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Kobro and Strzemiński: Łódź – Warsaw – Paris (1956–1957)

In the course of just one year, from December 1956 to December 1957, the avant-garde oeuvre of Władysław Strzemiński and his wife Katarzyna Kobro was presented at no fewer than four exhibitions.¹ The first and second of them were organised in Poland, i.e. in Łódź and Warsaw, respectively;² the third and fourth were organised in Paris. The response from both the Polish and foreign press was vigorous. The exhibitions profoundly influenced the Polish artistic milieu and became an important element of the history of contemporary art and the history of exhibitions in Poland. Yet an exploration of archive materials concerning those exhibitions yielded surprising results, one of them being the discovery that they very nearly might not have taken place at all.

In late June and early July of 1956, both Łódź and national newspapers published the following announcement:

The Organising Committee of Władysław Strzemiński's Posthumous Exhibition appeals to the interested parties to provide all [types of] materials illustrating the life and activity of the late artist. All pictures, reproductions, drawings, publications, photographs, architectural designs loaned for the duration of the exhibition (December 1956) will be returned afterwards. The Committee is also asking that relevant biographical materials be sent.

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- 1 This essay is based on research conducted in the framework of the National Programme for the Development of Humanities at the Ministry of Science and Higher Education, "The History of Exhibitions at Zachęta, the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, in the Period 1949–1970" research project, no. 0086/NPRH3/H11/82/2014.
 - 2 The official title was "Pośmiertna Wystawa Prac Władysława Strzemińskiego i Katarzyny Kobro" [The Posthumous Exhibition of Władysław Strzemiński's and Katarzyna Kobro's Oeuvre] but, earlier, at the stage of preparations it was described as "Wystawa Strzemińskiego i Jego Grupy" [The Exhibition of Strzemiński and His Group] and later as "Wystawa Pośmiertna Władysława Strzemińskiego" [The Posthumous Exhibition of Władysław Strzemiński]; hence the text contains a variety of titles according to the chronology as suggested by the extant archival materials and publications.

Please send all records, materials, pictures, etc. to the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Łódź Division, 65 Piotrkowska Street.³

This announcement suggests that all that was being planned was a monographic exhibition of Strzemiński's oeuvre, i.e. without Kōbro; the documentation of the Łódź Division of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions (Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, CBWA) does not entirely confirm this, however.⁴ A close analysis of this documentation clearly shows that the course of events was both dynamic and surprising. The situation was highly complex already at the outset.

In the history of Polish art, and of Polish culture in general, the year 1956 is perceived as a very clear political caesura – the starting point of a “thaw” that reflected the political thaw in Poland's internal and foreign affairs. However, it would be wrong to forget that it was only on 17 April of that year that Strzemiński's sworn enemy, Włodzimierz Sokorski, was recalled from the post of the Minister of Culture and Art. A true “thaw” in Poland's politics and culture was possible only after the events of October 1956.

The first official preliminary of exhibitions for the year 1956 that was submitted by the Łódź Division of the CBWA and approved by the central office in Warsaw contains no exhibitions of works by either Strzemiński or Kōbro. A detailed preliminary of exhibitions planned for the Centre of Art Propaganda contains “Architectural designs by Oplustil M.Eng.,” entered under number 9 with the dates 10 November – 2 December.⁵ It might therefore seem that at that time Strzemiński's exhibition was not being envisioned at all.

In answer to the motion sent by the Łódź Division of the CBWA dated 4 January 1956, no. 54/56, Gizela Szancerowa, the director of the CBWA, accepted the proposed changes in the plan of exhibitions for the second half of the year 1956. This is the first time that the plan mentioned the “Posthum[ous Exhibition] of Strzemiński and his group” to be held at the Centre of Art Propaganda, with the attached dates: 3 December – 31 December 1956.⁶ The answering letter reached the Łódź Division on 18 January 1956. Thus the Exhibition of Jerzy Oplustil's Architectural Designs disappeared from the preliminary of exhibitions for 1956 and was replaced by the Posthumous Exhibition

3 “W związku z wystawą pośmiertną Wł. Strzemińskiego” [In connection with Wł. Strzemiński's posthumous exhibition], *Głos Robotniczy*, 1956, no. 155, p. 10; cf. e.g., untitled, *Życie Literackie*, 1956, no. 28, p. 12; untitled, *Kronika*, 1956, no. 14, p. 10.

4 State Archive in Łódź, set 2400, Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Łódź, signature 296, Dept. of Publications and Documentation 1956–1957, “Wystawa Katarzyny Kōbro i Władysława Strzemińskiego XII 1956 – I 1957”, unpaginated.

5 State Archive in Łódź, set 2400, Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Łódź, signature 87, Dept. of Education and Propaganda, “Instrukcja dotycząca dokumentacji wystaw plastycznych oraz plany wystaw plastycznych 1951–1960”, file no. 2/1, unpaginated.

6 Ibid.

of Strzemiński and His Group,⁷ entered under December.⁸ So it was only in January of 1956 that Strzemiński's name appeared in the altered list of exhibitions planned for that year.

Interestingly, the engineer Jerzy Oplustil was not assigned any other date for his exhibition, but he did become a member of the Organising Committee for Władysław Strzemiński's exhibition, actively participated in its meetings and organisational work and, in addition, turns out to have been the co-author of the exhibition's design.⁹ Jerzy Oplustil had closely collaborated with Strzemiński in the years 1947–1952; they had conducted numerous joint architectural projects, especially between the years 1947 and 1949. In designing interiors and furnishings, Oplustil readily cooperated not only with Strzemiński but also with his students from the State College of Fine Arts (Państwowa Wyższa Szkoła Sztuk Plastycznych, PWSSP) in Łódź.¹⁰ These details about Jerzy Oplustil suggest that when his name was entered into the preliminary, it booked, so to speak, the dates for Strzemiński's exhibition until the coming of the real thaw in the cultural policy of the People's Republic of Poland, i.e. until a favourable political signal was received. This signal would mean that the Polish United Worker's Party gave its permission for the presence of the avant-garde on the official art scene and also allowed Strzemiński to return to his due place in contemporary art history. The entire process of preparing his posthumous exhibition in Łódź was conducted with extreme caution, as is well attested to by the statements of the committee members entered in the minutes from their meetings. The reasons why organising this exhibition had to proceed cautiously were twofold: firstly, the political situation in Poland was still uncertain; secondly, some very influential Łódź milieus viewed Strzemiński with particular disfavour.

Various factors complicated the process of organising an exhibition of Strzemiński's oeuvre, and not only in Łódź. Significantly, as late as in September of 1956 it was still impossible to move the exhibition to Warsaw; this was clearly stated by Gizela Szancerowa, the director of the CBWA. Her statement in this matter was entered in the minutes as follows: "Director Szancerowa said that Strzemiński's show in Warsaw in '57 is out of the question, so the best, most meticulously prepared exhibition is to be held in Łódź".¹¹ Bolesław

7 See note 2.

8 In answer to a letter from the Łódź Division L.dz. 23/56 dated 12 January 1956; the letter arrived at the Łódź Division on 21 January 1956. One of its two copies bears a handwritten note in red pencil (prace w Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, pismo 248); *ibid.*

9 *Katarzyna Kobro. Władysław Strzemiński*, exhibition catalogue, The Centre of Art Propaganda, Łódź, December 1956 – January 1957, Łódź, 1956, p. 2; exposition design: Marian Bogusz and Jerzy Oplustil.

10 More in: J. Oplustil, *Z kręgu Strzemińskiego* [From Strzemiński's circle], Warsaw, 1991.

11 Minutes from the meeting of the Organising Committee of Władysław Strzemiński's Exhibition, dated 21 September 1956 at 11 a.m., p. 1; State Archive in Łódź, set 2400, Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Łódź, signature 296, *op. cit.*

Utkin added: “A very good selection must be made”.¹² For this reason, all possible efforts were made to prepare the Łódź exhibition with the greatest care; it was treated as a first-priority task. After the period of Stalinism – and after Strzemiński had been excluded from the artistic milieu and, generally, all professional life and sentenced to civil death (which resulted in his death, at the age of just 59, less than three years later) – the Łódź milieu began evincing a strong need not only to restore his good name to Strzemiński, but also, perhaps mainly, to expiate his elimination from the artistic life. A posthumous exhibition of Strzemiński’s oeuvre, and, after a closed-door debate at the meeting of the Organising Committee, also the oeuvre of his wife Katarzyna Kobro, was to constitute this expiation. The couple had functioned as an inseparable artistic team until at least the final days of the Second Republic of Poland, jointly creating their main artistic projects (e.g. “Kompozycja przestrzeni. Obliczenia rytmu czasoprzestrzennego” [Spatial composition. Calculations of the spatio-temporal rhythm]) and educational projects (the inclusion of art history and drawing in the curricula of secondary schools and adult education courses). They had also jointly participated in the international art scene, establishing the a.r. art group and the a.r. Library, and finally creating the a.r. International Collection of Modern Art (Figs. 1–2).

