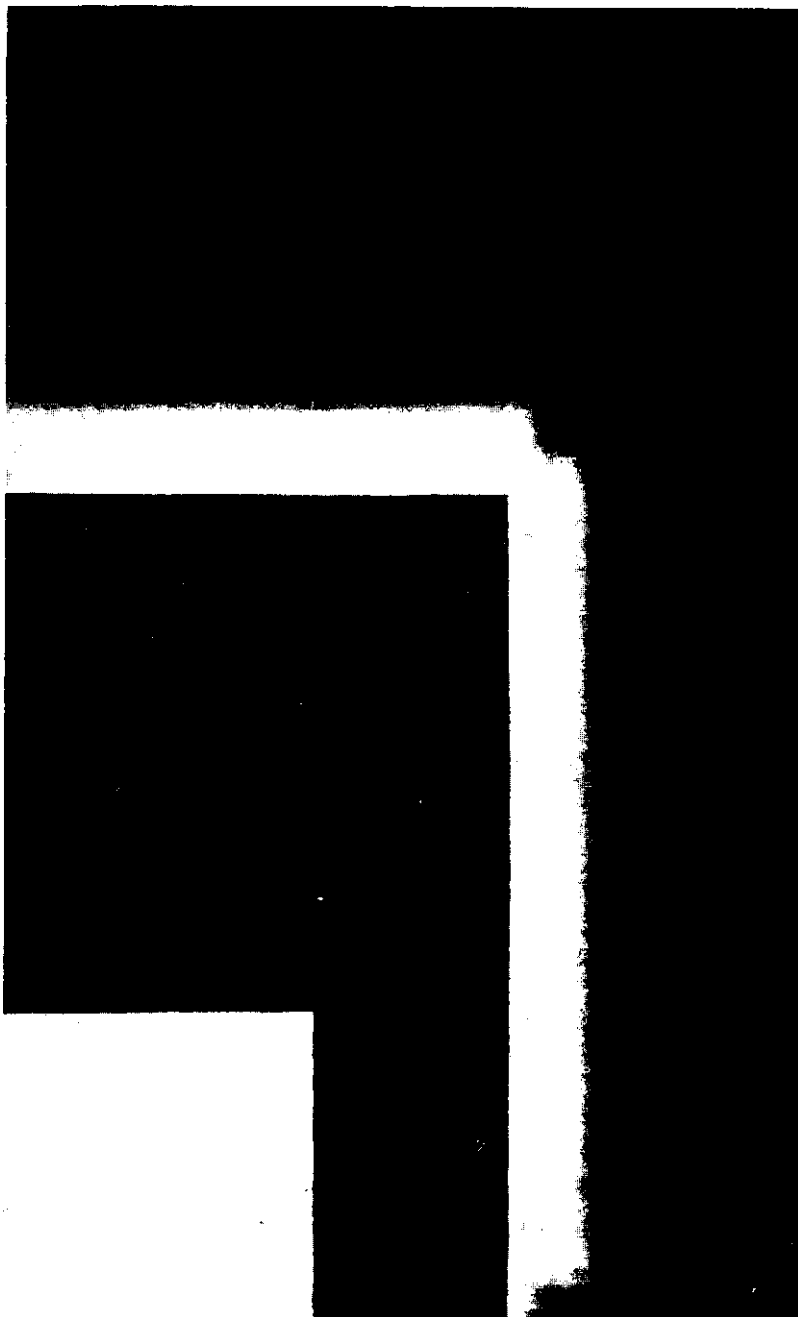


Strzemiriski and Kopro: In Search of Motivation

Some works appear too early and make a comeback too late, their very precocity interfering—and continuing to interfere—with their reception. The belated discovery of such works plunges us into a state of confusion: we confront them the same way we would confront an improbable species that does not fit comfortably into the categories of our evolutionist reading of natural history. Wladyslaw Strzeminski's and Katarzyna Kopro's texts and works from the '20s and '30s belong to this category. We would wish to call them "seminal," so much do they seem to have directly influenced the art and aesthetics of the '60s. But this is impossible, since they have been condemned to a double oblivion. First, as part of the Eastern European avant-garde, they were tightly covered up with the lugubrious lid of stalinization (this is common enough and I do not need to say more on this point, but in their case this oblivion was abetted by the Nazi destruction—only about 15 of Kopro's sculptures have survived, 6 of which are reconstructions). Second, their work was ignored by artists and critics in the West who would later ask the same questions and often adopt the same solutions, despite the fact that, with Gomulka's return to power in 1956, nothing prevented the rediscovery of this work. "Rediscovery" is slightly inaccurate, in fact, for in comparison to those of the Russian avant-garde of the '20s the ideas and works of the Polish avant-garde had not circulated very widely in Europe prior to World War II.

Given the historicist bias of our aesthetic judgment, our first impulse is to "rehabilitate" Strzeminski's and Kopro's work, and to contest the novelty of what was produced later—to argue, for example, that Yves Klein invented nothing with his monochromes, or that Frank Stella was truly presumptuous in claiming that European art had never been anything more than a balancing act ("You do something in one corner and balance it with something in the other corner").¹ However well-intended such rehabilitation may be, it has the perfect uselessness of an academic

II Abstraction I



45. *Wladyslaw Strzeminski, Architectonic Composition 9c, 1929. Oil on canvas, 96 x 60 cm (37*4 x 23*s in). Museum Sztuki, Lodz. Photo of the museum.*

debate. For we "discover" Strzeminski and Kbro at a time when the system of values we call modernist has floundered—a system that they themselves formulated very precisely, some 30 years before the theories that are more familiar to us. So that rehabilitation is no longer the order of the day; what *is* in order is an attempt to understand the causes, mechanisms, and effects of the mortal crisis, or declared death, of modernism (which means, by the same token, the necessity to reexamine its history).

It is precisely this task that a close reading of Strzemihski and Kbro's work and theory, which they baptized *unism*, can help us to achieve. Why? Because the historicism that makes us evaluate works of art as a function of their date, that is, of their position within an unbroken chain of events, this very historicism was an essential condition of modernism. Because our disarray in front of their works and their texts, itself the product of a theory of history they had coined better than others, should help us understand that this theory is wrong (that history is not linear and that temporalities are not synchronous), and that it is partly because modernism was explicitly grounded on such a theory that it is nowadays in crisis and might have reached the end of its course.

The fact that the oblivion to which they have been consigned continues is itself instructive and can no longer be explained by circumstances alone. Their works have been exhibited widely during the past 15 years in the major museums of modern art in the West. Both were represented in the 1976 exhibition "Constructivism in Poland," which appeared in four U.S. museums, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York; Kbro's work was markedly featured in the exhibition "The Planar Dimension," organized by Margit Rowell at the Guggenheim Museum in 1979; a good selection of their writings has been available in English since 1973 and a larger one in French since 1977. Still, there has been no serious study of their work in the West, no critical evaluation.³ This lasting oblivion, it seems to me, stems from the specific historical situation of these texts and works, a situation of "in between" that obliges us to periodize history differently and to rid ourselves of such traditional conceptual tools as genealogy, influence, and style.

Strzeminski's and Kbro's texts are dense. They are also singularly consistent: there was no radical theoretical modification between 1922 and 1936, that is, during the whole period one could call "the unist adventure" (the anthology of their texts Published in French by Antoine Baudin and Pierre-Maxim Jedryka covers exactly this time span, framed by the first and last texts Strzemihski wrote before the war).³ Of course, one can observe mild inflections over the years—and in his introduction Baudin shows how those inflections are tied, directly or indirectly, to the social and Political history of Poland. But the fundamental question raised in these texts

remains the same. This question is the main vector of the theory of art we call the modernist theory, a theory whose initiator was Baudelaire but that only got its label with the appearance of "abstraction" in painting. And if those texts help us to better frame the question, and thus to understand the relative "failure" of the answers that were proposed in time, a "failure" whose measure is given today by the difficulty we find in mourning modernism, it is because of the strange "in-between" situation I just mentioned.

In a few words: the modernist theory had two major moments during this century (they are not the only moments, but all others proceeded from them, either by derivation or by confrontation). The first moment, itself derived from cubism, reached its apogee at the beginning of the '20s, just before the academic "return to order" of those very same years; the second moment climaxed in the '60s. It is the texts of the first nonexpressionist abstract *painters* that constituted the first theoretical corpus (Malevich's and Mondrian's writings are here the paragons); the writings of the so-called "formalist" American *critics*, that is, of Clement Greenberg and those who proceeded from his work, constituted the second corpus.⁴ No doubt because it was the product of critics and not of artists, the second wave of modernist theory wished to be rationalist: one gained in clarity (the mystical tone that emanated from Mondrian's or Malevich's texts disappeared), but one lost the scope of vision. (The work of art is no longer for Greenberg an epistemological model, the metaphoric announcement of a future classless society, but a specific answer to a given formal problem.) Now, the rarity of Strzemiński's and Kobra's texts stems from the fact that they partake simultaneously of those two theoretical sets (not chronologically, of course, for they are just about contemporaneous with the first wave, but logically). This hybrid situation leads these texts to displace constantly the position of either theoretical series and, moreover, to emphasize via these displacements what was their common question. What those texts teach us remarkably is that modernism in the broad sense of the term was not merely an operation of ontological reduction—Greenberg's canonical interpretation—but rather a vast enterprise of motivation, *of motivation of the arbitrary*.

That essentialism and historicism are two strategies of motivation, and are the two fundamental strategies of the modernist discourse, we can certainly read between the lines of Greenberg's essays, as well as of those who followed him. But if this axis of motivation is more manifest in Strzemiński's and Kobra's writings, it is because in becoming rationalist their theory did not abandon a third strategy of motivation, which was specific to the first moment of the modernist theory, that is, **Utopia**. Moreover, this third strategy caps the other two, motivates them in turn. Strzemiński-

ski's and Kobro's essentialism was never simply an aesthetic program (pursuit of degree zero, of the specificity of each art); it was, rather, articulated onto a social program and found its "justification" in the history of the social division of labor.⁵ Charged with a historical function, their essentialism was formulated with the utmost seriousness: they did not share Mondrian's horror of three-dimensionality (which the Dutch painter condemned as the fatal flaw of architecture and sculpture); nor did they treat as a liability the fact that sculpture belongs to the same space as ordinary objects—the space of everyday life—as Greenberg would in the '60s. On the contrary, this was for them the essential condition of sculpture itself, what must be magnified and worked through. For a Mondrian or a Greenberg, the plea for medium-specificity remained vastly rhetorical (they judged architecture or sculpture according to pictorial criteria); for Strzeminski and Kobro it was the key point of their theory and practice. But if their "laocoonism" is among the most incisive, it is because it was a primary aspect of their **Utopian** teleology: "the_aim of modern painting and sculpture is ... a creative experiment, an invention of form, which stimulates the growth of opportunity provided by daily life";⁶ but, like all experiment, artistic experiment is elaborated upon, and is the function of, conditions that are each time specific. Not to consider the specific properties of each art was, in their view, to repeat the past rather than extend it, to adopt ready-made solutions, to ignore the properties of materials and to project onto them instead an a priori vision, to impose upon art a "universal system," a transcendental content. Hence their criticism of the baroque's indifference to materials, of the use of proportional grids in Renaissance painting, or of what they called Malevich's "universalism."⁷ Because the essentialism of the theoreticians of unism is an integral part of their utopianism, it is exacerbated. From those essentialist premises, Strzeminski and Kobro were perhaps the only modernist artists to isolate and define four different arts (painting, sculpture, architecture, typography), *without making any one of them dependent upon any other** Even more importantly, their utopianism led them to question this exacerbated essentialism, forced them to refine it (one strategy of motivation working "against" another, dialecticizing it). Although he defined pictorial investigation as a quest for the "natural essence" of painting (absolute flatness), Strzeminski was aware that the object he sought was a myth:

Two-dimensional, atemporal space is a fiction, as is the one-dimensional space used to measure all dimensions (meter, cubit, etc.). The fact that the meter, the ideal one-dimensional space, does not exist—that we never find ourselves in this space—does not mean that this fiction (if indeed it is one?) is unproductive.⁹

A *fiction*: must I insist on the intelligence of this critical distancing? Again I hold this as a symptom of the "in-between" situation mentioned above. Neither a Mondrian nor a Greenberg would have accepted a relativization of their credo in this manner, that is, its historicization.

