club took place on Thursdays at 6 pm and frequently lasted long into the night.[487] The success and appeal of the club is best measured by its membership: in 1955, it boasted thirty members, by January 1956, it had seventy eight members, and at its closing in 1962 (an event which is often cited as the end of the Thaw), the club had 292 official members and a second list of unofficial participants numbering approximately 2000.[488] Although he was not an official member, Stażewski was a regular participant. The influence of the club as a forum of dissent and opinion-making should not be underestimated. The topics of the Thursday meetings, which included art, culture, and politics, were seemingly innocent and neutral in nature, but as Andrzej Friszke later

[487] Witold Jedlicki, *Klub Krzywego Koła* (Paris: Kultura, 1963; repr., Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Grup Oporu "Solidarni," 1989). Jedlicki's was the sole account for several decades. The details of the club's activities became accessible only when the archives of the Office of National Security were transferred to the Institute of National Remembrance (IPN), established in December 1998 and devoted to the investigation of crimes against the Polish nation.
[488] Andrzej Friszke, "Początki Klubu Krzywego Koła," *Zeszyty Historyczne* 149 (2004): 54, 57. See also Jedlicki, *Klub Krzywego Koła*, 94.

noticed in an extremely informative article "during this time – when the doctrine of Socialist Realism was still strictly observed – discussions about culture had a dimension of the ideological view of the world and were thus political."[489]

The history of the Crooked Wheel Club is somewhat controversial. Because of the influence of Jedlicki's book (which was in wide circulation in the dissident circles), the argument was that the club was founded at the inspiration of the Office of Security, colloquially refered to as *bezpieka*, a pejorative term for 'secret police.' More recently Andrzej Friszke, citing the correspondence of the founding members including the Garzteckis, also argued that the club was inspired by the Office of Security. Other accounts dealing with the club in passing generally agree.[490] Espousing a different view, Paweł Ceranka argued that "the Club was initated without the participation of the security apparatus but with the knowledge of the authorities."[491]

The existence of different clubs (including youth organizations) constituted an important aspect of the political map, and authorities were more often than not suspicious of their activities. It is very likely that the Crooked Wheel Club was also scrutinized closely. There seems to be a consensus that in mid-1956 the Club underwent an internal reorganization that resulted in a split into a moderate faction, including members who belonged to the Party, and a radical faction, consisting of those who did not belong to the Party and favored radical democratic reforms.[492] By the beginning of 1957, the split

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[489] Friszke, "Początki Klubu Krzywego Koła," 48.
[490] Friszke, "Początki Klubu Krzywego Koła," 45. See also, for instance, Paczkowski, *Pól Wieku Dziejów Polski*, 199; and Barbara Fijałkowska and Tadeusz Godlewski, *Polskie Dylematy Polityczne 1939-1995* (Olsztyn: Wyższa Szkoła Pedagogiczna, 1996), 117.
[491] Paweł Ceranka, "Sprawa o kryptonimie 'Kwadrat'," *Zeszyty Historyczne* 152 (2004): 99. For this and Friszke's article, I am grateful to Dr. Sławomir Cenckiewicz of IPN in Gdansk.
[492] Friszke, "Początki Klubu Krzywego Koła," 65. See also Friszke's response to Ceranka, "Replika", *Zeszyty Historyczne* 152 (2004): 100-02.

seems to have resulted in the decrease of the interference and control of the authorities, although soon after the club would be dissolved. It is important to remember that at the height of Stalinism the mere existence of informal clubs had been punished by arrests and imprisonment. The changes occurring during the Thaw, including the Crooked Wheel Club, were seen as an extremely significant improvement, even if discussions were monitored or controlled by the authorities. After the club was finally liquidated, it was dangerous to openly admit to have been within its circles, because it was perceived as *antypaństwowy*, or anti-Polish.[493] The Crooked Wheel Club was one of the more important venues for the exchange of ideas of the Polish intelligentsia during the Thaw period, but it remained of great consequence even after its dissolution.

The Crooked Wheel Club had its own exhibition space and an artistic section called the Crooked Wheel Gallery), managed by Marian Bogusz.[494] The art historian Peter Seltz, who traveled to Poland in the early 1960s, accompanied by Kazimir Karpuszko in the role of interpreter and consultant, wrote that while there were neither private collectors nor private galleries at the time, the Crooked Wheel Gallery was a venue "where many of the most advanced art exhibitions take place, as well as discussions on various cultural matters.“[495] During its existence between 1955 and 1965, the Crooked Wheel Gallery offered an exhibition space that was relatively free and

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[493] Friszke, “Początki Klubu Krzywego Koła,” 56. Ceranka, "Sprawa o kryptonimie 'Kwadrat',” 89. Ceranka also argued that first instance of legal action against members of Klub Krzywego Koła took place retroactively in March 1964, p. 99.

[494] On Bogusz, see *Marian Bogusz: 1920-1980, Wystawa Monograficzna* (Poznan: Muzeum Narodowe, 1982).

[495] Peter Selz, *15 Polish Painters* (New York: the Museum of Modern Art, 1961), 5. Selz's exhibition *15 Polish Painters* was not at all supported by the Ministry of Art and Culture. According to the Polish art historian Włodzimierz Nowaczyk, the New York show (which included Stażewski) presented an idealized view of Polish contemporary art, because the liberties of the Thaw seemed to have regressed by 1961 and abstraction that symbolized opposition to the American art historian, was no longer useful to the regime. See Włodzimierz Nowaczyk, "Tropy Nowoczesności," in *Odwilż*, ed. Piotrowski, 57.

independent, because it was not supported and thus also not subsidized by the government (the participating artists hung their own work, printed catalogues, etc.). The Crooked Wheel Gallery can be traced back to the Warsaw Grupa 55 (Group 55), also ran by Bogusz. Group 55 was established almost contemporaneously with *Arsenał*, perhaps in opposition to it. One of Group 55's first shows was organized in the apartment of Barabara Zbrożyna in the fall of 1954; later the shows would take place in the apartment of Bogusz's brother. Because Group 55 was violently opposed to the type of lyrical-expressionist painting, or what also has been called the style of "expressionist existentialism" shown in the *Arsenał* exhibition, the members boycotted that show.[496] In fact, Bogusz was informed that it was not possible for Group 55 to exhibit as a group, so its members declined participation in the *Arsenał* all together. Instead, they organized unofficial exhibitions in private apartments (Fig. 85). After the group began to use the exhibition space of the Crooked Wheel Club, it assumed its new name after that of the club. The Crooked Wheel Gallery performed an extremely important role in Warsaw during the post-October period. Janusz Zagrodzki, an art historian and critic who cultivated the tradition of Constructivism not only in his curatorial choices but also by reconstructing the lost sculptures of Katarzyna Kobro, argued in an excellent essay accompanying an exhibition devoted to the Crooked Wheel Gallery that "Polish art of the 1950s [had] a hidden side resulting from the political disease of Polish society, whose legislature was shaky and ambivalent and life happened between one or other political and economic crisis," but the crisis of these years also "liberated an important aspect of

[496] Anda Rottenberg, *Sztuka w Polsce, 1945-2005*, 52.

art, that of freedom."[497] At first, Bogusz orchestrated group exhibitions, many of which took place outside the gallery. These were often inspired by the prewar Constructivism, in an attempt to express and articulate a kind of utopian collective agenda. Gradually, solo exhibitions by individual artists began to take place.[498] An important aspect of the activities of the Crooked Wheel Gallery, which applied to other areas of artistic and cultural activities, had to do with the fact that in order to exist and function at all, one had to engage in certain creative maneuvers to outsmart the censorship machine, playing a creative game with the authorities. Dłubak later remembered that certain strategies were meant "to convince those who supervised art and culture that contemporary art could be reconciled with Marxism."[499] This situation was not endemic to Poland. Éva Forgács wrote that the Hungarian art critic Ernõ Kállai (1890-1954), who sought an art audience among manual workers, "had to defend his exhibition and abstract art in general" by arguing that "there was no political divide: many abstract artists were socialist or even Communist." But, "he fought a naive uphill battle against the already ongoing Communist takeover."[500] Although the Crooked Wheel Gallery was active during the Thaw, it was noticed in retrospect that Bogusz happened to operate in a country in which "each organizational unit was forced to accept the rules of the game with which this

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[497] Janusz Zagrodzki, "The Second Birth," in *Galeria Krzywe Koło*, 6. This catalogue, devoted to the Crooked Wheel Gallery, edited by Zagrodzki, is an excellent source of documents, interviews, and essays, with text both in Polish and English. Although the catalogue contains text in English, all translations from the Polish are mine. The Crooked Wheel Gallery exhibition was first proposed at the National Museum in Warsaw in 1981. It was postponed due to the imposition of martial law by General Jaruzelski, the project came to fruition only in 1990.

[498] Artists given solo shows included Barbara Pniewska, Aleksander Kobzdej, Tadeusz Dominik, Stefan Gierowski as well as Stażewski.

[499] Dłubak, in *Galeria Krzywe Koło*, 31.

[500] Éva Forgács, "1956 in Hungary and the Concept of East European Art," *Third Text* 2 (March 2006): 180.

country was ordered . . . .If it did not conform, it ceased to exist."[501] The decade after World War II was characterized by a total prohibition of any political references or criticism of the system in art as well as a ban on abstract art in general. In such an atmospher, the Crooked Wheel Gallery provided a more liberal forum for exhibiting various types of abstract art for a limited time.[502] The gallery was not closed down at the same time as the club, because the authorities realized that abstraction did not present a direct threat and, moreover, could be used in offering a new liberal image of Communism. Although, as Kotkowska-Bareja remembered in retrospect, abstraction – especially geometric abstract art – was ideologically oppositional and demoralized the public, specifically Soviet visitors exploring Warsaw's Old Town.[503]

[501] Hanna Kotkowska-Bareja, "Wielkie Nadzieje – początek i koniec Galerii Krzywe Koło," in *Galeria Krzywe Koło*, 12.
[502] At its closing, the gallery donated thirty-five works to the National Museum in Warsaw, and thirteen works to the Koszalin Museum. While museums were allowed to accept gifts of abstract art, they were not able to make any purchases.
[503] Kotkowska-Bareja, "Wielkie Nadzieje," 12.

At Denise René: *Froid*

If the Crooked Wheel Gallery is an example of the postwar artistic culture within Poland the exhibition *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne* demonstrates the conditions outside Poland. Hosted by Denise René in her Paris gallery, the exhibition opened on 22 November 1957 and due to popular demand was extended until 10 January of the following year (Fig. 86).[504] The show included works by Malevich and that of Polish artists Katarzyna Kobro, Władysław Strzemiński, Henryk Berlewi, and Henryk Stażewski.[505] This show provides an exquisite example of the complexities of the post-Thaw Communist cultural policies and politics, and the tricky conditions of producing art under its watchful eye both at home and abroad. The cultural workers of the Gomułka government undoubtedly used the art of Polish Constructivism, which – because it did not openly criticize the political system, was presumed to lack engagement – in order to demonstrate both a positive image of Poland abroad and a liberal face of Communism. Previously banned art was put to work to repair the fatigued image of the Communist-governed country. To show historically leftist art in France was to legitimize the Communist ideology, a significant gesture, judging by the fact that at the time France had

[504] Both Przyboś and Stażewski expressed great gratitude to René, who offered her gallery for the show free of charge, a custom not frequently practiced. See Julian Przyboś, "U Denise René," *Przegląd Kulturalny* 4 (1958): 7. See also Henryk Stażewski, "Francuzi byli zaskoczeni wysokim poziomem polskiego malarstwa abstrakcyjnego," *Kurier Polski,* 8 January 1958, 4. On Galerie Denise René, see *Galeria Denise René* (Lodz: Muzeum Sztuki, 1997); and *Denise René, l'intrépide: une galerie dans l'aventure de l'art abstrait, 1944-1978* (Paris: Centre Georges Pomidou, 2001).

[505] Stażewski showed four replicas of lost paintings produced in 1932, 1936, and 1938, as well as well as three *Compositions* of 1949, 1950, and 1956. Stażewski accompanied his work to Paris on his first trip abroad since 1937. It was to be the first of only two trips outside of Poland the artist had taken after the War (the second to the Venice Biennale in 1966). On the participation of Polish artists in the Venice Biennale, see Joanna Sosnowska, *Polacy na Biennale Sztuki w Wenecji, 1895-1999* (Warsaw: Instytut Sztuki PAN, 1999).

the second-largest Communist Party (after Italy) in Western Europe.[506] A bit more than a year later, the Polish Ministry of Art and Culture issued the now infamous statute allowing for public showings of art to include no more than 15 percent abstraction. This rule remained in effect until the early 1990s, although in the later years it was not strictly enforced, which when juxtaposed with *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne* on rue de la Boétie, this requirement offers a glimpse into the nature of the politics of "repressive tolerance."

In retrospect, the exhibition, organized by Julian Przyboś and Jean Cassou, did not create a loud critical echo, but it was useful in the dissemination of Polish Constructivism in the West after World War II.[507] In fact, Max Bill had planned and organized a similar exhibition entitled *Konkrete Kunst* in Zurich in 1960.[508] The show was also significant on other levels. First of all, at this moment of relative freedom, of the opening of the East to the West, the work of Malevich (all of which came from Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum) was seen in Paris for the first time in the postwar period. Denise René organized other significant shows, including the first Mondrian retrospective in France earlier that year (Fig. 87), but Malevich was at this moment largely unknown. In addition, in this show the work of the most well known Polish Constructivists confronted that of the Russian Malevich. Surely with the blessing and the prompting of Przyboś, the exhibition claimed Malevich as a Polish artist. As discussed

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[506] For discussion of French debates of Stalinist terror in Eastern Europe see Tony Judt, *Past Imperfect, French Intellectuals, 1944-1956* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); esp. chap. 5.

[507] Jean Cassou was the director of the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris. The committee included among others Willem Sandberg, the director of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam; Marian Minich, the director of Modern Art Museum in Lodz; as well as the French writer Jean-Paul Sartre; and the artist Tristan Tzara.

