

MONOCHROMES OF WŁADYSŁAW STRZEMIŃSKI

THE DEVELOPMENT AND MEANING OF UNISM

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Cover picture: Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja unistyczna 14 (1934) (eng. Unist composition 14)
(source: Archiwum Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi / Museum of Art in Łódź archival)

Abstract

This thesis investigates the practice and theory of Unism, art theory developed by Polish avant-garde painter Władysław Strzemiński and his wife, sculptor and designer Katarzyna Kobro. Artists who initially worked under the influence of Russian Constructivism and Suprematism of Kazimir Malevich, along with the creation of Unism gained intellectual and artistic independence and a place on the map of global modernism. Despite the connections and exchange of experiences with various environments, Unism appears as a separate, multithreaded phenomenon supported by a meticulously built background of theoretical texts.

The research has been divided into two main parts- "Description" and "Interpretation", both providing innovative approaches in their categories. "Description" part contains the formal analysis of all known Unist paintings created by Strzemiński, related to the theoretical framework and distributed into subcategories. "Interpretation" part contains smaller chapters in which, based on the theoretical texts of Strzemiński and his close associates, perspectives for interpreting these paintings from various positions (historical, social, political) are formed. The last chapter, "Outcome", puts results of the investigation in the context of current state of knowledge and research performed by scholars and curators, by critical juxtaposition and comparison.

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Introduction

The distinct gesture of painting a one-colored surface may seem like the definitive work of art, the dead end of modernism, or a malignant joke towards the institution and the viewers. Radical artists of the 20th attributed a wide range of meanings to it: it was used as a metaphor for the end of visual arts or as a catalyst for understanding the secrets of the human psyche and spirituality. I have been fascinated with monochrome painting since my first encounter with the works of Władysław Strzemiński, artist and educator, one of the most important figures of 20th-century art in Poland. He dedicated his life to the search for the ultimate form and truth of painting, which resulted in several books and art theories. Presumably, the most fascinating outcome of this search was a theory called Unizm (eng. Unism) introduced by the artist in his book "Unizm w malartswie" (eng. "Unism in painting") [1], published in 1928 in Warsaw. In this text, Strzemiński developed a compelling conceptual framework for his works, based on an analysis of the canon of European painting in a very specific way: as a history of the development of "visual phenomena" [1], collective visual consciousness. He distinguished the basic color and compositional principles that determined the uniqueness and consistency of the painting systems of subsequent eras starting from Baroque (the moment when the painting was created as a separate field, independent of architectural composition) and stated that all of them were based on different types of contrasts. He called this approach Dualism and contrasted it with Unism, which suggest that the only logical and inevitable implication of the course of development of European painting in the context of changing socio-economic environment, automatization of work and the evolution of human perception is to reach the state of unity, the ultimate abstraction in which the surface and the color become one to create perfect, infinite, balanced and pure compositions. He further developed this idea in a number of press articles and books published alone or with his wife and outstanding sculptor Katarzyna Kobro between 1923 and 1934. The influence of Kobro and other Polish and Russian visual artists (including Kazimir Malevich, Vladimir Tatlin, Henryk Stażewski, Leon Chwistek) and poets (Julian Przyboś, Jan Brzękowski) undeniably made it easier for Strzemiński to extend his idea beyond the realm of pure painting.

This thesis will trace the process of development and application of Unist theory in the painting practice of Strzemiński, by close examination of works considered by critics or the author himself as Unist. Moreover, I propose several interpretations of these works, basing them on the additional context of quotes from Strzemiński and Kobro, biographical and historical facts, or polemical voices of other authors. The structure of the text is divided into two main parts:

Chapter 1. Description

This part provides essential factual information on the biography and influences of Strzemiński and a more detailed description of Unist theory. Furthermore, all Unist paintings are introduced, analyzed, and divided into sub-periods or groups- not based on chronology but on the approach and artistic strategies used to construct the image. There is a total of 13 paintings created in the period of 11 years, therefore they naturally differ significantly from each other.

