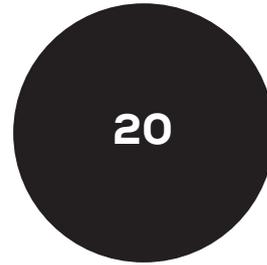




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## **View. Theories and Practices of Visual Culture**

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*Art as an Agent of Modernisation: Władysław Strzemiński's Double Agent Politics of Social Change, the Museum and Artistic Culture*

**author:**

Tomasz Załuski

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**affiliation:**

Institute of Literary Research of the Polish Academy of Sciences  
Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw

Tomasz Załuski

## **Art as an Agent of Modernization: Władysław Strzemiński's Double Politics of Social Change, the Museum, and Artistic Culture**<sup>1</sup>

It is not enough to create a good work of art.[...]  
It is also necessary to create the appropriate  
conditions for it to exert influence.

Władysław Strzemiński in a letter to Julian Przyboś, 1929 [L, 224]<sup>2</sup>

The avant-garde has often been defined in terms of originality and novelty or viewed through the prism of experimenting with artistic form, language, medium or the communication process. It has also been considered as an attempt to integrate art with the praxis of everyday life and as an enterprise for designing social change and creating visions of a new man, new culture and new society. This has led to interpreting the avant-garde as a radical but also utopian artistic and cultural movement. In fact, the notion of "the utopian" has largely contributed to the questioning and dismantling of these radical social and political imperatives of the avant-garde. As a result, it is quite commonly presumed that the latter might have been radical but its radicalism was empty and unreal, purely phantasmatic.

Less often, even nowadays, the avant-garde is described and defined in the terms indicated in the epigraph above, quoting a letter from Władysław Strzemiński to Julian Przyboś: namely, in terms of the necessity and ability to create new circumstances for radical artistic and socio-political ideas to get culturally enrooted, socially legitimized, and politically implemented. In order to create these appropriate circumstances, the avant-garde has had to be able to function and perform efficiently within the real conditions of a particular time and place. As, for example, in the famous opening of *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* by Karl Marx, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past."<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the avant-garde has

been forced to negotiate its position within existing conditions in the fields of art production and social life, it has had to develop realistic, complex and sometimes ambivalent tactics, and engage in pragmatic actions and initiatives. It is here that the so-called “utopianism” of the avant-garde gets replaced by, or at least supplemented with, its operativity, good judgement and effectivity, enterprising spirit and resourcefulness – that is to say with its ability, sometimes highly developed, to self-organize and self-institutionalize in the public sphere.

This very aspect has directed my own research on the artistic and organizational practices of Polish constructivist artist Władysław Strzemiński. I am particularly interested in his expanded idea of art as an agent of cultural and social modernization and in how he strove to implement it: how he negotiated with existing historical circumstances in order to change them and create new ones, ones that would help his artistic and social ideas to exert influence and become actualized. In what follows, I will present some general premises of my interpretative work on Strzemiński’s legacy. I will show how, in his case, a modernization imperative translated into what I call a “double politics”. It is in this context that I will briefly situate his successful attempt at creating the International Collection of Modern Art, which later became the basis for the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, as a museum of the avant-garde. The aim will be to show what role the collection, deposited in a municipal museum in Łódź and made accessible to the general public, was to play in Strzemiński’s overall politics of modernization. In the second part of my article, I will consider how this legacy of modernization could be taken up, updated, activated and performed institutionally today. Specifically, I will propose repurposing and updating the idea of the “Museum of Artistic Culture” as an institution capable of providing a relevant and responsible answer to the avant-garde’s ethos and heritage of modernization. I will do so with reference to a project entitled *The Effectivity of Art*, organized by myself – following an invitation from the Muzeum Sztuki – in the years 2012–2014. It is one of a few projects through which the institution has tried to work with, and re-work, this modernizing legacy of the avant-garde in the sphere of contemporary artistic and activist practices.

### **Władysław Strzemiński’s double politics**

The issue of Władysław Strzemiński’s political stance and the political implications of his art have been an object of controversy and divergent interpretations for

decades. His art has been associated with leftist ideas, such as socialism<sup>4</sup> or communism,<sup>5</sup> or with social solidarism under the direction of the middle class, as well as being considered structurally equivalent and linked to industrial capitalism.<sup>6</sup> It has also been provocatively suggested that certain social implications of his art bring it dangerously close to fascism.<sup>7</sup> Last but not least, the artist has been declared a Polish patriot,<sup>8</sup> accused of political opportunism,<sup>9</sup> or has been considered completely apolitical, unable to take any political stance at all.<sup>10</sup> I think that in order to sift through all these interpretations and look at the question of Strzemiński's politics from the right perspective, it has to be assumed that art for him was a politics of modernization.<sup>11</sup> To be more precise – a double politics.<sup>12</sup>

The artist never explicitly equates art with politics nor does he suggest that artistic practice should be subordinated to a political cause. Nevertheless, there seem to be in his writings from the 1920s and 1930s two implicit, interconnected concepts – or two aspects of a single concept – of art as politics. I propose to call one of them an ideological “politics of ends” or – to use a common concept of the era – a “mission”, and the other one a pragmatic “realpolitik of means” or a “tactic”. The former comprised his modernisation programme while the latter aimed to create appropriate conditions for its implementation.