The minutes from the meetings of the Organising Committee indicate that the issue of including the works of Katarzyna Kobro in Strzemiński’s exhibition was a point of discussion. In conclusion, it was decided that the achievements of both artists would be celebrated; but the decision whether to present their works together or in separate exhibition spaces proved difficult. The minutes contain a note that their works would be exhibited separately. Yet a unique recording of the National Film Archive (Filmoteka Narodowa) shows Kobro’s sculptures exhibited together with Strzemiński’s paintings¹³ (Figs. 3–4). A part of their oeuvre cannot be considered separately. Large passages from *Kompozycja przestrzeni. Obliczenia rytmu czasoprzestrzennego*, a text co-authored by Kobro and Strzemiński, complemented the works at the exhibition and in the catalogue to Strzemiński’s *Kompozycje architektoniczne* [Architectural compositions].¹⁴ Members of the Organising Committee, who were mostly people closely associated with Strzemiński and in many cases well acquainted with both him and his wife, were obviously unsure as to how to deal with the issue of the couple’s separation in 1947 as a result of their experiences during and immediately after the 2nd World War, which had proved disastrous to their marriage. Despite their final separation and the rupture of any private links, Kobro and Strzemiński retained deep respect for each other as artists. The Neoplastic Room, an exhibition space at the Museum of Art

12 Ibid.

13 The National Film Archive, no. 11311, *Wystawa Kobro – Strzemiński w Łodzi*, Łódź, 6 January 1957, camera operator Zbigniew Skoczek, 1957, 6’36”.

14 *Katarzyna Kobro...*, op. cit., p. 25.



Fig. 1. Julian Przyboś, Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro, 1929, archival photograph, Museum of Art in Łódź



Fig. 2. The a.r. International Collection of Modern Art, 1931, archival photograph, Museum of Art in Łódź



Fig. 3. Part of the exhibition, the National Film Archive, no. 11311, *Wystawa Kobro – Strzemiński w Łodzi*, Łódź, 6 January 1957, camera operator Zbigniew Skoczek, 1957 (11:37:33:08)



Fig. 4. Part of the exhibition, the National Film Archive, no. 11311, *Wystawa Kobro – Strzemiński w Łodzi*, Łódź, 6 January 1957, camera operator Zbigniew Skoczek, 1957 (11:39:36:16)

in Łódź which Strzemiński had designed in 1948, i.e. soon after the couple's separation, constituted his tribute to *Kompozycje architektoniczne*, Kobro's wide-ranging artistic achievement in the field of sculpture. He placed her spatial compositions in the focal point of the Neoplastic Room, with paintings by



Fig. 5. The Neoplastic Room, 1948, archival photograph, Museum of Art in Łódź

the leading members of 20th-century European avant-garde in the background (Fig. 5). The organisers of their posthumous exhibition in 1956 most probably considered Strzemiński's concept a very important reference point; this will be discussed later. The Neoplastic Room was destroyed in 1950 – the Museum of Art in Łódź did not exhibit avant-garde art during the period of Socialist Realism and during the initial stages of the thaw. An overwhelming majority of extant works by both Strzemiński and Kobro remained in the collection of the Museum of Art in Łódź – kept in storage, just as the surviving works from the a.r. International Collection of Modern Art. At the time the exhibition was beginning to be organised their state of preservation was lamentable. Stefan Krygier reminisced:

In 1956, upon the initiative of Julian Przyboś, plans arose for a large posthumous exhibition of Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro to be held in Łódź. Together with Professor Stefan Wegner and Julian Przyboś, I took part in the talks on organisational issues at the Museum of Art in Łódź. At one point Julian Przyboś expressed the desire to see the collection at once. Having entered the basement, we saw the paintings, dusty, dirty and with the glass broken, lying scattered on the floor. Our first impulse was to transfer the collection to a ground-floor room. Never again did I see Julian Przyboś in such a state of agitation as when he was helping to carry the works.

He was incensed because the situation we had discovered in the basement most probably touched him personally. The “a.r.” collection, as well as the works of Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro, were an integral component of the idea which he had been fighting for, which he had helped to create, when before the war he had taken part in the creative avant-garde movement.¹⁵

Curiously, the Museum of Art in Łódź did not propose that the Strzemiński and Kobro posthumous exhibition be organised. It might seem that this would have been the most appropriate place to do so, also for reasons of logistics: most of the works presented at that exhibition had come from its collection. The deciding factor may have been political reasons – the lack of permission from the authorities or even an outright prohibition – or purely personal issues. An indisputable answer may prove impossible to find, since the archive of Marian Minich PhD, the director of this museum (in 1934–1939, 1945–1965), was destroyed in the early 1960s.¹⁶ It is known for a fact that in the year 1956 he personally joined the meetings of the exhibition’s Organising Committee¹⁷ and that he authorised the loan of a large number of both Kobro’s and Strzemiński’s works to be exhibited in Łódź, then in Warsaw, and afterwards also in Paris.

From the formal point of view, the Organising Committee of Władysław Strzemiński’s exhibition included Ryszard Stefańczyk, Stefan Wegner, Bolesław Utkin, Stefan Krygier, Jerzy Oplustil, Lech Kunka, Jakobina Strzemińska, Nora Szczepańska, the painter Tadeusz Roman (officially responsible for organising the exhibition as the director of the Łódź Division of the CBWA) and a young historian of art, Janina Ładnowska. All of them were associated with the Łódź artistic milieu and were mostly painters – mainly Strzemiński’s former students who were linked with the State College of Fine Arts in Łódź.¹⁸

Many other persons actively participated in organising the exhibition. The catalogue’s imprint records each person who was responsible for some area of work:

Script design: Marian Bogusz

Exposition design: Marian Bogusz, Jerzy Oplustil

“Teoria widzenia” exposition design: Stefan Krygier, Lech Kunka, Jerzy Mackiewicz

15 S. Krygier, “Jakim go znałem...” [As I knew him...], *Sztuka*, 1986, no. 6, p. 27.

16 Information received from Ms. Paulina Kurc-Maj, director of the Department of Modern Art, Museum of Art in Łódź.

17 State Archive in Łódź, set 2400, Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Łódź, signature 296, Dept. of Publications and Documentation 1956–1957, “Wystawa Kobro i Władysława Strzemińskiego XII 1956 – I 1957, Protokoły posiedzeń Komitetu Organizacyjnego wystawy pośmiertnej Władysława Strzemińskiego”, unpaginated.

18 State Archive in Łódź, set 2400, Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Łódź, signature 296, Dept. of Publications and Documentation 1956–1957, “Wystawa Kobro i Władysława Strzemińskiego XII 1956 – I 1957, Protokoły posiedzeń Komitetu Organizacyjnego wystawy pośmiertnej Władysława Strzemińskiego, posiedzenie z 3 IX 1956”, unpaginated.

Graphic design for the catalogue: Stefan Wegner

Graphic design for the poster: Lech Kunka

Invitation: Stanisław Fijałkowski

Text selection: Stanisław Fijałkowski, Antoni Starczewski, Bolesław Utkin

Photographs to be reproduced: Eugeniusz Haneman

Photographs for placards: Jerzy Mackiewicz

Overall coordination: Stefan Wegner

Unless otherwise noted, the exhibits are owned by the Museum of Art in Łódź and were made available courtesy of its Director, Marian Minich PhD.¹⁹

The catalogue included the essays *Nowatorstwo Strzemińskiego* [Strzemiński's innovativeness] by Julian Przyboś and *Wspomnienia biograficzne* [Biographical recollections] by Stefan Wegner,²⁰ as well as a bibliography of Strzemiński's oeuvre as prepared by Irena Treichel in cooperation with Wanda Polakowska²¹ and a bibliography of Kobro's oeuvre as prepared by Bolesław Utkin.²² Other persons, such as the already mentioned Gizela Szancerowa or Henryk Stażewski, who had once belonged to the a.r. group and still remained faithful to geometric abstraction, also attended the committee's meetings.

The origins of the Łódź exhibition are not known, but we may hypothesise that its inception was linked with the changes that were taking place in the artistic milieu of Łódź, including at the State College of Fine Arts from which Strzemiński had been dismissed in January of 1950. His dismissal was decreed by the then-Minister of Culture and Art Włodzimierz Sokorski with the acceptance of the college's authorities, then chaired by Stefan Wegner, who himself was dismissed soon after. The only one to protest against Strzemiński's dismissal, which occurred in rather dramatic circumstances, was Professor Roman Modzelewski. Strzemiński had already been excluded from the Association of Artists and Designers (Związek Artystów Plastyków) in Łódź two years before, under the pretext of not having a diploma from any college of art. The political situation in Poland made it possible for the resentful bigwigs of the Łódź artistic milieu to remove Strzemiński and to cut him off from all means of supporting himself, thus indirectly leading to his untimely death in December of 1952.²³

In 1956 Roman Modzelewski held the post of the rector of the State College of Fine Arts and returned Professor Stefan Wegner to his former position

19 *Katarzyna Kobro...*, op. cit., p. 2.

20 J. Przyboś, "Nowatorstwo Strzemińskiego" [Strzemiński's innovativeness], in: *ibid.*, pp. 3–11; S. Wegner, "Wspomnienia biograficzne" [Biographical recollections], in: *ibid.*, pp. 12–17.

21 *Katarzyna Kobro...*, op. cit., pp. 56–67.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

23 Library of the Museum of Art in Łódź, R. Modzelewski, *Odpowiedź na referat prof. Fijałkowskiego pt. Głos w dyskusji nad referatem prof. Modzelewskiego zatytułowanym „Twórca samotny”* [In answer to Prof. Fijałkowski's paper "A voice in the debate on Prof. Modzelewski's paper entitled 'The lone creator'"], typescript, p. 26 ff.

