



Received: 2025-07-21

Revised: 2025-09-08; 2025-10-13

Accepted: 2025-10-14

Jarosław Suchan

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6732-3988>

Institute of Art History, Jagiellonian University, Krakow

jaroslaw.suchan@uj.edu.pl

BETWEEN UTOPIA AND PROTOTYPE: IDEA OF CHANGE IN THE WORK OF KATARZYNA KOBRO AND WŁADYSŁAW STRZEMIŃSKI*

Abstract: The avant-garde maintains a dialectical relationship with history. On the one hand, it is oriented toward change, and on the other, it strives to establish an eternal now – a utopia, the achievement of which would end all history and the need for any further change. In this context, Yves-Alain Bois analyzes the historicism of Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński, concluding that the system they created, Unism, was destined to fail because, despite taking into account the workings of history, it did not break with the utopian ideal of unity, towards which art and the social world were ultimately intended to strive. This text is a polemic against this thesis and, at the same time, an expression of doubt regarding François Jullien's suggestions that utopian thinking, associated with projecting great change, is counterproductive and, in fact, counteracts the possibility of a genuine transformation of the world. In this text, I propose a pragmatic approach to the relationship between change and utopia, invoking the concept of the prototype for this purpose. I approach the work of Kobro and Strzemiński as successive iterations of the prototyping process, demonstrating the positive relationship between utopian vision and practical action in history.

Keywords: avant-garde historicism, modernist idea of change, prototyping, real utopia, unism

* Significant parts of this essay are based on my earlier text, *Kobro & Strzemiński. Prototipos del nuevo pensamiento*, in: *Kobro & Strzemiński. Prototipos vanguardistas*, ed. A. Pinteño, Museo Reina Sofia, Madrid 2017, pp. 17-67.

Renato Poggioli identifies agonism, understood as the “sense of consciousness of belonging to an intermediate stage” between the past and the future, as one of the aspects of the avant-garde. From this stems the imperative of transformation, which, according to the author, characterizes the avant-garde and its prefiguration, romanticism, distinguishing them from the classical ages¹. “Each classical age,” he writes, “felt that it represented a summit, to which the recent past was only the way up and which the imminent future would be obliged to preserve if it wished to avoid what would otherwise be a fatal and infelicitous fall back to barbarism.” In turn, the avant-garde’s and romanticism’s understanding of history is based on the assumption, that “every age attains the fullness of its own time, not by being, but by becoming, not in terms of its own self but of its relative historical mission and hence of history as an absolute. This means that for moderns the consciousness of historical culmination, or the fullness of time, is at once granted or denied to each epoch, pertaining to none or to all”². Following François Jullien’s theoretical vocabulary, we could say that while classicisms are manifestations of coincidence – the congruence of their time with a supra-historical paragon – the avant-garde (and romanticism) can be seen as a dialectical movement: of de-coincidence with its time, driven by congruence to an ultimate destiny of history³.

Yves-Alain Bois, author of an excellent essay on the work of Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro, interprets the avant-garde’s approach to history in a similar way⁴. In his view, the avant-garde sees history as a linear process of constant change, as an “unbroken chain of events”⁵. Bois more strongly links avant-garde historicism with finalism, with the belief that art develops in a specific direction according to immutable laws – and that this direction was determined at the beginning of history. Such historicism emerges from the writings of Kazimir Malevich and Piet Mondrian, which he believes constitute the first peak “moment” of modernist avant-garde theory⁶. By emphasizing finalism as constitutive of avant-garde selfawareness, some theorists, such as Boris Groys even come to the conclusion that it is essentially opposed to change – its goal is to “escape permanent changes”, to overcome historicity in a utopian eternal now⁷. In this longing for a life beyond time, the

¹ R. Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, transl. G. Fitzgerald, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1968, p. 72.

² *Ibid.*, p. 73.

³ Cf. F. Jullien, *De-coincidence: Where Art and Existence Come From*, transl. P. Rodriguez, National Taiwan University of the Arts, Taipei 2017.

⁴ Y.-A. Bois, *Strzemiński and Kobro: In Search of Motivation*, in: id., *Painting as Model*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London 1990, pp. 123-155.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

⁷ B. Groys, *The Weak Universalism*, “e-flux journal” 2010, no.15, http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_130.pdf (accessed: June 12, 2010).

avant-garde paradoxically turns out to be closer to the classical age than romanticism, differing from the former only in that it locates the eternal now not in its present but in its future...

According to Bois, the "utopian teleology" also determines the art and theory of Kobro and Strzemiński. It refers, however, not to an end set in time but to an ideologically defined purpose of the art – an indication of its ultimate "motivation". The motivation would be a permanent formal experiment, conducted with the aim of inspiring practical solutions that could improve the quality of social life. This makes the historicism of Kobro and Strzemiński more complex than that articulated in the concepts of Malevich and Mondrian: like the latter, it is based on the principle of constant development of forms, but at the same time, it is accompanied by the cognizance that subsequent stages of this process occur under different conditions and respond to problems identified differently at different times. Furthermore, the Polish couple, unlike Malevich and Mondrian, do not assume that the development of forms follows a predetermined scenario. Rather, in their view, it is the result of the accumulation and crystallization of successive achievements. The teleology of history does not mean, therefore, the existence of a universal law governing the form evolution, but the existence of a universal law determining the relationship between the shaping of form and the historical context in which it is shaped⁸.

Bois, recognizing the complexity of the historicism of Kobro and Strzemiński, nevertheless asserts that ultimately their art system does not transcend the horizon defined by modernist finalism. This is because it adheres to the essentialist principle of organic unity – the harmonious integration of all elements into a single whole – and the utopian assumption that history strives to achieve it. This principle renders their system closed, incapable, to use Jullien's famous phrase, of reopening possibilities, and therefore devoid of the potential to animate actual transformations⁹. In the perspective suggested by Bois, utopia contradicts the possibility of real change, that is, change that is not programmed, change that is open to the contingency of history and unpredictable upcoming opportunities – change that could lead to a transcendence of what is imaginable.

In the following pages, I will attempt to address this interpretation of the art of Kobro and Strzemiński, and thus take a different look at the relationship between utopia and change in avant-garde art, in order to demonstrate the potential of utopian thinking. In doing so, I will polemicize against the post-modernist prejudice against utopia as a dangerous and ineffective narrative

⁸ Y.-A. Bois, *Strzemiński and Kobro...*, pp. 127-130.