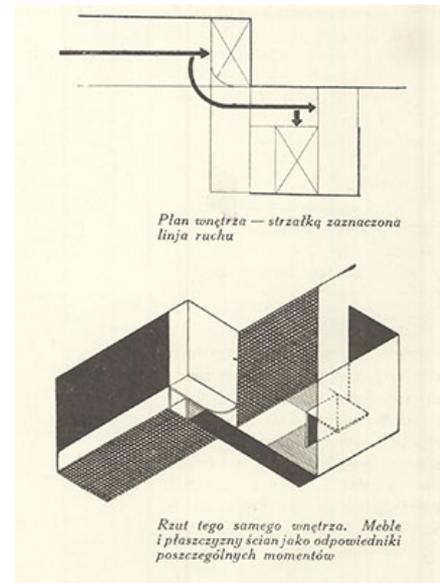
Reversing traditional premises of the concept of political art, Strzemiński seems to imply that one should not proceed by expressing an already articulated political stance in art but infer from the very specificity of modern art its own sociopolitical implications and take them as one's attitude to life and political stance:

As long as we do not draw from modern art its social and ideological implications – the logic of its form – modern art will float in mid-air and will not find any social extension. I am not speaking of agitation or taking a political stand and “expressing” it by means of art but of the logic of an attitude towards the facts of an individual life (the life of the creator) as well as towards the facts of life more generally, the logic that stems from the logic of artistic forms [L, 256].

Now, one might wonder what “attitude”, and what kinds of sociopolitical ideas, forms and practices “stem” from the formal logic of modern art. In other words, what politics should follow from it? Strzemiński's answer to this question ought to be sought in what I have called the ideological “politics of ends”. The latter, co-

authored by Strzemiński and his wife, artist Katarzyna Kobro, entailed redefining art, transforming and expanding its conceptual basis. Art, for them, was no longer to function as a formal ornament of life. It was to be seen as giving shape to life itself: "organizing the course of life processes."<sup>13</sup> This radically expanded concept of art still retains the possibility of engaging in such traditional art practices as painting a picture or making a sculpture; yet, it confers on them a new function and meaning. Let us reconstruct its logic: a singular artwork is a formal experiment, an exercise in art but also a kind of research task. This makes art something very close to science, the methods of which it may also employ. Art becomes knowledge production: artistic experiments lead to the discovery or creation of new organizational rules and methods that are inferred out of a singular work and articulated as coherent concepts. Such concepts, when applied to mass production, can become the basis for designing buildings and objects of everyday use which start to shape a living space and the actions of mass consumers. It is in this way that art was to organize the course of life processes according to the standards and norms of the modern world [W, 237]. It is also in this way that art becomes a culturalist and Taylorist biopolitics,<sup>14</sup> a bioproduction of modern life – provided that we take the concept of biopolitics in a relatively neutral sense. Art should be a tool for modernizing social life according to the principles of scientific management and, therefore, for making life more productive, functional, economic and efficient. More precisely, it should become a laboratory of organizational and anthropotechnical models for the design of architectural and urbanist spaces as well as mass-produced utilitarian objects. Having been built and produced in this way, these spaces and objects are supposed to reshape human habitus and affects, increase human energy and quality of life. Eventually, they should stimulate the creation of a rational social community.

This Taylorist inspiration is quite explicit in the writings of Strzemiński and Kobro.<sup>15</sup> The biopolitics of Taylorism must have really appealed to both artists, who saw it as a genuinely modern way of organizing life. Planned and managed by a single



Katarzyna Kobro, above: the plan of an interior with arrows showing the lines of movement; below: an architectural projection of the same interior with furniture and walls as equivalents of the respective moments [in:] eadem, "Funkcjonalizm" [Functionalism], *Forma*, no. 4 (1936): 11. Courtesy of Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

decision-making center, Taylorist politics was thought to be effective and efficient, freed from the destabilising play of forces and devoid of all superfluous verbiage and rhetorical fireworks that were so typical of traditional political activity [W, 144]. Accordingly, Strzemiński's modernizing, progressive, Taylorist politics of modern art could not be identified with, and equated to, any of the traditional political views, doctrines and systems. Instead, it offered a measure for evaluating those views and systems so as to determine if – and to what degree – they created appropriate circumstances for its own development and implementation. It was from the perspective of this modernizing politics that the artist evaluated actual economic and socio-political circumstances and kept on inventing different tactics to act effectively within their changing context.

This is exactly where Strzemiński's "politics of ends" had to open itself to a supplementary type of action, that which I have termed the pragmatic "realpolitik of means". The latter was supposed to strive for appropriate conditions and necessary means – institutional, social, political, economic etc. – that would provide modern art with social legitimacy and enough power to modernize social life. This kind of politics implied it was necessary to enter the field of antagonistic forces and interests. Its task was to remove factors which blocked or weakened the social impact of modern art and hindered the process of its becoming a biopolitics of modern life. It should be also noted that it was mainly Strzemiński himself who performed this "realpolitik of means"; Kobro, most probably for reasons of nationality, language (she was born in Russia), and the patriarchal society, was engaged in it to a lesser extent.