[508] Henryk Berlewi to Henryk Stażewski, 15 January 1959. Markek Stażewski, private archive.

earlier, Malevich was born of Polish parents in russified Poland (specifically Ukraine) but grew up speaking mainly Russian. He tried to arrange not only a visit but a permanent stay in Poland in 1922, and made it to Warsaw in 1927 on the only European journey he was ever to make. However, even the 1927 trip to Warsaw was cut short, because the Polish government was suspicious of Malevich's association with the Bolshevik Revolution and his presumed Communist sympathies.[509]

The Malevich-Strzemiński confrontation was certainly morphologically compelling, but it also situated Polish art within a more familiar paradigm. At the opening of the exhibition, Cassou tried to portray the prewar Polish avant-garde in more general terms:

> If young Polish artists today so enthusiastically embrace the developments in abstract art, it is not only a result of the natural process of the emancipation of their creative energies. It is not just a result of the external trends, which are international in scope. It may also be that, perhaps not fully aware, they find uniquely Polish aspirations born in the vicinity of the Russian October. They relate to the movement, which had rational foundations, its needs, and the testimony of its dignities but which was interrupted by circumstances. . . .We should give due to this Polish school, deeply original and spontaneous, which right after World War I enthusiastically demonstrated – with passion and liveliness characteristic of this beautiful nation – its spiritual restlessness and its appetite for invention and renewal.[510]

Immediately after his return to Warsaw, Stażewski – who was fluent in French – noticed that the viewing public was mostly interested in work of the Russian artist.[511] Even if the exhibition did not resonate critically as much as was anticipated, it was significant if only because of its setting. Denise René promoted art termed "hard" or "cold," which was also advocated by Seuphor, a frequent contributor and collaborator. Her curatorial

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[509] Janusz Zagrodzki, "Malewicz w Polsce," *Projekt* 3 (1975): 39.
[510] Jean Cassou, "Introduction," in *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne* (Paris: Galerie Denise René, 1957), 9, 10.
[511] Stażewski, "Francuzi byli zaskoczeni wysokim poziomem polskiego malarstwa abstrakcyjnego," 4.

activities were considered political in nature, because she organized pioneer exhibitions such as the 1951 *Klarform, 20 artistes de l'École de Paris*, which included Hans Arp, Auguste Herbin, and Victor Vasarely, and traveled to what were considered at the moment the provincial centers of Copenhagen, Stockholm, and Helsinki. René was often criticized in the French press, such as the right wing *Le Figaro* or the Communist *Les Lettres Françaises*, for the excessively international character of her exhibitions, but also because geometric abstraction was not exactly in high demand during the early years of the gallery, which was cofounded with Vasarely in 1945.[512]

Years later, René described *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne* during, what she called, the Polish Spring as an event that was significant not only artistically but also politically.[513] At the same time, however, somewhat pessimistically she noticed that the influence of art on life was much weaker, and especially so in case of geometric abstraction, as its intellectual and often spiritual quality did not allow it to be a tool in the service of propaganda, to be a weapon of political propaganda.[514] Anka Ptaszkowska, an important art critic and curator who knew Stażewski and often wrote about his art, remembered later that despite different political systems in France and Poland, in France, Ptaszkowska found a similar atmosphere of "leftist idealism" that permeated Stażewski's Warsaw studio in her younger years.[515] And yet, it is this "leftist idealism" that a short while later would become so suspicious, especially in Poland. Berlewi, Strzemiński, Kobro, and Stażewski, each in their different way, fell prey to the politicization of art.

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[512] See discussion by Urszula Czartoryska, "Abstrakcja, wczoraj i jutro," in *Galeria Denise René*, 12-27.
[513] Denise René, interview by Anka Ptaszkowska (1996), in *Galeria Denise René*, 32.
[514] Denise René, interview, in *Galeria Denise René*, 30.
[515] Denise René, interview, in *Galeria Denise René*, 30.

The Thaw in Moscow: Khruschev's Oteplenie

This section briefly addresses the artistic Thaw in Soviet Russia after the death of Stalin in 1953, in order to elucidate the relative freedom afforded to Poland in relation to Soviet Russia and other satellites.[516] If in postwar Poland geometric abstract art was practiced (especially so in the 1960s), in Soviet Russia the legacy of Constructivism was troubled. The French-born Russian curator and critic Andrei Erofeev wrote that in Soviet Russia "the time of the Thaw was. . . .considered to be the spiritual successor" of the 1920s modernist utopia but, at the same time, "the Russian conscience [was] unfavorably disposed to the cause and ideology of its. . . .predecessors."[517] The ambivalence toward the legacy of Constructivism and the embrace of Western art was, of course, a reaction against Socialist Realism, but it is also attributed to the historical association of Constructivism with the Bolshevik Revolution.[518] Soviet Russia's paradox is the fact that Russian artists were more familiar with Western art, because American artists, including Jackson Pollock, Robert Motherwell, and Mark Rothko, were shown in 1959, than with their own avant-

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[516] On postwar Russian art see, Paul Sjeklocha and Igor Mead, *Unofficial Art in the Soviet Union* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); John E. Bowlt, Elena Kornetchuk, and Norma J. Roberts, eds., *The Quest for Self-Expression: Painting in Moscow and Leningrad, 1965-1990* (Columbus, Ohio: Columbus Museum of Art, 1990); Matthew Cullerne Bown and Brandon Taylor, eds., *Art of the Soviets: Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture in a One Party State, 1917-1992* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1993); Alla Rosenfeld and Norton T. Dodge, eds. *Nonconformist Art: the Soviet experience, 1956-1986* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995); *Forbidden Art: the Postwar Russian Avant-Garde* (Los Angeles: Curatorial Assistance, 1998); Yevgenia Petrova, ed., *Abstraction in Russia* (St. Petersburg: Palace Editions, 2001).

[517] Andrei Erofeev, "Nonofficial Art: Soviet Artists of the 1960s" (1995); in Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospilysz, eds. *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), 39, 38.

[518] See my discussion of Boris Groys in Chapter 1. That postwar Russian artists were not interested in continuing the tradition of the avant-garde in the 1920s has also been argued by Karl Eimermacher in "From Unity to Diversity: Sociocultural Aspects of the Moscow Art Scene, 1945-1988" in *Forbidden Art*, 83-127. This catalogue accompanied the exhibition which took place at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena and the State Russian Museum in St. Petersburg. On the Soviet Nonconformists see also the very important volume by Rosenfeld and Dodge, *Nonconformist Art*.

garde of the earlier twentieth-century, because it was "locked away in the depositories and archives, remaining inaccessible right up until the late 1970s."[519] In addition, many artists perceived geometric abstraction as having exhausted its subversive dimension and instead aspired toward an art which would directly address – if not openly critique – the totalitarian system.

The Soviet Academy of Art, established in 1947, was dedicated to keeping "a constant eye on the work of Soviet artists and preventing them from deviating from the path set by the academy, while at the same time putting forward the necessary models of Socialist Realism."[520] The Soviet authorities' historic intolerance of modernist tendencies in art, generally grouped under the term "formalist," might imply that there was no shift away from the officially mandated modes of figuration toward abstraction even during the Thaw. And yet, the revival of the prewar artistic traditions could be seen in several important examples: the fact that the Greek collector George Costakis began to show Constructivist art to eager young artists as early as 1953 in his Moscow apartment; the Pushkin Museum in Moscow mounted an exhibition entitled *Fourteenth to Twentieth-century French Art* in 1955, a show that is generally thought to mark the rehabilitation of Impressionism (which until this moment was considered formalist); Pablo Picasso was the subject of the October 1956 exhibition in Moscow and the following year in Leningrad; the works of Aleksandr Rodchenko were exhibited in Moscow in 1957; the

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[519] See Larisa Kachuk, "Abstract Art in Moscow 1950s-2000," in an important two volume work *Abstraction in Russia: XX Century*, ed. Evgenia Petrova (St. Petersburg: State Russian Museum and Palace Editions, 2001), 18. See also John Bowlt, who wrote that the postwar Soviet underground was influenced more by American Pop art and even Socialist Realism than by the prewar Russian avant-garde, as its works "languished inaccessibly in museum storerooms." John Bowlt, "The Soviet Nonconformists and the Legacy of the Russian Avant-Garde," *Forbidden Art*, 51.

[520] "Constitution of the Academy of Arts of the USSR" (1947); quoted in C. Core, "Jubilee Reflections on the Academy of Arts," *A-Ya* 7 (1986): 53.

twentieth anniversary of Lissitzky's death was commemorated in 1961 on the pages of an important design journal *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo*;[521] *samizdat*, or dissident practice of unofficial publication of texts supressed by the government, activities of artists and poets were becoming more accessible to the general public;[522] in February 1962, the daily paper *Izvestia* printed an article by the critic Mikhail Alpatov, in which he argued in support of not only modern but abstractionist tendencies in painting.[523] It would not be much longer, however, that Khrushchev would again advocate the strict adherence to the principles of Socialist Realism.[524]

The turning point of the Soviet Thaw is generally located in Moscow's *Sixth World Festival of Youth and Students*, which occurred during the summer of 1957 in Sokolniki Park. The Sokoloniki exhibition was revolutionary in many respects. Its sheer size, representing art from about fifty countries and nearly 5000 works of art from the United States, and Western and Eastern Europe, allowed the unprecedented exposure of the public to a great variety of art. The volume of exhibited works, as well as live demonstrations of artists at work in special tents, generated a lively discussion about the merits of realism and abstraction in the press. But perhaps the most important legacy of the Sokolniki show was the fact that it gave rise to first unofficial exhibitions that would become extremely influential after the Thaw. Igor Golomshtock, the Moscow art

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[521] Nikolai Khardzhiev, *Dekorativnoe Iskusstvo* 2 (Moscow 1961): 29.
[522] Irene Kolchinsky, *The Revival of the Russian Literary Avant-Garde: The Thaw Generation and Beyond* (Munich: Verlag Otto Sanger, 2001), 9. For a personal but informative account on the *samizdat* activities, and persecutions under Khrushchev, see Ludmilla Alexeyeva and Paul Goldberg, *The Thaw Generation: Coming of Sge in the Post-Stalin Era* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990).
[523] Cited in Priscilla Johnson and Leopold Labedz, eds., *Khruschev and the Arts: The Politics of Soviet Culture, 1962-1964* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1965), 3.
[524] See, for example, Max Hayward, "Conflict and Change in Literature," *SURVEY* 46 (January 1963): 11.

historian who emigrated to Paris in 1972 and was responsible for introducing the unoffical art of the 1970s and 1980s to Western audiences, wrote that many Russian artists learned of each other's existence during this show and then would soon collaborate to organize semi-legal exhibitions in student and workers' clubs, engineering institutes, and private apartments, first in Moscow and later in Leningrad.[525]

While the Sokolniki show was meant to illustrate the liberalizing direction of Khrushchev's cultural policy of the different roads to Socialism, the 1958 *International Exhibition of Contemporary Art from Socialist Countries* revealed that deviations from the accepted paradigm still prompted critical disapproval. The exhibition of art from twelve socialist countries, including Korea and Vietnam, which opened on 24 December 1958 and remained on view for the next three months, was meant to illustrate the most representative art developments of each of the participating countries, according to their own criteria.[526] Juliusz Starzyński, the chief curator of the exhibition's Polish pavillion, concentrated on the inclusion of fewer artists represented by a greater number of works, ranging from the monumental realism of Xavery Dunikowski (1875-1964) to the colorism of Adam Marczyński (1908-1985). The result was immense popularity and controversy at the same time: out of 2300 entries in the exhibition registry1500 commented on the Polish pavillion.[527] Starzyński reported that while the art of Dunikowski was appreciated for its monumentality, most of responses critiqued the

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[525] Igor Golomshtok, "The History and Organization of Artistic Life in Soviet Union," in *Soviet Emigré Artists: Life and Work in the USSR and the United States,* ed. Marilyn Rueschmayer, Igor Golomshtok, and Janet Kennedy (New York, Armonk: M. E. Sharpe, 1985), 47.
[526] Juliusz Starzyński, "Międzynarodowa wystawa plastyki w Moskwie," *Kierunki* 45 (1958): 12.
[527] Mieczysław Sawicki, "Gorące dyskusje na temat sztuki Polskiej. Rozmowa z Prof. Juliuszem Starzyńskim," *Życie Warszawy*, April 1959, 3.

inadequate engagement of Polish artists with contemporary subject matter.[528] The Polish pavilion elicited criticism for its outwardly modernist tone, but the argument for its modernist tendency could be made only in comparison to other pavilions, which fairly uniformly followed the criteria of Socialist Realism. Moscow correspondent for *Życie Warszawy* (*The Life of Warsaw*) reported after the opening that "some of the works in the Polish section have no parallels in any other section – this refers to works close to abstractionism."[529] In fact, the Polish pavilion was very tame according to Polish standards: Starzyński himself admited that art exhibited was "most classic and of established value."[530] This resulted from the fact that Colorism was part of the academic establishment, which in Poland was considered to be a kind of compromise "between realism and formalism."[531] The Moscow show was accompanied by a three-day symposium, which revolved around the defiinition of Socialist art and its relationship to reality, and here too the Polish section was isolated in claiming that there was a possibility of diverse forms of artistic expression in Socialist art. [532] In other words, once again it was necessary to call upon the political discourse in order to justify the committee's choices by, evoking Khrushchev's own recent motto of each country's uniquely national way toward the fullfillment of socialist culture. Therefore, the 1958 "international" exhibition illustrates two things; first, the decision to prepare the Polish "modernist" pavillion to travel to Moscow makes clear that Poland was unique in its response to the Thaw and that even minimal, freedoms of artistic expression would not be

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[528] Sawicki, "Gorące dyskusje na temat sztuki Polskiej," 3.
[529] Ewa Waszczuk, "Międzynarodowa wystawa sztuki krajów socjalistycznych," *Życie Warszawy,* December 1958, 1.
[530] Sawicki, "Gorące dyskusje na temat sztuki Polskiej," 3.
[531] Piotr Piotrowski, "Odwilż," 11.
[532] Sawicki, "Gorące dyskusje na temat sztuki Polskiej," 3.

given up without a fight; second, the fact that Poland was the only satellite to deviate from the norm indicates that while the 1956 Thaw did not follow the same course across Eastern Europe, by 1958, the Thaw was beginning to chill up again all across.