It is at this juncture that the displacement produced by this "in-between" situation of Strzemiński's and Kobra's texts in the realm of modernist historicism must be examined. First, let us look at the similarities: much the same way neoplasticism was for Mondrian the necessary culmination of the whole art of the past, unism for its theoreticians is the result of what they call the "visual acquisitions," and is situated at the end of a chain that comprises impressionism, cubism, and suprematism. For Strzemiński and Kobra as for Greenberg, a work of art derives its meaning only from the way it measures up to its recent past, to its present (the measurement of the topicality of a work of art is that of a perfection that is accessible only today),¹⁰ and to its future ("only the ulterior artistic evolution will provide the justification of current abstract art").¹¹ But even if Strzemiński considers abstract art as the resultant of an evolutionist line, as "the synthesis, the crystallization of the visual acquisitions" of the precedent artistic movements,¹² he never thought, as Mondrian or Greenberg did, that he was telling the *truth* of the art of the past. For a Mondrian, painting had always already sought abstraction—only it had not been conscious of it because this desire was "veiled" by the charm of "appearances." For Greenberg, modernist art shows us that if our ancestors were right to appreciate the art of "Leonardo, Raphael, Titian, Rubens, Rembrandt and Watteau," they "often gave wrong or irrelevant reasons to do so."¹³ Nothing as naive appears in the texts of Strzemiński and Kobra. Their evolutionism is not blind to the scissions of history. If Strzemiński is perfectly aware of the difficulty of breaking totally with one's tradition (which is why one must not merely repudiate it),¹⁴ he is far from conceiving a kind of atemporal universality that would negate the specificity of this tradition. His extraordinary formal analyses led him to regard Cézanne's art and cubism, as strange as that might seem at first, as offspring of the baroque tradition that, for him, it was essential to eradicate. But such a reading never drove him toward an undifferentiation of the criteria of judgment in history. On the contrary, unlike what will be the case for unism, "A picture that contained little contrasts, that was in agreement with its innate qualities and with itself—was a dull picture from the baroque point of view."¹⁵ The elaboration of a typology of formal systems that were adopted in the course of human history was a task of paramount importance for Strzemiński; his structural attention made him a

historian of the long duration, an analyst of what remains the same behind the apparent changes, a sharp critic who does not get easily fooled by any avant-gardist triumphalism.

Taking scientific experimentation with its "epistemological breaks" as a model for artistic work, Strzeminski and Kobro never lost sight of the collective dimension, precisely because they had a **Utopian** aim. This collective dimension is clearly more affirmed in the texts of the '30s, that is, at the time when the accusations of "bourgeois" and "asocial" formalism were more the rule than the exception. ("The artist's goal is not to express his individuality, but to work collectively toward the creation of objective values whose measure is form.")¹⁶ But it was already asserted in one of the earliest texts by Strzeminski, dating from 1924, a text that contradicts beforehand any denunciation of modern art as an iconoclast *tabula rasa*.

He is the winner in art who steadily attempts to develop a system, who aims at objective perfection: he tests and improves the system again and again. Such an effort is beyond an individual's capacity; it requires collective endeavors. And thus: to undertake the work of one's predecessors; to investigate the assumptions; to mend the system and to continue—this is the way of creating true cultural values. Contemporary creation has to arise on the basis of previous efforts, but its beginning must be where everything already done ends. Tradition is the raw material that must be used for construction, which means that it must be transformed into what it has never been. The further we go, the more faithful we are to tradition."¹⁷

We are reaching here a point where essentialism, historicism, and **Utopia** meet—the great dream of an "objective" language, the fantasy of the degree zero, common to all avant-garde movements of the '20s. But Strzeminski did not entirely subscribe to this myth, and his reservations stem from the rigor of his historicism. Here, for example, is the way he criticizes Malevich:

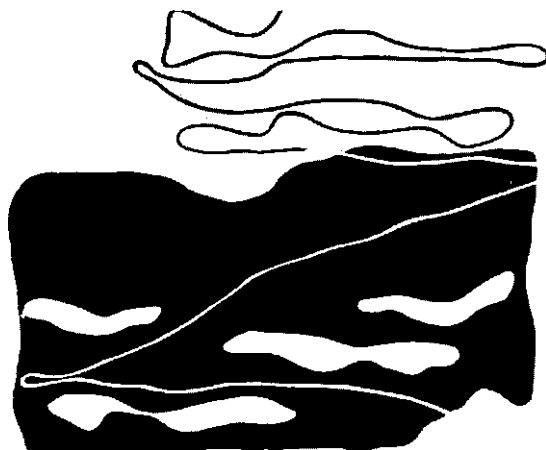
Shapes as natural as nature—said Malevich about the deepest assumption of suprematism. Universal cosmic shapes as the sign and shape of universal cosmic dynamism. The fault of suprematism was that, attempting to discover the laws of cosmic organicity, it overlooked the fact that it was creating its own shape in dependence on the environment that it wanted to overcome. . . . It is impossible and vain to speak at all about shapes.¹⁸ "

And again, more generally: "it is not a question of assimilating some supposedly perfect, extratemporal form. Such a form does not exist and never will, because the artistic criteria are in fact a sublimation of the criteria of life, which are different at every epoch."¹⁹ Strzemiński and Kōbro believed in an "objective logic of the evolution of art"²⁰ that would be "as absolute as the evolution of nature";²¹ but this absoluteness concerns not the formal configurations of such or such a system, but the law of historical determination ("nothing valuable can arise all by itself, without being reliant upon something preceding," wrote Kōbro;²² "a new form does not spring from itself, but appears thanks to a modification of the objective conditions," added Strzemiński²³). "Hence the necessity for the artist to recapitulate the entire trajectory of the evolution of art, so that he will be able to elaborate in full consciousness the form appropriate to our own time."²⁴ This formulation, repeated more than once, will undoubtedly be regarded with skepticism today; but the fact that information gradually took precedence over experience in artistic formation in the era of so-called "late capitalism" is not foreign to the crisis of modernism. This theme of ontogeny recapitulating phylogeny was not a mere accessory to the historicist theory of Strzemiński and Kōbro: it constituted one of its central tenets, that which made it a strategy of motivation. For what this evolutionist conception of history legislates is *the quality* of the work of art. As early as 1922, in his "Notes on Russian Art," perhaps one of the most illuminating essays ever written on the art of the Soviet avant-garde (together with the lecture Lissitzky delivered in Berlin at the same time),²⁵ Strzemiński remarked: "it is the quality that is crucial, not the quantity. Numerous artists now famous (Rodchenko, Stepanova, etc.) cannot even conceive of the efforts that were deployed to attain the solutions of cubism and suprematism. Unconscious of the values contained in the realizations of the new art, they make a "new art" all the same, without developing it, without raising new questions, but by compiling in their works fragments of those of their predecessors."²⁶ This is a text one might find prophetic, as it seems to describe in advance the climate of cultural amnesia that surrounds today's artistic production (the same text gives a definition of expressionism that matches even more exactly the international neoexpressionist "postmodernism" that invaded the galleries in the '80s).²⁷ Absolutist in his historicism, Strzemiński condemned redundancy without reservation: in the same manner that there are for him useless artists (Kandinsky is one of those), there are useless works of art. Like, the scientist, the artist is an experimenter, hence he must never repeat himself: "An abstract painting has no other *raison d'être* than the discovery of new data, new in comparison to those offered by preceding works. This is why one should paint only when one has something to say."²⁸

The context in which these lines occur—Strzeminski is discussing one of his late "still lifes" and "landscapes" heavily influenced by Arp's biomorphism—tends to obscure their tragic dimension. For this text was written in 1934—that is, at the precise moment at which his unist work came to an end. The paragraph continues: "This justifies, I believe, the possibility of painting not only abstract pictures, but also paintings born from contact with nature, whether as an experiment or for pleasure." This could be interpreted, wrongly, as a verbal pirouette. In fact, Strzeminski himself was forced to abandon unism once he reached the point at which his system left him nothing more to say (and we should probably explain the abrupt halt of Kopro's career in the same way, and not, or not only, as the result of circumstances).²⁹ A sense of having reached an impasse is, in my view, the inevitable consequence of unist theory—in fact, of every modernist theory, bound as it is by a desire to eliminate all arbitrariness (the same sense of doom occurred many times during the course of modernism—we could even say it is one of the conditions of possibility of modernism).³⁰ But this impasse is more than formal; it is also political, in the broadest sense of the term, and concerns the **Utopian** daydream that was one of unism's driving forces as it was of all the movements of the first modernist wave. One year after he wrote the lines cited above, Strzeminski reiterated the same excuses in a text that stands as the last apology for unism (it is not indifferent that it is a polemical text):

Those marine landscapes that I exhibited in Lwow [see fig. 46] are not signs of my abandonment of abstraction nor of my getting closer to "reality." I painted them as a hobby, for they are less demanding. I do not think that the reproduction of reality is closer to life than the transformation of that reality, than its organization. Which is closer to life: relating its events or investigating the laws and principles that regulate it? Today it is not submission to reality and its reproduction that are needed, but its transformation. I therefore consider anti-unism to be a betrayal of the fundamental direction of the aspirations of our age.³¹

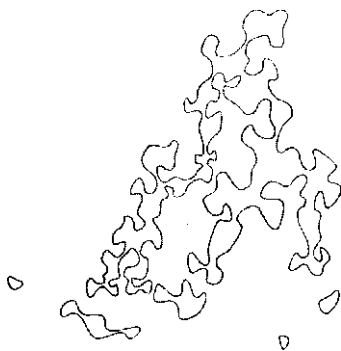
However, Strzeminski's work from the moment he wrote these lines to his death must be described as anti-unist. Every characteristic—centered compositions, figure/ground opposition, dynamism, illusionistic depth, nondeductive structure, "—contradicts unism's basic principles. How can one account for this contradiction? By the time he wrote these lines, Strzeminski believed in art's value as a model, in its role as the herald of a new social reality, because he no longer believed in the possibility of a future Golden Age. His duplicity was not hypocritical, but desperate: he defended to the death a faith of which he had been the prophet,



46. *Wladyslaw Strzeminski, Sea Landscape, 1934. Distemper on cardboard, 21 X 27 cm (8V4 X 10-Vn in.). Museum Sztuki, Lodz. Photo of the museum.*

but in which he himself could no longer believe, because it had been disproved by the facts of history. The last article he published before the war, "Aspects of Reality," deals with surrealism, whose principles are exposed with clarity and sympathy, so much sympathy that one might think for a moment that Strzeminski has adopted them (all the more since the only description contained in the text, concerning works by the unnamed Arp, could be applied word for word to the drawings he is doing at the time [see fig. 47]). The text concludes as follows:

We know today that the tangling of the biological line of the surrealists, desperately wriggling while searching for a way out, that the explanation of man by recourse to the movements of his unconscious and of biology, are the reflection of the blood pulse and irrational play of blind forces that are forming the events of present history. ... Let us oppose to the contemplation and to the passive apprehension of surrealism the productive utilitarianism of a functional art in the service of a society organized in a positive and homogeneous system, freed from the blind play of incoherent forces.³²



47. *Wladyslaw Strzeminski, Cast Forth 3, 1940. Pencil on paper, 30 X 38 cm (11*4 x 15 in.). Museum Sztuki, Lodz. Photo of the museum.*

The rhetoric is lurid but these lines must be read in context. Confronting the Nazi threat (it refers explicitly to Mem *Kampf*), what this text tells us is that there is only one solution: to continue to believe that there is a way out, other than barbarism.