– with the full support of the college’s Senate, but to the great dissatisfaction of Minister Sokorski, who demanded that Wegner be removed again. The Senate unanimously voted to leave Wegner be and the minutes from the meeting were passed on to the minister. The storm died down and Wegner remained.²⁴ Stefan Krygier and Lech Kunka were employed at the State College of Fine Arts that same year. Stanisław Fijałkowski was already working there as Professor Modzelewski’s assistant. After the period of Stalinism, artists from the circle that had once been close to Strzemiński were returning to their normal creative work and activity in the milieu. Four of the above were among the co-organisers of Strzemiński’s posthumous exhibition in Łódź.

Bearing in mind the prestigious quality of the exhibition which was intended to return Kobro and Strzemiński their due position in the history of the European avant-garde²⁵ – or, in fact, the history of modern art in Europe – the organisers attached great importance to the smallest details of the exposition and the catalogue, from the script and the selection of works and theoretical texts to the visual arrangement of the whole. The minutes from the committee meetings, as well as the final effect, i.e. the exhibition and its catalogue, make this immediately obvious. The concept for the entire exhibition relied on an attempt to present Strzemiński’s artistic and theoretical output as a coherent, homogeneous work. The script was produced by Marian Bogusz and Jerzy Oplustil. At that time Bogusz was a noted Warsaw artist of the young generation; in his work he analysed problems of space.²⁶ He was one of the initiators of Group 55 (1955) and of the Krzywe Koło Gallery (1956). In 1947 he had helped to established the Young Artists and Scientists’ Club (Klub Młodych Artystów i Naukowców) to which he invited, among others, Władysław Strzemiński and the young painters and designers from his circle, usually students of the State College of Fine Arts in Łódź. He was also active as a stage designer. Jerzy Oplustil, as has already been mentioned, had collaborated with Strzemiński and a few of his students in the late 1940s, designing the interiors of civic buildings and exhibition pavilions.

24 Ibid., p. 27.

25 State Archive in Łódź, set 2400, Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Łódź, signature 296, Dept. of Publications and Documentation 1956–1957, “Wystawa Kobro i Władysława Strzemińskiego XII 1956 – I 1957. Protokół posiedzenia Komitetu Organizacyjnego Pośmiertnej Wystawy Władysława Strzemińskiego z dnia 21 IX 1956”, p. 3.

26 In the text *Konfrontacje 1960* [Confrontations 1960], printed in the catalogue of the exhibition under the same title, Aleksander Wojciechowski thus described Bogusz’s artistic explorations in the mid-1950s: “Marian Bogusz. Five years ago, during the exhibition of ‘Group 55’ in which Marian Bogusz participated, the issue of space evident at the forefront of his work was pointed out. It was said that this was an imagined, ‘philosophical’ space, filled not with objects but with thoughts. It was at the same time a real space; but its realness was present in the same sense as our psychological, intellectual experiences are real”; quoted after *Galeria Krzywe Koło* [The Krzywe Koło Gallery], catalogue of the retrospective exhibition, National Museum in Warsaw, July – September, Warsaw, 1990, p. 71.

The organisers of the Posthumous Exhibition of Władysław Strzemiński's and Katarzyna Kobro's Oeuvre wanted to create an exhibition which would show the *opus magnum* of both of these artists in a comprehensive, suggestive and visually very attractive way, i.e. one that would be very innovative and worthy of the Neoplastic Room. After years and years of crude, incredibly boring Socrealist exhibitions, where the artistic quality of the displayed works was usually dismal and the ideological message was fed to the audience in spades, they wished to surprise the viewers with a first-rate quality, freshness and a modern outlook of the exhibition. This was a considerable challenge, since the Centre of Art Propaganda had at its disposal only a small space that was not easy to divide and where it would prove difficult to house – and display satisfactorily – a substantial number of works. In addition, the author of the design had to take into account the financial and material resources as well as the fact that time was limited.

The assumption of the exhibition's script was to present the entirety of Strzemiński's oeuvre, i.e. his works of art and the theoretical texts that complemented them and were an integral component of the show and the catalogue. Kobro's and Strzemiński's innovativeness was shown in the script and emphasised by the scenery, i.e. the exposition design. The exhibition opened with photographic reproductions of works by Kobro and Strzemiński, as well as of those by European artists: Hans Arp, George Braque, Theo van Doesburg, Fernand Léger, Kazimierz Malewicz [Kazimir Malevich],²⁷ Piet Mondrian, Pablo Picasso and Georges Vantongerloo.²⁸ Thus, Kobro's and Strzemiński's oeuvre was presented in the broader context of the European avant-garde and as being in full partnership with it, not just influenced by it. This is reflected by the following record from a discussion held during a meeting of the Organising Committee:

Under discussion was the issue of Strzemiński's attitude to the past and to contemporary art.

Citizen²⁹ Krygier suggested that large-format reproductions should not be displayed, but that Strzemiński and Kobro should be shown against the background of e.g. Malewicz and Mondrian.

Citizen Stażewski praised the idea of [placing] black-and-white reproductions in the hall, emphasising that the character of a reproduction should be retained. The exposition is to be complemented by a frieze of reproductions of Arp's to show the differences and analogies between the two artists.

Citizen Wegner said that Strzemiński and Kobro are to be amongst those artists, not

27 In this essay, the Polish spelling (Kazimierz Malewicz) is used, following the spelling in the quoted press articles; the transliteration from Russian is Kazimir Malevich (translator's note).

28 Given in the same order as in *Katarzyna Kobro...*, op. cit., p. 18.

29 The title *obywatel* = citizen (abbreviated to *ob.*) was at that time customarily included in official documents, sometimes with an additional title, e.g. "citizen judge", "citizen director" (translator's note).



Fig. 6. Part of the exhibition, the National Film Archive, no. 11311, *Wystawa Kobro – Strzemiński w Łodzi*, Łódź, 6 January 1957, camera operator Zbigniew Skoczek, 1957 (11:37:40:20)

derivative of them. They must be shown as being on a par with, e.g. Picasso and others. The author of the exposition pointed out that the reproductions in the hall will signal the atmosphere of Strzemiński's and Kbro's work. All comparisons and analogies will be [placed] on pulpits, there being reproductions of, for instance, Strzemiński's side by side with Malewicz's. The texts are to be very brief, so as not to suggest that the West [is] first and [only] then Strzemiński.

Oplustil M.Eng. remarked that it would be best not to force conclusions but to show the works.³⁰

The detailed script, signed by Bogusz, stated that the exhibition would occupy (a) the entrance space, placing Kbro's and Strzemiński's oeuvre in the context of the European avant-garde, (b) the main hall, "a display of the works in the chronological development of the oeuvre", and (c) the small hall, devoted in its entirety to "Wł. Strzemiński's chief theoretical work *Teoria widzenia* [The theory of vision]". Openwork screens divided the main hall into seven spaces: 1. the Cézanne period, 2. the Cubist period, 3. the Neoplastic (Spatio-temporal) period, 4. the Unist period, 5. Hyper-realism, 6. oil paintings (space and sun), works which are today known as Afterimages and/or solar compositions, and 7. paintings and compositions from the final period (Figs. 6–8). In each of these spaces, the works were complemented by Strzemiński's theoretical

30 State Archive in Łódź, set 2400, Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Łódź, signature 296, Dept. of Publications and Documentation 1956–1957, "Wystawa Kbro i Władysława Strzemińskiego XII 1956 – I 1957. Protokół posiedzenia Komitetu Organizacyjnego Pośmiertnej Wystawy Władysława Strzemińskiego z dnia 21 IX 1956", p. 3.



Fig. 7. Part of the exhibition, the National Film Archive, no. 11311, *Wystawa Kobro – Strzemiński w Łodzi*, Łódź, 6 January 1957, camera operator Zbigniew Skoczek, 1957 (11:38:42:00)

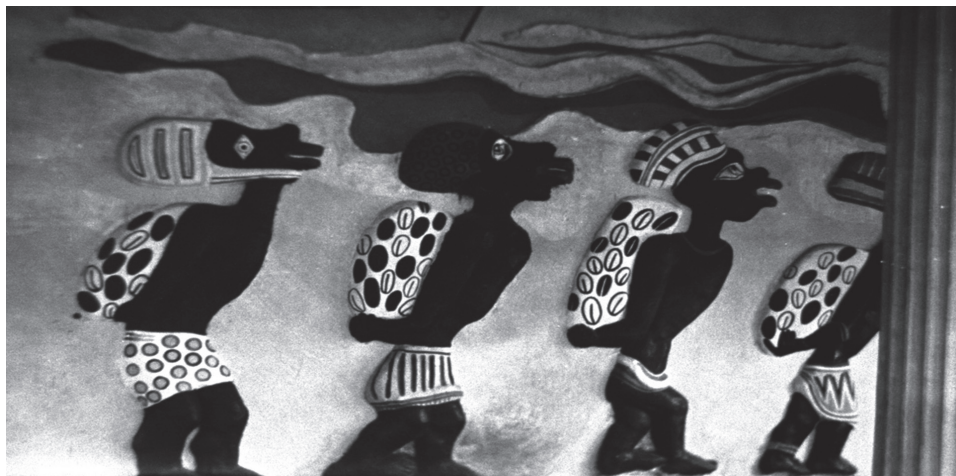


Fig. 8. Relief sculptures at the Egzotyczna Café, the National Film Archive, no. 11311, *Wystawa Kobro – Strzemiński w Łodzi*, Łódź, 6 January 1957, camera operator Zbigniew Skoczek, 1957 (11:40:54:12)

texts. The exhibition in the small hall, which focused on *Teoria widzenia*, had a “separately devised script”.³¹