An excellent source for reconstruction of this "politics of means" are Strzemiński's letters. They show him to have been not only a creator of a radical project for modernizing art and social life but, above all, prove that he was a realist and a pragmatic who was capable of tactical actions aimed at implementing this very project. The artist was perfectly aware of how the public sphere functioned and knew the influence that the printed press could exert on public opinion. He

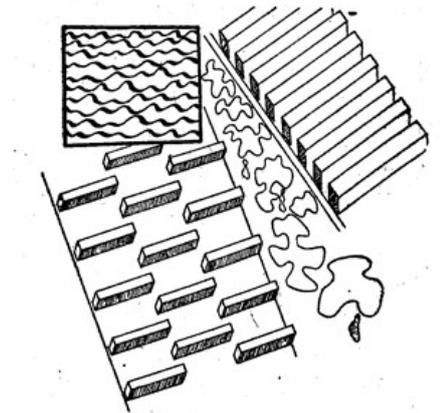


Władysław Strzemiński, "A design of a flat interior composition," 1930, in: Katarzyna Kobro, Władysław Strzemiński, *Kompozycja przestrzeni. Obliczenia rytmu czasoprzestrzennego* [Composition of Space. Calculations of a Spatio-Temporal Rhythm], (Łódź: Biblioteka a.r., 1931), illustration 44. Courtesy of Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

considered it necessary for modern artists to “advertize” their art in order to create a desired public image of it. He wanted to shape the social imaginary by creating a strong association between modern art and various phenomena of technological and economic modernization. Therefore, he would take part in public discussions, give lectures and presentations, but also, and above all, he wrote and published texts in Polish art and literary journals as well as in the everyday press. He was an indefatigable advocate of modern art – he kept on defending it, educating people about it, proving its cultural, social and economic relevance and granting it its rightful place among agents of modernization. He organized press campaigns and created “press facts” to support modern art and defend it against the

accusations of those who criticized it and wanted to delegitimize it. What is more, he sought collaboration and a coalition within the art scene as well as institutional and political support for his enterprises. In the interwar period his “politics of means” involved the founding of, and participation in, subsequent artistic groups – Blok, Praesens, and a.r. He also participated in the creation of the Union of Polish Visual Artists in Łódź – a collective body and public representation of artists. Last but not least, Strzemiński – together with Kobro – developed an original educational programme for art and design and made every effort to implement it in different schools in Nowa Wilejka, Szczekociny, Koluszki and Łódź.

And yet, as early as the end of the 1920s, a time which constituted a turning point in many respects – economic, sociopolitical, cultural and artistic – Strzemiński saw in retrospect that modern art had managed in Poland to gain neither social legitimacy, nor the necessary symbolic and material means of action. In *Bilans modernizmu* [An Assessment of Modernism] from 1929, he answers some critical voices raised against modern art in Poland. In his opinion, the reason behind the misunderstanding of modern art and the hostile reception it used to get at the time was the lack of any proper artistic tradition in Poland, an absence of progressive development of artistic forms and tendencies in the early modern, or pre-modern period:



Władysław Strzemiński, the aesthetics of unism as visual equivalent to the homogeneousness of the functionalist residential quarter, in: idem, “Łódź sfunkcjonalizowana” [Łódź Functionalised], *Myśl Współczesna* 1947, no. 11, p. 453

We are accused of not being on firm ground, of not having any connection to the tradition of past generations, of importing foreign trends and novelties. That is indeed a fact. We have got no common tradition with this very generation that has wasted Polish art. We are referring not to decline but to progress. We are developing a connection to foreign art because our own predecessors have made art into something hostile to art itself [W, 120].

Another and deeper reason is indicated in a letter to Przyboś, where Strzemiński writes about the necessity of accounting for “the sociological foundation of modernism” [L, 225]. It seems it was here that he saw the source of the problem: in his view, Poland lacked such a proper sociological foundation for modernism. Even though modern art, when it comes to its psycho-physiological impact, was perfectly suited to the aesthetic needs and requirements of the contemporary viewer, it was not appreciated there but instead treated with suspicion, prejudice and hostility. For Strzemiński, this could not be explained solely in artistic or aesthetic terms but had to derive from a more general social approach to life: “The approach to modern art is but a symptom of a much more general approach to modern life phenomena” [W, 244]. Accordingly, he started to seek and critically reconstruct wider historical, geopolitical, socioeconomic and cultural factors that could have been responsible for the absence of a hospitable atmosphere in Poland for modernity and modern art. Anticipating some general tenets of both modernization theories and postcolonial studies, the artist considered factors that enabled the modernization process to be internal to a particular country or region, and the process itself to be linear, evolutionary, irreversible and basically the same for all countries and societies in so far as it goes through the same necessary phases everywhere. On the other hand, he was conscious of the fact that a period of colonial dependency leaves its mark on the mentality, habits, culture and way of life of a given society and can wield influence long after the country regains its political sovereignty. A combination of the two perspectives created a kind of analytical framework which he applied to Polish history and culture. Among the factors he identified as responsible for the backwardness and anti-modernistic sentiments of Polish society were the Partitions of Poland in the 18th century and their long-term impact, the ideology of romanticism and sarmatism, a socioeconomic and geopolitical genealogy of the Polish managerial and bureaucratic classes, and lastly, a strong nationalist discourse and xenophobic tendencies within Polish society.