In 1962, Khrushchev put an end to the cultural and artistic Thaw with his appearance on the second floor at the exhibition of *Thirty Years of Moscow Art*, commonly referred to as Manezh, because it was held at the Manezh Central Exhibition Hall. Several dissident artists operating outside of the official artistic culture, including Eli Beliutin (b. 1925), Ernst Neizvestny (b. 1925), and Vladimir Yankilevsky (b. 1938), were invited to show their work in three small rooms on the second floor of this huge state-sponsored exhibition. According to Elena Kornetchuk, the show elicted no serious coverage until members of the Party and the government led by Khrushchev visited.[533] Khrushchev's reaction to art shown on the second floor is now infamous. His unsparing remarks appeared in *Isskustvo*:

> such "creativity" is alien to our people, they reject it. This must be pondered by these people who call themselves artists, yet create such "pictures" that you cannot tell – were they drawn by the hand of a person, or daubed by the tail of a donkey. They must understand their errors and work for the people.[534]

According to Yankilevsky, whose account of the meeting with the Soviet leader would appear in print years later, one of the "second floor" artists "asked why Khrushchev had reacted so negatively to their work, since it was he who had initiated the de-Stalinization process in the first place. Khrushchev replied sternly: As far as art is concerned I am a Stalinist."[535] Yankilevsky, whose *Two Principles (Triptych No. 2)* (Fig. 88) was shown

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[533] Elena Kornetchuk, "Soviet Art and the State," in *The Quest for Self-Expression*, 26.
[534] Khrushchev, "Vysokoe prizvanie sovetskovo iskusstva – sluzhit' narodu, delu kommunisma," (1962); quoted in Kornetchuk, "Soviet Art and the State," 27.
[535] Vladimir Yankilevsky, "Memoirs of the Manezh Exhibition, 1962," *Zimmerli Journal* 1 (Fall 2003): 73.

on the second floor, claimed that Bielutin and Neizvestny were the center of the attack by Khrushchev, who at one point exclaimed: "You're deceiving the people, traitors to the motherland! We'll send you all to cut timber!"[536] It was speculated whether the invitation of the experimental artists to participate in the state-sponsored show "represented a genuine desire to bring the experimentalists into the main fold of the art establishment or whether it was simply a provocation."[537] Yet, there is a consensus among scholars today that serious repercussions did ensue. A strong wave of conservative attitudes reflecting the struggle against formalism followed, and, according to Golomshtock, unofficial artists were banned from exhibiting art, a situation he called "tantamount to creative death."[538] Recently, Andrei Erofeev has noticed the paradoxical situation the unofficial artists found themselves in:

> The dissident artists' persecution by the authorities did not elicit any sympathy among the Soviet intelligentsia or the larger educated public. On the contrary, as the intellectuals' anti-Soviet feelings intensified, so, too, did their contempt for the abstractionists, whose predecessors had compromised with the Bolsheviks in 1920s. The avant-gardists' ultimate argument in their own defense vis-à-vis the Soviet authorities – their revolutionary loyalty – only served to intensify the public's disillusionment with the 1960s abstract movement.[539]

The "swan song" of the Russian experimental artists during the Thaw was silenced before it could be heard. In fact, although the Manezh exhibition was on view until February, the general public never got to see art on the third floor.[540] The fate of the Manezh show parallels that of the 1948 Krakow *Nowocześni*, but, as the next chapter illustrates, in Poland the effects of the Thaw, once rolling, could not be stopped.

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[536] Yankilevsky, "Memoirs of the Manezh Exhibition," 74.
[537] Michael Scammel, "Art as Politics and Politics in Art," in *Nonconformist Art*, 51.
[538] Golomshtok, "The History and Organization of Artistic Life in Soviet Union," in *Soviet Emigré Artists*, 48.
[539] Andrei Erofeev, "Russian Abstract Painting After the Thaw (Thoughts on Two Recent Exhibitions in Russia)," *Zimmerli Journal* 1 (Fall 2003): 23-24.
[540] Susan Reid, "In the Name of the People," *Kritika* 6 (Fall 2005): 689.

CHAPTER FOUR

HENRYK STAŻEWSKI: AVANT-GARDE OR ARRIÉRE-GARDE?

> One would read a book not knowing that it was contaminated after its author signed "the exit instruction."[541] One attended church unaware that the parish priest acquired the cement for its construction with the help of the secret service functionaries. At the cinema, one would be moved, not knowing that the film was produced with the blessing of the General Secretary of the Communist Party. Life was make-belief, one big matrix where everything was different than it actually was.[542]

This chapter examines the postwar oeuvre of Henryk Stażewski (Fig. 89). This artist's work allows for an examination of the questions of continuity and/or rupture of Constructivist art and thought, because having survived Stalin he continued to produce geometric abstraction – with state issued interruptions – until his death in 1988 (Fig. 90). I refer to Stażewski's postwar oeuvre as geometric abstraction in order to set it apart from his prewar Constructivist work. Although he had many opportunities for foreign travels and exhibitions, Stażewski voluntarily remained in Communist Poland except for two postwar trips to Paris in 1957 and to Venice in 1966. I believe that his choice to remain in Poland is not only a testimony of moral and personal integrity but also a gesture of dissent against the country in which obtaining a passport could often be an equivalent to

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[541] The "exit instruction" (instrukcja wyjazdowa) was a government-issued form used during the tenure of the Polish People's Republic (PRL). Because it was required for foreign travel in an official capacity, possession of it intimated collaboration with the secret service.

[542] Mariusz Janicki and Wiesław Władyka, "Getto PRL," *Polityka* 24 (July 2006): 24. "Człowiek czytał książke, nie wiedząc, że jest skażona, bo jej autor podpisał instrukcję wyjazdową. Chodził do kościoła, nie zdając sobie sprawy, że cement na jego budową proboszcz zdobył dzięki pomocy funkcjonariuszy tajnych służb. Wzruszał się w kinie bez świadomości, iż zgodę na produkcję filmu dał sekretarz KC. Całe życie było na niby, jeden wielki matrix, gdzie wszystko było nie tym, czym się wydawało."

having to deal, if not cooperate, with the secret police. Stażewski's pictorial output provides an ideal case study for analyzing the function of the post-Stalinist cultural policies of "repressive tolerance." The focus of this analysis is the art criticism relating to the work and exhibitions in which Stażewski took part during the Thaw – between 1955 and 1959, including Julian Przyboś and Mieczysław Porębski as well as younger writers such as Andrzej Wat. Additionally, I discuss a large artistic event in Elbląg referred to as the *Biennale Form Przestrzennych* (*Biennale of Spatial Forms*) in late 1964.

The description of the plight of an individual under the Communist regime from the popular magazine *Polityka* (*Politics*) (cited at the beginning of this section), went back to the moment of the relative freedom and opening up to the Western world during the Thaw. This picture of the daily reality in Poland extended with varying degrees to the realm of history, art, culture, and criticism throughout the tenure of the Polish People's Republic (PRL), between the end of World War II in 1945 and the fall of Communism in 1989. Although the icy dogmas of Stalinist years would slowly melt away, life, art, and culture remained set within the boundaries of the "big matrix where everything was different than it actually was." I argue that the freedom of the Thaw was relative and that in order to function at all an artist was forced to comply – at least minimally – with official requirements, which meant that the smallest gesture of defiance (such as painting a work using geometric abstract forms) constituted a significant act of dissent. This is why Henryk Stażewski was so instrumental for the history of postwar art, because without his perserverance, it is difficult to imagine the beginnings of the Foksal Gallery or the careers of younger artists such as Edward Krasiński, with whom Stażewski shared

a studio for nearly twenty years, or Zbigniew Gostomski (b. 1932).[543] In addition to addressing the changes in the postwar art criticism, this chapter further explicates the nature of postwar Constructivism (Benjamin H. D. Buchloh's "cold war constructivism" and Piotr Piotrowski's "neoconstructivism") behind the Iron Curtain.[544]

Stażewski's art has been often been interpreted as occupying the space *in-between*. The art historian Janina Ładnowska described his prewar goemetric abstract arts as existing between "Constructivism, Purism and Neoplasticism, determinism and possiblity."[545] His work was also mapped across the American model of the 1960s Minimalism by Gregory Battcock, for whom the Polish artist's career offered an opportunity to examine Constructivist-Suprematist principles in the context of contemporary aesthetics, complementing that space in-between the art of Agnes Martin and Frank Stella.[546] To situate Stażewski's work within the Minimalist grid is to disregard the historical and political specificity of his work. After the fall of Communism, it was frequently suggested that "terms like East and West. . . are a product

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[543] While Stażewski's work is discussed in numerous exhibition catalogues, more detailed analyses of his oeuvre are few and far between. The earliest significant discussion was carried out in 1965 by Hanna Ptaszkowska-Krasińska; see Ptaszkowska-Krasińska, *Henryk Stażewski* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Artystyczno-Graficzne, 1965). Bożena Kowalska's discussion of Stażewski's oeuvre both before and after World War II is also an important contribution; see Bożena Kowalska, *Henryk Stażewski* (Warsaw: Arkady, 1985). More recently, see also, *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988: W Setną Rocznicę Urodzin* (Lodz: Muzeum Sztuki, 1995); and Małgorzata Jurkiewicz, Joanna Mytkowska, and Wiesław Borowski, eds. *Henryk Stażewski: The Economy of Thought and Perception* (Warsaw: Fundacja Galerii Foksal and Galeria Foksal, 2005).

[544] "Cold war constructivism," as a version of Constructivism, became a part of the Western canon only after being sufficiently depoliticized. See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Cold War Constructivism," in *Reconstructing Modernism: Art in New York, Paris, and Montreal, 1945-1964*, ed. Serge Guilbaut (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1990), 85. Piotrowski defined neoconstructivism as the fusion of the political and ideological agenda with the creative process of an autonomous work of art; Piotr Piotrowski, *Znaczenia Modernizmu: W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku* (Poznan: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, 1999), 124.

[545] Janina Ładnowska, "Sztuka wolnego ładu," in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988: w setną rocznicę urodzin* (Lodz: Muzeum Sztuki, 1995), 26.

[546] Gregory Battcock, *Paintings by Henryk Stażewski* (New York: Gruenbaum Gallery, 1976), 1.

not of geography but of geopolitics which [hold little relevance] for our lives today."[547] I also agree with Éva Forgács, who argued that the validity of the concept of East-European art is questionable.[548] However, to jettison these terms entirely before we advance more appropriate models is to affirm what Homi Bhabha called the "ambivalent mimicry;" which is a result of mimicking of Western models resulting in an obliviousness to particular historical and political traditions.[549] The myth of *in-betweenism* ubiquitous in the narratives of Eastern European past is complicated by the fact that historically Eastern European countries have not been a part of the Eurocentric discourse. The economic and political inferiority of Eastern Europe in relation to the West is often compensated for by masquerading as Western, thereby ignoring national identities. The art critic, Bojana Pejić, who curated a 1999 exhibition *After the Wall*, noticed that

> The *myth* of in-betweenism embraces Eastern narratives of the past as well as reflections of different post-Modern, post-Soviet, post-Titoist and post-colonial presents. Now, in the process of unpacking our own self-image, the question as to whether those who live in the Northern, Southern and Western Europe are also equally in-between something else inevitably arises. But beside the copyright relating to our own in-betweenism we also like to cherish another myth: only *ours* have been cultures of interruption. Only *We* have had to deal with endless series of historical breaks (religions and languages included), with Occupations and ensuing Liberations, of which that from Soviet Communism was only the last. Only *We* have always had to start again form point zero.[550]

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[547] Igor Marković, "Global Village of Post-World," *Magazyn Sztuki* 23 (March 1999): 75.
[548] Éva Forgács, "How the New Left Invented East-European Art," *Centropa* 3 (2003), 93. It is perhaps telling that the sourcebook, which accompanied the LACMA exhibition about the avant-garde from East and Central Europe is entitled "between worlds," which does not carry the kind of pejorative connotations associated with the space *in-between*. See Timothy E. Benson and Éva Forgács, eds. *Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910-1930* (Los Angeles: County Museum of Art; Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002).
[549] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: the Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" (1984), in *October: The First Decade*, ed. Annette Michelson, Rosalind Krauss, Douglas Crimp, and Joan Copjec (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1988), 318-19.
[550] Bojana Pejić, "The Dialectics of Normality," in *After the Wall: Art and Culture in Post Communist Europe*, ed., Bojana Pojić and David Elliott (Stockholm: Moderne Museet, 1999), 1: 24.

Return of Geometric Abstraction?