The exhibition space was limited, so it was decided to place the paintings on the walls and on screens made of a metal frame with nylon threads

31 Ibid., unpaginated.

stretched vertically inside (Fig. 9). The colour scheme of the frames was to correspond to the colour scheme of the paintings placed in them, and the openwork was to divide the space yet to concurrently open it up. This solution was accepted most probably as a reference to the concept of the Neoplastic Room; at the same time the idea of organising the space by means of colour and not a solid barrier or a space-enclosing wall was a continuation of the notions expressed by Kobra and Strzemiński in the text of *Kompozycja przestrzeni* [Spatial composition] and in Unism as realised in sculpture. Most of Kobra's best works that were still extant came from this very period. Only a few surviving black-and-white photographs show Kobra's sculptures positioned on surfaces painted in a way which suggests that the colour continued in the space of the sculpture placed on the meeting line of those colourful spaces (Fig. 10). The colour scheme of the exhibition frames matched that of the paintings hanging therein; hence, by analogy, it may be assumed that it comprised the primary colours of red, yellow and blue, arranged in a contrasting manner and making the spatial composition complete. Owing to its correspondence with the colour scheme of Mondrian's works, the interior was called, slightly inappropriately, neoplastic.

The Posthumous Exhibition of Władysław Strzemiński's and Katarzyna Kobra's Oeuvre is invaluable as the first attempt at creating a catalogue of both extant and lost works by both Kobra and Strzemiński, their locations in museum collections and in private possession, and their state of preservation, which, as has already been shown, reflected their status during the previous decade. In addition, it was an incentive to commence work on Strzemiński's biography and a bibliography of texts by Strzemiński and Kobra – a bibliography which, unfortunately, even today is often considered incomplete. Also, from the very beginning the exhibition was conceived as a place where the public would finally, for the first time, become acquainted with Strzemiński's treatise *Teoria widzenia* as a text that crowned his artistic, didactic and intellectual activity. Despite some inaccuracies and errors, most of them impossible to avoid, the authors of the exhibition "organised an immensely interesting exhibition in a way that had never before been seen in Łódź".³²

Yet the Posthumous Exhibition of Władysław Strzemiński's and Katarzyna Kobra's Oeuvre had many other contexts and levels of meaning as well. Certainly one of those was the expiatory nature of the show. It was underwritten by the Association of Artists and Designers [Związek Artystów Plastyków] in Łódź, the same one that in 1948 had rejected Władysław Strzemiński as its member, thus excluding him from the official art scene and by the same token depriving him of all means of supporting himself in the period 1950–1952, i.e. after his disgraceful dismissal from the State College of Fine Arts in January of 1950. The fact that Strzemiński had been the co-creator and *spiritus movens* of

32 E. Etler, "Lekcja Władysława Strzemińskiego" [A lesson by Władysław Strzemiński], *Kronika*, 1957, no. 1, p. 3.



Fig. 9. Part of the exhibition, the National Film Archive, no. 11311, *Wystawa Kobro – Strzemiński w Łodzi*, Łódź, 6 January 1957, camera operator Zbigniew Skoczek, 1957 (11:38:07:17)

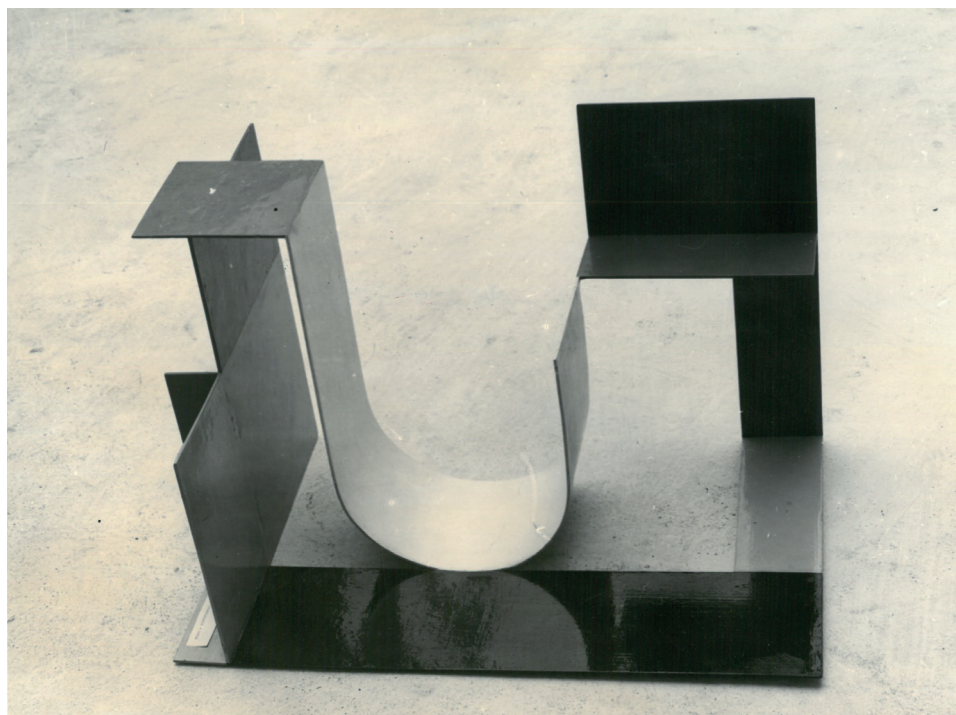


Fig. 10. Katarzyna Kobro's *Kompozycja przestrzenna* [Spatial composition] at the exhibition, archival photograph, Documentation Department, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art

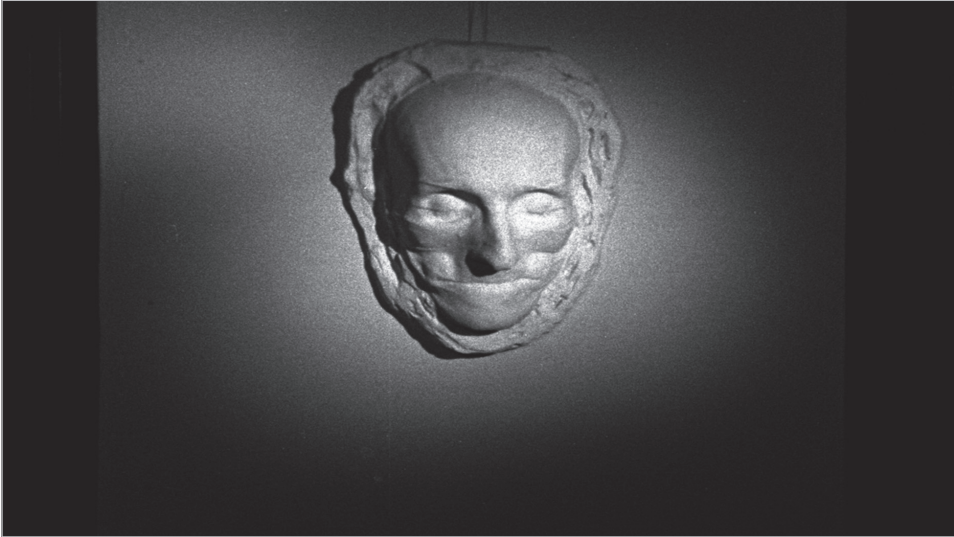


Fig. 11. Death mask, the National Film Archive, no. 11311, *Wystawa Kobro – Strzemiński w Łodzi*, Łódź, 6 January 1957, camera operator Zbigniew Skoczek, 1957 (11:39:56:09)

the Polish Artists and Designers Trade Union in Łódź in the 1930s and that in the years 1945–1946 he had actively participated in its work was conveniently forgotten. The fact that in 1932 Strzemiński became the first-ever laureate of the prestigious City of Łódź Artistic Award was overlooked. After the 2nd World War he was among the initiators and creators of the State College of Fine Arts in Łódź and he designed an innovative curriculum for the college, with the aim of training its graduates for collaboration with the industry. He taught at the college from its inception until his dismissal. Some of its lecturers – including the former colleague who had contributed to his dismissal – and Strzemiński’s former students became members of the exhibition’s Organising Committee. This endeavour opened entirely new opportunities to them; for instance, it offered Stefan Wegner and, for entirely different reasons, Strzemiński’s ex-students Stefan Krygier and Lech Kunka, who had resisted Stalinist oppression, a chance to return to the artistic milieu. It also launched the artistic careers of some of his other ex-students, for instance Stanisław Fijałkowski. Soon they had their own exhibitions at the Łódź Division of the Bureau of Art Exhibitions and the works of some of them were shown at its other divisions. It must be emphasised that the exhibition of Kobro’s and Strzemiński’s works constituted a very important contribution of the Łódź creative milieu to the revival of unfettered art in Poland after over six years of relentless domination of Socialist Realism and of ideological control over artists and their art. In the period of the thaw, abstraction was perceived as synonymous with both freedom and modernity. For this very reason, in the latter half of the 1950s abstraction in all its forms became almost ubiquitous



Fig. 12. The exhibition's title placard, the National Film Archive, no. 11311, *Wystawa Kobro – Strzemiński w Łodzi*, Łódź, 6 January 1957, camera operator Zbigniew Skoczek, 1957 (11:39:48:00)



Fig. 13. Invitation to Kobro's and Strzemiński's exhibition in Łódź, Documentation Department, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art (also: State Archive in Łódź, Modern and Contemporary Art Section at the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences)

in Polish art.³³ The fact that Strzemiński's death mask was placed in the first room, right by the entrance, was especially significant; this gesture gave the exhibition the overtone of a posthumous tribute. The same message was expressed by the fact that the exhibition was termed a "posthumous" one (and it must be noted that it was termed as such from the very beginning); this pointed to its gravity and, in a sense, imposed the direction of the viewer vs. the work relationship (Fig. 11).