These nationalist and xenophobic tendencies further intensified with the onset of the Sanation, a political movement with the ambition to bring about a moral sanitation of the Polish body politic constituted around Józef Piłsudski, the first Marshal of Poland and *de facto* head of state in that period, which gained momentum after Piłsudski's Coup d'État of 1926. Confronting the situation, Strzemiński stressed forcefully that "the conditions for the absorption of good art by the masses should be sought outside of art itself" [W, 198]. This view is expressed in *Blokada sztuki* [The Blockade of Art] in 1934, where he passionately criticizes institutional conditions and sociopolitical power relations that defined the field of art production and distribution in 1930s Poland. He attacks those in charge of art institutions and the art press who claim that modern art must not enter the public sphere in Poland as it is not natively Polish and remains foreign to "the Polish soul" [W, 197]. Since this cultural and institutional politics was shaped by general political tendencies, Strzemiński declares that "the border between art and politics has suddenly vanished" [W, 199]. In effect, artists should take any actions necessary, even militant ones, to fight for political changes that would lead to the transformation of the institutional field of art. Strzemiński goes as far as to state that they have to prepare for war and this preparation is "a struggle for a new system" [W, 199]. Elliptical as this may sound, it is clear that the artist is calling for a radical political change that would also lead to the transformation of the institutional field of art: "to be able to assimilate good art but first of all, to be able to create it with impunity – yes, with impunity! – one would need to rearrange everything here completely" [W, 198-199].

It was in this complex and overdetermined context that the International Collection of Modern Art, a cornerstone of the Muzeum Sztuki as a museum of the avant-garde, was created as a grassroots and independent initiative. At the beginning of the 1930s Strzemiński – together with the other members of the "a.r." group (Katarzyna Kobro, Henryk Stażewski, Julian Przyboś, and Jan Brzękowski) – asked numerous foreign and Polish avant-garde artists to donate works and thus contribute to the creation of the collection. In 1931 an agreement was signed with



Members of the a.r. group (from the left): Julian Przyboś, Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro.  
Courtesy of Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

the Łódź Municipal Council to deposit the collection in the building occupied by the Julian and Kazimierz Bartoszewicz Municipal Museum of History and Art and thus it was made accessible to the general public. A crucial role in this was played by Przemysław Smolik, Head of the Department of Culture and Education in the Łódź Municipality and a member of PPS, the Socialist Party of Poland – the very same political force that according to Strzemiński did not “stem” from modern art [L, 256].

The task of the collection as a cornerstone for a future museum of modern art was at least threefold. First of all, it was to construct an artistic background by way of an invented or imported tradition, to create a reference point for the future development of modern art in Poland. Second, the aim was to educate the general public on the historical genealogy of modern art and therefore provide the latter with cultural authority, social legitimacy and appreciation. Finally, the collection was meant to promote modernity at large and contribute to the creation of a genuinely modern social subjectivity in Poland. It aimed to transform the collective imaginary and reinvent “the Polish soul” so that it would be ready to rise to the challenges of modern life and support the modernization plans of artists and designers.

In order to effectively perform this complex task, the museum and its collection was intended to take its place in a kind of network of mutually supporting and cooperating institutions. In my opinion, Strzemiński started to build such a network of institutional connections in the aftermath of World War II, trying to take advantage of the new sociopolitical circumstances that were created by the new communist authorities in Poland. In the late 1940s, taking various tactical steps, he tried to encourage collaboration between the renamed Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź – with its International Collection of Modern Art – the newly-established State Higher School of Visual Art in Łódź, where he worked and where he participated in the creation of the Department of Spatial Design, and finally – factories representing different branches of industry. He also wanted to establish a link between artistic and scientific institutions so he chose to partner with the journal “Myśl Współczesna” [Contemporary Thought], which was edited by a circle of progressive left-wing intellectuals and researchers from the newly established University of



The room of the International Collection of Modern Art at the Julian and Kazimierz Bartoszewicz Municipal Museum of History and Art in Łódź, 1932. Courtesy of Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

Lodz. They sought to develop a socially engaged, egalitarian university which would produce the knowledge necessary to enhance the ongoing social change as well as help to rebuild the country, destroyed during the war, and modernize it.<sup>16</sup>

Strzemiński believed that the modernizing politics of modern art could be implemented only by means of this institutional coalition. He acted as a mediating agent between all these professional and institutional circles, as a kind of central node in the network that was slowly being created – but not without difficulties. The introduction of Stalinism and the doctrine of Socialist Realism in Poland in 1949, the artist's firing from the State Higher School of Visual Art in 1950, and finally his death in 1952, put an end to these networking efforts.

### **The Museum of Artistic Culture. The need for a contemporary reappraisal and update of the idea**

What is to be done with the modernizing ethos of the avant-garde? How should we respond, again and anew, to the challenges it poses? What would be, especially in institutional terms, a relevant and responsible way of inheriting Strzemiński's conception and practice of art as a politics of modernization? How can the contemporary museum of art embody, re-work and re-activate the memory of the museum and its vital role in the modernization project as envisioned by the artist?