In the previous chapter, I argued that Polish painting around 1955 was plagued by work referred to as 'lyrical' and also known as Colorism. While Constructivist inspired art became more prominent, not only in its historical but also in new articulations, by the mid-1960s, in 1955 Stażewski's was a lonesome but an extremely significant and influential voice. The magazine *Struktury*, published between 1959 and 1961 as an addition to the Lublin *Kamena*, was a space that reflected the debate about the virtues of new painting, recently liberated from the grip of the Socialist Realist tradition. This radical publication united young art historians from the art history department at the prestigious Catholic University in Lublin, including Jerzy Ludwiński and Anka Ptaszkowska. Joining them was Włodzimierz Borowski (born 1930), an artist associated with the group Zamek (Castle), founded in 1957 and devoted to promoting and producing alternative forms of art (in opposition to the prevalent tendencies of both realism and Colorism). The first issue of *Struktury* proclaimed that the editors were committed to the promotion of modern art in all its articulations without promoting any one particular trend.[551] During the lifetime of the publication, however, it would become apparent that *Struktury* shared the hostility of Zamek in relation to both realism and Colorism. Janusz Bogucki, an editor of the Krakow publication *Plastyka* (*Plastic Arts*) – often considered an intellectual precedent to *Struktury* – was a frequent contributor to the Lublin publication and criticized the explosion of Colorism, which he deemed as the epidemic

[551] See *Struktury* 1 (May 1959); reprinted in Anda Rottenberg, "Struktury," in *Polskie Życie Artystyczne 1945-1960*, ed. Aleksander Wojciechowski (Wroclaw: Zakład im. Ossolińskich, 1992), 463.

return to post-impressionist tendencies.[552] The explosion of the colorist type of abstraction meant for him that "Constructivist abstraction of the intellectual type once represented by *Blok* today does not have too many representatives."[553] The critic Mariusz Tchorek, who also began his career at the Catholic University, remembered that in the mid-1960s, geometric abstraction was new, subversive, alternative: "It was something new – geometric abstraction – in those days."[554]

Stażewski's output was sparse from 1951 until the end of 1954, the period of the intensification of Stalinism in culture and politics. In the mid-1940s, the artist produced works such as *Three Female Nudes* (*Trzy Akty Kobiece*) of 1945 (Fig. 91) and *Escape* (*Ucieczka*) of 1947 (Fig. 92), both of which employed monumentalizing baroque forms. These he called *deformacja w sztuce* (deformation in art).[555] In 1948, Stażewski published an article on the distortion of artistic form in the visual arts, which was copiously illustrated with works by Picasso. Picasso's ubiquitous presence in painting and criticism in Eastern Europe during the late 1940s was a product of the increasing official pressures on Polish artists to conform to the tenets of Socialist Realism. The Spaniard's use of abstracted forms was overlooked by the regime because of his affiliation with the Communist Party. By the same token, his official status could be

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[552] Janusz Bogucki, "Obraz wewnętrzny czyli na śladach nowej awangardy," *Struktury* 5 (1959): 6.
[553] Bogucki, "Obraz wewnętrzny, 6.
[554] Joanna Mytkowska, "Rozmowa z Mariuszem Tchorkiem," reprinted in *Tadeusz Kantor: z archiwum Galerii Foksal,* ed., Małgorzata Jurkiewicz, Joanna Mytkowska, and Andrzej Przywara eds. (Warsaw: Galeria Foksal, 2000), 455.
[555] Henryk Stażewski, "Deformacja w malarstwie," *Kuźnica* 7 (1948): 8-9. It is important to note that the 1947 *Escape*, which thematically refers to the war years, is stylistically rare within the artist's oeuvre and critically remains wrapped in silence, though it is briefly discussed in Bernatowicz's book on the reception of Picasso behind the Iron Curtain; see Piotr Bernatowicz, *Picasso za Żelazną Kurtyną: recepcja artysty i jego sztuki w krajach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945-1970* (Krakow: Universitas, 2006), 137. On Stażewski's figurative work, see also Janina Ładnowska, "Inny Stażewski," *Tygiel Kultury* 10/12 (2000): 28-34.

exploited and employed in the defense of creative artistic freedom. For example, Stażewski wrote that Picasso is "a de facto realist. Most of his paintings consistute quick observations, reflexive deformation in search of expression."[556] In order to show that the formal distortion of pictorial space and figure does not necessarily result in the break with nature and reality, Stażewski even suggested that Fauvism provided formal inspiration for such artists as André Fougeron (1913-1998), who was one of the most important Socialist Realist painters in France. It is important to note that while Stażewski produced cubist-inspired still-lifes during the early 1920s, he was much more interested in the work of Malevich and Mondrian.

In light of the restrictions of the Stalinist years, Stażewski's exhibition at the Club of the Polish Writers' Union in October 1955 was perceived as truly triumphant. The show was hailed as one of the first articulations of the return of abstraction during the Thaw after a long period of institutionalized Socialist Realism.[557] The exhibition consisted of twenty-one works, including six abstract compositions, four ceramic plates decorated with abstract motifs, five nudes (mostly drawings), and five figurative paintings (mainly portraits), most of which formally referenced Picasso.[558] The choice of works for this exhibition seems peculiar. The *Two Musicians* (*Dwaj Muzykanci*) of 1950 (Fig. 93) was shown but the *Abstract Composition* (*Kompozycja Abstrakcyjna*) of 1949

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[556] Stażewski, "Deformacja w malarstwie," 8.

[557] In 1955, Stażewski was in close contact with the newly founded Grupa 55, which – as I discussed in Chapter 3 – became Krzywe Koło Gallery; see Barbara Majewska, "Dwugłos o Wystawie 'Grupy 55," and Jerzy Ludwiński, "Dwugłos o Wystawie Grupy 55," both in *Przegląd Kulturalny* 30 (1956): 5-6. This year Stażewski supported himself by producing wall paintings for the Metalexport on Mokotowska Street in Warsaw. The fact that he was awarded the Gold Medal of Achievement this same year is evidence to the changing cultural policies of the Thaw years. See Joanna Guze's article analyzing public commissions and distribution of awards in "Sprawy Plastyków o których trzeba mówić głośno," *Przegląd Kulturalny* 48 (1956): 2.

[558] *Wystawa Prac Henryka Stażewskiego,* (Warsaw: Związek Literatów Polskich, 1955).

(Fig. 94), in which soft-shaped, sharp-edged, pastel-colored forms are inscribed within a geometric net, was not picked for the show. The *Abstract Composition* (*Kompozycja Abstrakcyjna*) of 1950 (Fig. 2), which formally refers to the Constructivist aesthetic, was also not shown. The 1950 *Abstract Composition* was painted at the height of Stalinism and was most likely seen only by a selected few who visited Stażewski's studio. The 1949 *Abstract Composition* was also most likely seen only in Stażewski's studio, but was later publicly shown at Galerie Denise René in 1957. The choice of exhibited works indicates that the state had control over what kind of art was shown publicly even during the Thaw. In this case, the reference to Picasso in *Two Musicians* would be as radical as possible, suggesting that the freedom of the Thaw was relative indeed.

In 1955, Stażewski's *Two Musicians* may appear morphologically cautious, perhaps even – according to Western standards – chronologically delayed. But it did open up a view of geometric abstract tendencies to the generation of artists schooled during the darkest years of Stalinism. Stażewski's work at the Club of the Polish Writers' Union was displayed in a very conservative setting, which – judging by both prewar exhibitions and the Kordegarda (Guardhouse) show two years later – was counterintuitive to his exhibition practices. According to the description of the young art historian Andrzej Wat – the son of the Futurist, Communist poet Aleksander Wat – it recalled a nineteenth-century room filled with paintings executed in tonality of pastels (blues, pinks, and celadons) arranged around a fireplace and surrounded by plates of Stażewski's own design.[559] The majority of paintings in the October show made use of the "cubist arabesques" that resulted in rationally constructed surfaces in which color

[559] Andrzej Wat, "Wystawa Prac Henryka Stażewskiego," *Przegląd Artystyczny* 1 (1956): 88-89.

functioned independently of line.[560] This is why Wat's review focused on Stażewski's prewar flirtation with Cubism inspired by Picasso and Braque.[561] For example, *Two Musicians* is by no means a Constructivist work, but may instead be defined as geometricized figuration. The clearly discernable figures of musicians, a subject thoroughly exploited by Cubism, seem almost incidental to the system of interlacing lines. The rational construction of the canvas is softened by the use of subdued violets, greens, and blues. Wat argued that the major change in Stażewski's postwar output included an addition of a lyrical dimension articulated in "if not motif, then a humanist climate," which made the work additionally forceful because of its emotional load.[562]

The *Abstract Composition (Still Life)* (*Kompozycja Abstrakcyjna: martwa natura*) of 1954 (Fig. 95) was painted especially for the exhibition. The composition has its source in Picasso's *Pitcher, Bowl of Fruit, and Leaves* of 1931 (Fig. 96), but in Stażewski's painting it is much more simplified, the colors significantly more washed out. The theme of the still life, like that of musicians, had been explored by Picasso in his Cubist works, but Stażewski chose the work of the Spaniard that dialogued directly with Matisse. Stażewski's *Still Life* is purified in effect, and composition, and its colors are washed out in comparison with Picasso. Both, however, are governed by a strict geometric rationale amplified with the "arabesque," which traditionally belonged to Matisse's vernacular. Matisse did not have the same status as Picasso in the countries behind the Iron Curtain. This is why Stażewski called upon the acceptable art of Picassso both in his 1947 article "Deformation in Art" as well as his early Thaw works.

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[560] Wat, "Wystawa Prac Henryka Stażewskiego," 86.
[561] Wat, "Wystawa Prac Henryka Stażewskiego," 86.
[562] Wat, "Wystawa Prac Henryka Stażewskiego," 86, 88.

Stażewski's *Abstract Composition (Still Life)* may have appeared chronologically delayed in 1955 if it was exhibited in Paris or New York, but appearing in plain view in Poland in the government-operated space after years of Socialist Realist indoctrination, it seemed innovative and daring. The circumstances of the exhibition and choice of paintings begs a question why Stażewski painted a work specifically for the exhibition. As I mentioned earlier, the 1949 *Abstract Composition* as well as the 1950 *Abstract Composition*, produced five years before the October show, were safely stored in the artist's studio, seen by the privileged few who attended the informal, daily five o'clock meetings. One can conclude that these two paintings were formally too daring. Wat's review of Stażewski's show was also implicated in the discourse of "repressive tolerance" palpable on at least two counts: first, by defining Stażewski's work in terms of lyrical abstraction, Wat situated his work within an acceptable paradigm of academicized Colorism, or as Seuphor would have it, in the midst of the contemporary plague of Art Informel and Tachisme; second, Wat needed to address the uncomfortable issue of the artistic distortion of form and the relationship of such "deformations" to figuration if not outright realism.[563] Wat found himself in an uncharted territory, still uncertain about the acceptability of abstraction other than the academicized Colorism, and thus unsure of the direction of the postwar geometric abstract art. In 1955, both the artist and his critic had to exercise caution by referring to approved stylistic modes.

[563] Wat, "Wystawa Prac Henryka Stażewskiego," 90.

The Second Exhibition of Contemporary Art at Zachęta

The *Second Exhibition of Contemporary Art* at the Zachęta Gallery, held in October and November 1957, set off a discussion about the nature, viability, and credibility of geometric abstraction (Fig. 97).[564] The debate in Poland featured on the pages of the periodical *Przegląd Kulturalny* (*Cultural Review*), was between Julian Przyboś, the writer and poet whose ties with Constructivist artists were well known since the 1920s, and Mieczysław Porębski, an influential critic and art historian associated with the artistic culture of both Krakow and Warsaw.[565]

The organizers of the show, which included Stażewski, intended the exhibition to be a tribute to the original Krakow *Nowocześni* exhibition of 1949, the last event before the tightening of the noose of Socialist Realism, while at the same time presenting new, contemporary works. In his comments, Przyboś noticed that the historical and political situation in Poland influenced the artistic developments to such an extent that the same issue of the prewar Constructivist tradition had "to be taken up again, anew and from the beginning."[566] A list of artists and artist groups active during the 1920s was placed before the entrance to the Zachęta show as a reminder of the intellectual precedents to the exhibited works. Yet, as Przyboś noticed, most of the work included in the exhibition did not relate to the Constructivist tradition but rather to Tachisme. Tachisme was for Przyboś, as it was for Seuphor, a frenetic "exaltation of color" and its meaningless madness, erroneously promoted by *Przegląd Artystyczny* (*the Art Review*) to the

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[564] Nearly simultaneously on October 19, the exhibition of the Warsaw artists from the 1949 Krakow *Nowocześni* show opened at the Krzywe Koło Gallery.
[565] See Julian Przyboś, "Sztuka Abstrakcyjna – Jak z Niej Wyjść," *Przegląd Kulturalny* 45 (1957): 5. See also Mieczysław Porębski, "Jak nie wychodzić?" *Przegląd Kulturalny* 46 (1957): 6.
[566] Przyboś, "Sztuka Abstrakcyjna," 5.

detriment of its young practitioners.[567] Before 1956, *Przegląd Artystyczny* was committed to describing both the moral and political messages in painterly anecdotes, but it also promoted art that portrayed nothing but "the content of one's own soul blindly looking at painting," or the type of lyrical abstraction known as Colorism.[568] The editor of *Przegląd Artystyczny*, Aleksander Wojciechowski, addressed the dissemination of 'lyrical' abstraction in his article entitled "Ostrożnie - świeżo malowane!" ("Caution: Freshly Painted!"), in which he placed the blame for the proliferation of the lyrical type of abstraction on the frivolous thoughtlessness and charming politeness of Polish art critics.[569] The uncritical embrace of anything that looked "modern" was a direct result of the regime's regulations of all artistic endeavors and the promotion of Socialist Realism previous to the Thaw. Both Przyboś and Wojciechowski had well-defined opinions about the so-called "good" kind of abstract art. Wojciechowski, whose article was illustrated with a number of paintings exemplifying both the "good," the "bad," and the "ugly," including Stażewski's 1950 *Abstract Composition* (Fig. 2), concluded that the decision lay in the hands of the reader or viewer.[570] Przyboś was more adamant about the art he deemed worthy. As a long-time supporter of Polish Constructivism and one of the organizers of the Strzemiński/Kobro exhibition the previous year, Przyboś felt that Stażewski's art exemplified in the show by *Composition II* (*Kompozycja II*) of 1956 (Fig. 98) made the *Second Exhibition of Contemporary Art* at Zachęta worthwhile.[571]

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[567] Przyboś, "Sztuka Abstrakcyjna," 5.
[568] Przyboś, "Sztuka Abstrakcyjna," 5. "…treść własnej duszy ślepo patrzącej na obraz."
[569] Aleksander Wojciechowski, "Ostrożnie - świeżo malowane!" *Przegląd Artystyczny* 2 (1957): 3.
[570] Wojciechowski misdated Stażewski's *Abstract Composition* to 1956. See Wojciechowski, "Ostrożnie - świeżo malowane!," 9.
[571] Przyboś thought that Stażewski's best work traveled to Paris for the *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne* at Denise René Gallery.