Presentation structure:

„Pre- unist period”: Kompozycja syntetyczna 1 (1923), Kompozycja postsuprematystyczna 2 (1923), Kompozycja unistyczna 4 (1925), Kompozycja Unistyczna 7 (1929)

„Organisation of shape”: Kompozycja unistyczna 5 (1924-1927), Kompozycja unistyczna 6 (1928)

„Introduction of texture”: Kompozycja unistyczna 8 (1931), Kompozycja unistyczna 9 (1931), Kompozycja unistyczna 10 (1931), Kompozycja unistyczna 11 (1931)

„Organic line monochromes”: Kompozycja unistyczna 12 (1932), Kompozycja unistyczna 13 (1934), Kompozycja unistyczna 14 (1934)

Chapter 2. Interpretation

In this part the abundant legacy of Strzemiński's written works (including books, press articles, manifestos, and private correspondence) is explored to provide and trace different interpretations and positions that could be taken to understand the meaning of Unism. Strzemiński was not always consistent in his own interpretation of this paintings, as different sources (polemics with fellow artists, lectures he gave as a teacher at the Academy of Fine Arts) reveals various ways to understand the monochromes painted between 1923 and 1934. Three interpretations presented in this chapter include:

The Continuum- the interpretation of paintings in the context of Strzemiński's theories on history and continuation in culture. His ambition, despite the radically modernist conceptual and formal apparatus used, was not to reject or negate the art of the past. On the contrary, he believed that the development of „visual awareness” [1] materialized by specific artistic Epoques, led to Unism as the only logical conclusion and the starting point for the subsequent search for the next generations.

The System- the interpretation of the whole period as the development of an algorithm or system not a series of

distinct canvases. Individual works were in a sense insignificant exemplifications of the "System", which was later translated and expanded on the other fields like architecture, labor organization, design, typography, sculpture, or even everyday lifestyle. In this approach, Unism becomes a pre-conceptual art theory that emphasizes the role of theory over the object.

The Statement- in this context Unist paintings are perceived as a social statement, associated with radical communist and technocratic ideas. Strzemiński himself believed in the possibility to express political or economic ideas with abstract art, as he associated certain composition types or attitudes towards art with different political views.

The aim of this thesis is to expand the field of discourse about the legacy of Strzemiński by providing innovative angles of interpretation and organization of Unist paintings and theory. These seemingly simple canvases still hold great potential for inspiration and recontextualisation, since they confront the viewer with the multithreaded, ambiguous philosophy of Unism- an important yet peculiar episode in the history of global modernism. The current state of research on Strzemiński's art is thoroughly summed up in 3 publications published by the Museum of Art in Łódź over the last 30 years: „Władysław Strzemiński : 1893- 1952 : materiały z sesji w Łodzi 26-27 listopada 1993” (eng. “Władysław Strzemiński: 1893- 1952: materials of the conference, 26th and 27th November 1993”) [2], „Powidoki życia. Władysław Strzemiński i prawa dla sztuki (eng. „Afterimages of life. Władysław Strzemiński and laws for art”) [3], and „Władysław Strzemiński. Czytelność obrazów” (eng. „Władysław Strzemiński. Readability of Images”) [4], and numerous press articles. Certain topics raised in above publications naturally intersect to some extent with the positions presented in this text, however, both the organizational approach presented in Chapter 1 and the meta-analysis in Chapter 2 place the art and theory of Strzemiński in a novel light, opening new fields of discussion, contrasting or developing the thoughts of previous researchers.

Chapter 1. Description

1.1 Władysław Strzemiński

Władysław Strzemiński was a Polish art theoretician, painter, writer, designer, and scholar, born in 1893 in Polish family in Minsk and died in 1952 in Łódź, Poland. He is considered a pioneer of avant-garde, who has received international recognition due to his innovative theories of Unism (presented in 1928 book "Unism in painting") and Afterimage painting (presented in 1957 book "The theory of seeing"). After his military service in the First World War, he attended classes at the First Free State Workshops (SVOMAS) in Moscow, where he met Kazimir Malewicz and Vladimir Tatlin, two artists who had invaluable impact on young Strzemiński and influenced his early artistic work. After a few years of mainly didactic and theoretical work he moved to Poland, where he became a central figure of the nascent avant-garde scene, publishing his texts in magazines, including the most influential one "Blok". He began exhibiting his work both solo and as a participant of larger shows covering the Polish Constructivist movement. In 1929 he set up an artistic group "a.r.group" (a.r. stands for "artyści rewolucyjni" or "revolutionary artists" in English) together with his wife, sculptor Katarzyna Kobro and a friend and fellow painter Henryk Stażewski. In 1932 the group initiated the creation of the first International Collection of Modern Art in Europe (now Museum of Art in Łódź), based in Łódź, which became a second oldest modern art museum in the world.