As Andrzej Turowski has indicated,<sup>17</sup> one of the main sources for Strzemiński's conception of a modern art collection and museum is to be sought in his Russian period and, more specifically, in discussions surrounding the notion of the Museum of Artistic Culture and his attempts to create a network of such institutions that took place in post-revolutionary Russia in the late 1910s and early 1920s. Strzemiński participated in the meetings of the IZO Narkompros (the Department of Fine Arts at the People's Commissariat of Education and Enlightenment) in Moscow and played a vital role there in the development of the Central Exhibition Bureau. He knew the ideas and postulates presented at the 1919 Petrograd conference on museums of art organised by IZO Narkompros, during which the very term "artistic culture" was coined.<sup>18</sup> Finally, he was aware of the unfavourable circumstances of creating new art institutions in Witebsk and Smolensk. Judging by his later writings and initiatives focused on the question of the museum, it seems that there were three main ideas he found inspiring in discussions about the Museum of Artistic Culture. Firstly, the very question of artistic culture as a culture of experiment and

invention. Secondly, a need to stress the formal aspect of art and organize the museum collection and the works exhibited around the evolution of form that leads teleologically to the present artistic achievements and, therefore, legitimize them as the necessary next steps in the development of art. And thirdly, a need to integrate within the Museum of Artistic Culture the functions of collecting and exhibiting art, providing artistic education for art students and the general public, and establishing a scientific institute for research and experimentation in art, architecture, psycho-physiology, ergonomics, biomechanics etc. that could be used in the designing of utilitarian spaces and objects.

I have brought up the subject of the "Museum of Artistic Culture" so as to present a few cursory remarks on this very term. I believe that it could be re-purposed and updated today so as to provide a relevant answer to the question of how art museums can institutionally activate the modernization ethos of their avant-garde collections. On the one hand, a Museum of Artistic Culture could henceforth refer to a process of institutional transformation and expansion that is already under way as museums are trying to reinvent their missions, redefine their tasks and break out of the traditional cultural, sociopolitical, economic and legal frameworks of their functioning. On the other hand, the term in question could refer to a new institutional model, a kind of regulative idea that would enhance and direct the process of institutional transformation towards the creation of an institution that would answer faithfully to the modernization imperatives of the avant-garde. I will limit myself to indicating certain aspects of this latter model.

Obviously, a contemporary Museum of Artistic Culture should inherit the ethos of modernization in a critical and transformative way. This should begin with the very understanding of the concept of "artistic culture". I think that "artistic culture" should now, after the avant-garde, the neo-avant-garde and the institutional critique, refer to all artistic activities and all workings of the field of art production in its relationships with other spheres within the social field. This already poses some challenge to existing institutions. Namely, they should work with – collect, exhibit, research and educate on – not only what are called "works of art" but all artefacts, documents and testimonies of modernization projects of the avant-garde. This, in turn, translates into is a need for cross-disciplinary research projects and radically contextual, historical and educational exhibitions of the avant-garde in its various modernizing efforts and initiatives. Especially important is social and cultural

education. The museum should not only expand its own educational activities but also share its expertise at a meta-level: educate the educators, support, coordinate and advise on large-scale public and school programs and curricula. In this way new channels for the distribution of the avant-garde's heritage could be ensured and the social and cultural modernization the avant-garde hoped for could be implemented as a systemic solution. What is more, the contemporary Museum of Artistic Culture should be an institution where the active inheriting of the avant-garde's traditions will find its rightful place. Such a museum should provide a space in which social, cultural and artistic modernization imperatives are detached from their determined historical embodiments, their situational and tactical solutions, so as to be transformed and re-embodied, translated into new positive forms and projects, re-articulated within the context of present-day issues, problems and struggles.

This leads me to another aspect I want to touch upon: a need for the contemporary Museum of Artistic Culture to support different forms of artistic, cultural, social, political, and urban activism and act as a kind of activist or socially engaged institution itself. Among other things, the museum should invest its symbolic capital and its autonomy – no matter how fragile, complicated and self-contradictory it is and must remain – in disclosing and introducing into the public sphere issues which are excluded from present municipal and governmental policies. The museum must become a regular site for participatory, inclusive and inter-class discussions, initiatives and interventions. One of their guiding threads will be the very processes, traditions and models of modernization, in their different local, trans-local and glocal shapes, aspects, stakes and conditions. They should be addressed thematically, reworked in a (self-)critical fashion and experimented on. The avant-garde ethos of radical experimentation, questioning and bracketing existing rules so as to invent new ones or proceed with no rules whatsoever, could in fact contribute here to exposing the limits of the concept of modernization, extending it and opening it up to the challenges of the difficult present and the unforeseeable future.

The question of artistic and institutional activism was also an explicit subject of a project organized by the Muzeum Sztuki and I will share my further thoughts on the possibility of museums acting as modernization agents by referring to this very enterprise.