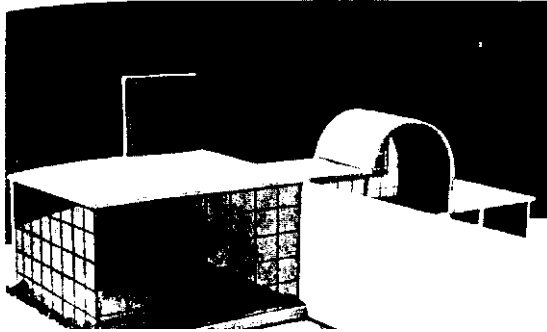
Strzeminski's and Kobro's disillusion, around 1936, matched in density the intelligence of their **Utopia**. Unlike the Russian productivists, whose position Strzeminski had criticized harshly as early as 1922,³³ they insisted at length on the necessity of a mediation between formal experimentation and its use in daily life: "An experimentation from which new plastic values emanate does not yet imply the possibility of an immediate realization."³⁴ And elsewhere: "Abstract art constitutes a laboratory of research in the formal domain. The results of these researches enter daily life as definitive components. This does not imply, however, that an immediate use of a work of abstract art is necessary."³⁵ And finally: "Thus, the social influence of art is indirect."³⁶ It is true that, during a brief moment when they felt outflanked from the left, Strzeminski and Kobro seemed to adopt the very same instrumental conception of art that they combated all their lives. But a closer look is instructive. The topic at stake was architecture and, in architecture, functionalism. At first condemned for its massive use of standardized forms (that is, "projected," determined a priori), then

for its technical fantasy that more often than not masks a complete lack of formal invention,³⁷ functionalism is then envisioned by Kobro and Strzemihski as a possibility of direct action. But the functionalism they imagine is a radical one, grounded on a phenomenology of space and not on a typology of buildings based on their program^the ground plan and sections of the building do not have any value in themselves, but only as structures orienting the movements of man, as the spatiotemporal rhythm of the life of man in his daily activity."³⁸ So in 1934-36, when the theoreticians of unism expressed the desire to "go beyond the conception of the picture as the unique field proper to the realization of artistic intentions,"³⁹ it was in no way to adopt the positions of productivism. If their interest shifted toward architecture, it was not, despite appearances, that they considered it as an outlet for their "formal experimentation." It was rather that architecture bore for them, in its very stuff, that is, space, a wealth of effects (psychological, kinesthetic, and social) that painting and sculpture could only take into account in a metaphorical way. Two texts, one by Strzemihski (1931), the other by Kobro (1934) help to define the terms of this debate:

1. The elements of architecture are:
 - a) places where a man stops during any activity;
 - b) motion when he passes from one activity to another.
2. The aim of architecture is an organization of the rhythm of consecutive motions and stops, and thereby the forming of the whole of life.
3. The final goal of architecture is not the building of convenient houses; it is also not the blowing up of abstract sculptures and calling them exhibition pavilions. Its aim is: to be a regulator of the rhythm of social and individual life.⁴⁰

As long as we remain within the limits of a picture as the only kind of a work of art that is deserving of an artist, we shall never grasp the essence of functionalism. A work of art cannot be more or less "functional." It can be simply a field of a plastic experiment, offering more or less useful solutions of forms for a utilitarian realization of functionalism.⁴¹

Chronologically sandwiched between these two texts is a project by Kobro that wholly contradicts the theory that there is a radical distinction between a work of art, which is not functional, and a building. This is a project for a *Functional Nursery School*, which is nothing less than the clumsy enlargement of one of her sculptures (fig. 48). How could we account for such a discrepancy between words and deeds?



48. *Katarzyna Kobro, Project for a Functional Nursery School, after 1932. Illustrated in *Forma*, no. 5 (1936), p. 11. The sculpture that is at the base of this architectural model is *Space Composition 8*, ca. 1932. Museum Sztuki, Lodz. Photo of the museum.*

Simply, Strzemiński and Kobro, not being architects, did not have at their disposal the means to put their anthropological theory of architecture into practice (one would have had to be Rietveld for that).⁴² All the same, their radical functionalism is one of the very rare theories of modern architecture (with Le Corbusier's idea of the "picturesque promenade") to have taken into consideration the movement of man in the building.⁴³ In this radical functionalism, "what is at stake is not a rhythm incorporated into the determined scheme of a superimposed form, but a rhythm derived from life in all its complexity."⁴⁴ In short, this radical functionalism denounces as fraudulent the functionalist claim of modern architecture in general.

Conceiving artistic work as a kind of quasi-scientific research, Strzemiński and Kobro rejected art for art's sake without stepping onto this fatal stumbling-block of the Russian avant-garde, the instrumentalization of art: "works of pure art that propose neither a formal solution nor a perfecting of form . . . have no *raison d'être*."⁴⁵ They rejected the notions of "beauty,"⁴⁶ of "formal richness,"⁴⁷ and of taste.⁴⁸ A metaphor (motivation) was at the base of their **Utopia** (the unit work whose every part is equivalent and interdependent is *like* the socialist society). Such a metaphor might sound naive; in a certain way, however, I hold it as accurate, and I believe that Strzemiński and Kobro were right to think that they were achieving, or trying to achieve, in

their art a fundamental mutation, much greater than a merely aesthetic one, that is, the deconstruction of a whole series of oppositions upon which Western metaphysics and hence social order are grounded.

But what was unism, then, from a "purely" formal point of view? Among other things, it was a response to one of modernism's fundamental questions: what is the mode of existence of the work of art once its expressive function has been discarded? "A work of plastic art," Strzemiński wrote, "does not express anything. A work of plastic art is not a sign of anything. It is (exists) in itself."⁴⁹ This seems simple, tautological, but it warrants closer scrutiny. The general principle of unism runs as follows (Jrom_ 1924 on):

A real = autonomous existence in the plastic arts: when a work of art is plastically~self-sufficient; when it constitutes an end in itself and does not seek justification in values that subsist beyond the picture. An item of pure art, built in accordance with its own principles, stands up beside other worldly organisms as a parallel entity, as a real *be'ing, for every thing has its own laws of construction of its organism*. When we build one thing, we cannot do it according to the laws and principles belonging to another thing.⁵⁰

In each art, and in necessarily different manner in each, the artist must strive to produce a "real" work, one that has a "real" existence—that is, one that refers to nothing outside itself, that relies upon no transcendence. A work of art is "baroque" (that is, "arbitrary") when its formal configuration is not completely justified by its material conditions (dimensions, materials, etc.) but originates instead in an a priori system, in a preexisting vision. In what Strzemiński and Kobra call the "pictorial baroque," "the idea, alien to painting, stands in the way and bars the understanding that a picture is not an illusion of a phenomenon seen elsewhere or even calculated right away and transported to a picture, but that it is itself, in itself, and for itself."⁵¹ From such a passage, however, one should not conclude that illusionism is the essential target of unism: illusionism is only the ineluctable consequence of the projective nature of the "baroque," of its dependence upon literature, not so much for what concerns its themes (that would just be a cliché) as for the major role devoted in painting, after the relinquishment of medieval symmetry, of that mode of ordering called *composition*. According to Strzemiński, composition rests on a rhetorical model (more recently, Michael Baxandall has advanced a similar argument).⁵² Any composition stages a drama (thesis/antithesis) whose resolution (synthesis) must be

convincing. ("The basic assumption underlying the baroque is that a picture should be a sign of the dramatic pathos. The pathos is that which finds its expression in the dynamism of directional tensions and in the drama of the blows inflicted by lines upon other lines.")⁵³ But this resolution, Strzeminski declared, is not "real," because the plastic problem it resolves is based on metaphysical oppositions "artificially" imposed on the pictorial and sculptural matter. This resolution, in fact, is itself metaphysical ("A form that is strung to infinity, a form that is being fed but is never saturated, a hampered rush—this is the essential content of a Baroque painting").⁵⁴ Unism's war machine against what Strzeminski and Kobra called the baroque—that is, all past art, including cubism and suprematism—was a war machine against the rhetoric of composition, against Western metaphysics. Dualism was to be abolished;

Against this dualistic conception, attempting to connect things that cannot be connected, and finding its reason not in the attainment of its intended objective, but in the power of the struggling forces and in the too strenuous effort wasted to subdue them, against this conception producing forces in order to fight them continuously, but never to conquer them—we have to oppose a conception of a picture as a reconciled and organic unity. The dualistic conception must be replaced by the unistic one. Rather than the sublime dramatic outbursts and the power of forces—a picture, as organic as nature.⁵⁵

What do Strzeminski and Kobra mean by this notion of "organicity" (a notion that, as we will see, reincapsulates their enterprise within the confines of Western metaphysics at the very moment it was thought to struggle against it)? The "law of organicity" stipulates that the work of art must be engendered from its "primary given," according to its "first principles," which means that this law functions differently for different media. As far as painting is concerned, these "first principles" belong to three different orders, all of which are indissolubly linked to the fact that a picture is, or rather ought to be, a thing designed for *looking at* only:⁵⁶ flames[^] deduction of forms from the shape of the frame, abolition of the figure/ground opposition. As soon as a form is not "motivated" by the "natural" limits of the painting—that is not derived from the shape of the frame—it floats (thereby introducing a non-Pictorial, rhetorical element—namely, time). It detaches itself from the ground, it hollows out the "natural" planarity of the picture and creates an illusionistic depth. Everything Strzeminski said about the necessity of abolishing time in painting, about the "absolute simultaneity of phenomena," about "pure opticality," is part and parcel of the modernist tradition that goes back to [^]e[^]sing and (in Greenberg's account) to

Kant.⁵⁷ Indeed, one can find the same kind of preoccupations in the texts of the most radical artists of modernism, for example Mondrian during the '20s. But the specificity of Strzemiński's theory, which he anticipated American artists of the '60s, was his association of the abolition of temporality in painting with that of all contrasts, of all "unmotivated" disjunctions, of compositional equilibrium. Thanks to the radicality of his theory, he was an outstanding analyst, not easily intimidated by stylistic effects and able to propose a transversal reading of many works preceding unism. Here are some examples: the surfaces of Mondrian's neoplastic canvases are flat, to be sure, but his pictures are not yet flat because he did not rid himself of the compositional ideology ("The painter still looks for contrasts; painting flat, he still fails to understand what consequences it should imply");⁵⁸ the centered composition of cubist paintings results in a "greater intensity of forms,"⁵⁹ the contrast between the linear network of the central figure (horizontal/vertical lines) and that of the peripheral areas (curves, shadings off) is explained by the necessity, for the cubist artists, to "camouflage their propensity toward volume";⁶⁰ Malevich's obligation to renounce color, that is, to limit the possibilities of his art, results from the contradiction between the dynamism of his shapes and his desire to break with the linearity of contours;⁶¹ Tatlin's incapacity to abandon the centered composition, essential to baroque dynamism, comes from the contradiction between the material determinism of his shapes (a cylinder for sheet iron, a T or L profile for steel, etc.) and the absence of determination in their articulation.⁶² One could multiply the examples: Strzemiński's formal analyses are brilliant demonstrations from which art historians could benefit enormously. I shall mention only one more case: among all the artists of the constructivist tradition, Strzemiński was perhaps the only one not to overestimate the power of geometry. While his own style is almost entirely geometrical, in 1927-28 he wrote: "It is time to clear up the misunderstanding by which geometrical construction is almost a strict work, almost a piece of engineering. Actually, geometrical composition is as arbitrary and subjective as any other."⁶³

Strzemiński's painting, however, had never really lived up to his theory. Or rather, theory and practice were not in sync.⁶⁴ We can distinguish three periods in his work: pre-unist (cubist apprenticeship, early abstract works inspired by Tatlin and Malevich and thus vulnerable to the same charges Strzemiński leveled later against these artists), unist (1924-32), and post-unist (inspired by Arp's idiosyncratic surrealism). The unist period is itself divisible into four sections, and this division is not exactly chronological. The earliest canvases that Strzemiński dubbed unist (1924-28) resemble puzzles: a single plane, bordered by a rectilinear "margin," has

49. *Władysław Strzemiński, Unist Composition 7, 1929- Oil on canvas, 77 x 63 cm (30 1/8 x 24 3/4 in.). Museum Sztuki, Łódź. Photo Zdzisław Sowiński.*

•

been divided over and over into color areas of equal saturation with zigzagging contours (see fig. 49). The shape of the plane itself has been derived from the form of the frame, but not the internal divisions of that plane. What is more, bordered as it is by a margin, it distinguishes itself from a "preexisting" ground. The three other sections are constituted by (1) the extraordinary series of *Architectonic Paintings* (1926-30; see figs. 45, 50); (2) a few exceptional canvases like *Unist Composition 9* (1931; fig. 51) in which the geometric division of the architectonic painting is counteracted by a homogenization of facture and color saturation, which makes those works almost indecipherable in black and white reproductions (the surfaces of these paintings are constituted of textured lines of paint reminiscent of television scan lines that carry the division of color and upset the figure/ground opposition); and (3) monochromes (figs. 52, 53)- Although the will to abolish every contrast (of color, form, facture), expressed by Strzemiński as early as 1924, implies an all-over monochromatic painting, he did not adopt this solution until the end of his unist period, "1932, and then only in a handful of works (a great number of them, it is true, might have been destroyed).