The Posthumous Exhibition of Władysław Strzemiński's and Katarzyna Kobro's Oeuvre at the Łódź Division of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions opened on Sunday, 16 December 1956, at twelve noon. It was housed in the Centre of Art Propaganda, no. 4 Park Sienkiewicza (Fig. 12). The invitation lists three co-organisers: the Polish Artists and Designers Trade Union, the Organising Committee and the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions (Fig. 13). Attendance was 12,350 viewers in total, of which 7,300 came during the first twelve days at the very end of the year 1956 and a further 5,050 during the first thirteen days of the year 1957.³⁴ It was seen by, on average, 608 viewers a day, which was not a bad result at all, considering the avant-garde radicalism of both artists' oeuvre and their many years' absence from the artistic milieu of Łódź. The last time Strzemiński had taken part in an exhibition of the Artists and Designers' Trade Union was in 1946, whereas Kobro ceased exhibiting her works after the war and did not participate in the artistic life at all. With regard to attendance, the exhibition held fifth place among all fifteen exhibitions organised in 1956 by the Łódź Division of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions. Bearing in mind that the reception of avant-garde works, and especially their theoretical explication, after the insipidity of Socialist Realism was not an easy thing, the result must be considered a major success.

When exactly the option of moving Kobro's and Strzemiński's exhibition to the capital arose remains a mystery. Housed in the Zachęta building of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Warsaw, it was open to the public from 18 January to 10 February 1957. Just as in Łódź, the exposition was designed by Marian Bogusz and the poster was designed by Lech Kunka. A total of 170 exhibits were on display.³⁵ The surviving documentation held in the State Archive in Łódź and in the Institutional Archive of the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art contains no information as to when and in what circumstances the decision was taken to show the exhibition in Warsaw, but it could not have been earlier than in late autumn, after the events of October 1956. The

33 Cf. I. Luba, "The Faces of Socialist Realism and Subsequent Liberalisation in Polish Painting", in: *Behind the Iron Curtain. Official and Independent Art in the Soviet Union and Poland 1945–1989*, Warsaw, 2010, p. 84.

34 State Archive in Łódź, set 2400, Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Łódź, signature 87, Dept. of Education and Propaganda, "Instrukcja dotycząca dokumentacji wystaw plastycznych oraz plany wystaw plastycznych 1951–1960", file no. 2/1, unpaginated.

35 Katarzyna Kobro: 12 sculptures, 1 painting on glass; Władysław Strzemiński: 77 paintings, 79 watercolours and drawings, 1 print.

scheme came to fruition owing to the combined efforts of the organisers of the Łódź exhibition, with the special involvement of Gizela Szancerowa as the director of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions and, above all, of Julian Przyboś. Three decades later Stefan Krygier recalled: "After Strzemiński's death, J. Przyboś was the greatest promoter of his art. He contributed to the transfer of Strzemiński's and Katarzyna Kobro's exhibition to Warsaw. I regret that the beautiful and very involved speech that Przyboś gave at the vernissage in Zachęta was not recorded".³⁶ It is very probable that this speech was similar in spirit to the first essay Przyboś had written about Strzemiński in the period of the thaw, in autumn 1955, entitled *Wnioski i propozycje* [Conclusions and proposals]. He wrote:

[being] turned towards the future, Strzemiński, an innovator and precursor, was aware that in the history of art (just as in the history of any other human activity) there was no *return*, and there could not be. Aiming at a universal art, he pointed to new ways of bringing painting back to its social function. [...] The universality of visual art will rely not on one picture, tiny or huge, being seen by many or very many people, but on the whole human environment being shaped like a picture. One will live in a picture, so to speak. This is the concept of the universality of art as Strzemiński foresaw in his books and realised in his art. Art is no longer ceremonial and exceptional; every quotidian thing becomes art.

The "Espace" group, which consists of architects, engineers, painters, sculptors, furniture makers etc., is currently promulgating and attempting to effectuate similar ideas in France. They, too, have the artistic integrity of people's quotidian lives in mind. Similarly, but not as profoundly as Strzemiński and his group, they are trying to combine all types of artistic activity into a single universe of art, one that is not divisible into types. [...]

But in art, we must rely on – creativity, that is on our own effort, not someone else's. Our own, which means [set] at that highest level of visual awareness which our most outstanding contemporary creators have reached; those who did not imitate anyone else's painting, but, walking in the world's artistic avant-garde, shared in the making of that creative advance which in France, for instance, gave birth to Picasso, Léger and the "Espace" group, in Poland to Strzemiński [and] the "Praesens" group, in Mexico – to Rivera and his comrades' murals.³⁷

From the perspective of political history, the exhibition at the Łódź Division of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, later transferred to Warsaw, institutionally sanctioned and conferred a very high status on both Kobro's and Strzemiński's art, art theory and other actions intended to promote avant-garde art in Poland, for instance their founding the a.r. International Collection of Modern Art and the last outburst of Strzemiński's creative freedom – his designing the Neoplastic Room at the Museum of Art in Łódź. In fact, official recognition by means of having the exhibition housed in Zachęta, which

36 S. Krygier, "Jakim go znałem...", *Sztuka*, 1986, no. 6, p. 27.

37 J. Przyboś, "Wnioski i propozycje" [Conclusions and proposals], *Przegląd Kulturalny*, 1955, no. 43, p. 3.

at that time was Poland's chief exhibition space devoted to modern art, was a value in itself.

Moreover, the exhibition of Kobro's and Strzemiński's works in Warsaw opened up entirely new perspectives on official cultural cooperation between circles rooted in opposing political camps, i.e. socialist Poland on the one hand and the Western countries, France and Holland, on the other; this will be discussed later. It was also a crucial step towards one of the boldest and most radical gestures made by the current authorities, i.e. sending the exhibition abroad, outside the Iron Curtain – and to Paris, no less, the very heart of avant-garde art – as an exhibition project that was to promote the Polish avant-garde under the official patronage of, jointly, two government departments: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Culture. This gesture was politically significant, both abroad and in the country, but it also indicated a very telling reversal of the direction in artistic relations along the Warsaw–Paris line that was rooted in the situation of the Polish art scene. Soon, and quite unexpectedly, Kazimierz Malewicz was to become the key figure in this new and surprising political *volte-face*.

In the 1950s artistic investigations in Poland were dominated by the imperative of modernity.³⁸ Geometric abstraction deriving from Constructivism clearly indicated that the avant-garde art that had developed in Poland in the early 1920s, with inspiration coming from, among others, Strzemiński, was continued. Tadeusz Kantor and the youngest generation of painters were trying to place *art informel* in opposition to the avant-garde and to promote the former as truly modern. Yet while they were trying to implant *art informel*, imported from Paris, on home ground, the organisers of the posthumous exhibition of Kobro's and Strzemiński's oeuvre, with Julian Przyboś and Gizela Szancerowa at the forefront, presented the output of the Polish precursors of abstract art, artists who had helped to create the European avant-garde, to the Paris audience, and not once, but twice. First, a total of twenty-two works by Kobro and Strzemiński were on loan at the exhibition entitled *50 ans de peinture abstraite* at Galerie Raymond Creuze in Paris in May 1957 (Galerie Creuze, Salle Balzac, Paris, du 9 mai au 12 juin 1957), where they represented Polish art;³⁹ the second, far more prestigious exhibition to be held in Paris

38 I. Luba, "Imperatyw nowoczesności (w sztuce polskiej lat 50.)" [The imperative of modernity (in Polish art of the 1950s)], in: *Wizje nowoczesności. Lata 50. i 60. – wzornictwo, estetyka i styl życia* [Visions of modernity: the 1950s and 1960s – design, aesthetics and lifestyle], Warsaw, 2012, p. 9.