1.2 Unist theory

The theory of Unism was introduced in its final, well-organized form in 1928 in the book "Unizm w malarstwie" (eng. "Unism in painting") [1]. A fair few fundamental elements of the theory can be found in the earlier texts published in the avant-garde press in Poland, especially in the text "B=2" [5]. Unism was later developed in 1931 book "Kompozycja przestrzeni: obliczenia rytmu czasoprzestrzennego" (eng. „Spatial composition: calculation of space-time rhythm”) [6] written in collaboration with Katarzyna Kobro. The creation of Unism in its early stages may be perceived as process of gradual rejection of Suprematist principles in his thinking, as from 1922 he started criticizing the movement created by Kazimir Malewicz. The theory reached its ultimate form in 1934, after which Strzemiński abandoned it and moved in a less radical direction.

Władysław Strzemiński, well-educated scholar, theoretician, and artist, built his concepts upon an analysis of history of European art. He stated that the principles of composition in European painting have not changed since the Baroque, since all paintings, even the most avant-garde ones were "Dualist" (the term was introduced by Strzemiński in "Unizm w malarstwie", 1928)- built as an accumulation of conflicts and contrasts, for example: the contrast between figure and background, the contrast between line and color, the contrast between directions of composition and the shape of canvas. In opposition to Dualism, he proposed his revolutionary theory of Unism which aims to create a painting free of tensions and dramatic contradictions as a respond to the progress of "acquired visual awareness" [1] in modern society. Profound lifestyle and socio-economical changes of industrial era transposed the perception on cultural and even biological level, Strzemiński claimed (these ideas were structured and published in 1957 (post-mortem) in the book "Teoria widzenia" (eng. "The theory of vision")) therefore, a new type of anti-individualistic art, based on system as excellent and efficient as Ford car factory should be created [5]. Strzemiński believed, that the profound shifts of XX century created a perfect condition for art to overcome its long lasting dependance on Baroque tradition. In this context Unism was the transformational power originated from the reflection on visual matter, but with the potential to expand to other domains- from daily life to social organization. The key concept of Unism is "organicity" (pol. "organiczność") [1], by which Strzemiński meant the compliance of a given thing with its inherent values, which implies the assumption that every object or act has its purest, most perfect form, a Platonic idea. Organization of a workspace, domestic space design, biological evolution, all strive to reach the state of undisturbed organicity. In painting, this meant removing the dichotomies and contrasts to introduce a composition emerging directly from two basic features of the medium- flatness of the surface and quadrangularity of canvas. "To create a work of art as an organic plastic being. This is the confluence of all endeavors." [5]. Paradoxically, Strzemiński started his considerations from similar positions as the Russian constructivists, but his conclusions were entirely divergent. While, in 1921 Alexander Rodchenko exhibited three monochrome paintings (red, yellow, and blue) and declared the death of painting, Strzemiński never created or claimed something as radical- where Rodchenko saw death, Strzemiński recognized perfection. Moreover, despite the fascination with the industrial organization and automation of work, he always allowed, or possibly even appreciate, the irrational, intuitive and individualistic element in his work.

"One should not think that the use of numerical calculations can make the idea mechanical and all painting activities automatic. [...] Calculation should go hand in hand with intuition. The mutual support of one activity by another creates a painting" [1]. He deeply believed and cherished the visual medium and could not accept the concept of the ultimate end of painting.