⁹ Cf. F. Jullien, *Ponownie otworzyć możliwości: de-koïncydencja i kolejne życie*, transl. E. Marynowicz-Hetka, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2024.

due to its totalizing ambition, which seems to determine Bois's text, as well as against the position, advocated by Jullien, among others, that utopian visions of great change – a "spectacular grand Resolution/Final" – are counter-productive, as they bind energies that could otherwise be spent on everyday actions aimed at unsealing the established order of things, destabilizing it, and ultimately transforming it¹⁰. For the purposes of this polemic, I will activate, as a methodological tool, the concept of a *prototype*¹¹.

Here, *prototype* is understood as a device, material thing, or conceptual scheme devised for experimental purposes to verify initial assumptions. A prototype, therefore, is a test model, a template for future target devices. The dictionary meaning of the term ranges from *matrix*, *exemplar*, *archetype*, *original* to *trial run*, *example*, *mock-up* and *sample*. Cognitive science has a slightly different understanding of the term, combining it with the process of categorization. This discipline defines a prototype as the chief specimen of a given category, or, in the words of Eleanor Rosch, the architect of prototype theory, as an exemplar containing "attributes most representative of items inside and least representative of items outside the category"¹². A prototype, therefore – and this is the most important aspect for my interpretation – is only an approximation, and the ideal exemplar does not exist. What characterizes prototypes, in their cognitive and technological interpretation, is their mutability and temporariness. They are by no means permanent solutions, as they become outdated the moment another, better prototype (one closer to the unattainable ideal) is constructed or when they are replaced by the production model as mass production is launched.

We will not find the notion of prototype in Strzemiński and Kobra's writings, neither is it utilized by modernist theory. However, it may prove useful in untangling the nexus of essentialism, historicism and utopianism – "motivations" that, according to Bois, marked the work of the artists and ultimately made it a system doomed to failure. The idea of the prototype remains in a syntactic relationship to these motivations. At the same time, it enables their problematization and, consequently, the deconstruction of the narrative about the miscarriage of the avant-garde concept of change.

¹⁰ Ibid., pp. 169, 177.

¹¹ The subject of prototype remains mostly unexplored in art discourse. Of the published investigations into the topic, particular attention should be given to: C. Manchanda, *Models and Prototypes*, Mildred Lane Kemper Art Museum, St. Louis 2006; S. Küchler, *The Prototype in 20th Century Art*, "Visual Communication" 2010, no. 3, pp. 301-312; *Visuelle Modelle*, eds. I. Reichle, S. Siegel, A. Spelten, Verlag Wilhelm Fink, Paderborn 2008.

¹² E. Rosch, *Principles of Categorization*, in: *Cognition and Categorization*, ed. E. Rosch, Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale 1978, p. 30.

Ultimate painting

In the theoretical universe of Kobro and Strzemiński, three prototypical devices can be identified: suprematist, unist and realist, the first of which was the only one not developed by them. It originated in the Russian avant-garde milieu, where the work of both artists began to take shape. This ideologically diverse environment was united by one thing: a shared belief that art should participate in the process of transforming the world¹³. Their disputes revolved around the character and the extent of that participation and, consequently, the social dimension of artistic practice. These disputes were incredibly intense, and lines of division often shifted. Nevertheless, to simplify it, we can say that on one side were the proponents of autonomous art, while on the other side were those who believed art made sense only when it realized utilitarian aims. The leaders of the former included Malevich, who believed that exploring the problems of structure in painting or sculpture would facilitate the recognition and articulation of a universal order as the basis for new “visions of life”¹⁴. The leaders of the latter fraction included Aleksandr Rodchenko, in whose circle the idea of “laboratory constructivism” was formed, based around the assumption that the artist is supposed to investigate the constructional and textural properties of materials, the results of which investigations would then be used by industrial designers, engineers and factory workers¹⁵. Over time, the attitudes espoused by members of this circle were gradually radicalized, leading to *the passage of the artist from the laboratory to the factory*; that is, to the direct engagement of artist in designing for industry¹⁶. As the cultural policy radicalized and the achievements of the avant-garde were increasingly accused of being useless, expectations that the artist would serve the Soviet state in a more practical manner grew more intense. This gradually marginalized experimental/laboratory practices, eventually leading to their replacement by propaganda-oriented art and, to a lesser degree, by involvement in industrial design¹⁷.

¹³ A. Turowski, *Tradycja, historia i myśl rosyjskiej awangardy artystycznej*, in: *Między sztuką a komuną: Teksty awangardy rosyjskiej 1910-1932*, ed. A. Turowski, Universitas, Kraków 1998, p. 23.

¹⁴ K. Malevich, *Unovis. Programnaja stat'ja*, “Iskusstvo” 1921, no. 4, pp. 9-10.

¹⁵ Cf. M. Gough, *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution*, University of California Press, Berkeley 2005; M. Gough, *In the Laboratory of Constructivism: Karl Ioganson's Cold Structures*, “October” 1998, no. 84, pp. 91-117.

¹⁶ O. Brik, *Into Production!* (1923), transl. R. Sherwood, in: *The Tradition of Constructivism*, ed. S. Bonn, Viking Press, New York 1974, pp. 83-85.

¹⁷ A. Turowski, *Tradycja, historia...*, pp. 33-34.

This was the artistic landscape that served as the breeding ground for Kobro and Strzemiński's work. Its first manifestations are a testimony to their openness to impulses coming from different directions. Gradually, however, their preferences became increasingly unequivocal, as evidenced by Strzemiński's first theoretical text, *O sztuce rosyjskiej - Notatki*¹⁸. The aim of it was to discuss the main avant-garde tendencies in post-revolutionary Russia, but above all, to mark the author's ideological position and to articulate the fundamental premise around which he would continue to build his oeuvre in the following years. The premise was the unity of an artwork stemming from accordance of the means used in its creation with objective laws defining its nature. In light of such a conception of an artwork, the first prototype emerges: Malevich's suprematist painting.

According to Strzemiński, suprematism was the crowning achievement of all art that came before it. Its accomplishment lay in the creation of a cohesive system that allowed one to unite "abstract elements in an organic whole made according to objective law"¹⁹. That system assumed that the painting should be based on "properties specific to painting itself" and purged of any "alien means"²⁰. Suprematism argued that the essential value of painting is its flatness, which invalidates all attempts at creating an illusion of three-dimensional space or, as Strzemiński writes, "punching holes in the canvas." The abandonment of illusion, resulting in an ever-tighter bond between forms on the painting and its surface and the achievement of a compositional equilibrium, defined the direction toward which the historically determined evolution of painting had been moving, with suprematism as the culmination of that process²¹.