The conflict between lyrical and geometric, between the hot and cold, is illustrated in the debate between Przyboś and Porębski. In his article entitled "Sztuka Abstrakcyjna – Jak z Niej Wyjść?" ("Abstract Art – How to Get Out of It?"), Przyboś used the term "abstraction" to refer to Tachisme and the term "avant-garde" to denote geometric abstract art rooted in Constructivism. "Abstractionism is not the last word of our epoch," he wrote; instead, it should be seen as a stage toward the new way of seeing, and then it should be overcome.[572] The *Second Exhibition of Contemporary Art* at Zachęta showed that abstraction had triumphed over figuration but, according to Przyboś, the simplistic understanding of non-geometric abstraction resulted in artwork defined by "random splashes of paint."[573] In order to eliminate abstractionism and return to true painting, he believed that artists needed to redefine painting according to "new principles of composition," which would result in art whose "content is that which happens between painter's eye and nature."[574] For Porębski, whose response was entitled "Jak nie wychodzić?" ("How Not to Get Out?"), it was not important whether contemporary artist employed illusory forms (as in figurative painting) or constructed forms (as in geometric abstraction) or automatic, emotive forms (as in Tachisme or Colorism).[575] In fact, he thought that Przyboś was so grounded "in the atmosphere of the constructivist experiment of the avant-garde of the interwar period," that he was too conservative and not open to

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[572] Przyboś, "Sztuka Abstrakcyjna," 5. The concept of the new vision, or new seeing, was developed by Strzemiński in his last book called *Teoria Widzenia* (The Theory of Vision) devoted to the physiology of sight and visual, optical awareness. Strzemiński began *The Theory of Vision* in 1948, but it was published posthumously in 1958.
[573] Przyboś, "Sztuka Abstrakcyjna," 5.
[574] Przyboś, "Sztuka Abstrakcyjna," 5. "Jak wyjść z abstrakcjonizmu, żeby wrócić do obrazu i malarstwa?"
[575] Porębski, "Jak nie wychodzić?" *Przegląd Kulturalny* 46 (1957): 6.

the experiments of abstract art of the present day.[576] For Porębski, the contemporary artist creates plastic structures with the means of the "elements of illusion, construction, chance – whatever it may be" in order to arrive at "new relationships between thought and instinct, movement and matter, imagination and reality."[577] The power of contemporary art depends on a certain degree of violence by the virtue of its own definition: *abstraho*, he wrote, means to tear away.[578] Modern abstraction must entail a challenge to the natural ways of the world in order to achieve a sense of freedom, perhaps fragmentary and limited but a sense of freedom nevertheless. Art Informel or Tachisme should therefore be seen as a new and logical step in the development of contemporary art. The period of Socialist Realism was in part responsible for this development. Socialist Realism clearly illustrated that it is impossible to combine its dogmatic instructions with a spontaneous development of art. Before Socialist Realism, Porębski wrote, abstract art was mainly rooted in the constructive-experimental tradition of the 1920s. Faced with the isolation of Stalinist years, however, painting had time to address issues it previously had no courage to address. Faced with the horrors of World War II and the subsequent reign of Communism, Polish contemporary art developed new ways of expression that is Tachisme.[579]

In addition to encapsulating the hot/cold abstraction debate, the Przyboś/Porębski polemic illustrates the condition and language of art criticism under Communism. The

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[576] Porębski, "Jak nie wychodzić?" 6.
[577] Porębski, "Jak nie wychodzić?" 6. "Nowoczesnym nazwę twórce, który w kreowanej przez siebie plastycznej strukturze (operującej elementami iluzji, konstrukcji, przypadku – jak się zdarzy) osiąga – właśnie co?"
[578] Porębski, "Jak nie wychodzić?" 6. "Bo też siła nowoczesnej abstrakcji (abstraho – odrywać, ta czynność nie odbywa sie bez gwałtu) polega na czym innym. Bedąc w istocie swej wyzwaniem rzuconym naturalnemu porządkowi świata, nowoczesna abstrakcja ustanawia w jego obliczu własny, fragmentaryczny i ograniczony ale istniejący porządek wolności."
[579] Porębski, "Jak nie wychodzic?" 6.

Thaw was a period of rehabilitations and explanations of "mistakes" precipitated by Stalinist regime. Przyboś and Porębski were able to analyze art that was previously disallowed, but their self-censorship resulted in a discussion that can be described as a battle of plastic form, or what a contemporary historian aptly termed "the silent drama of form."[580] Przyboś was able to discuss the Constructivist tradition which he held dear. Porębski had a chance to rehabilitate his own Socialist Realist past. He wrote that it was easier to change one's ideologies than taste.[581] Although the Thaw was a time of greater freedom, the critical responses still carried the ballast of Socialist Realist terminology as well as its vagueness.

[580] Piotr Juszkiewicz, *Od rozkoszy historiozofii do "Gry w Nic" – Polska Krytyka Artystyczna Czasu Odwilży* (Poznan: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UAM, 2005), 144, 221.
[581] Porębski, "Jak nie wychodzić?" 6.

Kordegarda Reliefs

Stażewski's postwar pictorial output was shown at the National Museum in Warsaw as early as 1947, and while he returned to abstraction in 1949, it was only a decade later, in 1959, that first exhibition of a new series of reliefs took place at Kordegarda (Guardhouse) in Warsaw. The show, was organized under the auspices of the government organ of the Union of Polish Plastic Artists (ZPAP) and opened in May.[582] The three reliefs produced in 1958, each entitled *Compositions (Reliefs)* (*Kompozycja (Relief*) (Fig. 99), are generally not more than 40 by 50 centimeters in size. Colorless or nearly monochromatic panels of simple shapes scattered randomly across pictorial surface would constitute the core of Stażewski's production for the next five years. To take another example, the *Plastic Composition 9* (*Kompozycja Plastyczna 9*) (Fig. 100), produced in 1958 and included in the 1959 Kordegarda show, displays a moderately loosened geometry with both pointedly jagged and sinusoidal shapes that suggest movement in their relationship to the pictorial surface.

Stażewski's reliefs have many sources. Turowski defined Stażewski's Constructivism as Dadaist, and his Dadaism mimetic "in the sense that the represented world did not appear to the artist as categorically organized and conscious totality, and his art did not succumb to any stylistic categories."[583] In that sense, the formal similarities with such works by Jean Arp as the *Constellation According to the Laws of Chance* of 1930 (Fig. 101) reach beyond their morphology. The formal affinity with the

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[582] This year, Michal Bylina invited Stażewski to the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw as an adviser for the diploma of the artist, Zbigniew Gostomski. This was Stażewski's only appearance within the official realm of academia. Stażewski also showed his work between February and April at the National Museum in Warsaw in an exhibition entitled *Od Młodej Polski do naszych dni* (*From Young Poland to Our Times*).

[583] Andrzej Turowski, "Stażewski Internacjonał," in *Henryk Stażewski: Ekonomia Myślenia i Postrzegania*, 31.

biomorphic language exploited by Arp was indirectly endorsed by Stażewski in a relief entitled *Hommage à Jean Arp* of 1959, which he sent to Meudon, outside of Paris, where Arp had lived on and off since 1926.[584] Both Stażewski and Arp utlized neutral forms in countless possible relationships and extended the definition of painting beyond its frame. Stażewski's *Plastic Composition 9* brings to mind the work of Victor Vasarely, whose intensely geometric pictorial and spatial language was often manipulated in order to create color and optical illusions. In works such *Langsor II* of 1952-1956 (Fig. 102), Vasarely abandoned intense geometrical language in favor of biomorphic forms, which themselves also reference Arp. Stażewski, whose earlier *Relief* of 1955 (Fig. 103) exhibits an almost lyrical quality in the factural differentiation of the surface (an effect that was of great interest to him during the prewar period), renounced the expressive surface in *Plastic Composition 9*.

As with the 1957 Zachęta show, the Kordegarda exhibition spurred a prompt critical debate. Favorable reviews appeared in such conservative publications as the *Tygodnik Demokratyczny* (*Democratic Weekly*).[585] But more importantly, it triggered a discussion about the status and viability of Stażewski's current art in contemporary context. For example, Przyboś wrote that

> the Kordegarda exhibition revealed the new Stażewski. . . .There are convex forms whose very thickness reveal plastic strength and expression as well relationships of depicted planes. In these compositions, Stażewski combined painting with sculpture, surface with space, space with color and facture of material surface. The degree of control over artistic means allowed him to reach a complete synthesis. . . .This is not just the beginning of a new road, not only an investigation of previously explored forms. Among exhibited works, there are at least three masterpieces as vociferous as those of the first masters of abstraction. .

[584] Arp thanked Stażewski in a letter dated 26 April 1959; in Marek Stażewski, private archive.
[585] "Kordegarda – Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki," *Tygodnik Demokratyczny* 20 (1959): 8.

> . . Anyone who has eyes has noticed [the masters] long ago and among them . . . Henryk Stażewski.[586]

But the conservative critic Jerzy Stajuda (1936-1992), who was also an artist, disagreed writing that

> geometric abstraction that needs not be seen in context; it is, therefore, a rarity. . . Stażewski is in fact more an architect than a painter, for he treats the picture plane as a formal laboratory in which form advances into space. And paintings of this moment cannot be treated independently. Generally, we know more about them than see in them. . . .But then I shouldn't issue such complaints, for geometric abstraction entered our daily life – in architecture, fashion, books, advertisement. These paintings have less and less power to intrigue. These new attempts give most uninteresting effects. Perhaps they are in the process of becoming the new naturalism – the world is becoming so well-groomed![587]

The respective positions of the two critical voices, typical of Polish criticism at the time, viewing artistic practice in purely formal means termed by one writer as extremely naked and vulnerable, illustrate the sense of uneasiness caused by geometric abstraction in general, and Stażewski's in particular.[588] On one hand, Stażewski was seen as an avatar of experimental art and was criticized for engaging in Western imports of the formalist aesthetic. Previous to the Thaw, his abstraction had been seen as an act of dissent. On the other hand, his post-Thaw production was often seen as a nostalgic echo of the past, a new kind of academicism.

In the exhibition catalogue to the Kordegarda show, Janusz Bogucki noted that Stażewski's paintings had a long-time established position within the rare tradition of geometric abstraction in Poland and elswhere, the "most disciplined and lucid and the closest to the tradition of precise geometry of Malevich and Mondrian."[589] Bogucki

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[586] Przyboś, "Nowy Stażewski," *Przegląd Kulturalny* 23 (1959): 10.
[587] Jerzy Stajuda, "Henryk Stażewski," *Przegląd Artystyczny* 3 (1959): 31, 34.
[588] Małgorzata Lisiewicz, "Kontestacja Czy Kontynuacja. Szkic o sztuce Polskiej i krytyce lat 60," *Magazyn Sztuki* 1 (1995): 51-63.
[589] Bogucki, *Wystawa Prac Henryka Stażewskiego*, n.p.

recognized the artist's status as the "classic," the "precursor," and the "veteran," but distinguished the most recent output as a new chapter of Stażewski's painterly biography.[590] This new episode was characterized by jettisoning "the traditional métier of the canvas, the brush, the paint, to occupy the space on the border of painting and relief operating not only with colors but plastic shapes."[591] The new work combined "the traditional qualities of abstraction: geometric discipline and fluidity, precise contours of form recalling the type practiced by Arp, and the expression of elements achieved by the differentiation of material, surface, facture."[592] Bogucki's text is a eulogy to the artistic creativity of Stażewski and as such falls into one of two categories, of art criticism during the late 1950s, either optimistically positive or excessively negative. For all its merit, Bogucki's text is a somewhat naïve, almost romantic tribute to the artistic genius of an artist with a long history. It is full of phrases that like painting to "small abstract poems," and refer to the "emotion of the painter," whose works exhibit qualities that are "elementary, nearly childish as in the box of colored blocks," while immediately counteracting these with comparisons to the work of physicist or mathematician and the "refined, ascetic precision of construction."[593]

Unfortunately, what is not evident in the catalogue of the Kordegarda show is the excellent design of the exhibition space. The catalogue does not include installation views but prints only a photograph of Stażewski in his studio surrounded by reliefs. Stażewski's Kordegarda space was organized in cooperation with the architect Stanisław Zamecznik (1909-1971), and is known mainly through a few photographs that

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[590] Bogucki, *Wystawa Prac Henryka Stażewskiego,* n.p. See also Anka Ptaszkowska, "Klasyka czy Awangarda," *Struktury* 2 (1959): 5.
[591] Bogucki, *Wystawa Prac Henryka Stażewskiego,* n.p.
[592] Bogucki, *Wystawa Prac Henryka Stażewskiego*, n.p.
[593] Bogucki, *Wystawa Prac Henryka Stażewskiego,* n.p.

accompanied a review by Jerzy Stajuda in *Przegląd Artystyczny* (Fig. 104).[594] The excellent design situates the reliefs in a context of a specific environment, which stood in stark contrast to the exhibition at the Club of the Polish Writers' Union in October 1955, where mostly pastel-colored paintings were situated within a traditional room replete with a fireplace, as Wat described in his review of the show.[595] In his article entitled "The New Stażewski," Przyboś wrote that the reliefs exhibited at Kordegarda were stripped of the ascetic approach of Malevich and Mondrian and invested the world of geometric abstraction with grace. The convex forms of varied thickness that plastically expressed the relationship of various planes combined "painting with sculpture, surface with space, space with color and facture of material surface."[596] Further, Przyboś believed that if the world were constructed by such artists like Stażewski, it would be a better place:

> We do have a few artists who could carve the face of our country so that it had the features of the twentieth-century. There are a few artists who, if they were given the task of spatial and urban planning as well as landscaping, would bring us closer to socialist art than some of its present practitioners and theoreticians. Somewhere in the world, in India, Venezuela, Brazil, great artists plan and build new capitals, the capitalist system is not afraid of their creative thought – while building the new system, why don't we use our most gifted artists as the chief architects of the People's Republic.[597]

It is puzzling that Bogucki, who mentioned Stażewski's prewar interest in painting's relationship to architecture, and Przyboś, who wrote about "spatial planning," made no mention of the carefully orchestrated environment in which these reliefs were meant to be viewed. Stażewski's Kordergarda exhibition design was preceded by the

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[594] Jerzy Stajuda, "Henryk Stażewski," *Przegląd Artystyczny* 3 (1959): 31, 34.
[595] Reviewers for the magazine *Struktury* mention the innovative design of the exhibition space. See *Struktury* 2 (1959): 7.
[596] Przyboś, "Nowy Stażewski," *Przegląd Kulturalny* 23 (1959): 10.
[597] Przyboś, "Nowy Stażewski," 10.

Spatial Arrangment (*Studium Przestrzeni*) designed by the artist Wojciech Fangor, a year earlier in collaboration with Zamecznik (Fig. 105). Rooted in Constructivist tradition, Fangor's paintings entered the third dimension in this spatial arrangement, which Bożena Kowalska later described as "the first 'environment' in the world."[598] Further, Stażewski's Kordergarda exhibition space has its art historical precedent in Lissitzky's early twentieth-century designs, such as the 1926 temporary exhibition design called *Room for Constructivist Art* (*Raum für konstruktive Kunst*) in Dresden, and the later *Abstract Cabinet* (*Kabinett der Abstrakten*) permanent exhibition space for the Provinzialmuseum in Hannover (Fig. 106). Like Lissitzky, Stażewski believed in the constructive role of art, which through its visual effects would lead to the transformation of society in a process that Maria Gough later called "the activation of the viewer."[599] Stażewski also believed in the social and political role of art in the postwar period as well, and his committment to the transformative potential of art was expressed in later exhibition designs including his *Exhibition of Paintings in Spatial Color Arrangment* (*Wystawa obrazów w przestrzeni aranżowanej barwami*) in 1967 at the Foksal Gallery in Warsaw (Fig. 107), or the room devoted to his reliefs executed in the 1960s at the Lodz Museum of Art (Fig. 108).