39 *50 ans de peinture abstraite. Exposition internationale organisée à l'occasion de la publication du Dictionnaire de la peinture abstraite par Michel Seuphor aux Editions Fernand Hasan*. Galerie Creuze, Salle Balzac, Paris, du 9 mai au 12 juin 1957, Editeur Paris: Galerie Creuze, 1957, exhibition catalogue, Préface de Michel Seuphor, Paris 1957; cf. The International Exhibition of Non-objective Art, France, Paris, Galerie Raymond Creuze, May 1957, two exhibitors from Poland (K. Kobro, W. Strzemiński), twenty-two exhibits (13 paintings, 7 sculptures, 2 drawings); in the press: "Ze świata" [World news], *Kronika*,



Fig. 14. A press cutting: the article by J. Przybóś with the same photograph of Denise René, Documentation Department, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art

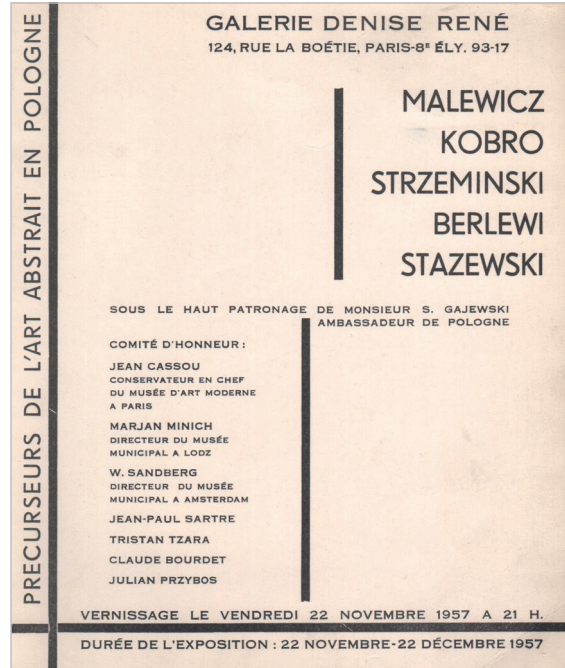
was *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne: Malewicz, Kobra, Strzemiński, Berlewi, Stażewski* which was presented at the Denise René Gallery.⁴⁰ Originally planned for the period of 22 November – 22 December 1957, it was prolonged until 10 January 1958 because of its great success with the viewers.⁴¹ Its rank and popularity resulted from several factors, the most important being the inclusion of works by Kazimierz Malewicz. They were presented in Paris for the first time, acquired for the exhibition thanks to the efforts of the Polish diplomatic services and the gallery owner herself. Denise René was at that

1957, no. 10, p. 11; *Rocznik CBWA* [Annual of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions] 1957, Warsaw, 1957, p. 61.

40 *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne*, exhibition catalogue, ten reproductions, introductions by n. Jean Cassou, Julian Przybóś, Henryk Berlewi, Warsaw, 1957; Exhibition: *Precursors of abstract art in Poland*, France, Paris, the Denise René Gallery, curator: Julian Przybóś, poster design: Marian Bogusz, December 1957; five exhibitors, forty-four exhibits (25 oils, 9 watercolours, 7 sculptures, 3 drawings); *Rocznik CBWA*, *ibid.*; <http://www.deniserene.com/8.html>.

41 (S. Dr.), "Francuzi byli zaskoczeni wysokim poziomem polskiego malarstwa abstrakcyjnego. O ocenie wystawy w Paryżu rozmawiamy z Henrykiem Stażewskim" [The French were astonished by the high quality of Polish abstract painting. We speak with Henryk Stażewski about an assessment of the exhibition], *Kurier Polski*, 1958, no. 6, p. 4.

Fig. 15. Invitation to the *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne: Malewicz, Kobro, Strzemiński, Berlewi, Stażewski* exhibition at Galerie Denise René, Documentation Department, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art



time an unquestionable authority in the field of avant-garde art, with special interest in geometric abstraction (Fig. 14). Works exhibited in her gallery were the best of the best; this was where the rankings of artists were made.

The exhibition *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne: Malewicz, Kobro, Strzemiński, Berlewi, Stażewski* was organised “sous le haut patronage de Monsieur S. Gajewski Ambassadeur de Pologne” (Fig. 15). The Honorary Committee included members of the international cultural elite; the vernissage invitation contained the names of “Jean Cassou, conservateur en chef du Musée d’art moderne à Paris; Marian Minich, directeur du Musée municipal à Lodz; W. Sandberg, directeur du Musée municipal à Amsterdam; Jean-Paul Sartre; Tristan Tzara; Claude Bourdet; Julian Przybos”.

The opening of the exhibition at the Denise René Gallery in Paris took place on 15 November 1957 (Figs. 16–17). Its origin was commented on in the Polish press: “The idea to organise this exhibition was born at the International Exhibition of Abstract Art, which was opened in Paris in May of this year. A painting from the *Architectural Compositions* series exhibited therein aroused such great interest that the Denise René Gallery offered to hold an exhibition of Polish abstract painters”.⁴² Henryk Stażewski was more con-

⁴² State Archive in Łódź, set 2400, Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Łódź, signature 296, Dept. of Publications and Documentation 1956–1957, “Wystawa Katarzyny Kobro i Władysława Strzemińskiego XII 1956 – I 1957”, press cutting, unpaginated.

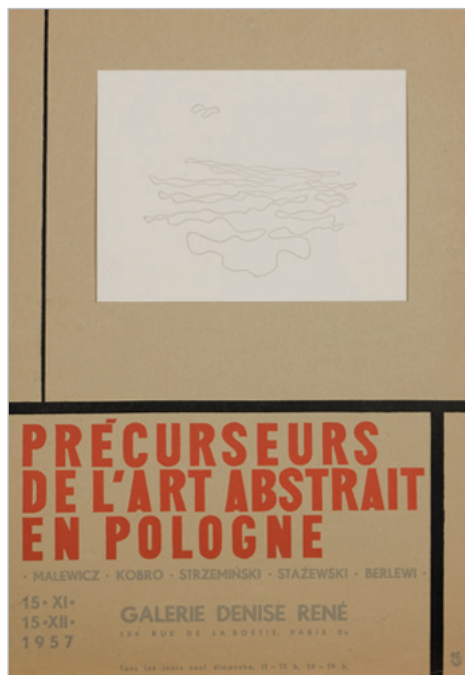


Fig. 16. Poster of the *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne: Malewicz, Kobro, Strzemiński, Berlewi, Stażewski* exhibition at Galerie Denise René, Documentation Department, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art

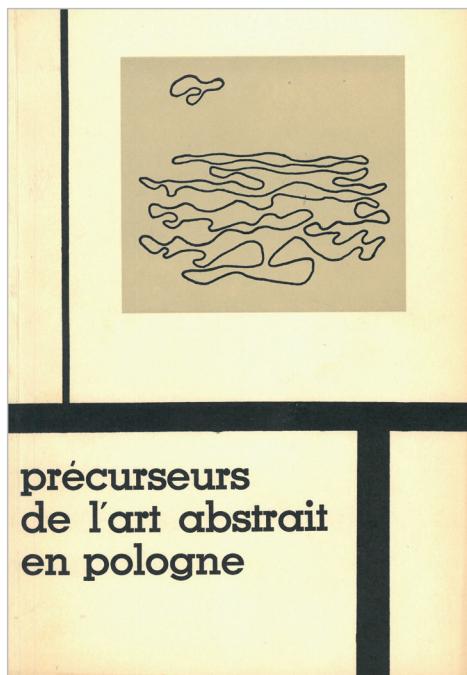


Fig. 17. Cover of the catalogue for the *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne: Malewicz, Kobro, Strzemiński, Berlewi, Stażewski* exhibition at Galerie Denise René, Documentation Department, Zachęta – National Gallery of Art

crete in speaking about her contribution: “The owner of the gallery endorses only the art of pure abstraction. We are grateful to her for her aid in organising the exhibition, as she has made the exhibition rooms available to us free of charge, while to rent such a space in Paris would have cost around half a million francs”.⁴³

Reports from the exhibition which were published in the Polish press accentuated – following in the footsteps of Przyboś in this – the thirty-five-year history of the avant-garde in Poland and the contribution to it that had been made by the artists exhibited at the Denise René Gallery. These artists were emphasised as being equal partners to the luminaries of the European avant-garde and as sharing with them the glory of being precursors of non-objective art: “The creative individuality of these artists is attested to by, among others, the fact that they were not only precursors in Poland, but also initiators of

43 (S. Dr.), op. cit., p. 4.

new trends in abstract art worldwide”.⁴⁴ Kazimierz Malewicz was mentioned in the same context: “The Warsaw public became acquainted with the works of Wł. Strzemiński, a disciple of K. Malewicz, at the exhibition in Zachęta in January of this year. His principles of abstract painting were realised in spatial sculptural compositions by Katarzyna Kobro”.⁴⁵ The significance of the exhibition as a breakthrough in awareness of Malewicz’s art in Western Europe was underlined by Andrzej Turowski in his monograph *Malewicz w Warszawie: rekonstrukcje i symulacje* [Malewicz in Warsaw: reconstructions and simulations], with special emphasis on two of its aspects:

The Paris exhibition may be viewed as a fact which ended [...] the tale of Malewicz in Warsaw and began his work’s new existence in the wider world. In this sense, the exhibition acquires an entirely different meaning. On the one hand, it seems to accomplish, posthumously, Malewicz’s plan of travelling to Paris [...]. A journey of life which would have made true the utopia of the modernist artist’s universalism. On the other hand, [...] the exhibition was organised at a moment [...] of a peculiar interlock between the political and the mercantile situations in which Malewicz’s oeuvre had been trapped earlier, and then would be trapped again. I have in mind here two facts which, although not equal in terms of scale, were identically important with regard to the approach adopted herein. The first of them was the “Polish thaw”, a short period of de-Stalinisation during which all discourses pertaining to modernity and abstraction acquired a political meaning as a symbol of freedom.⁴⁶

As the second of these facts, Turowski points to the purchase of a collection of Malewicz’s works which he had left in Germany in 1927 during his suddenly interrupted journey to Paris – it was bought for the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam by its director Willem Sandberg.⁴⁷ The recently discovered set of official letters exchanged at the ministerial level in 1957 allows us to see these two aspects as being intertwined.⁴⁸

Paradoxically, the exhibition *Précurseurs de l’art abstrait en Pologne* at the Galerie Denis René in Paris was the first-ever official show of the Polish avant-garde to be held abroad and organised by a state institution, i.e. the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, under the patronage of the ambassador of the People’s Republic of Poland in France. This is not altered by the fact that Julian Przyboś, who was the instigator, co-organiser and promoter of the Paris

44 “Polscy prekursorzy abstrakcjonizmu w Paryżu” [Polish precursors of abstractionism in Paris], *Życie Literackie*, 1957, no. 46, p. 11.