By embracing suprematism as a paragon, Strzemiński undertook to criticize other trends in Russian avant-garde. He considers them either derivative or a product of a misinterpretation of the essence of art. His fiercest criticism is reserved for the idea of the artists' direct involvement in industry. Strzemiński openly calls it "the microbe causing the decay of Russian art" and claims that reducing pure formal solutions to practical, utilitarian projects will undoubtedly lead to the stagnation of art itself. Moreover, he suggests that its further evolution – "the investigation of the attained form and invention of a more perfect form" – has become redundant²². Strzemiński accuses artists who

¹⁸ The article was published in issues no. 3 (1922) and no. 4 (1923) of the avant-garde magazine "Zwrotnica". For the English version, see *Notes on Russian Art*, in: *Art between Worlds: A Sourcebook of Central European Avant-Gardes, 1910–1930*, eds. T. O. Benson, É. Forgács, MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts 2002, pp. 272–79.

¹⁹ W. Strzemiński, *O sztuce rosyjskiej - Notatki*, "Zwrotnica" 1923, no. 4, p. 113.

²⁰ Ibid., "Zwrotnica" 1922, no. 3, p. 82.

²¹ Ibid., "Zwrotnica" 1922, no. 3, p. 79.

²² Ibid., "Zwrotnica" 1922, no. 4, p. 112.

subordinated themselves to the concept of sham (as the practical applicability of their solutions is more a declaration than a fact), confusing art with technology ("engineerism," or an "art trend that emerges when an artist, losing his artistic credibility, resorts to using engineering forms and objectives") and even opportunism ("convergence for the interests of this new art and state authorities of the USSR")²³. One consequence of their domination of contemporary Russian art is its rejection of that which is crucially important, namely the search for the essence of art and "solving the problem of organic unity of form and space"²⁴.

Reading Strzemiński's two-part essay, one may get the impression that he supports the teleological belief of Malevich that the development of artistic form inevitably leads to suprematism and that in suprematism the history of painting finds fulfillment. Even if that is the case, the optic changes quickly. Suprematist painting stops being the "ultimate painting" and becomes a prototype, the best of all existing "approximations" or, as cognitive sciences would have it, a central exemplar in the category: *a painting*. Does this imply the abolition of the finalist historicism, and turning it into a historicism of endless transformation, or is it only a postponement of the attainment of the ultimate goal, performed by assigning oneself the task of ending history? A semblance of an answer can be found in another of Strzemiński's essays, published in the catalogue of the 1923 *New Art Exhibition* in Vilnius. The essay culminates with a call "Forward without a pause," after which the author concludes that, although the accomplishments of cubism and suprematism allowed for the creation of "the most perfect style of contemporary applied art" ("as invention of electricity allowed to build up the electrotechnics of the present day"), it should not be the task of autonomous art. Its primary objective is to "secure the possibility of persistent development"²⁵. We may draw the following conclusions from that passage: creating autonomous art is not the pursuit of an ultimate ideal – the end of all transformation – but a serial prototyping process that, first, is separate from the implementation process (the realization of "applied arts"); and, second, is repetitive in nature because drafting and perfecting new forms and solutions in the laboratory should never end. In this way, Strzemiński secures the possibility of assumption-free experimentation, for only through activity that goes beyond the realization of goals imaginable at a given moment does one gain the chance to discover solutions that can meet the as-yet-unknown challenges of the future. The transformative mission of art achieves a dialectical depth, which will be reflected in the formula of the next prototype – the *unist* one.

²³ Ibid., "Zwrotnica" 1922, no. 4, p. 113.

²⁴ Ibid.,

²⁵ W. Strzemiński, [Określam sztukę...], in: *Katalog Wystawy Nowej Sztuki*, Lux, Vilnius 1923, p. 21.

Organic unity

In the aforementioned essay, Strzemiński claims art is creation of “the unity of organic form, by its organicity parallel with nature”²⁶. Such unity can be achieved only when creation abides by laws specific to the created art. The evolution drives art toward such creation; every movement and every new trend pushes it closer toward that ultimate goal, but none of them – not even suprematism, the most advanced and forward-oriented trend – has managed to attain it, since none of them has rejected everything that could undermine or subvert that selfsufficiency²⁷. This is because our aesthetic sensibilities still bear the marks of baroque influences, despite strenuous efforts on the part of subsequent generations of artists to root them out. According to Strzemiński, *baroque* implies a duality of forms, which in turn produces a dynamism that shatters the unity of the painting. Dynamism is a spatiotemporal phenomenon, alien to painting which operates within two-dimensional space and exists “outside time,” rendering the work nonidentical with itself, “violating” its organicity – and thus must be rejected²⁸.

That is why, in Strzemiński’s opinion, dualistic art had to be replaced by unism. The ideal of the latter is a “picture as organic as nature itself.” Instead of central composition – a rule of equivalence: “Every square inch of the picture is of equal value and plays part in the picture’s construction in the same degree.” All divisions and contrasts (contrast tears the body of the picture asunder, thus causing its death) have to be removed, because “Every division of the picture means that time is needed to unite it visually. Only a completely uniform picture can be extra-temporal, purely spatial”²⁹.

In 1923, Strzemiński began to create paintings in which, starting from suprematism, he tried to abolish the contradictions implicit in the suprematist program and transcend baroque dualism. These efforts are encapsulated in Strzemiński’s unist paintings created from 1931 to 1934. All divisions underwent gradual nullification, all contrasts and other elements that could give an impression of movement or three-dimensionality were eliminated. In the final paintings of the series, the surface is uniformly covered with a single color, but – to avoid the unwanted impression of depth – paint has been applied in the form of a relief pattern. Thus, the painting constantly reminds the observer of its own material nature, of the fact that it is just an “object.”

²⁶ Ibid., p. 19.

²⁷ W. Strzemiński, *B = 2*, “Blok” 1924, no. 8-9, n. pag., English translation in: *Art between Worlds*..., pp. 500-1.

²⁸ W. Strzemiński, *Notatki*, “Zwrotnica” 1927, no. 11, p. 243.

²⁹ W. Strzemiński, *Dualizm i unizm*, “Droga” 1927, no. 6-7, pp. 220-222.

A paradoxical object, however, as indicated by Turowski, because the loss of its semiotic properties brought the unist painting ever closer to a utility object but without "imbuing it with a distinct utilitarian value." This revealed the "purely theoretical meaning of the object"³⁰. This purely theoretical nature should be understood as a property that gives the painting the status of a prototype – a test specimen serving to falsify an a priori adopted assumption, which in this case would concern the essence of painting: possibility of existence of a painting that would be equal to nature in its *beingness*.