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[598] Bożena Kowalska, *W poszukiwaniu ładu: artyści o sztuce* (Katowice: Galeria Sztuki Współczesnej BWA, 2001), 50.

[599] Maria Gough, "Constructivism Disoriented: El Lissitzky's Dresden and Hannover *Demonstrationsräume*," 77; in *Situating El Lissitzky: Vitebsk, Berlin, Moscow,* ed. Nancy Perloff and Brian Reed (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute, 2003).

The Third Exhibition of Contemporary Art at Zachęta: The End of the Thaw?

If the reception of the Kordegarda show was generally encouraging, even if ambivalent at times, the next annual *Third Exhibition of Contemporary Art* in 1959 met a different fate. Not only was the exhibition received with hostility by critics, but it was closed by the authorities before the scheduled time, only three days after the opening.[600] In fact, by the end of the year, the Ministry of Art and Culture issued an edict allowing a total of no more than 15percent of abstract works in any one exhibition.[601] Nearly two hundred works were exhibited at Zachęta in October, including works by Jan Ziemski (1920-1988), who in the mid-1950s produced Surrealist-inspired abstract paintings and later was interested in the textural qualities and matter of painting, as in the *Formura (F II)* of 1959 (Fig. 109), and Stażewski's *Abstract Composition II* (*Kompozycja Abstrakcyjna*) of 1958 (Fig. 110).[602] The exhibition vibrated energetically on the pages of various magazines periodicals, most, if not all, of which were owned by the government. The newspaper *Głos Robotnika* (*The Worker's Voice*), printed an anonymous review that stated that the exhibition offered nothing new.[603] In addition, the reviewer criticized the selection process, in which Stażewski played a major role. The selected works, according to the article, were not at all representative of the general Polish art of the moment: "It seems that the process of choosing works and artists is a

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[600] The closing was announced on the cover of *Struktury* 6 (1959). The announcement gave no reason for this closing date change but announced that the show could be seen instead in November and December at the Lublin Museum.
[601] Anda Rottenberg, "Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki," in *Polskie Życie Artystyczne w latach, 1945-1960,* ed. Aleksander Wojciechowski (Wroclaw: Ossolineum, 1992), 201.
[602] The neologism *formura* derives from words form, to form, and to build, and indicates the process of constructing an object.
[603] T. E., "Kilka Uwag o Ogólnopolskiej Wystawie Abstrakcjonistów: Raczej Symbol," *Głos Robotnika*, 23 September 1959, 8.

sweet secret of the exhibition organizers."[604] But, on the other hand, *Struktury* devoted a large portion of its sixth issue in 1959 to the topic of the exhibition, to commentary of a more positive and constructive vein. The young critic Anka Ptaszkowska thought that the *Third Exibition* was "filled with good painting."[605] An anonymous reviewer for *Nowa Kultura* (*The New Culture*) decided that the *Third Exhibition* signaled "the end of modernism as a unique phenomenon."[606] In *Przegląd Kulturalny* (*The Cultural Review*), Jacek Sempoliński, an artist employed by the Fine Arts Academy at the Warsaw University, claimed that contemporary painting finally eliminated the heritage of the nineteenth century.[607] For Sempoliński, the function of a contemporary work of art was to repeat and continue the achieved developments. The notion of repetition, or the continuation of the prewar experimental artistic traditions runs through this and other texts. Some writers, such as K. T. Toeplitz, felt that such continuation was negative. Toeplitz wrote that

> even a few years ago, to paint an abstract work in Poland – the mere use of its stylistic conventions – demonstrated a brave worldview. It didn't matter if the work was worth anything – the mere acceptance of the style, of its poetics and expression indicated an acceptance of those values of the world, which were swiftly disappearing from the cultural map.[608]

Toeplitz claimed that if in the past, abstraction, if nothing else, elicited a certain kind of respect for its demonstration of courage, at the present time, it was a sign of conformity, a compliance with the status quo with no trace of originality. But another critic, A. J. Wieczorkowski, thought that the quest for originality was outdated when he wrote that

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[604] T. E., "Kilka Uwag o Ogólnopolskiej Wystawie Abstrakcjonistów," 8.
[605] Anka Ptaszkowska, "Dobre Malarstwo i art fiction: III Ogólnopolska Wystawa," *Struktury* 5 (October 1959): 15.
[606] KTT [Toeplitz], "Rekolekcje Malarskie," *Nowa Kultura* 38 (September 1959): 6.
[607] Jacek Sempoliński, "Wystawa na Dobrym Poziomie," *Przegląd Kulturalny* 40 (October 1959): 6.
[608] KTT [Toeplitz], "Rekolekcje Malarskie," 6.

"again comes the term conformity, as if in the realm of painting the requirement was akin to the conquering of the Winter Palace."[609] But the problem was that Toeplitz, not unlike other critics, lumped all abstraction under the same umbrella:

> These world-shattering works that experiment with form and composition seem to have made full circle back to that frightening and critical point at which it is not enough just to speak a new language, but it is necessary to say something. Everything starts anew. The magic of conventionalized and ultimately not such a complicated technique ceases to work and again, as from the beginning of painting, artists cannot be classified as "new" and "old," but those who are empty and those who have a message to communicate, the brave and the cowardly, the wise and the stupid. The instrument has again become just an instrument, and we await for the beginning of the concert.[610]

In the same issue of *Nowa Kultura*, Joanna Guze argued that although the abstract trends in Poland before World War II could be characterized only as epigonic, within the postwar context the practice of various abstract idioms was virtually omnipresent.[611] She wrote that postwar abstraction "flourished within – in the certain sense – new, if not virgin territories, such as Japan, Spain, Poland."[612] Guze's insight was supplemented by Ignacy Witz, an artist and critic, who wrote on the pages of the Warsaw daily paper that the "majority of Polish painting since two years ago, since a year ago, since a month ago and since yesterday was as modern as modern can be," but – Witz added by way of explanation – "no one [knew] what the term meant."[613] Witz was nostalgic for the pioneering postwar efforts articulated in the 1949 exhibition of *Nowocześni* and its post-Thaw version of 1957. But although Stażewski was instrumental in both exhibitions of the *Nowocześni*, Witz had the most contempt for what he called the work of those who

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[609] Chochoł [A. J. Wieczorkowski], "Z Chaty Rozśpiewanej," *Współczesność* 19 (October 1959): 8.
[610] KTT [Toeplitz], "Rekolekcje Malarskie," *Nowa Kultura* 38 (September 1959): 6.
[611] Joanna Guze, "Osobliwości Awangardy," *Nowa Kultura* 38 (September 1959): 6.
[612] Guze, "Osobliwości Awangardy," 6.
[613] Ignacy Witz, "Nowocześni po raz trzeci," *Życie Warszawy*, 18 September 1959, 3.

attempt to overcome the fundamental plastic rules, among whom he counted the Polish Constructivists.[614] If Witz recognized that discussions about modern and contemporary art were vague, because terms were never adequately explained and understood, his own writing continued in the same vein and was manifested in the use of such expressions as works painted in a manner that was "clean, wide, and sensitive," or painting that was "large, light, and clear – very decorative and sensitive," or canvasses of "light scale."[615] Another contemporary critic noticed that such criticism was a testimony that, in fact, "contemporary painting surpassed the language. . . of its critic" and that, paradoxically, the critics of contemporary music, who needed to get through that space between Beethoven and Schaeffer, seem to have been better equipped than the critics of contemporary painting – a revelation that seemed surprising to him, because "it should be the other way around. Paintings, we all agree, do not scream or make terrible noise."[616]

The reviews of the *Third Exhibition* reveal that there was little consensus about defining what constituted modern and contemporary art in post-Thaw Poland. One recurring theme included the notion of *nowy akademizm* (new academicism), or the phenomenon of the development of "a formula for contemporary creative process," which was similar to the previous "pseudo-realist formula" of Socialist Realism.[617] For Bogucki, who noticed that at Zachęta the viewer was presented with same works that could be seen at national museums across Poland, defined the "new academicism" as "mature work representing well-known trends and masters: our classics, laureates,

[614] Witz, "Nowocześni po raz trzeci," 3.
[615] Witz, "Nowocześni po raz trzeci," 3.
[616] Chochoł, "Z Chaty Rozśpiewanej," 6.
[617] Aleksander Wojciechowski (1959) in *Argumenty*; in *Struktury* 6 (1959): 16.

presidents, patrons."[618] Bogucki cited the tradition of "postcolorism" practiced by the many followers of Piotr Potworowski (1892-1962), a painter associated with an artistic group formally known as Kapizm (Kapism). As I discussed earlier, the group's name derived from the Polish pronounciation of the abreviation of the term Komitet Paryski (Paris Committee, or KP). The group strove for grants and fellowships to travel and study in Paris and was primarily concerned with issues of painting and emotion (Fig. 111). Yet, the critic Wiesław Borowski, who a few years later would be one of the co-founders of the Foksal Gallery, thought that the most fascinating aspect of the *Third Exhibition* at Zachęta was that many paintings called into question the essence of painterly composition "not in the sense of destruction of all that has been achieved in painting, but in the sense of a radical change, of a formal protest."[619] For example, Tytus Dzieduszycki (1930-1973), an artists who, like Ziemski, was a member of the group Zamek (Castle), achieved "a coup against the painterly composition in such a way that it led to the end of the traditional definition of painting" in such works as *Another Painting* (*Inny Obraz*) of 1959 (Fig. 112).[620] The new art as it was defined by the *Third Exhibition*, Ptaszkowska argued, signaled a new avant-garde that would be taking "the last step towards the destruction of painting as it was understood etymologically."[621] Other critics, however, claimed that the Zachęta exhibition was only trying to keep up

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[618] Janusz Bogucki, "O Wystawie," *Struktury* 6 (1959): 16

[619] Wiesław Borowski, "U Kresu Obrazu," *Struktury* 6 (1959): 15. "Uderzyć w samą zasadę obrazu, w samą istotę "kompozycji" malarskiej – to wydaje się sprawa niewątpliwie pasjonująca. Uderzyć przytem nie w sensie zniszczenia wszystkiego, co już zostało osiągnięte w sztuce, lecz w znaczeniu radykalnej zmiany, formalnego protestu. Zachować szacunek dla najogólniejszej specyfiki sztuk plastycznych i dla wartości już znalezionych, lecz jak najszybciej się od tych osiągnieć oddalić."

[620] Borowski, "U Kresu Obrazu," *Struktury* 6 (1959):

[621] Ptaszkowska, "Dobre malarstwo i art fiction," 15. "Nowa awangarda robi ostatni krok na drodze zniszczenia obrazu tak, jak go pojmujemy etymologicznie. Iluzje przestrzeni zastępuje przestrzenią konkretną, trójwymiarową, taka jaką posiadają wszystkie realnie istniejące przedmioty. Termin – malarz można już śmiało zastąpić terminem – plastyk."

with developments in the West and was therefore the least interesting of any in the country.[622] Yet others thought that the show was the culmination of "an epoch of trying to even out our lateness, of getting rid of complexes, of creating art no worse generally than in the West, and at the same time having a certain domestic taste."[623] Overall, the reception of the *Third Exhibition* indicated that opening up of creative freedom during the Thaw left many critics unsure about the status and future of contemporary painting.

[622] Jerzy Olkiewicz (1959) in *Stolica*; in *Struktury* 6 (1959): 16.
[623] Janusz Bogucki, "Awangarda czy akademizm?" *Życie Literackie* 40 (October 1959); reprinted in *Struktury* 5 (October 1959): 16.

Reliefs at the Gallery Krzywe Koło

The 1961 exhibition at the Gallery Krzywe Koło (Crooked Wheel) , where Stażewski exhibited his new reliefs, was a culmination of the artist's exploration of monochromatic, often white reliefs, which had begun in 1959 (Fig. 113). The white reliefs consisted of forms created by a combination of straight and curved lines that generate silhouettes of deflated barrel shapes that appear to be in constant movement, such as in the *Painted Relief 1* (*Relief Malowany 1*) of 1960 (Fig. 114). Stażewski made groups of these reliefs of the same size and often of identical shapes. In the catalogue of the exhibition, Stażewski wrote

> In recent years, my interest included the spatial art forms. Having broken away from flat painting fused with the wall on which it is hung, I move toward a three-dimensional relief affixed to flat surface or a double-sided relief situated in space. This kind of plastic art is an effacement of the boundary between painting and sculpture.
>
> The present exhibition illustrates the stage of my oeuvre in which the visual problem is narrowed to only one solution: the repeatability of one and the same form in different systems. The problem of form thus ceases to exist, and what is left are issues of relationships, proportions, and construction.[624]

The deflated-barrel-like-form sometimes seems disembodied and fragmented, floating across the hardboard surface, as in the *White Relief 17* (*Relief Biały 17*) of 1961 (Fig. 115). A few years later, Stażewski wrote that in these reliefs "there [was] no hierarchy, no form [was] more important than the first."[625] Sometimes these forms touch each

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[624] Henryk Stażewski, "Autobiografia," *Stażewski* (Warsaw: Galeria Krzywe Koło, 1962), 18. "W ostatinch latach zainteresowania moje poszły w kierunku sztuki przestrzennej zrywając z płaskim obrazem zespolonym ze ścianą, przechodzę do trójwymiarowego reliefu umieszczonego w przestrzeni. Tego rodzaju plastyka jest zatarciem granicy między malarstwem a rzeźbą.

Na obecnej wystawie pokazany jest taki etap w mojej twórczości, w którym jest zwężenie problemu do jednego tylko rozwiązania: powtarzanie jednej formy w różnych układach. Przestaje istnieć zagadnienie formy, pojawia się problem stosunków, proporcji i konstrukcji."