45 Ibid.

46 A. Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie: rekonstrukcje i symulacje* [Malewicz in Warsaw: reconstructions and simulations], Cracow, 2002, pp. 220–222.

47 Ibid., pp. 222–223.

48 Institutional archive of the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, Precursors of abstract art, Letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Department of the Visual Arts of the Ministry of Culture and Art dated 19 June 1957, BM Nr DPI.565/1319/Og/57 re: exhibition of avant-garde artists in Paris, duplicate: Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions.

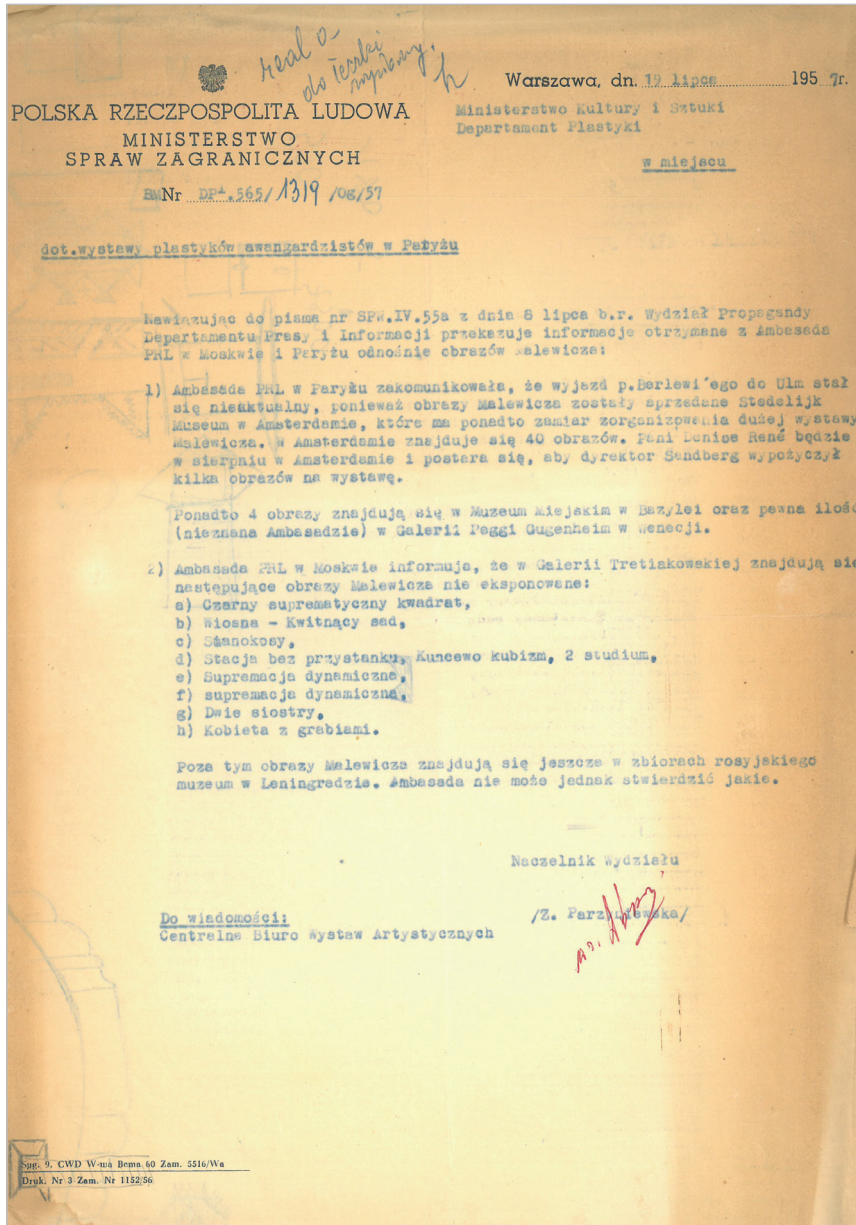


Fig. 18. Institutional archive of the Zachęta – National Gallery of Art, Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, precursors of abstract art, letter from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Department of the Visual Arts of the Ministry of Culture and Art dated 19 June 1957, BM Nr DPI.565/1319/Og/57 re: exhibition of avant-garde artists in Paris, duplicate: Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions

exhibition, had numerous private contacts in the Paris art world. It was also the first, and so far the only, exhibition in which Kazimierz Malewicz was explicitly described as a Pole and placed in the context of the emergence and later development of the avant-garde in Poland. The institutions involved in arranging the loans of Malewicz's works for this exhibition were the Ministry of Culture and Art (Department of the Visual Arts), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Propaganda Division of the Press and Information Department) and its subordinate Polish embassies in Paris and Moscow.⁴⁹ The Ministry of Foreign Affairs cooperated with the owner of the Paris gallery, who reportedly personally arranged the loan of Malewicz's works from the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam: "Mrs. Denise René will be in Amsterdam in August and will persuade Director Sandberg to loan a few paintings for the exhibition"⁵⁰ (Fig. 18).

That the works of Kazimierz Malewicz were presented – for the first time in the West, in the capital city of France – thanks to the efforts and under the aegis of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, during the period of the post-Stalinist thaw, and, in addition, that this happened a few weeks before their presentation at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (29 December 1957), was a gesture that held much meaning to European and even world-wide public opinion, as noted by the French press. René Barotte wrote in *L'Intransigeant*:

Pour la première fois un groupe d'artistes d'avant-garde, indifférents au "Credo" esthétique du Kremlin, a pu passer le rideau de fer. Il s'agit de cinq chercheurs polonaise: Malewicz, Kobro, Strzemiński, Berlewi, Stażewski. Ceux-ci, dès 1913, ont pose les bases d'un art abstrait très rigoureux don't les jeunes chercheurs actuels se sont inspirés largement.⁵¹

Behind the Iron Curtain, and especially in the Soviet Union, exhibiting works by Malewicz was not only impossible, it was not even dreamt of. Let it be recalled that in early 1956, when the Organising Committee of Strzemiński's posthumous exhibition was formed, its presentation in Warsaw, in the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, was out of the question; this had been expressly stated by its director Gizela Szancerowa. In other words, political consent was lacking. During the few short months of 1957 the situation changed dramatically.

By the same token, efforts aimed at the twofold recognition of Malewicz's status ended in success. Turowski wrote about the posthumous completion, after thirty years, of Malewicz's journey to Paris.⁵² This also meant the completion, after thirty-five years, of a different circle and a symbolic fulfilment

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 R. Barotte, "D'une galerie à l'autre", *L'Intransigeant*, 1957, no. 182.

52 A. Turowski, op. cit., pp. 220–223.

of Strzemiński's dream: the repatriation of Kazimierz Malewicz. This had been the aim of Strzemiński's efforts from the moment of his own arrival in Poland. This is confirmed by the editorial in *Zwrotnica* from 1922, referring to Strzemiński, who "recently returned from Russia, where he took an active part in the local art scene. In a letter addressed to our Editors he asks us to make every effort to bring Mr. Malewicz, our compatriot, who apparently holds one of the leading positions in the Russian art world, back to Poland. We bring this issue to the attention of the Department of Culture and Art".⁵³

In his first text, entitled *O sztuce rosyjskiej. Notatki* [On Russian art. Notes] and published in Poland in November 1922,⁵⁴ Strzemiński presented Malewicz's artistic personality and oeuvre with esteem, emphasising his Polish origins and at the same time his great input into the development of Russian art:

The foundation for the existence of the new Russian art are the works of Malewicz – an artist of immeasurable greatness – a giant who shall rule the fates of art for centuries to come. Where Picasso stopped at the very beginning of the path and turned back – this is exactly where Malewicz went on and finally came to the only possible starting point for an era – to Suprematism as a system of combining abstract elements into an organic whole arranged in accordance with an objective law.⁵⁵

It is worth noting that in this essay Strzemiński quoted from memory large passages from Malewicz's texts.⁵⁶ He also noted the immense creative potential of Katarzyna Kobro, about whom he was the first to write: "[T]he most talented of the young people, the sculptress Kobro; her Suprematist sculptures are a phenomenon on an European scale. Her works are a true step forward, a seizing of yet unconquered merits; they do not imitate Malewicz, but constitute a parallel creation".⁵⁷ He closed the argumentation of his essay with a noteworthy insight that Kobro and Drewin were "the only faithful inheritors of Malewicz's spirit".⁵⁸

As has already been stated, only thirty-five years after a letter regarding this issue was published did Strzemiński's efforts come to a symbolic fulfilment

53 [Editors], note to the text: W. Strzemiński, "O sztuce rosyjskiej. Notatki" [On Russian art. Notes], *Zwrotnica*, 1922, no. 3, p. 79.