Between October 2012 and May 2013, at the invitation of and in cooperation with the Muzeum Sztuki, I organized a series of open lectures, presentations and discussions under the title *The Effectiveness of Art*. The essence of the project was to develop an engaged and, at the same time, realistic and critical method to define and – most importantly – to assess the effectiveness of contemporary artistic and institutional practices, or at least what it may be in these diverse fields. The idea was also to indicate what conditions must be met for art to be able to gain or increase its effectiveness where it has had no effects thus far. To this end, we decided to break up the general question of the “effectiveness of art” into a number of more specific, interrelated issues. Together with researchers from various fields, artists, curators, activists and publicists invited to join the project, we looked at artistic activities in the context of the transforming the capitalist economy, the political nature of cultural practices, the social values of design, civic activism and urban movements, collaboration between art and science, and finally – the tasks and modes of artistic institutions’ activities. We were particularly interested in practices carried out in Poland, although there were also references and comparisons to similar phenomena in other countries. The whole project was summarised in a book called *The Effectiveness of Art*, released at the end of 2014.<sup>19</sup> The volume consisted of twenty-two theoretical texts, case studies, interviews with artists and activists, and artistic manifestos. They presented a broad panorama of voices and analytical perspectives, as well as assessments of artistic, activist and institutional practices. I think that for the Muzeum Sztuki the whole project was an important step towards the renewing of its founding avant-garde ethos of art as an agent of cultural and social modernisation in the contemporary context with its accompanying new stakes, tasks and struggles.



*Skuteczność sztuki* [The Effectivity of Art], ed. Tomasz Załuski (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2014)

The term “effectiveness of art” undoubtedly refers to the ethos of the avant-garde – the ethos of changing reality and the need for active involvement in society, both of which define many contemporary artistic ideas and practices. The term also brings to mind disputes about whether art, as “the other place” in the social space, is able to shape this space – and if so, with what instruments, to what extent, and based on what values. Thus, the “effectiveness of art” can be an emblem of a desire to instrumentalize artistic practices, to subordinate them and make them serve

external social or political goals, while rejecting the autonomy of the field of art and values that constitute its specificity.<sup>20</sup> However, it can also mean retaining such symbolic autonomy as a kind of “laboratory” in which different experimental “inventions” emerge that can be potentially, in an indirect and complex way, transplanted onto a broader social background.<sup>21</sup> Another distinction is marked by the opposition between real and symbolic action. It is sometimes believed that artistic practices are capable of effecting real cultural, social or political change, albeit generally on a micro-scale.<sup>22</sup> A different view assumes that if art has any effectiveness, it entails exclusively disclosing and publicizing certain problems by introducing them to the public discourse. The change which art is capable of gets limited then to the symbolic transformation of social imaginaries.<sup>23</sup> Another disputed issue is the question of what “cause” artistic practices – willingly or unwillingly – actually serve. In addition to concepts that attribute broader values of emancipation to art and seek its effectiveness in the field where it is realized, there are also ones that presuppose that artistic tools and values are today successfully used on the “other side of the barricade,” in the service of the mechanisms of power, control and exploitation – and that that it is precisely where art is sometimes amazingly effective.<sup>24</sup> In reference to artistic practices, the very category of “effectiveness” appears highly suspicious in this context, as it is too strongly associated with the criteria of productivity, efficiency and measurability – with capitalist values imposed in all spheres of life.

Taking all these overdetermined aspects into account, we wanted to look back, analyze specific artistic and institutional practices, and see which of them actually “worked” and which did not, what factors influenced their success or failure, and what was achieved – or failed to be achieved – through them. Thus, our main goal was to critically re-work the issue of the effectiveness of art, show its general “economy,” analyze a number of ambivalences, difficulties and deficiencies related to activities that relate to the social, political, economic and cultural exterior of the field of artistic production, and ultimately – mount a careful, comprehensive and balanced defence of such activities and their potentials. The book that is the outcome of the project features a variety of voices, evaluations and postulates. I will outline some of my own conclusions from this project concerning art institutions.

A common criticism of the so-called “social turn” in contemporary art – or what may be termed more generally its “turn to the outside” – points out the “inbred” and self-

reproductive aspect of art, which ventures out into other spheres of reality in order to expand its own domain, redefine its concepts and gain new potentialities of action. Indeed, art is characterized by a certain "narcissism," through which it enters new realms of reality in order to "see itself reflected" in them and re-learn and generate new knowledge about itself – thus generating symbolic capital for itself and reasserting its own cultural position. It is, if one can risk such a term, "structural narcissism" independent of the actual altruism and social empathy of individual artists. This "narcissistic" aspect must be taken into account in any analysis of art that "turns to the outside" – regardless of whether we are dealing with a social, cultural, educational, ethical, political, or other turn. We need to develop critical awareness of the forms of appropriation and instrumentalization, to which elements of social life are subject in artistic and institutional practices, becoming "fuel" for generating economic and symbolic capital for the artworld, as well as consolidating the aesthetic, cultural, economic and class distinctions that build it. However, when formulating justified criticism of these phenomena, we cannot forget that they are of a structural nature and cannot be avoided completely. It is then a question of establishing the right relation, the right economy between this "narcissistic" generation of capital for oneself and redistributing different forms of symbolic, cultural, social, political, economic etc. capital within the social field.

The "effectiveness of art" is often understood in terms of the production of alternative patterns or prototypes of social reality: models of human relations, exchange, economy, participation, cooperation, communalism etc. Let us suppose that such a model is actually produced within an art institution – on the symbolic level. Then, we can wonder if there is a contradiction between the symbolic level and the real functioning of contemporary artistic institutions in the capitalist system. The question is to what extent such institutions – taking into account their inherent habitus and external economic, working, legal and political conditions – are really capable of implementing such an alternative model of relations, both in their own activities as well as their social environment. Such a question is still all too rarely considered in the field of art. This especially concerns art institutions, which are increasingly willing to engage in social projects and support artistic activism, but do not make sufficient efforts to disseminate and socialize values that are produced in the course of such projects. The capital generated by these projects falls into the void because they lack opportunity for redistribution. Art is not responsible for the models created in its field, it does not know how to take care of

their further social fate – even on the symbolic level, not to mention the real one. It offers them, but does not seek to implement them.