"Unism begins with the principle that a divided composition is never homogeneous," Strzemiński will say in 1934.⁶⁵ But until he finally produced even-textured monochromes (they are not all that way), Strzemiński sought a way to motivate the

50. *Wladyslaw Strzeminski, Architectonic Composition 1, 1926. Oil on canvas, 90 X 64 cm (35 1/8 x 25 1/4 in.). Museum Sztuki, Lodz. Photo Jolanta Sadowska.*

51. *Wladyslaw Strzeminski, Unist Composition 9, 1931. Oil on canvas, 48 x 32 cm (18 7/8 x 12 5/16 in.). Museum Sztuki, Lodz. Photo of the museum. The configuration of this painting is similar to that of the Architectonic Compositions, although less strictly geometric. If it cannot be seen in a black and white reproduction, it is because there Strzeminski's art matches perfectly his theory: not only is the rippled texture even throughout the whole canvas (each ripple is composed of two lines, a high relief line and a low relief line), but the colors are of exactly identical value and saturation. Furthermore, the unity of the surface is reinforced because one of every two "ripples" is plain pink; the other ripples, each comprising a yellow and a green segment, carry out the vertical color division of the painting (there are two areas, a pink-yellow area and a pink-green area). For a detailed analysis of this canvas, cf. Pierre-Maxime Jedryka, "Ellipses," in *L'Espece uniste*, p. 195.*

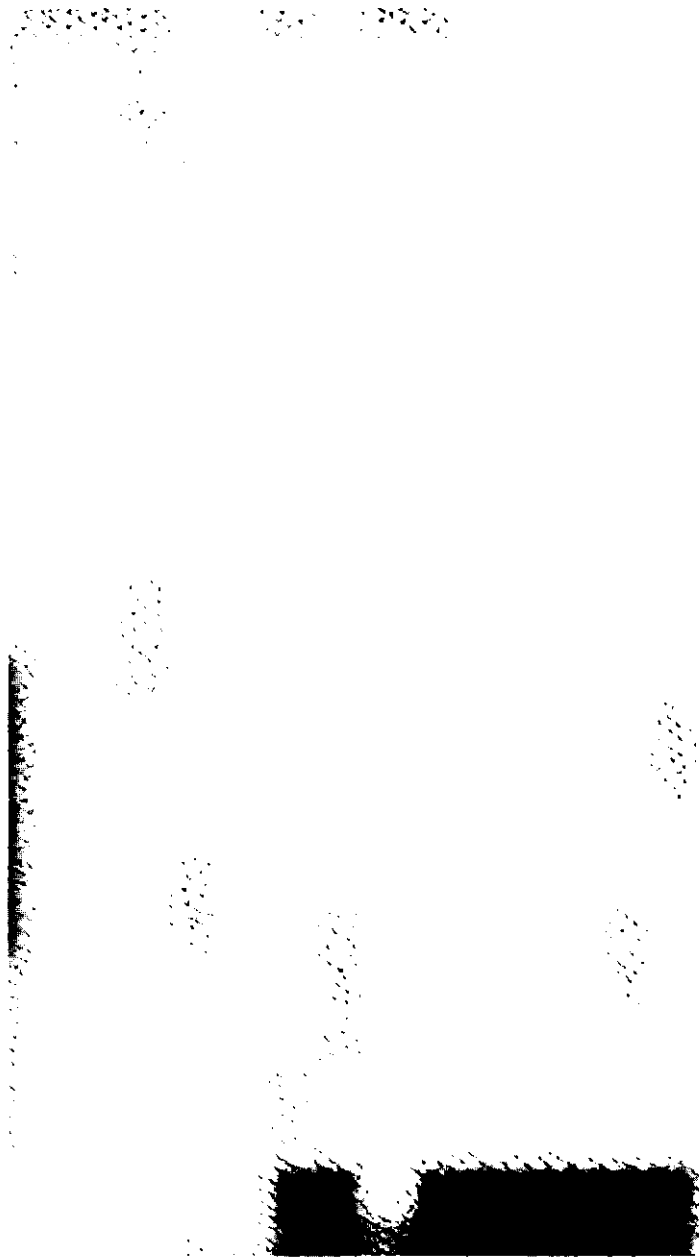


52. *Wladyslaw Strzeminski, Unist Composition 10, 1931 Oil on canvas, 74 x 50 cm (29 1/8 x 19 3/8 in.). Museum Sztuki, Lodz. Photo of the museum.*

^*division* of the canvas. Hence the deductivist injunction, already in place in his earliest texts but not applied until he had found a plastic solution to the problem of division with his "architectonic" canvases. This solution is enunciated in his great text of 1927—28, entitled "Unism in Painting":

Starting the construction of a picture, we should take its length and breadth as the basic dimensions and as the starting point, while the breadth and length as well as the place of each shape should be dependent on them. In this way the dimensions of a picture become the main thing in it, rather than a secondary one, existing as if beyond our awareness, as it used to be in the baroque; they become something basic and determine the construction and its character.⁶⁶

jThe paintings Strzeminski called "architectonic" demonstrate this principle: **the canvas** has been divided geometrically into two or three surfaces (supposed to be of equal color intensity, which was hardly the case), in such a way that we cannot decide which is "form" and which is "ground." The division of the surface is indeed derived from the painting's proportions (all internal divisions are based on the ratio of its **length** to its width). However, the sheer variety of these works, most of which were



53. *Władysław Strzemiński*, *Unist Composition 8*, 1931–32. *Oil on canvas*, 60 × 36 cm (23⁷/₈ × 14¹/₁₆ in.). *Museum Sztuki, Łódź*. *Photo of the museum.*

executed in the same format and size, as well as the quite common introduction of a curvilinear form (which violates the deductivist law, at least in a rectangular painting) suggest that Strzemiński was constrained to bend his theories to his practice (see fig- 54). He explained himself only in an extraordinary text on sculpture, dating from ~~1929~~ and coauthored with Kobra: "The offered method of conduct concerns only the size of the shapes and their arrangement, it says nothing about the shapes themselves. This is up to the artist, who knows himself what shapes he needs.""

This kind of reintroduction in extremis of the "arbitrary," of the artist's subjectivity, must have been problematic for Strzemiński (to repeat: it is the impossibility of eradicating entirely the "arbitrariness," except if one chooses the solution of the monochromes—and maybe not even then—that is at the base of our current mourning of modernism). Even before he opted for the monochrome, Strzemiński tried to push the limits of this arbitrariness further back, and in one stroke he made his entire system crumble into pieces. His question was: if the divisions of the painting

54. *Władysław Strzemiński, Architectonic Composition 14d, 1929-30. Oil on canvas, 96 x 60 cm (37*4 x 23*8 in.). Museum Sztuki, Łódź. Photo of the museum.*

are determined by its dimensions, then what motivates these dimensions? The answer marks a logical impasse that destroys the essentialist specialization of the different arts and radically violates the "law of organicity" on which unism was based. Using architecture as a reference—in architecture, Strzemiński wrote, "the homogeneous rhythm of movements must be a function of the dimensions of man"—he arrived at a kind of ideal proportion ($n = 8:5$) applicable to both painting and sculpture (see fig. 55).⁶⁸ Most of his "architectonic" paintings employ this proportional system derived from the Fibonacci series.⁶⁹

It is impossible to eliminate the arbitrary: wishing to reduce it to a minimum, Strzemiński in the end returned to precisely what he had condemned in 1924, humanism and the use of a projective system—the confusion "between art and the hieromathematics of Pythagoras."⁷⁰

Strzemiński and Kobro's theory of sculpture is one of the most elaborate of our century, and the 15 or so sculptures that illustrate it—all by Kobro—are among the most astonishing. Following the "law of organicity," the theory begins with the difference between painting and sculpture:

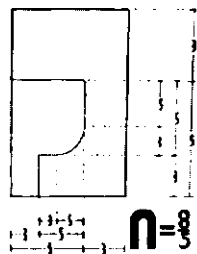
/ The painting has natural limits that are determined by the dimensions of
/ the canvas. It cannot go beyond its natural limits. This is why the construction of the painting takes its limits as a point of departure. A sculpture, on the other hand, does not have such natural limits, defined a priori. Hence the natural law must be for a sculpture not to enclose itself within a volume, but to unite with the totality of space, with the infinite space. The union of the sculpture with space, the saturation of space by the sculpture, the fusion of the sculpture in space and its link with it constitute the organic law of sculpture.⁷¹

Since it does not have "limits that would exist prior to its conception,"⁷² a sculpture must be considered as a part of space, must exhibit the same characteristics as space. In exactly the same way that a figure, in one of Strzemiński's "architectonic" paintings, must be in an "undecidable" relationship with the ground of the painting (a positive/negative relationship), and consists only in the "motivated" division of the surface of the painting, a unist sculpture must divide and shape interior as well as exterior space. For Kobro, "the most important problem" in the entire history of sculpture is



42. W. STRZEMIŃSKI

1929



43.