Unism, striving to build an "absolute structure", would seemingly align with finalism specific to the modernist avant-garde³¹. Strzemiński's refraining from making any more unist paintings in 1934 would therefore be a consequence of the artist's recognition that the goal – the sought-after absolute – had been attained. This is how Bois interprets the meaning of this gesture, writing that the artist "himself was forced to abandon unism once he reached the point at which his system left him nothing more to say"³². This reading does not seem particularly productive, so I propose framing unist painting in a more pragmatic perspective, viewing it not as the "grand Final" of (art) history but as a necessary stage – a stage not in the historical but the production process. This sense of Unism is revealed when it is provisionally removed from the "unbroken chain of events" recorded by art history and embedded in the sequence of media explored by Kobro and Strzemiński.

As Bois points out, Kobro and Strzemiński's concepts are related to *la-ocoonism*, a belief that all arts are separate from one another and that each art has its own unique laws³³. That is why unist sculpture does not reference the criteria of unist painting but creates its own catalogue³⁴. In their treatise *Kompozycja przestrzeni. Obliczenia rytmu czasoprzestrzennego*, Kobro and Strzemiński consider sculpture and painting to be phenomena evolving side by side, yet distinct³⁵. They are linked only by the assumption that a work of art should be a single entity, with its unity achieved through consistency of form with the innate properties of the work. While in the case of painting this consistency means the absolute separation of the image from what is external to it, in the case of sculpture it is articulated in its close connection with physical environment, which is achieved by subordinating the composition to a universal spatial-temporal rhythm. Sculpture and painting appear as wholly separate realms,

³⁰ A. Turowski, *Awangardowe marginesy*, Instytut Kultury, Warszawa 1997, p. 86.

³¹ W. Strzemiński, *Integralizm malarstwa abstrakcyjnego*, "Forma" 1934, no. 2, p. 10.

³² Y.-A. Bois, *Strzemiński and Kobro...*, p. 131.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 127.

³⁴ W. Strzemiński, *Określam sztukę...*, p. 20.

³⁵ K. Kobro, W. Strzemiński, *Kompozycja przestrzeni. Obliczenia rytmu czasoprzestrzennego*, Biblioteka "a.r.", Łódź 1931.

which approach the ‘absolute structure’ on their own terms. At the same time, however, they exist as “portions” resembling those in the production processes of a Fordist factory³⁶. Thus, awareness of the individual specificity of the art media not only translates to different definitions of the construction principles of paintings and sculptures but also results in sculpture and painting receiving different assignments in the division of labor.

Things get more complicated when the system formulated by Kobro and Strzemiński is extended to architecture. In *Kompozycja przestrzeni...*, a program for new architecture is smoothly derived from the analysis of sculptural space. In a text written a few years later, Kobro states unequivocally: “Sculpture should become an architectural issue, a laboratorylike effort to organize methods of planning space, movement and city landscapes to resemble a functional organism, stemming from the production capabilities of modern art, science and technology”³⁷. Kobro herself demonstrated what such a translation of sculptural experiments into architectural solutions might look like when she created a mock-up of a preschool referencing her 1932 *Kompozycja przestrzenna* (8). The obvious connection between these two works, as well as the less obvious but striking similarities between Kobro's spatial compositions and Strzemiński's architectural compositions (1924-1929) may suggest that they both viewed painting and sculpture in a productivist way: as a preparatory phase in the process of designing functional devices and solutions. However, we are not facing here that sort of simple causality. The art factory, in which a painter, a sculptor and an architect work at different sections along the production line, is invented to produce not specific solutions but “hypotheses”³⁸. Rather than polish concrete implementation projects, each individual section perfects resolutions for theoretical problems and does so necessarily according to its own internal principles – because only this can guarantee arriving at optimal solutions. And this is not architecture (or functional design), but the realm of social life that should test these solutions. “The primary method of working with art,” Strzemiński writes, “involves experimenting with and inventing forms, both of which should yield consequences in terms of organizational methods and emotional attitudes, binding it to production and scientific management of labor and everyday life. The ultimate test for any given formal invention is the organizational coefficient it exerts on existing forms of life”³⁹.

³⁶ In the text that heralded Strzemiński's unist explorations, art is compared to manufacturing and the artist is compared to an engineer in a Fordist manufacturing plant. The task of the engineer is to perfect the labor organization systems in his portion of the production line. Cf. W. Strzemiński, *B* = 2, n. pag.

³⁷ K. Kobro, *[Dla ludzi niezdolnych do myślenia...]*, “Forma” 1935, no. 3, p. 14.

³⁸ W. Strzemiński, *Surogaty sztuki*, “Budowa” 1936, no. 1, p. 6.

³⁹ W. Strzemiński, *Co myślę o architekturze nowoczesnej*, “Wiadomości Literackie” 1934, no. 23, p. 4. See also: K. Kobro, *[Rzeźba stanowi...]*, “Głos Plastyków” 1937, no. 1-7, p. 42.

The objective of unism, therefore, is biopolitical in nature: the organization of human life, the rationalization of life activities was to extricate them from the yoke of emotional quivering and set them on a common course, so that in a joint effort with other human beings – thus creating a single organism, so to speak – a human being could change the world for the better, becoming happier in the process thanks to the feeling of purpose that this effort brings him or her⁴⁰. Society was to be the ultimate unist work of art: “The search for unity is the deepest and most universal moving force of our times. It provides a social foundation of unism”⁴¹. Unism, therefore, was to be the answer to the deficits of traditional forms of organizing societies, forms that are not organic because they are rooted in hierarchies (contrasts disrupting unity), individualism (lack of connection between pieces of the whole) and arbitrariness (i.e., relationships based on power rather than rationality)⁴². As long as, according to Bois, Strzemiński and Kobra believed in the effectiveness of this answer – that is, in the possibility of designing a new, better world through art – they saw the point in perfecting methods of organizing painting and sculptural forms. When, under the pressure of the political crises that shook Europe and the world in the early 1930s, this belief weakened, further work in this area became unjustified.

While it is impossible to deny the connection between the abandonment of unist painting and spatial compositions (the last one was created in 1933) and the political situation, this act should not, in my opinion, be seen as Strzemiński and Kobra's withdrawal from unism as a biopolitical project. On the contrary, the conviction that the current crisis was, as Strzemiński put it, the result of “an irrational game of blind forces and rushing blood shaping recent historical events”⁴³ could only strengthen both of them in their conviction of the timeliness of the project, which, as Kobra wrote, was intended to pave the way for the victory of “the active forces of the human intellect over the current state of irrationalism and chaos”⁴⁴. The postrevolutionary optimism that underpinned unism – sustained in the 1920s by rapid economic, industrial and technological growth – was seriously shaken by the Great Depression, Stalinist terror and the advance of fascism. Kobra and Strzemiński, however, saw these negative phenomena not so much as the result of excessive power of reason, but rather as evidence of the return to power of “the basest of social instincts”⁴⁵.