This applies particularly to art institutions, because today they not only support manifestations of social activism in artistic practices, but declare activist ambitions themselves and are willing to present themselves as instruments of social change. So far, such institutional activism has been mainly significant for the institutions themselves, paving the way for them to open up to new opportunities, to transform their status, to invent and define themselves anew. However, it may be a necessary stage on the way to taking action for actual redistribution of the capital generated by practices implemented within their framework. This redistribution could be encouraged if museums/galleries, in addition to their exhibition departments, and the research, promotion and education departments, established departments for social activism. The latter would be in charge of implementing artistic “prototypes” in the social field, both in-house as well as in collaboration with external subjects and institutions that could take them over and use them in their own social activities. This is necessary because a broader, more effective and systemic redistribution of the various forms of capital generated by art requires alliances and the collaboration of both artists and art institutions with other subjects/bodies operating in the public sphere.

Such a “department of social activism” should be another element of the contemporary Museum of Artistic Culture as an heir to the avant-garde ethos of modernization. I sincerely hope that the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, which is constantly trying to re-work its avant-garde and modernizing heritage, will establish such a department in the near future.

## Footnotes

1 The text is a modified version of a paper delivered at the conference *Museum of the Avant-garde or the Avant-garde Museum? Collecting the Radical*, organized by the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Poland, 2-3.12.2017.

2 The following abbreviations have been used in the article for the collected texts and letters of Władysław Strzemiński that are repeatedly cited: W – Władysław Strzemiński, *Pisma* [Collected Writings], (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im.

Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo, 1975); L – "Listy Władysława Strzemińskiego do Juliana Przybosa z lat 1929-1933" [The Letters of Władysław Strzemiński to Julian Przyboś, 1929-1933], ed. Andrzej Turowski, *Rocznik Historii Sztuki*, 1973, vol. 9.

3 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1972), 10.

4 Yve-Alain Bois, "Strzemiński and Kobra: In search of motivation," in: idem, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993) 135.

5 Andrzej Turowski, *Konstruktywizm polski* [Polish Constructivism], (Wrocław: Zakład Narodowy im. Ossolińskich – Wydawnictwo, 1981), 225-226. While admitting that Strzemiński was critical of the actual destructive impact of communism on art, Turowski nevertheless suggests that the artist seemed to have a more positive approach to communism as long as it formed "the social air and atmosphere" and was understood as a "standpoint on the phenomena of individual and social life" and a "general life attitude", rather than simply as "a political or propaganda tendency" – *ibid.* However, in the late 1990s Turowski changes his analytical perspective and situates both Katarzyna Kobra and Władysław Strzemiński in the context of social solidarism and cooperativism, see – idem, *Awangardowe marginesy* [The Margins of the Avant-Garde] (Warszawa: Instytut Kultury, 1998), 127.

6 Stanisław Czekalski, *Harmonia totalna. Tayloryzm i unizm* [A Total Harmony. Taylorism and Unism], an unpublished paper delivered at the *Katarzyna Kobra 1898-1851. W stulecie urodzin* conference [Katarzyna Kobra 1898-1851. On the centenary of her birth], organized by the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Poland, 23.10.1998.

7 Kazimierz Piotrowski, "Strzemiński i Chwistek – spór o esencjalizm w kontekście krytyki pseudomodernizmu" [Strzemiński and Chwistek – a Dispute on Essentialism in the Context of Critiques of Pseudo-Modernism] in: *Władysław Strzemiński. Uniwersalne oddziaływanie idei* [Władysław Strzemiński. The Universal Impact of Ideas], ed. G. Sztabiński (Łódź: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych im. Władysława Strzemińskiego, 2005), 39.

8 Iwona Luba, "Paradoks sztuki oficjalnej. Polsko-rosyjsko-radziecki galimatias" [The Official Art Paradox. A Polish-Russian-Soviet Hotchpotch] in: *Polska – Rosja*.

*Sztuka i historia / Poland – Russia. Art and History*, Vol. II, eds. Jerzy Malinowski, Irina Gavrash, Zofia Krasnopolska-Wesner (Warszawa-Toruń: Polski Instytut Studiów nad Sztuką Świata & Wydawnictwo Tako, 2014), 239.

9 Andrzej Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie* [Malevich in Warsaw], (Kraków: Universitas, 2004), 74.

10 Marian Minich, "Szalona galeria" [A Crazy Gallery], in: A. Minich-Scholz, *Marian Minich – pod wiatr*; M. Minich, *Wspomnienia wojenne. Szalona galeria* (Warszawa: Książka i Prasa, 2015), 231-232.