[625] Henryk Stażewski, [Untitled], *Odra* 2 (1968): 64; in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988*, 88-90.

other ever so slightly, as in the *White Relief 19* (*Relief Biały 19*) of 1961 (Fig. 116). Other times, there seems to be tension in the interstitial space where the two deflated-barrels meet, as in the *White Relief 5* (*Relief Biały 5*) of 1961 (Fig. 117). Yet, other times, the collapsed silhouettes overlap like shingles, as in the *White Relief 18* (*Relief Biały 18*) of 1961 (Fig. 118). Or they look like staves waiting to be hinged, as in the *White and Gray Relief* (*Relief Biało-Szary*) of 1961 (Fig. 119). The multilayered spatial form of the relief at other times becomes its own negative reflection as in the *Black and White Relief 20* (*Biało-Czarny Relief 20*) of 1961 (Fig. 120, top). In the "white reliefs,'"Stażewski surpassed the theory of *unizm*. Strzemiński's *unizm* called for an autonomous work of art that was defined by the harmony of all formal elements, including a flat, factured, monochromatic pictorial surface visually defined in Strzemiński's *Composition "Unism" 12* (*Kompozycja "Unizm" 12*) of 1932 (Fig. 56, bottom right). But, while Strzemiński faltered in the late 1930s, Stażewski took *unizm* to its logical conclusion. This is to say that, if *unizm* focused on the factured, monochromatic, unified pictorial surface of painting-as-object, then in the "white reliefs" Stażewski took the theory a step further: the autonomous status of the "white reliefs" is sustained in the serial monotony of their own repetition. A few years later, Stażewski described the compositional strategy of reliefs:

> In my work, one cannot talk about a classic composition that occurred in Mondrian, Arp, Malevich, or my own earlier work, where the main issue involved a combination of form in such a way that it created an ideal systematized ratio. In extreme situations, I do not hesitate to gather a number of repeated forms so that they create one unified, monochromatic, and monotonous structure. The figure-ground relationship then breaks down and each individual form becomes imperceptible, becomes part of the background against which it is set. The result

> is an open, neutral structure, which is a point of departure for all possible combinations and changes of spatial analysis.[626]

The "white reliefs" are characterized by their lack of contrast, both within the work and in comparison withe each other, and thus maintain the uniformity of pictorial surface proclaimed by the theory of *unizm.* Shown side by side, the "white reliefs" give a feel of an undisturbed wavering in the optical field, or as Stażewski explained later, of "the changeability of works deepened by the movement of the viewer."[627] By the constant vibration of form from one relief to the next, these works embody the physiology of perception. Reliefs are experienced in carefully organized environments that enhance the phenomenological aspect of the work. The critic Wiesław Borowski argued that these reliefs embodied the notion of anti-composition as Stażewski's basic tenet of composition.[628] If the forms remain identical, in the "white reliefs", the lay-out is in constant change in these works that Borowski called *nowy konstruktywizm* (new constructivism).[629] The use of identical forms from one relief to the next – the repeatability of forms – is nothing more than a production of a series, which thereby functioned as an instrument for opening up pictorial possibilities. If anti-compositional element is a trope commonly used during the 1950s in the West, Stażewski's philosophy is rooted specifically in prewar Constructivism. For Stażewski, reality needed "to be

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[626] Stażewski, [Untitled]; in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988*, 89. "W moich pracach nie można mówić o klasycznej kompozycji, takiej jaka występowała u Mondriana, Arpa, Malewicza czy też w moich wcześniejszych obrazach, w których chodziło przede wszystkim o zestawienia form w taki sposób, żeby tworzyły idealny, uporządkowany w sensie liczbowym i ustalony raz na zawsze układ. W skrajnym przypadku nie waham się przed nagromadzeniem takiej ilości elementów powtarzalnych, że tworzą one jednolitą, monotonną strukturę. Wtedy właściwych form prawie się nie dostrzega, zanika granica między nimi a tłem, na których zostały umieszczone. Powstaje układ otwarty, zupełnie neutralny, który może stanowić punkt wyjścia dla wszystkich możliwych zmian, przesunięć, prowadzących do zbadania i pomiaru tej przestrzeni."

[627] Henryk Stażewski, "Henryk Stażewski rozmawia z redakcją/talks with the Editor," *Projekt* (March 1979): 21.

[628] Wiesław Borowski, "Serie Stażewskiego," *Współczesność* (1969): 12.

[629] Wiesław Borowski, "II Stażewski," *Poezja* 1 (1965): 108.

governed by geometry reduced to a limited number of lines and surfaces."[630] In addition, he wrote that the use of geometric forms could "pose new problems today," indicating that "the meaning of these forms is very different than it was half a century ago."[631] Stażewski continued to believe in the role of art in shaping society, even if sometimes this belief had a sense of naivete:

> Today's art is a form of PROSTITUTION
> An artist who sells all of his works is a prostitute.
> Art needs to be distributed and disseminated free of charge.
> Government should finance artists
> And make purchases of materials necessary
> For his work.
> It should even, if necessary, purchase brushes made of gold.[632]

This 1979 unpublished manuscript is an example of Stażewski's practice of handwriting short texts, which he distributed to friends and colleagues (Fig. 123).

The critic Jerzy Ludwiński claimed that there was no virtuosity of technique in the construction of Stażewski's reliefs, because production difficulties depended only on finding a good carpenter to do the work.[633] I found no evidence to support Ludwiński's claim that Stażewski did not construct his own works.[634] In fact, a photograph taken in the 1960s, portrayed the artist at work on a relief made up of identical squares (Fig. 121). While the seriality of reliefs may suggest similar practices in the West, such as in production of multiples, Stażewski insisted on producing each work individually by hand. In fact, Stażewski snidely denigrated the mechanical system of the production of

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[630] Stażewski, [Untitled], (1976); in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988*, 95.
[631] Henryk Stażewski, "Abstrakcja Geometryczna," (1965); in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988*, 86.
[632] Henryk Stażewski, "Sztuka Dzisiejsza," Unpublished Manuscript, 1979; in *Henryk Stażewski: Ekonomia*, 312.
[633] I found only one reference to this fact in Jerzy Ludwiński, "Liczby i Intuicja," *Odra* 2 (1968): 63.
[634] Stażewski's technique is not discussed in any other source to my knowledge. In addition, the interviews I have conducted with Janina Ładnowska, Bożena Kowalska, and Marek Stażewski also shed no light on how the reliefs were constructed.

multiples utilized by Vasarely.[635] In addition, later, Stażewski became famous for the hand-written – often in multiple versions - essays and aphorisms, which he hand-delivered to friends and colleagues (Fig. 122 and Fig. 123).

[635] Henryk Stażewski, interview by Joanna Skoczylas, *Sztuka* 4 (1977): 23.

Stażewski, the Artist; Stażewski, the Man

The refusal of the pictorial surface of geometric abstraction to directly address any of the social, economic, and political questions was very much a part of the critical reception of Stażewski's postwar production.[636] In the year of 1966 Venice Biennale, where Stażewski exhibited *Relief 7* of 1966 (Fig. 124), the exchange was particularly pointed.[637] For the art critic Andrzej Osęka, "Stażewski always lacked originality, which is clearly visible when his oeuvre is set against works of Mondrian, Malevich, and was never situated within the Polish avant-garde as independently as Strzemiński, Szczuka."[638] Osęka also thought that the prewar artistic groups such as Blok were "no longer a sign of resistance but a point of departure for the pursuit of all kinds of successes (such as finding a cushy place in the administration,)" and were in fact "co-opted by the ever present hand of the bourgeoisie. . . .whose tune was set by those not at all dissimilar to the managerial kind encountered in commerce, entertainment industry, boxing."[639] Osęka described Stażewski's reliefs as domesticated: "we meet shapes precisely as squared and as curved as the newest models of cars, the keys of newest typewriters and calculators."[640] The critic Anka Ptaszkowska, who co-founded with Stażewski Foksal Gallery this same year, dismissed Osęka's article as "propaganda-advertisement."[641] She argued that the sentiments expressed by Osęka were meant to compensate for the long silence around Stażewski's oeuvre. Ptaszkowska was most infuriated by Osęka's

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[636] Stażewski often gave his paintings to friends, colleagues, and supporters, thus disseminating his works in the very specific context – personally delivered in the manner of the aphorisms for which he became well known.
[637] It is important to note that *Relief 7* of 1966 is reproduced upside down in Jurkiewicz, *Henryk Stażewski: Ekonomia,* 135.
[638] Osęka, "Gra w nic," *Kultura* 5 (30 January 1966): 9.
[639] Osęka, "Gra w nic," 9.
[640] Osęka, "Gra w nic," 9.
[641] Anna Ptaszkowska, "Odpowiedź Andrzejowi Osęce," *Kultura* 7 (13 February 1966): 9.

allegations that Stażewski's recent past was a "comfortable and safe space, be it in *socrealism* [Socialist Realism] or the avant-garde, which at all times subordinated his art to the existing economic situation."[642] Ptaszkowska further argued that it was "no secret that the position of an avant-garde artist both before and after the war" was extremely difficult, and "in Stażewski's case lasted nearly forty years of struggle for the right to create his own art, a struggle under extreme hardships morally and materially. A more favorable, although not exactly joyful situation is a fairly recent phenomena."[643] The membership in the artists' union (or ZPAP, which was absolutely crucial in order to produce, perform, or practice art, or simply to survive as an artist) required that visual artists participate in at least three exhibitions annually. For this reason many artists produced works that reconciled the required thematic content with their own formal logic simply in order to include their in officially sanctioned shows.[644]

The exchange between Osęka and Ptaszkowska is a testimony not only that such debates were possible in post-Thaw Communist Poland, but also that Stażewski's art fit uncomfortably within the postwar paradigm, or more specifically, it fit uncomfortably between that of Stalinist years and those of the Thaw and its immediate aftermath. The sympathies of Osęka, even if less personal in nature, were repeated on more than one occasion in later criticism. One anonymous reviewer deemed Stażewski

> an example of the Polish art's penchant for, if not stubbornness in, privileging art that avoids overt references to social or political issues. . . .For his generation, the artist's hermeticism signals a psychological defense that allowed him to maintain his integrity in a totalitarian state. . . .that he is a symbol of isolationism, which resulted as much from the limitations imposed by Communism as from self-imposed stylistic restrictions.[645]

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[642] Ptaszkowska, "Odpowiedź Andrzejowi Osęce," 9.
[643] Ptaszkowska, "Odpowiedź Andrzejowi Osęce," 9.
[644] Ptaszkowska, "Odpowiedź Andrzejowi Osęce," 9.
[645] "Henryk Stażewski: Muzeum Sztuki," *Artforum* 34 (September 1995): 101.

I believe that Stażewski was aware of the critical interpretation that took his art as a piercing silence, a muteness which was seen as an agreement with the repressive ideologies of the state. It is important to remember that he believed that the most important task was to continue the development of the abstract language. In addition, it is possible that to isolate yourself within an already isolated state should be seen as something of a parody. The political significance of Stażewski's postwar work resides in his careful choreography of the process of reception. The artist affected the interpretative practice by positioning the determining factor of his work's meaning within the context of a specific place, within the discursive space of location. If during the prewar years Stażewski attempted to invest painting with a collective, universal, and international force, in the postwar period he recognized the specificity of his geopolitical context. Stażewski was aware of the ambivalence and depoliticization of geometric abstract art rooted in the Constructivist aesthetic, and wanted to restore its socially constructive and political dimension by isolating himself in an already isolated state. If during the 1920s and 1930s the Polish artist frequently visited Paris, after 1945 Stażewski consistently exhibited his work at home (literally, in his apartment, and metaphorically, in the Polish capital), although he was repeatedly invited to exhibit both in Western Europe and the United States. Borowski wrote that "Stażewski consistently refused [all invitations]. Not because he was tired or afraid of the hardships of travel. He made an unyielding decision."[646] Stażewski escorted his works to exhibitions outside of Poland on two occasions only. He traveled to Paris in 1958 to Galerie Denise Réne's exhibition *Des précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne*. Almost a decade later, he went to the 1966

[646] Borowski, "Stażewski wobec Europy," in *Henryk Stażewski*, *1894-1988,* 54.

Venice Biennale where two of his reliefs represented Poland and received an Honorable Mention. Stażewski's decision was purely voluntary, as restrictions to travel outside of Poland were lifted after 1956 and travel stipends were given regularly to many artists after 1957.[647] However, as I mentioned earlier, obtaining an "exit instruction" (instrukcja wyjazdowa), a government-issued form for foreign travel, required that one deal with *bezpieka* (a pejorative term for the "secret police"), and intimated collaboration with the Polish equivalent of the Soviet KGB. Turowski argued that Stażewski's center prior to World War II was located between Lodz and Paris.[648] I argue that his post World War II center became smaller, localized, specific. Stażewski insisted on showing his work in Poland, yet he was nonetheless visited by many Western artists, for example, Michel Seuphor visited him in 1967, and Laurence Weiner in 1979. Daniel Buren installed his famous "stripes" in the window of Stażewski's studio in Warsaw in 1979 (Fig. 125). Buren's installation was very significant for Stażewski, because, as Stażewski wrote in 1980, it was "closely connected with its place of origin."[649] Nearly a decade later, a year before Stażewski's death, Olle Granath organized an exhibition at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm that featured a collaborative work by the Polish artist and Buren. This work entitled *Cabane éclatée nr. 9* featured seventeen of Stażewski's reliefs and paintings executed between 1968 and 1984 in a constructed environment designed by Buren. As I mentioned, Stażewski was aware of the depoliticization of geometric abstract art and wanted to restore its political dimension by isolating himself in an already isolated state.

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[647] See Rottenberg, "Ministerstwo Kultury i Sztuki," 198. See also Barbara Fijałkowska, *Polityka i Twór*cy*: 1948-1959* (Warsaw: Państwowe WydawnictwNaukowe, 1985).
[648] Turowski, "Dyskurs o Geometrii, Wolności i Rozumie," in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988*, 29.
[649] Henryk Stażewski, "Buren" (1980); in *Henryk Stażewski: Rilievi e dipinti, 1958-1987* (Rome: Spicchi dell'Est, 1992), 56.

This is why his collaboration with Buren can be understood as a form of institutional critique in which presence is inferred by absence.