W. STRZEMIŃSKI

WYKŁAD OBLICZENIA STO-
SUMIENIA LICZBOWYCH

Stosunek wysokości do szerokości $\frac{h}{b} = \frac{8}{5}$; stąd
każdy segment następnego szeregu: $\frac{1}{5}$ poprzed-
niego; t. zn. $h_1 : h_2 : h_3 = \frac{8}{5} : 1 : \frac{5}{8}$
każdy odcięty np. h składa się z $h_1 = \frac{5}{8}h$ i z od-
cinka $h_2 = h - h_1 = \frac{3}{8}h$

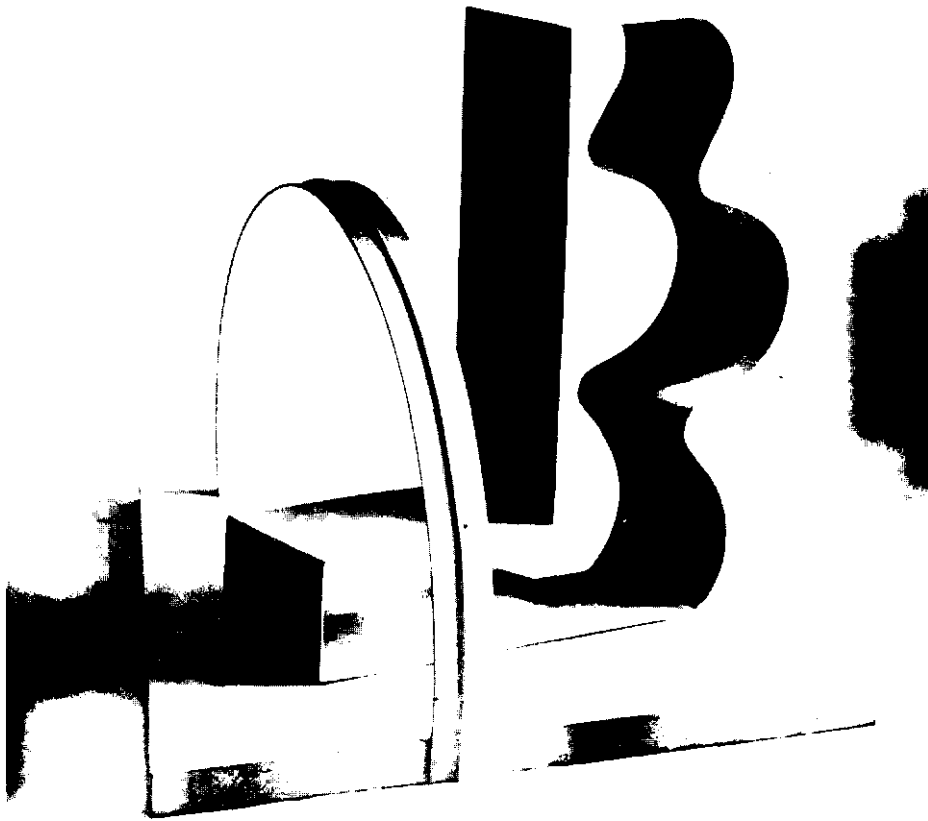
55. Władysław Strzemiński, *proportional scheme of an Architectonic Composition, now presumably lost. From Strzemiński and Kobre, Composition of Space: Calculations of a Spatio-Temporal Rhythm, 1931 Photo Museum Sztuki.*

the relationship between the space contained within the sculpture and the space situated outside the sculpture. Aside from this fundamental problem, the following issues are relatively secondary: the static or dynamic character of the sculpture, the predominance of line or of volume, the use or nonuse of color, the handling in lights and shadows or in masses. From the solution given to this principal problem will stem both the type of sculpture and the solutions found for the secondary questions.⁷³

I shall not try here to retrace the extremely complex typology of sculpture proposed by the theoreticians of unism from antiquity onward (Egyptian sculpture: a volume-sculpture, which does not raise the issue of exterior space; gothic sculpture, which reaches a union with that portion of exterior space contained within the limits of architecture; baroque sculpture, at last, where "the limit of form is the limit of the zone of influence of its dynamic forms," and which reaches a union with that portion of exterior space contained within this "limiting limit").⁷⁴ Again, despite the odd terminology, art historians would learn a lot from their analyses. But more important here is Strzemihski and Kobra's insistence upon "union with space." The issue is to avoid what Rosalind Krauss has called "the logic of the monument"—a commemorative logic that "distinguishes sculpture from the ongoing phenomena of daily life" and plunges the viewer "into a state of passive contemplation that cuts him off from the concerns of everyday life."⁷⁵ Why would anyone want to avoid this logic, when it has already demonstrated its effectiveness? Because it denies that sculpture inhabits the same space as the viewer, that is, the space of our experience in the world. Thus: "Unist sculpture does not produce sculptures. Unist sculpture sculpts space, condensing it within the limits of its sculptural zone [see hg. 56]. The unist sculpture, based upon the organic unity of sculpture and space, does not want the form to be a goal in itself, but only the expression of spatial relationships."⁷⁶

Even if she subscribed to the ideology of transparency that defines, as Krauss demonstrated, a good portion of the constructivist production,⁷⁷ Kobra did not employ the axes of spatial coordinates as a grid conceived as the sign of a universal language. Even if unism conceived space as one of the a priori categories of our sensibility, it was always concerned with the space of our experience:

The union of man and space is the action of man in that space. We come to know space through our actions. The vectors traced by the actions of man in space are: the vertical station of man and every object, the horizontal of the environment that he encounters on both sides, and the depth, before him, of forward movement.⁷⁸



56. Katarzyna Kobra, *Space Sculpture*, 1925 (1967). Painted steel and wood, 50 X 78 X 56 cm (19s/, x **31*16** x **22** in.) Reconstruction with use of the recovered fragment by Boleslaw Utkin and Janusz Zagrodzki, 1967. Museum Sztuki, Lodz. Photo of the museum.

Space is, according to Kobra and Strzemiński, homogeneous and infinite, in a state of constant equilibrium (an equilibrium that is neither dynamic, based on movement, nor static, based on weight—that is, on a type of movement).⁷⁹ As a result, every dynamic form will subtract itself from space and reintroduce the logic of the monument. Moreover, every figure is necessarily dynamic because it is opposed, as center and foreign body, to the homogeneity of surrounding space: "The figure must not be a foreign body in space, nor the center that dominates illicitly the rest of space. It must create the prolongation of space. If sculpture is to be united with space, the fundamental laws of space must govern its construction."⁸⁰

With the exception of her six earliest sculptures, made before 1925 and influenced by suprematism and Russian constructivism (figs. 57, 58),⁸¹ all of Kobra's work is composed of open planes, orthogonal or curved; the intersection of these planes

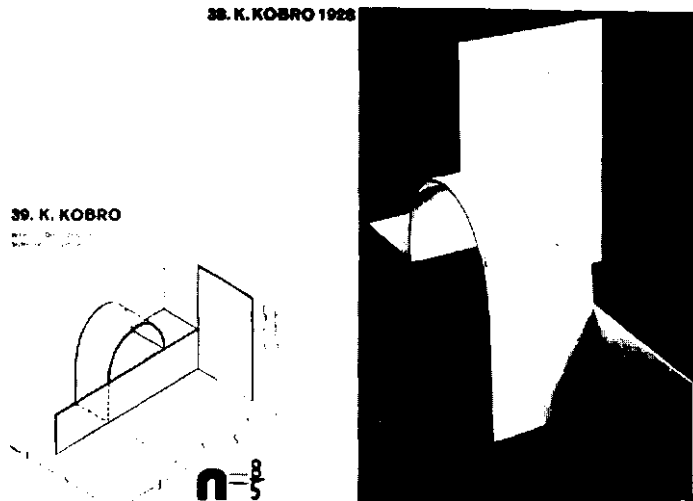
57. *Katarzyna Kobra, Suspended Composition 1, 1921 (1972). Fiberglass, epoxide resin, metal, and wood, 20 x 40 x 40 cm (7 7/8 x 15 3/4 x 15 3/4 in.) Reconstructed by Boleslaw Utkin in 1972. Museum Sztuki, Lodz. Photo of the museum.*

58. *Katarzyna Kobra, Abstract Sculpture 1, 1924- Glass, metal, and wood, 72 x 77.5 x 15.5 cm (28 3/8 x 30 5/8 x 6 1/8 in.) Museum Sztuki, Lodz. Photo of the museum.*

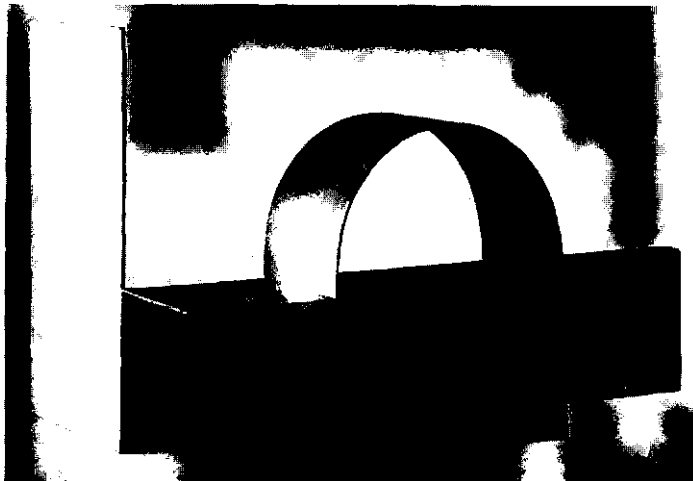
is supposed, according to the theory, to render space visible ("the division of space, the interruption of its continuity, the partial closing of one of its parts, all that renders it visible, plastic, for us, for space is by itself ungraspable and almost unperceivable")⁸² These planes, whose division and articulation were determined according to a constant proportional system (the same one used by Strzeminski in his "architectonic" paintings), were conceived as materializations of the axes of the space of our experience: "The lines of space are continued in those of the sculpture";⁸³ or else "each part of space that is not filled can be transformed into a sculptural shape."⁸⁴ But if Kobra had stopped here, nothing would have distinguished her work from constructivism in general, except for a rigor of mathematical specification (which has allowed the reconstruction of several lost works [see figs. 59, 60]). The real inventiveness of her work lies in the two methods she employed to prevent her sculptures' being perceived as figures in space—two methods based on an extreme syntactic disjunctiveness.

The first is the use of polychromy to destroy the "optical unity," which would separate the sculpture from space; in a painting, a sculpture must include the harshest contrasts possible (hence the use of primary colors—the only way to avoid the constitution of chromatic harmonies that would read as separate unities).⁸⁵ Contrasting with the formal arrangement of the sculpture, the disposition of colors causes it to explode in three dimensions: not only are two sides of a single plane painted different colors, but each color is also distributed noncontiguously in the three dimensions of depth, width, and height. A long quotation of Strzeminski and Kobra's text deserves to be made here, for it gives a very precise description of the works themselves:

Because of their different color intensity, we cannot see all the various planes at once. . . . We do not unite adjacent colors but those that bear the same amount of energy. Thus we do not attempt to diversify the various forms by color but to lay a given color on various planes of the sculpture, perpendicular to one another and separated from the other color planes. . . . Each color creates within the sculpture new spatial forms, more and more numerous, that fit into each other. The spatial forms, related by the given common color, hinge and create many "corridors" that link them together and with the exterior space. . . . We have thus a system of spatial forms created by color. This system is analogous to the system of forms of the sculpture itself [prior to the application of color], with one important fact however: both systems do not overlap. . . . In this



59. Katarzyna Kobro, *proportional scheme of a Space Composition 3*. From Strzeminski and Kobro, *Composition of Space: Calculations of a Spatio-Temporal Rhythm*, 1931. Photo Museum Sztuki.



60. Katarzyna Kobro, *Space Composition 3*, 1928. Painted steel, 40 x 64 X 40 cm (15*4 x 25*is x 75*4 in). Museum Sztuki, Lodz. Photo of the museum.