⁴⁰ K. Kobra, *Funkcjonalizm*, “Forma” 1936, no. 4, p. 10.

⁴¹ *Dyskusja L. Chwistek – W. Strzemiński*, “Forma” 1935, no. 3, p. 4.

⁴² Bois directly relates unism to the model of socialist society, see: Y.-B. Bois, *Strzemiński and Kobra...*, p. 135.

⁴³ W. Strzemiński, *Aspekty rzeczywistości*, “Forma” 1936, no. 5, p. 12.

⁴⁴ K. Kobra, *[Rzeźba stanowi...]*, p. 42.

⁴⁵ W. Strzemiński, *Aspekty...*, p. 12.

In the face of this return, art, which could contribute to the development of rational attitudes and thus strengthen society's resistance to destructive influences, took on even greater relevance.

However, the scope of its impact became equally important. Achieving the desired social effect required means far broader than an individual painting or sculpture⁴⁶. The continued production of paintings and sculptures made sense as long as they stimulated invention and allowed the prototyping of new, useful concepts⁴⁷. For concepts related to the rational organization of human life, such paintings (unist compositions) and such sculptures (spatial compositions) had already been created. Therefore, in accordance with the aforementioned principle, the reason for creating further ones had disappeared. The prototyping process of the device called *unism* had concluded; the time had come for its implementation outside the section of autonomous art – in industrial design, urban planning, organization of labor and social engineering. Simultaneously, experiments with another prototype began at Strzemiński's factory, this time concerning the organization not of the material (artistic and social), but that of seeing.

The Realism of Seeing

In 1934, Strzemiński painted his final unist painting, *Kompozycja unistyczna 14*. From then on, he would dedicate himself to what Leszek Brogowski calls the “realism of seeing”⁴⁸. The first symptoms of that new direction include his 1931 urban and marine landscapes, as well as still life pieces in which he combines soft, biological lines with a shift of the contour against the colour – a formal device that was supposed to visualize the afterimage effect. The set of these solutions is present in nearly all the artist's later works, including his final paintings, created in the late 1940s in a radically different social, artistic and theoretical reality.

As Strzemiński was abandoning unism in painting, Kobro created her final spatial composition – one radically different from its predecessors – and then completely gave up this sculptural conception. In *Kompozycja przestrzenna* (9), ca. 1933, the artist departed from rigorous geometric divisions, replacing them instead with biomorphic forms resembling those appearing at that time in Strzemiński's paintings. Shortly afterwards, she gave up art, only to return to it for a short time after the war. She sculpted the four nudes, a reference to the series of cubist-like nudes she created around the mid-1920s.

⁴⁶ W. Strzemiński, *Hasło przeciw stabilizatorom sztuki*, “Tygodnik Artystów” 1935, no. 14, p. 2.

⁴⁷ W. Strzemiński, [Nasza zawartość wzrokowa...], “Forma” 1934, no. 2, p. 18.

⁴⁸ L. Brogowski, *Powidoki i po... Unizm i “Teoria widzenia” Władysława Strzemińskiego*, słowo/obraz terytoria, Gdańsk 2001, pp. 55-56.

"The process of sculpting a naked human evokes physiological and sexual emotions. I sculpt just like other people go to the movies, to relax."⁴⁹ This is Kobro's only known statement about her figurative work. Strzemiński discusses his marine landscapes in a similar tone, calling them his "relaxational" paintings, implying that they are created on the margin of his true art: unism⁵⁰. Yet, when painterly unism transforms into functional design based on unist principles, what had previously been marginalized becomes Strzemiński's central and sole form of painting. The claim that it was practiced for respite ceases to be convincing. It should rather be seen as the second term of a dialectical response to the crisis of the time: the first term would be linked to the desire to overcome negative social tendencies by fostering functional solutions that served the rational organization of the space and time of human activity, the second term – to the need to express the substance of the era they lived in.

The belief that a work of art "expresses the life substance of the era it exists in", usually unknowingly to its author, is one of the symptoms of Strzemiński's intensifying historicism⁵¹. The substance is expressed by the work's structure and the formal solutions it utilizes, reflecting the "visual content" characteristic of a given era; that is, the range of vision available to the human at that moment thanks to scientific, technological and organizational advances. In Strzemiński's opinion, visual content is closely linked to social and economic transformations⁵². That is why in primitive and feudal societies, when the world consisted of isolated autarkies, the world was seen as divided into a series of unconnected objects, each one "distinct from the rest, isolated by its own local outline, colour and form"⁵³. Over time, as processes that bound "individual social and economic phenomena into a universal web of global interdependencies" grew stronger, "isolated closed off objects" started gradually disappearing from art, replaced by visual content that "embraced the influences and dependencies of individual objects"⁵⁴. Cubism, supposedly the most advanced form of the latter, visualized the relationships between each object using the afterimage effect, an optical illusion in which retinal impressions of an image persist after we move our eyes from one object to the next. As a new retinal impression is combined with earlier ones, our brains see "not a series of separate objects but

⁴⁹ K. Kobra, *L'action de sculpter...*, "Abstraction-Création" 1933, no. 2, p. 27.

⁵⁰ *Dyskusja L. Chwistek - W. Strzemiński...*, p. 5.

⁵¹ W. Strzemiński, *Sztuka nowoczesna w Polsce*, in: J. Brzękowski, L. Chwistek, P. Smolik, W. Strzemiński, *O sztuce nowoczesnej*, Wyd. Tow. Bibliofilów, Łódź 1934, p. 74.

⁵² W. Strzemiński, *Z powodu wystawy w IPS-ie*, "Głos Plastyków" 1934, vol. 3, no. 9-12, pp. 136-137.

⁵³ W. Strzemiński, *Sztuka nowoczesna a szkoły artystyczne (1932)*, in: id., *Pisma*, Wrocław 1975, p. 154.

⁵⁴ W. Strzemiński, *Aspekty...*, p. 8.

rather a vision of a painterly continuity of the world and the ways in which individual elements of the form influence each other"⁵⁵. In Strzemiński's narrative, in the post-cubist era the process of developing visual content is broken down into two distinct approaches: surrealist deformation and abstractionist constructionism. The abandonment of unist painting in favor of "realism of seeing" should be investigated in the context of that split.