The *Biennale of Spatial Forms*

The *First Biennale of Spatial Forms* (*Pierwsze Biennale Form Przestrzennych*) in the northern city of Elbąg held in late 1964, was an event that was unique on many levels, but perhaps most important, because it was rooted in the Constructivist tradition. In other words, the Biennale was a form of the proletarization of art, because it functioned as a way of disseminating art into life, as a collaboration between art and industry, and as a certain understanding between artists and the regime: the authorities financed the art, which could then be used in official ceremonies. The Biennale was organized by Marian Bogusz (1920-1980) and Gerard Kwiatkowski (b. 1930, also known as Jürgen Blum) under the auspices of the Zamech industrial plant, which was devoted to the production of propellers and turbines. Kwiatkowski, who founded Gallery El (Galeria El) in 1961 in Elbląg and was actually employed by Zamech as an artist-in-residence, solicited a great number of artists to participate in the experiment, which lasted for one month during which artists and workers collaborated in producing work that was later exhibited throughout the city.[650] The spatial forms were sculptures based on geometric, abstract forms included work by Gostomski (Fig. 126); Bogusz (Fig. 127); Kwiatkowski (Fig. 128); Adam Marczyński, who was earlier associated with Colorism (Fig. 129); Zbigniew Dłubak (Fig. 130); and Stażewski (Fig. 131 and Fig. 132). The majority of the spatial forms were constructed out of scrap metal in a truly collaborative effort between artists and workers. In fact, both workers and engineers were very much engaged in the process of designing and executing the spatial forms, while artists provided information and

[650] A good source discussing the Biennale is Kamila Pijewska's *I Biennale Form Przestrzennych w Elblągu: o koncepcji przestrzeni publicznej w rzeczywistości PRL* (Masters Thesis, University of Adam Mickiewicz, Poznan, 1999).

advice in matters of technique and montage.[651] The contribution of workers to the creative process resulted in a unique merging of the two separate spheres of art and labor. In addition, the works were exhibited throughout the city and became a part of the city's visual landscape. Piotrowski rightly noticed that on one hand such a fusion consisted of political naivety and, on the other, a pragmatic and quite brilliant strategy in manipulating the specific historical and political situation in favor of contemporary art.[652] No show could take place independently of the myriad official signatures of approval for reasons of censorship, but also because no private funds were available for such events. The unwritten agreement between Zamech and Gallery El functioned impeccably, according to Piotrowski, and was quite beneficial to all (unlimited funds, lack of harassment from the police, etc). The Biennale served as great advertisement to the Zamech factory, as it became very well known in subsequent years. In addition, the authorities could boast about its liberal art policies. As I argued earlier, geometric abstract art defined by the use of geometric forms as a symbol of social thought and organization was absolutely disallowed during the height of Stalinism until the beginning of the Thaw in 1956, because it opposed the aesthetic of Socialist Realism. In the post-Thaw period, the "liberal" Communist regime in Poland tolerated this art because it was thought to have eliminated palpable content all together, and such "autonomous" art could do less damage than overtly critical art forms.[653] However, at a time when any form of public expression was considered suspect if divergent from the official one, art should be interpreted as an

[651] Pijewska, *I Biennale Form Przestrzennych,* 12.
[652] Piotrowski, *Znaczenia Modernizmu*, 124.
[653] Piotr Piotrowski, " Between History and Geography: in search for the identity of Central Europe," *Culture of the Time of Transformation* (Poznan: WIS Publishers, 1999), 44.

equivalent to social and political action, regardless of how authorities manipulated its reception.

CONCLUSION

The fate of Constructivism in Eastern Europe reflects the changes in the political climate before and after World War II. The art of Russian Constructivism, which, in most rudimentary terms, can be defined by its use of geometric abstract forms, and out of which other "Constructivisms" had sprung, was historically linked with the legacy of Revolutionary Russia. This powerful political association was responsible for the complex and often ambivalent reception of Constructivism during the Cold War both east and west of Berlin. While the critical reaction to Constructivist thought and its aesthetic necessarily took different paths in the East and West, it was belated on both sides of the Iron Curtain. Suffice it to mention, as one example, that the first exhibition of Malevich's work after World War II took place only in 1957 at the *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne* in Paris at the Galerie Denise René.

My discussion of artistic experimental groups during the historical and political context of General Piłsudski's interwar Poland in the first part of the dissertation set the ground for my analysis of the development of abstract art in 1950s and 1960s discussed in the second part of the study. Poland regained independence in 1918, after more than a century of foreign occupation, but continued to be in conflict with Soviet Russia in what is known as the Polish-Bolshevik War, which culminated in the 1920 Battle of Warsaw. This war mobilized Polish society in an unprecedented way and resulted in a heightened sense of patriotism and nationalism that would shape the overall mood of the interwar period. As a consequence, during the 1920s, Bolshevism was viewed with extreme suspicion, if not outright hostility. Because Constructivism was historically associated

with Revolutionary Russia, artists associated with Polish Constructivism, such as Henryk Stażewski, who is the central figure of my study, were often perceived as Bolsheviks and by the same token anti-Polish. However, it is important to note that the interference of Polish government in matters of art and culture was generally not as vigorous as in the Soviet Union, if at all. Even if Constructivist artists in Poland were not extremely popular with the general public, in contrast to their colleagues in Soviet Russia, they were not censored by the authorities.

After the Yalta Conference in 1945, when Poland found itself under the domination of the Soviet Union, this situation underwent a dramatic change. When Stalinism took strong hold in Poland two years later, all abstract art was banned in favor of Socialist Realism. During this period, to paint an abstract work was tantamount to overt political dissent punishable by imprisonment. In fact, while cultural politics in Eastern Europe differed from country to country, at the end of the 1940s and the early 1950s, all were in agreement about one aspect: no tolerance for "formalism" in art or literature. Between 1948 and 1956, many artists across Eastern Europe chose to withdraw from official artistic life altogether, but were forced to lead a double life in which they participated only minimally in official exhibitions and conspiratorily produced art behind the closed doors of their studios. It was, on one hand, a protest against the state-mandated style, and, on the other, a form of self-preservation within the dictatorial regime. Maintaining one's profession meant that the state's requirements had to be fullfilled at least minimally, but it also meant that the smallest gesture of defiance could be perceived as political dissent.

This situation improved somewhat after the death of Stalin in 1953 during the period of destalinization. The reemergence of abstraction characterized the relative freedom of this period known as the Thaw. It is important to remember, however, that geometric abstract art rooted in prewar Constructivism was not a dominant pictorial language in the mid-1950s. Instead, "lyrical" type of abstract painting, akin to Art Informel and Taschisme, was the most common. In Poland, Stażewski's was a lone voice. In fact, the strongest interest in Constructivist aesthetic characterized the artistic scene of Yugoslavia, which boasted the group EXAT 51 (1951-56) and later a series of international exhibitions Nove Tendencjie (New Tendencies), which was initiated in the Croatian city of Zagreb in 1961. In contrast, in Hungary – with its own tradition of the prewar journal *Ma* (*Today*) and the postwar presence of Lajos Kassák (1887-1967) – the interest in Constructivist-inspired art would become more promiment only in the 1960s, as is evident in the works by Imre Bak (b. 1939), whose pictorial language oscillated between expressive and geometric abstraction.[654] Although the cultural politics of East Germany during the Thaw also resurrected the leftist prewar traditions, Herman Glöckner (1889-1987), like Stażewski, was one of the very few artists who employed the austere language of geometry in his work.[655] In an interesting twist of fate, previously banned, Constructivist-inspired art was co-opted by the post-Thaw "liberal" Communist regimes in the mid-1960. It even became an official pictorial language in at least two countries; while in Yugoslavia, geometric abstraction was employed in a great number of official

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[654] Piotr Piotrowski, *Awangarda w Cieniu Jałty: Sztuka w Europie Środkowo-Wschodniej w latach 1945-1989* (Poznan: Dom Wydawniczy Rebis, 2005), 131.

[655] It is important to note that the Thaw in Romania arrived with a decade-long delay in the mid-1960s along with Nicolae Ceausescu, whose liberal politics at first allowed a degree of artistic freedom but tightened in the 1970s, when he became one of the most feared of Eastern European Communist leaders.

monuments, Polish Communist government used Constructivism for the export of the "free" and "democratic" image of the People's Republic abroad.[656] It is important to remember that jettisoning the conventions of Socialist Realism did not mean that the state relinquished its control over artistic culture.

Thus, the question of political engagement was significant not only for the artists of the 1920s, but was relevant also in the history of the later reception of both Russian and Polish Constructivism. In fact, the main point of difference between Polish and Russian Constructivism was its relationship to politics. Polish artists such as Stażewski, whose prewar Constructivist oeuvre was informed and inspired by both Malevich and Mondrian, believed in international social activism but opposed the direct subordination of art to politics. Yet the reception of Stażewski's geometric abstract works was predicated on the complex attitudes toward Communism in Poland not only during the 1920s but also, for obvious reasons, during the postwar period. I argue that the postwar oeuvre of Stażewski is characterized by the use of geometric forms as a reaction to specific political and historical condition. He continued to believe in the role of art in shaping society and that the use of geometric forms "pose new problems today," indicating that "the meaning of these forms is very different than it was half-a-century-ago."[657] Stażewski associated the development of art with social and political transformations. During the 1920s, this development was defined in terms of the artist as an active contributor to the building of the new world; but confronted with the atrocities of the "velvet prison," he was instrumental in promoting art that could retain its autonomous, free status and would not conform to the state ideology.

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[656] Piotrowski, *Awangarda w Cieniu Jałty*, 117

[657] Henryk Stażewski, "Abstrakcja Geometryczna" (1965), in *Henryk Stażewski, 1894-1988: w setną rocznicę urodzin* (Lodz: Muzeum Sztuki, 1995), 86.

In contrast to the true spirit of internationalism, a hightened sense of isolationism and marginalization ensued in the Soviet satellites when the Iron Curtain separated East from West. The experimental art groups in Europe before the onset of the Nazi and Stalinist regimes were characterized by a spirit of international collaboration, often achieved through the publication and dissemination of journals, which was unprecedented in the history of Western art. Sometimes these collaborative efforts were supported by the political system, as was the case with *Vesch Objet Gegenstand*. Other times, as was the case with the Hungarian *Ma*, it was shunned by the home-regime and forced to continue abroad, in this case in Vienna. The vigorous exchange of information today cannot but seem astonishing: Peiper's *Zwrotnica* found its way to Tristian Tzara; Strzemiński mailed copies of *a.r.* to Tschichold; van Doesburg regularly received *Blok*, and later *Praesens*; articles from the Czech *Devětsil* were discussed by Polish artists; the Lithuanian *Muba*, published in Paris, featured articles about Malevich, Stażewski, and Chodasiewicz-Grabowska (later Nadja Leger); Stażewski brought *Abstraction Création* to Warsaw; *L'Art Contemporain – Sztuka Współczesna* disseminated information about Polish art in Paris; such examples are countless. The ever-flowing channels of artistic exchange seem to have blurred not only the physical distances but also those that come with national, ethnic, or religious affinities, and emphasized a more international and multicultural collective.

Yet, Eastern European art has largely failed to enter the Western art historical discourse. Repeatedly excluded, art from Eastern Europe became marginalized and peripheral. Perhaps most important then is the question of what constitutes regional art. In his review of Steven Mansbach's *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*, James Elkins argued

that "what is national in art often turns out to be the *content* of the painting (folk motifs, depictions of particular places in the country) and what is international turns out to be the style."[658] According to Elkins, to distinguish more precisely between what is national and what is international, as well as between different types of regionalism, can be part of the solution. The different types of regional art include regionalism, which "can be applied specifically to cases in which an artist knows what is happening in some other region, but decides to continue making art that is particular to her own culture;" parochialism, which "would be a better word to describe the case of an artist who knows something is happening in some other region, but is afraid to find out too much;" finally, provincialism describes an artist "who wants to knows about art that is taking place in some other region, but is prevented for political or economic reasons."[659] For example, because he incorporated lessons of "cubo-futurism, constructivism, expressionism, and other movements," the Hungarian artist Sándor Bortnyik (1893-1976) would thus be classified as a regionalist.[660] A good example of provincialism, according to Elkins, is the case of Polish artists, because they had difficulties "in forming contacts" during the partition years.[661]

But, if by 1917, before the end of the partition years, Polish artists were active in such groups as the Poznan Bunt and Krakow's Polish Expressionism (later known as Formizm), which were aware not only of each other's activities but other artistic centers in Europe, are they "provincial," or would one simply speak of their position on the

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[658] James Elkins, "Modern Art in Eastern Europe," review of Steven A. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe, from the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890-1939*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999, in *Art Bulletin* 82 (December 2000): 782.
[659] Elkins, "Modern Art in Eastern Europe," 783, 784.
[660] Elkins," Modern Art in Eastern Europe," 784.
[661] Elkins, "Modern Art in Eastern Europe," 784.

periphery of the Western art market and the Western discourse of art history? Also, can we speak of Stażewski's prewar Constructivism as an example of regionalism, because it was informed by Malevich and Mondrian, or should we view this part of his oeuvre as part of International Constructivism? In addition, how would one distinguish between the "soft-geometries" of Stażewski (Fig. 100) and Vassarely (Fig. 102)? Would Stażewski be "provincial" because of his (mostly self-imposed) isolation behind the Iron Curtain, and Vassarely not so because he worked in Paris? Although, or precisely because, it raises many questions, Elkins's list of possibilities is useful, as – for one instance – it cautions against interpretative models that situate Stażewski's postwar work within the grid of American Minimalism, because such critical move ignores the historical and political specificity of his work.[662]

If Polish art of the 1950s remains at the margins of Western art histories even after the fall of the Berlin Wall, the younger generation of artists from Poland managed to march spectacularly into the center, as is the case with Piotr Uklański (b. 1968), whose installation *The Nazis* of 1998 (Fig. 133) made him a household name in artistic communities east and west of Berlin. But is this passage from the margins to the center a cause for celebration? As one reviewer of Polish artist nostalgically noticed "the artistic uniformity that Stalinism could not, in the end, impose by force, globalism. . . . will accomplish by seduction."[663]

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[662] Gregory Battcock, *Paintings by Henryk Stażewski* (New York: Gruenbaum Gallery,1976), 1.
[663] Richard Vine, "Report from Poland: Woodstock on the Brda," *Art in America* 89 (March 2000): 60.

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