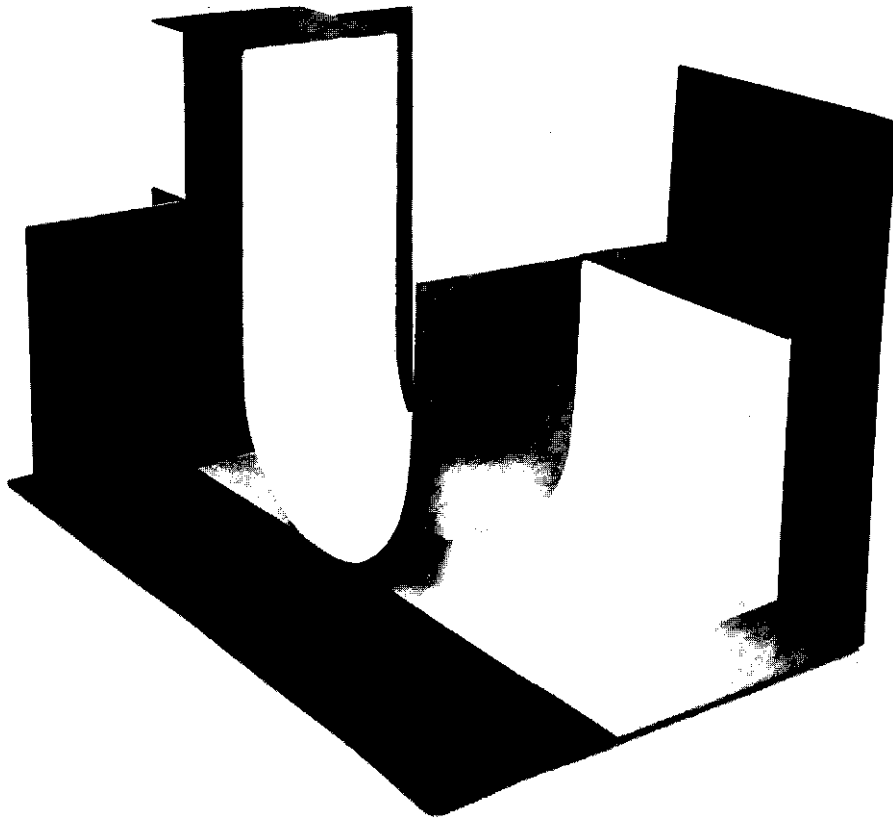
manner the extreme diversity of spatial partitions is emphasized in unist sculpture: they are independent from one another and yet create through their connections an incalculable diversity of links between the sculpture and space. The arrangement of the sculpture's forms determine intersections that make space concrete and "corridors" that give to the sculpture the internal unity of the spatial phenomenon, linking it to space. The same happens for each color used.⁸⁶

True, Kobra made few polychrome sculptures (if the number of surviving works is any indication). But the reason this system of optical disjunction is so effective in her work—in, for example, *Space Composition 4* (1929; fig. 61), one of her masterpieces and in my opinion one of the most extraordinary works of twentieth century sculpture—is that it was grafted onto another disjunctive principle used to greatest advantage in her white sculptures such as, for example, *Space Composition 5* (1929-30; fig. 62), another highly successful work. This second method (to which the coloristic syntax is "analogous," as is stated in the quotation just made) takes into account, perhaps for the first time explicitly in the history of sculpture, the duration of aesthetic experience: in unist theory, sculpture, unlike painting, is an art that mobilizes *time*:

The spatiotemporality of the work of art is related to its variability. We call spatiotemporal the spatial changes produced in time. Those variations are functions of the third dimension, of depth, which, although momentarily hidden, nevertheless reveals its existence while transforming the appearance of the work of art, the appearance of each form, in creating variability; when the spectator moves, certain forms present themselves, others hide; the perception of these forms changes constantly.⁸⁷

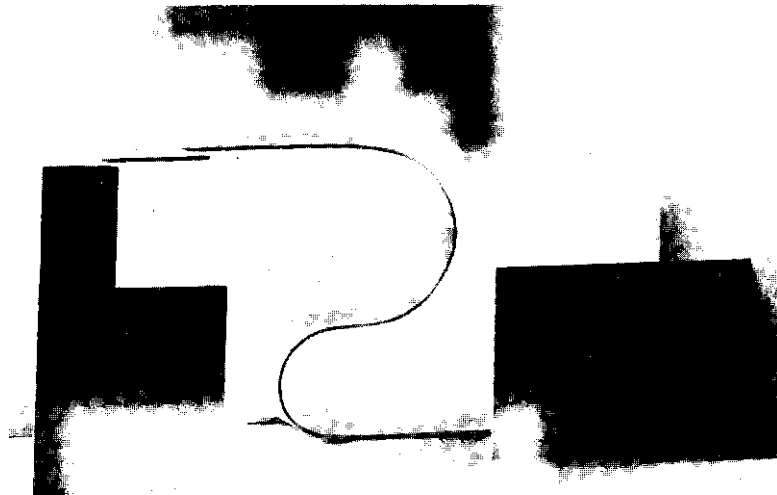
Wanting to stage the "transformation of depth into breadth," to render visible the invisible object which is depth ("wherever we stand to observe the work of art, depth is always hidden from us"), to solicit the spectator's movement, Kobra made sculptures in which no elevation can be inferred from any other. As we circulate around her best sculptures, what was negative (empty) becomes positive (full), what was *line* becomes plane or point, what was straight becomes curved, what was wide becomes narrow. An entire stream-of-consciousness novel would be necessary to describe the transformations that occur as we circulate around the two works mentioned above. And while her theory participates in the constructivist ideology of transparency, Kobra's sculptural practice undermines that ideology, as David Smith would later do using the same disjunctive language.⁸⁸ Rather than presupposing the existence

II Abstraction I



61. Katarzyna Kobro, Space Composition 4, 1929- Painted steel, 40 X 64 X 40
25*16 X 15*4 in). Museum Sztuki, Lodz. Photo of the museum.

Strzeminski and Kobra: In Search of Motivation



62. Katarzyna Kobra, *Space Composition 5*, 1929-30. Painted steel, 25 x 64 x 40 X 25 3/16 x 15 3/4, in.). Museum Sztuki, todz. Photo of the museum.

a generative core or spine, the rationality of which would be immediately intelligible (an image of our clear consciousness, to refer again to Rosalind Krauss's analysis of constructivism), these sculptures have the opacity of material objects, whose space they cohabit (the base has been eliminated). But unlike objects whose meanings are discovered through use, Kobra's sculptures treat our experience in the world in an abstract manner—without finality. Although we can apprehend them physically (measuring their variability as we move around them), neither the naked eye nor intellection is sufficient to comprehend them. The philosophical foundation of unism was phenomenology, albeit implicitly, as it will later be for minimalism, this time explicitly: "the form of existence produces the form of consciousness."⁸⁹

Despite the radicality of their works, however, despite the unprecedented intelligence of their theory, Strzemiński and Kobra clung to one principle that pulled their work back into the orbit of metaphysics at the very moment they believed they had escaped from it. This is the principle of unity, which underpins their "law of organicity" and the essentialism of modernism as a whole. Strzemiński and Kobra were fully aware of the difficulties involved in breaking with a secular tradition ("we are still thinking baroque," they would say); they believed they could do so by deconstructing, through their elaborate strategy, the arbitrariness of composition. Yet, because they never abandoned the ancient concept of the unity of the work of art (which goes back at least to Vitruvius), and although they never used it in a traditional way, their work represents one of the subtlest consolidations of that tradition (as would later that of the American artists of the '60s, done according to the same premises minus the **Utopia**).

As I wrote above, the essential question of modernism was that of motivation: "What is the mode of existence of the work of art once its expressive function has been discarded?" The answer was: "This existence is real as soon as the work of art is plastically self-sufficient and does not seek a transcendental justification, outside of itself." This "law of organicity" rests upon a fundamental naturalism (and, as might have been noted, the adjective "natural" appears frequently in the texts of unism): the naturalism of "creation," of *suigeneris* production as opposed to reproduction.⁹⁰ The unist picture "is (exists) in itself." The claims of this form of naturalism are perfectly summarized by Jacques Derrida in his warning against a metaphysical reading of Mallarmé's conception of the mime: "Since the mime imitates nothing, represents nothing, opens up in its origin the very thing he is tracing out, presenting, or producing, he must be the very movement of truth. Not, of course, truth in the form of adequacy between the representation and the present of the thing itself, or between

the imitator and the imitated, but truth as the present unveiling of the present: monstration, manifestation, production, *aletheia*.¹⁰¹ As Derrida demonstrates, nothing of the sort happens in Mallarmé's mimology, which thus constitutes a remarkable exception. For this type of naturalism is endemic to modernism as a whole. It guided the insatiable quest for motivation that the whole modernist enterprise represents; as such it commands the current "failure" of modernism as it commanded Strzeminski and Kopro's jettisoning of their unist principles, no matter how far they went in their attempts to reduce the arbitrary. Mallarmé was right: *Un coup de des jamais n'abolira le hasard*.

Strzeminski and Kobra: In Search of Motivation

References to essays by Strzeminski and Kobra are given to their Western publication (either French or English). However, every quotation has been checked with the original Polish by Lilianna Sekula, which accounts for some modifications. I would also like to thank Mary-Alice Lee for her help in preparing the English version of this essay.

1. Frank Stella, quoted in Bruce Glaser, "Questions to Stella and Judd" (1966), in G. Battcock, ed., *Minimal Art* (New York: Dutton, 1968), p. 149.

2. The 1976 American tour of "Constructivism in Poland" (an exhibition initially organized in 1973 by the Folkwang Museum in Essen, Germany, and the Kroller-Muller Museum in Otterlo, Holland, jointly with the Museum Sztuki, -Lodz, Poland, which holds most of the surviving works of Strzeminski and Kobra) was almost unnoticed. Its catalogue (hereafter cited as *CP*), which was available in English as early as 1973, still provides the best visual documentation of Strzeminski's and Kobra's work, and contains a vast anthology of their writings; its short but excellent critical texts are the work of Polish scholars. As far as I know, the short article Kate Linker wrote about Kobra is the only direct offspring of this exhibition in the American literature ("Katarzyna Kobra: Art/Architecture," *Arts Magazine*, October 1976, pp. 92-93), later followed by Merle Schipper's more generous account ("Katarzyna Kobra," *Women's Art Journal* 1, no. 2 [Fall 1980-Winter 1981], pp. 19-24). To that must be added Margit Rowell's short but excellent treatment of Kobra's work in the preface to the catalogue of the exhibition she organized at the Guggenheim Museum (*The Planar Dimension 1912-1932. From Surface to Space*, pp. 30-31); the mention of the "Kobra case" in Albert Elsen's overview of modern sculpture (*Modern European Sculpture 1918-1945. Unknown Beings and Other Realities* [New York: Braziller, 1979]); and Marcia Hafif's pious wish that we return to Strzeminski's principles ("Beginning Again," *Artforum*, September 1978, pp. 34-40). Not an impressive record. With one exception, the French situation is not much better: my own publication, in the first issue of *Macula* (1976, pp. 14-27), of a translation by Pierre-Maxime Jedryka of Strzeminski's brilliant text, "Unism in Painting," did not initiate a critical wave. The section concerning Polish constructivism in the exhibition catalogue *Presences polonaises* (Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1983) consists of new and badly translated versions of the 1973 catalogue essays by Polish scholars. The recent article by Xavier Deryng, "Le 'Tableau absolu,' mythe des années 20: L'unisme de Strzeminski" (in *Les Abstractions I' - La diffusion des abstractions, Hommage a Jean Laude*, ed. Louis Roux [Saint Etienne: CIREC, Université de Saint Etienne, 1986], pp. 95-104), is utterly derivative. The exception I mentioned above is Andrei Nakov's book, *Abstrait/concret*, which appeared in 1981 (Paris, Transedition), and which I had unfortunately not read when the present essay first appeared. Although it only partly concerns the Polish avant-garde (most of the book being devoted to the Russian one), it provides some very useful information on Strzeminski's and Kobra's beginnings in Russia, and gives a convincing interpretation of Strzeminski's essentialism as a dialectical result of his polemics with Mieczyslaw Szczuka, who was competing with him for the leading position of the modern movement in Poland, and whose position could be called "productivist." The arrival in France, after the military coup of 1982, of one of the experts on Polish constructivism, Andrzej Turowski, might elicit a new interest in the matter (Turowski's masterly book on the subject, *Konstruktywizm polski* [Lodz, 1981], still awaits translation into a western language, although a book by the same author appeared recently with a chapter devoted to Strzeminski and Kobra: *Existe-t-il un an de TEurope de l'Est* [Paris: Editions de la Villette, 1986]. Outside France and the U.S., a few publications must be taken into account. The most important is the catalogue of the Strzeminski exhibition at the Stadtische Kunsthalle in Dusseldorf (March-April 1980), with an introduction by Turowski and the German translation of some of Strzeminski's texts. In 1985 Kettle's Yard Gallery (Cambridge, England) organized an exhibition entitled *Constructivism in Poland 1923 to 1936*, in conjunction with the Museum Sztuki in Lodz. Its small catalogue, again mostly due to Polish scholars (Stanislawski and Zagrodski), contains an anthology of texts, among them a text by Strzeminski and another by Kobra that had not hitherto been translated into English.