Surrealism that refers to the first approach was initially framed by Strzemiński as a development of the cubist concept of the afterimage. That development would supposedly entail a shift from combining overlapping representations of objects located next to one another to combining distant images⁵⁶. This changes in his subsequent interpretations, which reveal that the true surrealist innovation is not the association of distant images but the consideration of the influence of emotion on the formation of visual content⁵⁷. In this instance, surrealism would not create new visual content so much as serve as the symptom of its deformation caused by the emotional turmoil of the economic and social crisis. "Surrealism," writes Strzemiński, "being in its essence a product of the blind play of forces set in motion by economic liberalism, and its fullest visual expression, is also a declaration of extreme pessimism and negativism"⁵⁸. It reflects the loss of faith in rational community, the rejection of everything that socialization brings to the individual, and the opening of oneself to the most primal impulses, the sort that is "common for all living beings." That is why, Strzemiński points out, the biological contour is the most prevalent form in surrealism, "outlining the lumpy, formless mass – a beached amoeba – a galatea that pulsates feebly on the shore, under the blazing sun, and feels disjointed sensations"⁵⁹. The same contour can be found in Strzemiński's marine landscapes and other "relaxational" paintings from that period.

The second approach is related to abstract art that would supposedly be "a conscious systematization and purification of compositional methods derived from the foundation of given visual content"⁶⁰. Abstract art would supposedly differ from the hitherto prevalent art forms in that its formal structure would not reflect the visual content specific to a given era so much as try to drive it in a specific direction. Abstraction would therefore strive to reverse the chain of causal relationships: it is not socioeconomic conditions that would shape the visual content and the latter the painterly form, but the other way around. Because of that, Strzemiński saw abstract art as an antidote against

⁵⁵ W. Strzemiński, *[Nasza zawartość...]*, p. 18.

⁵⁶ W. Strzemiński, *[Rozwój jednostki...]*, "Forma" 1935, no. 3, p. 17.

⁵⁷ W. Strzemiński, *Aspekty...*, pp. 8-9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

⁶⁰ W. Strzemiński, *[Nasza zawartość...]*, p. 18.

the deformative power of surrealism. Both he and Kobro considered surrealism to be rooted in individualistic, antisocial and destructive emotions that had to be overcome for the condition of society to improve⁶¹. Abstract art could help with that because it brings up “what binds people together in a society – organizational, constructive emotions and attitudes”⁶². This functionality of abstraction perhaps explains the sense of the final unist painting and final spatial composition. In both of them, the biological contour and amoeba-like form are subordinated to the organizational system that is supposed to produce organic unity. Possibly it was an attempt at using an abstract structure to arrange the chaos and randomness of human life laid bare by surrealism.

Why, then, was this attempt not continued? Unism was created for human beings seen as standardized individuals described by standard behaviors and standard needs. As such, a human was more an abstract eye or a piece of mathematical data to be used in spatiotemporal calculations than a living, feeling, thinking being. Surrealism complicated that image, thus invalidating the investigation of human existence in the context of abstract models based around a priori assumptions that were eventually replaced with the necessity of a more direct examination of the experience of life itself. Because of this empirical turn, further development of abstract models became much less important than the matter of using practical solutions based around these models and less important than witnessing the emotions of the modern human being. This, in turn, was related to the recognition of painting as a domain of real visual experience rather than just idealistic constructs. Years later, Strzemiński stated that this real visual experience encompasses not only the observed reality but the “observation of the observer, as well as of his psychophysiological reactions elicited by the act of observation”⁶³. As this assumption was internalized and accepted, a new prototyping process was initiated – but in this instance its subject was realism itself rather than the painting.

As Strzemiński once indicated, over the ages, paintings were created “as if the human being was a purely visual being – one big eye, so to speak”⁶⁴. That approach was first breached by the impressionists and the cubists, whose formal solutions took the corporeal aspect of seeing, and thus its dependence on physiological processes taking place within the human body, into consideration⁶⁵. Surrealists, in turn, demonstrated that seeing is also greatly influenced by emotion, thoughts and other stimuli. “As the visual content is subjected to interference from extravisual stimuli, it is transformed,” Strzemiński writes,

⁶¹ K. Kobro, *Funkcjonalizm*, p. 10.

⁶² W. Strzemiński, *Aspekty...*, p. 11.

⁶³ W. Strzemiński, *Teoria widzenia*, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 2016, p. 92.

⁶⁴ W. Strzemiński, *Aspekty...*, pp. 8-9.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 7-8.

“creating a complicated nexus of elements that constitute the psyche of every individual”⁶⁶. Strzemiński himself not only tried to provide painterly equivalents to these psychophysiological transformations; he attempted to use them to intentionally articulate his emotional attitude toward reality: toward social pathologies (*The Unemployed*, 1934), toward the horror of the Nazi occupation (series: *Deportations*, 1940-1941; *War on Homes*, 1941-1942; *Cheap as Mud*, 1943-1944; *Hands That Are Not with Us*, 1945), and finally towards the crime of the Holocaust (the series *To My Jewish Friends*, 1946).

By binding the phenomenon of seeing with the entirety of human experience, including its corporeal aspect, Strzemiński’s interpretation of seeing essentially becomes a phenomenological construct wherein the reality of the world being perceived and that of the perceiving subject blend into one. “We are built from the same matter as everything else, no artificial isolating barrier can be built between us and the rest of reality. Matter is continuous and each of its parts influences every other one,” Strzemiński notes in *Teoria widzenia*, his most important theoretical work, written before his death and published posthumously⁶⁷. Seeing, he adds, is related to the interaction between external matter and the human body, a process that takes place in material reality rather than in an abstract world⁶⁸. Therefore, all art that tries to contradict the material nature of seeing cannot reflect the truth about the human experience of the world. That is why Strzemiński opts for “humanist realism,” which considers the “human himself, their muscles, nerves, their psychophysiological disposition, their entire real organism” to be the true measure of things⁶⁹.

As Strzemiński was developing the idea of humanist realism, new Polish authorities, following the Stalinist regime in the USSR, tried to implement the doctrine of socialist realism. While not denying the need to formulate an aesthetic program that would be a response to the new socialist reality, the artist critically addressed this attempt to restore anachronistic aesthetics. In his interpretation, realism did not describe a form of mimesis that we customarily consider a faithful reflection of reality, and that in fact reflects the perspective of the nineteenth-century bourgeoisie, so much as it became an open catalogue of ways in which to depict the world as it is seen by a human immersed in history. This realism nullifies the difference between abstraction and figurativeness – both can be mere empty formalism, devoid of any factual link with reality, and both can constitute genuine realism; that is, a credible way of rendering historical truth⁷⁰.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 9.