11 There is a growing body of literature which uses the modernization perspective to analyze the Polish avant-garde in its complex relationships with other artistic, cultural and social phenomena of the interwar and postwar period, see Andrzej Szczerski, *Modernizacje. Sztuka i architektura w nowych państwach Europy Środkowo-Wschodniej 1918-1939* [Modernizations. Art and Architecture in the New Countries of Central and Eastern Europe 1918-1939], (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2011); Iwona Luba, *Duch romantyzmu i modernizacja. Sztuka oficjalna Drugiej Rzeczypospolitej* [The Spirit of Romanticism and Modernization. The Official Art of the Second Polish Republic], (Warszawa: Neriton, 2012); *Socrealizmy i modernizacje* [Social Realisms and Modernisations], eds. Aleksandra Sumorok, Tomasz Załuski (Łódź: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych im. W. Strzemińskiego w Łodzi, 2017); *Szklane domy. Wizje i praktyki modernizacji społecznych po roku 1918* [Glass Houses. The Visions and Practices of Social Modernisations after 1918], ed. Joanna Kordjak (Warszawa: Zachęta – Narodowa Galeria Sztuki, 2018). The modernization perspective has also been applied to Strzemiński, and more precisely, to his ideas and practices after 1945 – see Andrzej Szczerski, "Strzemiński – the Moderniser," in: *Powidoki życia. Władysław Strzemiński i prawa dla sztuki / Afterimages of life. Władysław Strzemiński and Rights for Art*, ed. Jarosław Lubiak (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2012), 225–245.

12 I developed my argument on Strzemiński's „double politics” elsewhere – see Tomasz Załuski, "Władysław Strzemiński po wojnie: modernizacja, marksizm, socrealizm" [Władysław Strzemiński after World War II: modernisation, Marxism, Social Realism], in: *Socrealizmy i modernizacje*, 229-237.

- 13 Katarzyna Kobro, Władysław Strzemiński, "Kto chce, niech szpera... Manifest grupy a.r." [Forge Around, Those Who Want It... A Manifesto of the a.r. group], in: *Strzemiński – In Memoriam*, ed. Janusz Zagrodzki, (Łódź: Sztuka Polska, 1988), 183.
- 14 For an expanded presentation and analysis of Kobro and Strzemiński's Taylorist biopolitics see T. Załuski, "Futerał na ciało. Taylorizm i biopolityka w koncepcji architektury funkcjonalistycznej Katarzyny Kobro i Władysława Strzemińskiego" [A Case for the Body. Taylorism and Biopolitics in Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński's Concept of Functionalist Architecture], in: *Architektura przymusu* [The Architecture of Coercion], eds. M. Domański, T. Ferenc (Łódź: Akademia Sztuk Pięknych im. W. Strzemińskiego w Łodzi, 2013), 21-37. See also Jarosław Suchan, Kobro & Strzemiński. "Prototypes of a new thinking," in: *Kobro & Strzemiński. Avant-garde Prototypes*, exhib. cat. (Madrid: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, 2017), 17-67.
- 15 See for example W, 157, 217 and Katarzyna Kobro, *Funkcjonalizm* [Functionalism], in: Nika Strzemińska, *Katarzyna Kobro*, (Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Scholar, 2004), 79-80.
- 16 On this subject see Agata Zysiak, *Punkty za pochodzenie. Powojenna modernizacja i uniwersytet w robotniczym mieście*, [Affirmative Action. Postwar Modernization and University in the Working Class City], (Kraków: Nomos, 2016).
- 17 Andrzej Turowski, *Muzea Kultury Artystycznej* [Museums of Artistic Culture], *Artium Quaestiones* 1983, no. 2, 89-103. Also available in English translation as "The Contemporary Museum is a Laboratory of Knowledge': The Origins of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Russia", in: *From Museum Critique to the Critical Museum*, eds. Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, Piotr Piotrowski, (London: Routledge, 2015).
- 18 For more information on the Petrograd Conference and the issue of Museums of Artistic Culture in post-revolutionary Russia see Maria Gough, *Futurist Museology, Modernism / Modernity* 2003, vol. 10, no. 2, 327-348. See also the relevant source texts gathered in: *Avant-Garde Museology*, ed. Arseny Zhilyaev, (Minneapolis: e-flux, V-A-C Foundation and University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 282-306.

19 *Skuteczność sztuki* [The Effectiveness of Art], ed. Tomasz Załuski, (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, 2014).

20 This classic motif of the politicization of art appears as one of the ways of making art socially effective in Artur Żmijewski's "manifesto" – see A. Żmijewski, "The applied social arts", on-line, <http://www.artmargins.com/index.php/featured-articles/119-the-applied-social-arts->, accessed 18 September 2018.

21 A contemporary version of this avant-garde motif can be found for example in Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics*, trans. Simon Pleasance and Fronza Woods (Paris: Les presses du réel, 2002).

22 This seems to be Grant Kester's position – see for example his *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004) and *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

23 See for example Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaboration and its Discontents", in: *Artforum* 44, 2006, no. 6, 178-183.

24 For the Polish context, see for example Rafał Jakubowicz, *O praktykach artwashingu oraz kulturze i sztuce jako narzędziu penalizacji biedy i gentryfikacji* [On Artwashing Practices, Culture and Art as Tools of Gentrification and the Penalisation of Poverty], on-line, [http://www.nowakrytyka.pl/pl/artykuly/Nk\\_online/?id=969/O\\_praktykach\\_artwashingu](http://www.nowakrytyka.pl/pl/artykuly/Nk_online/?id=969/O_praktykach_artwashingu), accessed 18 September 2018.