Two major Polish publications have recently enhanced our knowledge of the work of Strzemiński and Kobra. *Władysław Strzemiński—in memoriam*, ed. Janusz Zagrodzki (t. odz: Sztuka Polska, 1988), is an anthology of texts by Strzemiński, memoirs, documents, and critical essays by Polish and western scholars (including a Polish translation of the present text). *Katarzyna Kobra—i kompozycja przestrzeni*, also by Zagrodzki (Warsaw: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe, 1984), is the first monograph devoted to the artist. Both books reproduce a quantity of documents and works hitherto unpublished, and both confirm, sad as it might seem, that the unist period marked the apogee of Strzemiński's and Kobra's production.

Finally, I would like to thank Pierre-Maxime Jedryka for having shared with me his knowledge of the art and theory of Strzemiński and Kobra. His master's thesis at the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales, completed in 1975, reinforced my conviction about their work, which had originated with the 1973 show.

While this book was in galleys, I came across another western publication and a dissertation. The first is *Tre Pioneerer For Polsk Avant-Garde*, the catalogue of an exhibition held at the Fyns Kunstmuseum, Odense, Denmark, in 1985; it contains translations of texts hitherto unpublished in English, by Strzemiński and Kobra and by Henryk Stazewski, the third musketeer of the Polish avant-garde to whom this exhibition was also dedicated; another feature of this catalogue is a very useful essay of Lise-Lotte Blom on the Russian beginnings of Strzemiński and his relationship to cubism. As for Ursula Grzechca-Mohr's dissertation, *Kobra (Katarzyna Kobra-Strzemińska) und die konstruktivische Bewegung* (Münster, Kunsthistorischen Institut der Universität, 1986), I very much regret that I found it too late to be able to discuss it here.

3- *L'Espace uniste*, ed. and tr. Antoine Baudin and Pierre-Maxime Jedryka (Lausanne: L'Age d'Homme, 1977). Henceforth cited as *EU*.

4. There was always some confusion about the notion of "modernism," owing to the stiffening of the position of Greenberg, who confiscated the word during the '50s. One must distinguish between modernist theory in the narrow sense, the only one to actually take up the word—that is, Greenberg's and his followers' (a theory that in the end accepted only a few artists in the modernist pantheon)—and the modernist theory in the broad sense, which evaluates and isolates in modern art from impressionism onward its capacity of reflexivity and autodefinition. One must thus distinguish between the opposition to modernism in the narrow sense, minimalism's opposition in the '60s, for example (minimalist artists wanted to broaden the possibilities of artistic reflexivity that were defined in a too restricted way by Greenberg), and the current rejection of modernism in the broad sense, often grounded on a strict refusal of reflexivity as such.

5. "The farther a society pushes the division of activities, the higher a level of culture it attains. It is then a question of conferring on art tasks appropriate to it. The romantic conception of art as a magical art implied the reunion of several arts while in fact it was subordinating them all to a literary thematics and didactics." Strzemiński, "Modern Art in Poland" (1934), in *EU*, pp. 139-140.

6. Strzemiński, "a.r.2" (1932), in *EU*, p. 129.

7. Strzemiński, "B = 2; to read" (1924), in *CP*, pp. 82-83.

8. Cf. the remarkable text by Strzemiński, entitled "Functional Printing," in *CP*, pp. 111-113. Strzemiński, who was one of the masters of modern typography, took the question of medium specificity seriously: typography requires the greatest contrasts to fulfill its function, that is, the greater readability of a text (thus is necessarily "anti-unist," as he said in his discussion with Chwistek in 1934: cf. *EU*, p. 157). Starting from this idea, radically opposed to the Bauhaus notion of economy, Strzemiński realized a series of typographical compositions based on the poems of his friend Julian Przyboś. On Strzemiński as a typographer, cf. the catalogue of the exhibition "*Drukfunkcjonalny*" by J. Zagrodzki (t. odz: Museum Sztuki, 1975).

9. Strzemiński, "Discussion" (with L. Chwistek, held in 1934, published in 1935), *EU*, p. 161 (tr. slightly modified).

10. Strzemiński, "What Can Legitimately Be Called New An" (1924), in *EU*, p. 57.

11. Strzemiński, "Discussion," *EU*, p. 161.

12. Strzeminski, "Aspects of Reality" (1936), *EU*, p. 177.
13. Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting" (1961), rpt. in Gregory Battcock, ed., *The New Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: Dutton, 1973), p. 110.
14. Strzeminski: "The fatal attraction of the baroque is so strong that, reasoning in baroque terms, we are unaware of the fact, and we believe that we are free from this way of thinking," "Unism in Painting" (1927-28), in *CP*, p. 92 (tr. slightly modified).
15. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
16. Strzeminski, "Modern Art in Poland," *EU*, p. 139.
17. Strzeminski, "B = 2; to read," *CP*, p. 80.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 83 (tr. slightly modified).
19. Strzeminski, "Modern Art in Poland," *EU*, p. 143 (tr. slightly modified).
20. *Ibid.*, p. 136.
21. Strzeminski, "Aspects of Reality," *EU*, p. 178.
22. Katarzyna Kobro, "Functionalism" (1936), in *CP*, p. 119 (tr. slightly modified).
23. Strzeminski, "Modern Art in Poland," *EU*, p. 146 (tr. slightly modified).
24. *Ibid.*, p. 143.
25. El Lissitzky, "New Russian Art," in Sophie Lissitzky-Kuppers, *El Lissitzky: Life, Letters, Texts* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1968), pp. 330-340.
26. Strzeminski, "Notes on Russian Art" (1922), in *EU*, pp. 50-51. Strzeminski seems at first totally unfair with regard to Rodchenko and Stepanova, especially since their achievement in the field of sculpture and of "design" respectively is not to be discarded that easily. On the contrary, I would hold that some of Rodchenko's sculptures are major objects in the production of this century. But elsewhere in the text Strzeminski praises the Obmokhu group, with whom Rodchenko was closely associated, and credits it for having raised the level of contemporary sculpture to that of modern painting ("the only nice consequence, albeit unpremeditated, of the autohypnosis of productivism"). Strzeminski left Russia in 1922, before Stepanova's first textile designs were known, and it is not certain that he would have reacted negatively to them. At any rate, as the rest of the text makes clear, it is the *pictorial* production of Rodchenko and Stepanova that he is dismissing here, and as far as I am concerned with a perfect right (with the exception of a handful of works, such as his triptych of monochromes signaling his farewell to painting [1921], Rodchenko's pictures are mediocre; Stepanova's are no better).
27. "Expressionism may be defined as that trend that expresses feelings of a literary character (above all the feeling of confusion to which a mechanical world gives rise), using techniques that belong to every artistic movement of the past (including cubism and futurism). It is, if you will, an applied art (exploitation of the formal accomplishment of others)." *Ibid.*, p. 42.
28. Strzeminski, "Our Visual Potential" (1934), quoted by Antoine Baudin in his introduction to *EU*, "Avant-garde et constructivisme polonais entre les deux guerres: quelques points d'histoire," p. 28.
29. The abrupt and apparently definitive halt to Kobro's career is usually attributed to the birth of a daughter, then to the war and the Nazi persecutions (the Nazis destroyed practically all of her sculptures), then to the postwar depression and Stalinist persecutions (Kobro died of illness in 1951, one year before Strzeminski). It is obvious that all these factors are relevant. I simply do not believe that they explain everything.
30. On this issue, cf. in this volume the essays "Painting: The Task of Mourning," and "Ryman's Tact."
31. Strzeminski, "Discussion," *EU*, p. 156.
32. Strzeminski, "Aspects of Reality," *EU*, pp. 180-181. Antoine Baudin makes the connection with Arp in his introduction to the text, *ibid.*, p. 181.
33. Cf. Strzeminski, "Notes on Russian Art," *EU*, pp. 47-49.
34. Strzeminski, "Modern Art in Poland," *EU*, p. 149.
35. Strzeminski, "a.r.2," *EU*, p. 130.

36. Ibid, p. 129.
37. Strzemiński and Kobro, "Composition of Space, Calculations of Spatio-Temporal Rhythm" (1931), in *EU*, pp. 111-112.
38. Ibid, p. 112.
39. Strzemiński, "Discussion," *EU*, p. 160.
40. Strzemiński, "The Principles of New Architecture" (1931), in *CP*, p. 39. Quoting the last sentence of this passage, Baudin notes that it refers to a polemic between Strzemiński and the architect Szymon Syrkus, a polemic that would end with Strzemiński's break with the group *Praesens*, of which he was a most active member: during the preliminary work for the "Universal National Exhibition" of 1929, in Poznań, Strzemiński accused Syrkus of having plagiarized a sculpture by Kobro for his Fertilizer Pavilion, and of having "reduced its spatiality to a vulgar decorativism by filling the merallie skeleton" (cf. Baudin, "Avant-garde et constructivisme polonais," p. 22 and note 43).
41. Kobro, "Functionalism," *CP*, pp. 119-120.
42. Rietveld wrote, for example: "If, for a particular purpose, we separate, limit and bring into a human scale a part of the unlimited space, it is (if all goes well) a piece of space brought to life as reality. In this way, a special segment of space has been absorbed into our human system." ("View of Life as Background for My Work" [1957], English tr. in Theodore M. Brown, *The Work of G. Rietveld, Architect* [Utrecht: A. W. Bruna, 1958], p. 162; also quoted above in "The De Stijl Idea," where I insist upon De Stijl's antifunctionalism.) Rietveld's architectural theory is very similar to that of Kobro and Strzemiński.
43. On this issue, cf. my article, "A Picturesque Stroll around *Clara-Clara*," *October*, no. 29 (Summer 1984).
44. Strzemiński, "Modern Art in Poland," *EU*, p. 137.
45. Strzemiński, "a.r.2," *EU*, p. 130.
46. Strzemiński, "What Can Legitimately Be Called New Art," *EU*, p. 58.
47. Strzemiński, "Unism in Painting," *CP*, p. 92.
48. Strzemiński, "Modern Art in Poland," *EU*, p. 145.
49. Strzemiński, "What Can Legitimately Be Called New Art," *EU*, p. 57.
50. Strzemiński, "B = 2; to read," *CP*, p. 62 (tr. slightly modified).
51. Strzemiński, "Unism in Painting," *CP*, p. 91.
52. Cf. Michael Baxandall, *Giotto and the Orators* (Oxford University Press, 1971), particularly the third part, "Alberri and the Humanists: Composition."
53. Strzemiński, "Unism in Painting," *CP*, p. 91 (tr. slightly modified). Yves Klein's concept of the monochrome was based on the same antidiabetic, antidualistic, antitheatrical premises: "Why no two colors in the same painting? Well, because I refuse to provide a spectacle in my painting. I refuse to compare and to put in play, so that some stronger elements will emerge in contrast to other weaker ones. Even the most civilized representation is based on an idea of "struggle" between different forces, and the reader [*sic*] is confronted by an execution [*mise à mort*] in a painting, by ; morbid drama by definition, be it a drama of love or hate." ("The Monochrome Adventure," unfinished manuscript, Part I, in *Yves Klein* [Paris: Centre Georges Pompidou, 1983], p. 172. The English translation of this text in the American version of this exhibition catalogue [Houston: Institute for the Arts, Rice University, 1982], p. 220, is too faulty to be of any use.) A similar tendency toward the rejection of all contrasts is at the base of Ad Reinhardt's art and theory, although his *Black Painting* make clear that he never accepted the idea of a plain monochrome. His idea of "oneness" or "non duality" is quite similar to that of Strzemiński, and the litany of negations that constitute his "Twelve Technical Rules" could almost have been signed by the theoretician of unism. (Obviously the Polish painter would not have subscribed to a dictum such as "no texture" or "no size," but slogans from "no brushwork" to "no chess-playing," through others such as "no sketching," "no form, no design," "no color," "no time," and "no movement," would have met his approval. Cf. *Art as Art: The Selected Writings of Ad Reinhardt*, ed. Barbara Rose [New York: Viking, 1975], pp. 205-207.) Finally to complete this short comparison between unism and the art of the '50s and '60s, the whole interview of Stella and Judd by Bruce Glaser (mentioned above) should be recalled: both artists insist on the need to "get rid of compositional effects" and of part-to-part relationships (or contrasts

Judd's diatribe against what he calls ignorantly "the whole European tradition" could very well have been signed by Strzemiński: "All that art is based on systems built beforehand, a priori systems," etc. ("Questions to Stella and Judd," p. 151).