⁶⁷ W. Strzemiński, *Teoria...*, p. 206.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 205.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 281.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 56.

The concept of humanistic realism is based on this assumption. It is introduced by an exploration of afterimages being, as Brogowski indicates, the most fundamental and direct data of those that draw our attention to the phenomenon of seeing, causing us to see seeing itself, and thus to realize its phenomenological, or “humanist,” aspect⁷¹. The exploration produced a series of pictures painted in 1948 and 1949. The pictures combine glimmering, polychromatic backgrounds and amoeba-like shapes resembling those from the landscapes Strzemiński painted in the 1930s, with stark, geometric schemata that are probably supposed to reflect the dynamics of subpalpebral seeing. The images look fairly abstract and only their titles allow us to retrace the real objects that were transformed into elements of these visual sensations. In his last works, Strzemiński combines elements of afterimage painting with more mimetic representations of human figures and objects. Despite their mimetic character, the figures and the objects seem to function in these works on the same level that abstract forms operate on – as signs drawn from different visual codes rather than as direct references to reality⁷². The meaning of these works is not at all clear. Some see them as a compromise between Strzemiński’s own experimental aesthetic and doctrinal socialist realism. However, the interpretation that diagnoses them to be a synthesis of two distinct forms of realism constantly overlapping in Strzemiński’s theoretical works – one that refers to seeing as a psychophysiologically determined activity, and the other that considers it a historic phenomenon – seems much more interesting. Whether that synthesis was intended to be a manifestation of Strzemiński’s humanist realism or was only another stage in its prototyping is difficult to assess. The artist’s premature death interrupted his work on this concept, so we will never know in what direction he wanted to develop it.

Closing remarks: *Real Utopia*

According to Marshall Berman, modernity is a state in which two great contrasting forces clash: the desire for constant movement, change and novelty, and the craving for security and stability⁷³. Both are particularly evident in the avant-garde. It is characterized by the incessant quest for new forms and solutions; the driving force behind these quests, however, is the dream of an “ultimate picture” and a social utopia – of what is beyond time, perpetual and

⁷¹ L. Brogowski, *Powidoki...*, p. 41.

⁷² Cf. E. Degot, *Painting in History*, in: *Władysław Strzemiński: Readability of Images*, eds. P. Polit, J. Suchan, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 2015, pp. 53-66.

⁷³ M. Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity*, Penguin Books, New York 1988, pp. 13-14.

unchanging. The work of Kobro and Strzemiński is similarly dialectical in character. Within it, a dream of absolute unity, perfect order and total organization of both the artwork and the world – all these tranquil havens of the modern intellect – is intertwined with the feeling that the absolute is an empty spot, as human reality is steeped in history, and history constitutes incarnations of mutability. Therefore, while Strzemiński's final unist paintings and Kobro's final spatial compositions may suggest that the artists managed to reach the haven of certitude, their artistic journey does not end there.

Unism fascinates us with its intellectual rigor and radical consistency, prompting us to make it a theoretical framework encompassing the entire work of Kobro and Strzemiński. Then, crucial importance is conferred upon the question of whether the artists' subsequent decisions were consistent with the assumptions of this system, as well as the soundness of the assumptions themselves. This is the perspective Bois seems to be taking. He recognizes unism as a modernist system, defining modernism as a utopian movement that seeks to subordinate human reality to one eternal and universal set of principles. Since, in his view, this aspiration has been negatively verified by history, unism, too, should be considered a theoretical misconception⁷⁴. The fact that Kobro and Strzemiński ceased making unist paintings and spatial compositions in the mid-1930s would prove that they also became aware of its fallacy. Their further art would be nothing more than an escape from its consequences. According to Bois, unism, like all modernism, was doomed to failure because it ignored the complexity of the reality, the contingency of history and the singularities that define human life. Any indications in the artworks and writings of Kobro and Strzemiński that the artists took these aspects into account – and that their art contained the conditions for transcending modernism thus understood – are interpreted by him not as a manifestation of their self-awareness but rather as evidence of the irresolvable contradictions of their system⁷⁵.

By placing the idea of the prototype at the center of my deliberations, I suggest shifting this optics and consider unism not as a separate, complete system but as one of the sections in a larger process. I emphasize continuity rather than interruption in the art of Kobro and Strzemiński, and, what is more, I propose to acknowledge the value of the process itself, autonomous from the undertaken objective that is either impossible to attain (because the ideal is an empty spot) or whose achievement is no longer a matter of art (because the implementation process proceeds beyond it). Such an understanding of modern art is presented by Berman as he quotes from Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Notes from*

⁷⁴ Y. B. Bois, *Strzemiński and Kobro...*, p. 154.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 143-144.

the Underground: "Man loves to create roads, that is beyond dispute. But ... may it not be . . . that he is instinctively afraid of attaining his goal and completing the edifice he is constructing? How do you know, perhaps he only likes that edifice from a distance, and does not at all at close range, *perhaps he only likes to build it, and does not want to live in it.*"⁷⁶.

What results does exposing the process itself produce? Above all, it allows us to view the modern avant-garde as a space potentially open to the possibility of continuous transformation. Avant-garde art, understood as a process of prototyping and testing possibilities rather than producing ready-made alternatives, separated from the implementation process – though connected to it – becomes a site where the existing order can be disrupted, where de-coincidence can occur, and where genuine innovation can emerge. At the same time, it is not a site where one passively awaits change; the utopian horizon acts as a stimulus to actively work towards its occurrence. The status of the avant-garde is well reflected in the idea of a *Real Utopia*, which Erik Olin Wright defines as the "tension between dreams and practice," further stating that it is "grounded in the belief that what is pragmatically possible is not fixed independently of our imaginations, but is itself shaped by our visions. Self-fulfilling prophecies are powerful forces in history, and while it may be naively optimistic to say «where there is a will there is a way», it is certainly true that without «will» many «ways» become impossible"⁷⁷. The avant-garde artist, in a sense, "cooperates" with the conditions that make change possible – neither submitting to them, becoming a mere tool of external forces, nor adapting them to a pre-conceived scenario. This is how Kobro and Strzemiński's prototyping proceeds – as a collaboration with history and for history, yet not against utopia, but out of utopian *motivation*.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Berman Marshall (1988) *All That Is Solid Melts into Air. The Experience of Modernity*, New York: Penguin Books.

Bois Yves-Alain (1990) *Strzemiński and Kobro: In Search of Motivation*, [in:] Y.-A. Bois, *Painting as Model*, Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, pp. 123-155.

Degot Ekaterina (2015) *Painting in History*, [in:] P. Polit, J. Suchan, eds., *Władysław Strzemiński: Readability of Images*, Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, pp. 53-66.