54 W. Strzemiński, "O sztuce rosyjskiej. Notatki", *Zwrotnica*, 1922, no. 3, pp. 79–82; *Zwrotnica*, 1923, no. 4, pp. 110–114. The text is illustrated with the first Suprematist works by Kazimierz Malewicz to be reproduced in Poland.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 114.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 82.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 113.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 114. In the summer of the following year, 1924, Strzemiński married Katarzyna Kobro during a religious ceremony held in Riga. This allowed Kobro to come to Poland legally, to creatively cooperate with her husband and to enter the milieu of both the Polish and European avant-garde.

on the international scene – owing to the endeavour undertaken by the Ministry of Culture and Art in close cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of Poland.⁵⁹ This was made possible due to the efforts of the Organisational Committee of Władysław Strzemiński's Posthumous Exhibition at the Centre for Art Propaganda in Łódź in early 1956. The organisers of the *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne* exhibition returned Malewicz to the realm of art history in Poland, thus completing the mission that Strzemiński had begun in the year 1922.

Strzemiński, an engineer (a graduate of the prestigious St. Petersburg Nikolaevsky Engineering School) and an artist unyielding in his drive towards artistic freedom, had put Malewicz's oeuvre in opposition to the opportunistic "manufacturers" whom he diagnosed with astounding precision:

The manufacturing trends are a point of compromise between the new art and the governors of the RSFSR [Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic]. Only because of the profits which the government circles expect from it is the existence of new art allowed. In Russian conditions, art exists only as the official art or it does not exist at all. [...] And this is it. The further development [of what had been] initiated by Malewicz was almost entirely stopped due to pressure from Lunacharsky, who supported the manufacturers because of the material needs of the RSFSR and did not understand the flimsiness of their manifestoes.⁶⁰

Strzemiński's bitter diagnosis came over two decades before all of Central-Eastern Europe was plunged into the dark age of Stalinism, with its doctrine of Socialist Realism that had no room for any artistic or aesthetic compromises or concessions, and for ideological ones even less so, not to mention any artistic freedom. The fact that the creative output of the two precursors of the avant-garde was presented in Paris by two government departments of the People's Republic of Poland, with the honorary patronage of its ambassador in France, during a period of the political thaw was a sign of a great (if short-lived) transformation in the Eastern bloc – regardless of the propagandistic effectiveness of this emancipative gesture in the West.

The immense success of the *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne* exhibition was widely reported in the Polish press; the Łódź papers especially emphasised the success of Strzemiński's works.⁶¹ As confirmation of this the author of the report, Jerzy Oplustil, quoted passages from two Paris reviews: "It is an exhibition of vast ambitions and powerful theories that are capable of filling

59 Kazimierz Malewicz came to Poland only once, with a short visit in 1927; more on this visit in "Malewicz w Polsce" [Malewicz in Poland], *Zwrotnica*, 1927, no. 11, p. 1; A. Turowski, op. cit., esp. pp. 108–210.

60 W. Strzemiński, "O sztuce rosyjskiej. Notatki", *Zwrotnica*, 1923, no. 4, pp. 113–114.

61 (J.O.) [Jerzy Oplustil], "Ogromny sukces wystawy Strzemińskiego w Paryżu (Inf. własna)" [The great success of Strzemiński's exhibition in Paris (special report)], *Głos Robotniczy*, 1957, no. 289, p. 1.

the void” in *ARTS (Letris Spectacles)* of 27 November,⁶² and “This exhibition is more than a success. Over a thousand people, including many luminaries of the French cultural scene, M. Aragon, M. Tristan Tzara, Jean Cassou, Jean-Paul Sartre and others, organised and participated in the opening of the exhibition at the Denise René Gallery at Champs Élysées in Paris”. He also stressed that not only the French, but the Western-European press in general had published enthusiastic opinions about the show. “So the exhibition did not fail to meet the hopes that accompanied its inception and is a grand event both in Poland and in France”,⁶³ concluded Oplustil. The response to it was forceful indeed. The following is an excerpt from a review *Modern Art at the Polish Embassy* by Yvonne Hagen, published in the *Art and artists* column of *The International Herald Tribune*:

Kazimierz Malewicz, famous in the history of modern art. For his “Suprematist” canvas of a white rectangle on a white background, and for his compatriots, each precursors of modern plastic idioms, are being honored by the Polish Embassy with an exhibition of their works at the Denise René Gallery, 124 Rue La Boetie.

“If Mondrian organized space, Malewicz discovered it”, explains Berlewi. It is plain, at any rate, that no one man is responsible for any discovery, as each invention is a follow-through, step by step, of earlier developments working up to it.

The present event is a proud documentary exhibition of Poland’s role in creating new visual and plastic conceptions. All highly intellectualized artists, with training in the sciences and architecture, Malewicz, Kobro (the lone sculptor), Strzeminski, Berlewi and Stazewski each shows us his individual path toward the future.⁶⁴

Hagen not only appreciated the importance of the presented art and the approach of each of its creators, but also pointed out that the exhibition had been organised under the auspices of the Polish embassy in Paris, which she had even noted in the title.

Reviews published in the Paris press gave the *Précurseurs de l’art abstrait en Pologne* exhibition a very high ranking as an official seal of approval given to avant-garde art under conditions of the political thaw. The fact that this art was being promoted in the West by an official diplomatic agency of the Socialist Polish state was also appreciated. Furthermore, it was a clear green light for modern art, for Polish émigré artists such as Berlewi and also for further exhibitions of politically independent Polish art to be held abroad. The rank and meaning of this political and cultural signal were without precedent in their day, both in the West and in Poland. Viewed from the historical perspective of today, they are truly invaluable. In addition, the fact

62 Ibid. The original passage: “Grandes ambitions et grandes théories, pour combler un vide implacable” – R. Charmet, “Cinq expositions cubistes et abstraites illustrent la poursuite de l’impossible”, *ARTS*, 1957, no. 182.

63 Ibid.

64 Y. Hagen, “Modern Art at the Polish Embassy”, *The International Herald Tribune*, 27 November 1957, p. 7.

that Malewicz's output was shown in Paris for the first time – and in the context of Polish art – is of major importance. It must be remembered that hardly a year and a half earlier exhibiting Strzemiński's works in Łódź had been out of the question for political reasons, and the works of Malewicz, Kobro and Strzemiński were disintegrating in the storage rooms of both Polish and Soviet museums, with the Iron Curtain keeping them firmly away from Western galleries.

(Translated by Klaudyna Michałowicz)

Abstract

From December 1956 to December 1957, no fewer than four exhibitions presenting the oeuvre of Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński were organised: the Posthumous Exhibition of Władysław Strzemiński's and Katarzyna Kobro's Oeuvre, shown first in Łódź (16 December 1956 – 14 January 1957) and then in Warsaw (18 January – 10 February 1957), and two exhibitions in Paris: *50 ans de peinture abstraite* at Galerie Raymond Creuze (9 May – 12 June 1957) and *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne: Malewicz, Kobro, Strzemiński, Berlewi, Stażewski* at Galerie Denise René (22 November 1957 – 10 January 1958). All received a strong response, both in Poland and abroad. Research focused on these exhibitions has brought some surprising results. None of them had been planned until 1956, and only after the events of October 1956 was it possible to show the works of Kobro and Strzemiński in Warsaw in 1957. The exhibition at the Łódź Division of the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions was prepared with exceptional care and is immensely important, as it occasioned the first attempt at preparing a catalogue of both Kobro's and Strzemiński's works, of Strzemiński's biography and a bibliography of texts authored by Strzemiński and Kobro. In addition, it was there that Strzemiński's treatise *Teoria widzenia* first came to public attention; it was published only two years later. The exhibition was transferred, quite unexpectedly, to the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions in Warsaw, which was the chief institution involved in exhibiting modern art in Poland; this gave official sanction and a considerable status to the oeuvre of both avant-garde artists. The exhibition entitled *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne* became, paradoxically, the first-ever official exhibition of Polish avant-garde art to be held abroad and organised by a state agency, i.e. the Central Bureau of Art Exhibitions, under the aegis of the ambassador of the People's Republic of Poland in France. It was also the only exhibition in which Kazimierz Malewicz was regarded as a Pole and presented as belonging to the history of art in Poland; the mission initiated by Strzemiński in 1922 was thus completed. The institutions involved in arranging the loans of Malewicz's works for this exhibition were the Ministry of Culture and Art, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and its subordinate Polish embassies in Paris and Moscow. This was the first time that the works of Kazimierz Malewicz were presented in the West, thanks to the efforts and under the aegis of the Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs during the period of the post-Stalinist thaw; notably, this happened before their presentation at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam (29 December 1957).