Since unism strove toward the elimination of all contrasts (as signs of "dramatic tensions," hence of "literature"), no art of the past could have been accepted in its pantheon, not to speak about its or our present. But Strzemiński's extremism, there again, provides a striking stylistic analysis of the art of Cézanne as "arch-baroque" (that is: as an art entirely governed by conflicting forces striving toward an equilibrium), an analysis that matches entirely that of Matisse (cf. the essay "Matisse and Arche-drawing" in this volume). The only difference between Strzemiński and Matisse on this point, of course, is that while the latter held Cézanne's energetic conception as a radical break and a model to emulate, the former described it as the climax of a long tradition to be fought.

54. Strzemiński, "Unism in Painting," *CP*, p. 92.

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*, p. 91.

57. It is well known that Greenberg's first major essay was entitled "Towards a Newer Laocoon" (*Partisan Review* 7 (July-August 1940), pp. 296-310), and Greenberg's debt to Kant is acknowledged in "Modernist Painting." On this issue, as well as the exclusion of temporality, cf. Bois, "A Picturesque Stroll."

58. Strzemiński, "Unism in Painting," *CP*, p. 95. For entirely different reasons (he was himself a proponent of dynamism), Theo van Doesburg also criticized Mondrian, in 1930, in a notebook that was published posthumously, for the role of composition in his paintings ("the perfect harmony resulting from this pictorial discipline was deeply classical and if one disregards *fait abstraction des* the figures, a picture by Ingres or Poussin is identical to one by Mondrian"; *De Stijl*, last issue, 1932, p. 28). Strzemiński's two ideas are justified (Mondrian does not fully reach planarity; his art remains compositional), but they might not be as interrelated as he thought. There is certainly a thrust, in Mondrian's last period, to overcome planarity as such through an investigation of physical thickness: cf. in this volume "Piet Mondrian, *New York City*," *passim*.

59. Strzemiński, "Unism in Painting," *CP*, p. 90.

60. Strzemiński, "Notes on Russian Art," *EU*, p. 46.

61. "Because of its linear character, the form detaches itself from the painting and contrasts with the ground"; Strzemiński, "B = 2; to read," *EU*, p. 65. The English translation (*CP*, p. 83) omitted this sentence.

62. Strzemiński, "Object and Space" (1928), in *EU*, p. 83. This passage was omitted in the English translation, *CP*, pp. 104-105.

63. Strzemiński, "Unism in Painting," *CP*, p. 94.

64. As noted by Pierre-Maxime Jedryka in the postface to *EU*, "Ellipses," *passim*.

65. Strzemiński, "Discussion," *EU*, p. 156.

66. Strzemiński, "Unism in Painting," *CP*, p. 94.

67. Strzemiński and Kobra, "Composition of Space, Calculations of Spatio-Temporal Rhythm," *EU*, p. 123.

68. Strzemiński, "a.r.2," *EU*, p. 131

69. Janusz Zagrodzki analyzed the use of the Fibonacci series, an essential means for the reconstruction of Kobra's works. ("Reconstruction of Katarzyna Kobra's Sculptures," in *CP*, pp. 55-56). It would be a lot easier (but pedantic) to analyze Strzemiński's "architectonic compositions" in the same way.

70. Strzemiński, "B = 2; to read," *CP*, p. 83.

71. Strzemiński and Kobra, "Composition of Space," *EU*, p. 86.

72. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

73. *Ibid.*, p. 85.

74. *Ibid.*, p. 97.

75. Strzemiński, "Modern Art in Poland," *EU*, p. 149. For Krauss's analysis of the "logic of the monument," cf. "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1978), in *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), pp. 279-280.

76. Strzemiński and Kobro, "Composition of Space," *EU*, p. 106.

77. Cf. Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture* (New York: Viking, 1977), pp. 56-67. Krauss's vision of constructivism is somewhat partial, for she takes the work of Naum Gabo as the essential model (Rodchenko's wood sculptures of 1921, whose additive structure is very close to that of Carl Andre's minimalist works of the late '50s, could in no way be reduced to the "transparent" diagram of Gabo).

78. Strzemiński and Kobro, "Composition of Space," *EU*, p. 104.

79. "A summary analysis of the notion of weight is enough to reveal all the dynamism it contains" (*ibid.*, p. 103).

80. *Ibid.*, p. 102.

81. To my knowledge, only one of these early sculptures survives, but the team of Polish scholars working on unism at the Museum Sztuki in Lodz have been able to reconstruct another four from photographs, largely thanks to Kobro's rigorous system of proportions. The first one, not reconstructed, is a dense, quasi-cubist conglomerate of heteroclitic objects and materials made in 1920, when Kobro and Strzemiński were living in Russia. The second, *Suspended Sculpture 1* (1921, reconstructed in 1972) looks like the translation into space of a painting by Malevich; the third, *Suspended Sculpture 2* (1921-22, reconstructed in 1971) reflects the esthetics of the Obmokhu group and resembles both a work by Medunetsky in the collection of the Yale University Art Gallery and Rodchenko's hanging sculptures (all works exhibited at the third Obmokhu exhibition in Moscow in May 1921). *Abstract Sculptures 1, 2, and 3* (all from 1924, the first one preserved, the last two reconstructed in 1972) are related to Naum Gabo's "transparent" constructivism, which has been analyzed by Rosalind Krauss (cf. note 77). Kobro's real genius did not appear until 1925, with *Space Sculpture*.

Three things are worth noting here, concerning the relationship of Kobro's art to the production of the Obmokhu group: (1) In his "Notes on Russian Art," Strzemiński describes this relationship as that of a fellow-wanderer: "Close to them we find the most talented of these young artists, Kobro, whose suprematist sculptures are a phenomenon of European importance. Her works represent a true breakthrough, the conquest of still virginal values; they do not imitate Malevich's work but are parallel to it" (*EU*, p. 50). (2) In their "Composition of Space," Strzemiński and Kobro reproduce a work by Medunetsky (ill. 15). The work, now lost, is visible on one of the two photographs of the Obmokhu show just mentioned (cf. Christina Lodder, *Russian Constructivism* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983], p. 66; Lodder labeled this work *a* on the photograph). (3) The elements combined in the sculpture just mentioned, *Suspended Sculpture 2*, are in fact tools, as if Kobro's only answer to the productivist position advocated at the time (but not yet put into practice) by some members of the Obmokhu group was an esthetization of labor.

Despite the obvious ties of Kobro with this group, one should not overestimate its impact on her work and imagine her a follower: she seems rather to have been open to the various trends of the Russian avant-garde, without any dogmatism. This explains, for example, why Strzemiński calls her work suprematist (before Kobro left Russia with Strzemiński, in 1922, she had been a member of the Smolensk branch of Unovis, the organization founded by Malevich), but according to Zagrodzki, she might also have studied with Tatlin at the Moscow Free State Artistic Studio in 1919 (*Katarzyna Kobro—i kompozycje przestrzeni*, p. 31).

82. Strzemiński and Kobro, "Composition in Space," *EU*, p. 105.

83. *Ibid.*, p. 104.

84. *Ibid.*, p. 87.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 109.

86. *Ibid.*, pp. 107-108.

87. *Ibid.*, p. 115.

88. Cf. Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*, pp. 147-173.

89. Strzemiński, "B = 2; to read," *CP*, p. 81. Of course, Strzemiński could not have read Husserl: I am just underlining a striking similarity.

90. The most characteristic formulation of this type of naturalism is to be found in Jean Arp's rejection of the label "abstract art": "We don't want to copy nature. We don't want to reproduce, we want to produce. We want to produce like a plant produces a fruit, and not reproduce. We want to produce directly and not by way of any intermediary. Since this art doesn't have the slightest trace of abstraction, we name it: concrete art" ("Concrete Art" [1944], in *Arp on Arp*, ed. Marcel Jean, English tr. Joachim Neugroschel [New York: Viking, 1972], p. 139). The same idea is expressed virtually in the same terms by almost all the abstract artists of the first modernist wave, and I have quoted above Strzemiński's longing for "picture as organic as nature" ("Unism in Painting," *CP*, p. 92). However, five years later, answering a questionnaire sent by the French little magazine *Abstraction-Creation* (no. 2, 1933), he and Kobro stressed the difference between artistic work and natural production. One of the questions was: "What do you think about the influence of trees on your work?" Kobro answered: "A tree possesses an inexact form, given by chance. Since I strive toward the concrete, trees have no influence whatsoever on my work" (p. 27). Strzemiński's reply was more elaborate: "Trees revealed to me what is not a work of art. The form of a tree stems from: (a) symmetry' (in the shape and the distribution of leaves). This symmetry is the result of the cellular division of the plant. A painting does not grow, its cells do not go through the process of division, hence symmetry has no role to play there, (b) The fluid curvature of the shape of the stems and trunk, itself the result of the pressure of the wind, the direction of the sun (of light), and the spray of sap within the plant. These forces are not to be found in a picture, hence its form is different" (p. 40). Those remarks, however, do not weaken the fundamental naturalism of the unist position: they simply mark a growing caution of its advocates toward the natural metaphor, almost at the end of the unist adventure.

91. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, English tr. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981), pp. 205-206.

Piet Mondrian, New York City

This article would not have been possible without the valuable help of the late Charmion von Wiegand and the late Harry Holtzman. Both let me quote from unpublished material in their archives. Finally, I would like to thank Michael Fried for his help with the present version of this article.

1. Joseph Masheck, "Mondrian the New Yorker," *Artforum* 13 (October 1974), pp. 60-61.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
3. See James Johnson Sweeney, "Mondrian, the Dutch and *DeStijl*," *AnNews* 50 (Summer 1951), p. 63. Meyer Schapiro made a similar remark, at about the same time, in his courses. (However, his article on Mondrian appeared much later. See "Mondrian," in Schapiro, *Modern Art, 19th and 20th Centuries: Selected Papers* [New York: Braziller, 1978], p. 256.)
4. When I refer to a number accompanied by "Seuphor," it refers to the "catalogue by group" included in Michel Seuphor's book on the artist. See Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian: sa vie, son oeuvre*, 2d ed. (Paris: Flammarion, 1970).
5. One of these paintings belongs to Max Bill (Seuphor 301), another was reproduced in *De Stijl* 2 [March 1919], plate 9), and a recently published photo of the third was found in Vilmos Huszar's papers and published by Ankie de Jongh, "Die Stijl," *Museumjournaal* 17 (Dec. 1972), p. 273.
6. See Sweeney, "An Interview with Mondrian," in the exhibition catalogue *Piet Mondrian* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1948). This "interview" was in fact Sweeney's collage of letters Mondrian had sent to him as he was preparing a monograph on the artist. See also Sweeney, "Piet Mondrian," in this same catalogue (p. 13) and, among others, Robert Welsh's article "Landscape into Music—Mondrian's New York Period," *Arts Magazine* 40 (Feb. 1966) and Karin von Maur's "Mondrian and Music," in *Mondrian: Drawings, Watercolours, New York Paintings* (Stuttgart: Staatsgalerie, 1981), pp. 287-311.

Painting as Model

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This book was set in ITC Garamond by DEKR Corporation and printed and bound in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Bois, Yve Alain.

Painting as model/Yve-Alain Bois.

p. cm.

An October book.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-262-02306-7 (HB), 0-262-52180-6 (PB)

1. Painting—Philosophy. I. Title.

ND1140.B59 1990

750'.1—dc20

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