⁷⁶ M. Berman, *All That Is Solid...*, p. 316.

⁷⁷ E. O. Wright, *Envisioning Real Utopias*, Verso, London 2010, p. 4.

Gough Maria (1998) *In the Laboratory of Constructivism: Karl Ioganson's Cold Structures*, "October", no. 84, pp. 91-117.

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

Groys Boris (2010) *The Weak Universalism*, "e-flux journal", no. 15. Available at: [http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_130.pdf](http://worker01.e-flux.com/pdf/article_130.pdf) (accessed: 12.07.2010).

Jullien François (2017) *De-coincidence: Where Art and Existence Come From*, transl. P. Rodriguez, Taipei: National Taiwan University of the Arts.

Jullien François (2024) *Ponownie otworzyć możliwości: de-koincydencja i kolejne życie*, transl. E. Marynowicz-Hetka, Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego.

Kobro Katarzyna, Strzemiński Władysław (1931) *Kompozycja przestrzeni. Obliczenia rytmu czasoprzestrzennego*, Łódź: Biblioteka "a.r."

Kobro Katarzyna (1933) *L'action de sculpter*, "Abstraction-Création", no. 2, p. 27.

Kobro, Katarzyna (1935) *[Dla ludzi niezdolnych do myślenia...]*, "Forma", no. 3, p. 14.

Kobro Katarzyna (1936) *Funkcjonalizm*, "Forma", no. 4, pp. 9-13.

Kobro Katarzyna (1937) *[Rzeźba stanowi...]*, "Głos Plastyków", no. 1-7, pp. 42-43.

Malevich Kazimir (1921) *Unovis. Programmaja stat'ja*, "Iskusstvo", no. 4, pp. 9-10.

Rosch Eleanor (1978) *Principles of Categorization*, [in:] E. Rosch, B. Bloom Lloyd, eds., *Cognition and Categorization*, Hillsdale: Erlbaum Associates, pp. 27-48.

Strzemiński Władysław (1922-1923) *O sztuce rosyjskiej - Notatki*, "Zwrotnica", no. 3, pp. 79-82, no. 4, pp. 110-114.

Strzemiński Władysław (1923) *[Określam sztukę...]*, [in:] *Katalog Wystawy Nowej Sztuki*, Vilnius: Lux, pp. 19-21.

Strzemiński Władysław (1924) *B = 2*, "Blok", no. 8-9, n. pag.

Strzemiński Władysław (1927) *Notatki*, "Zwrotnica", no. 11, p. 243.

Strzemiński Władysław (1927) *Dualizm i unizm*, "Droga", no. 6-7, pp. 211-225.

Strzemiński Władysław (1932) *Sztuka nowoczesna w Polsce*, [in:] J. Brzękowski, L. Chwistek, P. Smolik, W. Strzemiński, *O sztuce nowoczesnej*, Łódź: Wyd. Tow. Bibliofilów, pp. 59-93.

Strzemiński Władysław (1934) *Co myślę o architekturze nowoczesnej*, "Wiadomości Literackie", no. 23, p. 4.

- Strzeмиński Władysław (1934) *[Nasza zawartość wzrokowa...]*, "Forma", no. 2, pp. 17-18.
- Strzeмиński Władysław (1935) *[Rozwój jednostki...]*, "Forma", no. 3, pp. 17.
- Strzeмиński Władysław (1935) *Hasło przeciw stabilizatorom sztuki*, "Tygodnik Artystów", no. 14, p. 2.
- Strzeмиński Władysław (1936) *Aspekty rzeczywistości*, "Forma", no. 5, pp. 6-13.
- Strzeмиński Władysław (1936) *Surogaty sztuki*, "Budowa", no. 1, pp. 3-6.
- Strzeмиński Władysław (2016) *Teoria widzenia*, Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki.
- Turowski Andrzej (1997) *Awangardowe marginesy*, Warszawa: Instytut Kultury.
- Turowski Andrzej (1998) *Tradycja, historia i myśl rosyjskiej awangardy artystycznej*, [in:] A. Turowski, *Między sztuką a komuną: Teksty awangardy rosyjskiej 1910-1932*, Kraków: Universitas, pp. 11-44.
- Wright Erik O. (2010) *Envisioning Real Utopias*, London: Verso.

MIĘDZY UTOPIĄ A PROTOTYPEM: IDEA ZMIANY W TWÓRCZOŚCI KATARZYN Y KOBRO I WŁADYSŁAWA STRZEMIŃSKIEGO (streszczenie)

Awangarda zachowuje wobec historii relację dialektyczną. Z jednej strony zorientowana jest na zmianę, z drugiej dąży do ustanowienia *wiecznego teraz* – utopii, której osiągnięcie zakończy wszelką historię i potrzebę wszelkich dalszych zmian. W takim kontekście Yves-Alain Bois analizuje historyzm Katarzyny Kobro i Władysława Strzeмиńskiego, dochodząc do wniosku, że system, jaki stworzyli, unizm, musiał ponieść klęskę, gdyż mimo uwzględnienia działania historii, nie zrywał z utopijnym ideałem jedności, do którego ostatecznie miała zmierzać sztuka i świat społeczny. Niniejszy tekst stanowi polemikę z tą tezą, a zarazem wyraz wątpliwości wobec formułowanych przez François Jullien sugestii, że myślenie utopijne, związane z projektowaniem wielkiej zmiany, jest kontr-produktywne i w istocie przeciwdziała możliwości zajścia rzeczywistej transformacji świata. W tekście proponuję pragmatyczne ujęcie relacji między zmianą a utopią, przywołując dla tego celu koncepcję prototypu. Twórczość Kobro i Strzeмиńskiego ujmuję jako kolejne odsłony procesu prototypowania, ukazując pozytywną zależność między utopijną wizją a praktycznym działaniem w historii.

Słowa kluczowe: historyzm awangardy, modernistyczna idea zmiany, prototypowanie, utopia rzeczywista, unizm

Jarosław Suchan, PhD, art historian, writer, curator and lecturer at the Institute of Art History, Jagiellonian University, Krakow. In the years 2006-2022, he was director of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź. Curator of many exhibitions of modern and contemporary art presented, among others, at the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Museo Reina Sofia in Madrid, Fundação Serralves in

Porto, Gemeentemuseum in The Hague, Universalmuseum Joanneum in Graz, Moderna Museet in Malmö and Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw. Author of numerous texts on the avantgarde, modernism, contemporary art and museology; editor of monographs on the work of Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro, Tadeusz Kantor, the Polish-Jewish avantgarde and avantgarde museology.