1.3 Katarzyna Kobro and the “a.r.” group

It is impossible to recognize the novelty and complexity of Strzemiński's theories without acknowledging the influence of his wife Katarzyna Kobro. She was a Polish sculptor of a German- Russian origin, born in Moscow in 1898. After the Second World War, she was separated from her husband, raising their daughter alone, and experiencing numerous repressions because of her origin. Private relations between Strzemiński and Kobro were marked by countless quarrels and violence, and thus her character remained in the shadow of her dominant husband for many years. In the years following the death of the artists, researchers increasingly appreciated Kobro's role and her contribution to the theoretical background of her own and her husband's works. Although some chapters of her biography remain unclear and many works have been destroyed or lost (some have been recreated based on existing photographic material), she is considered one of the greatest artists of the 20th century. At the beginning of her career, much like Władysław Strzemiński, she was significantly influenced by Russian constructivism and suprematism. In her artistic search, one can also find a continuation of the ideas of Henry Moore since she strived to “open” the solid and use sculptural matter to limit the space. The artist wrote several theoretical texts in her life, but the fullest expression of her views was written together with her husband “Spacial Composition. The Calculation of Space-Time Rhythm” [6]. This book was a result of joint research and mutual inspiration of Strzemiński's painting sensitivity and Kobro's extraordinary spatial imagination and can be perceived as an extension of Unism and its translation into a language of sculpture and architecture. A substantial value of the text is that it was written by two exceptional minds working in parallel realms of two and three-dimensionality. Some fragments of the text seem to be almost a dialogue, an exchange of experiences, and an attempt to establish rules governing individual fields of art. They point to the fundamental contrast between spatial art and painting- the image is limited by the flatness and rectangularity of its frame and cannot refer its composition to anything outside of them, while the sculpture is inseparable from the infinite space surrounding it on each side. Artists operate within the same conceptual framework as “Unism in painting” [1], however, while in painting practice the postulate of reducing contrasts and the dynamism of form naturally brought the work closer to monochrome, for sculpture the answer was not that obvious. Kobro's works from the “Spatial Compositions” series can be considered the equivalent of mature Unist paintings as she was able to unify the internal space of the sculpture with the continuity that surrounds it. Moreover, she introduced the concept of “rhythm”- “Rhythm is an ordered sequence of visual phenomena taking place over time.” [6]- a term that Strzemiński himself later used in the context of architecture and analysis of an industrial organization. Kobro's theories and practice had to be of key importance for broadening the context of Unism beyond the sphere of painting composition, and thus it is impossible to consider the Unist theory without recognizing her achievements.

In 1929 Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro and Henryk Stażewski, former members of avant-garde groups “Praesens” and “Blok” formed their own “group a.r.”. The nature of their initiative was rather fluid and informal, since they never exhibited their work in a joint exhibition (yet, they were usually invited to participate in modernist shows, especially at the Warsaw Institute of Art Propaganda- an important liberal art and social institution), or even held an official meeting. Apart from the founders, two Polish poets- Julian Przyboś and Jan Brzękowski were also considered members of the group, whose common idea was to engage modern art in ideological work and strengthen its influence on the shape of society. Group a.r. issued bulletins, discussed theoretical concerns and involved in organizing artistic life. Their biggest achievement was the creation of the first International Collection of Modern Art in Europe, which thanks to correspondence contacts established with international representatives of various trends in modern art, contained works of such prominent figures as Hans Arp or Theo van Doesburg. In the following years this collection became the foundation for creation of Museum of Art in Łódź, which still works today.



Figure 1. Archival photography of (from left to right) Julian Przyboś, Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro. On the famous photo taken around 1930 one can acknowledge the extravagant clothes handmade by Kobro. She was not only a fellow thinker but also the person responsible for the “prototyping” and practical implementation of ideas.



Figure 2. Katarzyna Kobro, Kompozycja przestrzenna 6 (1931) (eng. Spatial composition 6)



Figure 3. Kazimir Malevich, Супрематическая композиция (синий прямоугольник поверх красного луча) (1915)
(eng. Suprematist Composition)

1.4 Image analysis

“Every content, every concept of the totality of the world requires its unique form.” [7]. Władysław Strzemiński published these words in the Polish art magazine “Zwrotnica” in 1922, a year before creating the very first Unist painting, hence the whole period of Unism may be perceived as a philosophical and artistic journey towards finding the most perfect and undisputable language of forms resulting from the characteristics of the painting, inaccessible to other fields of culture. He believed that every field of human activity should create and develop its own specific tools to explore and examine the complexity of reality.

In the following chapter all paintings considered by critics or artist himself as Unist will be presented and divided into categories. A distinct organizational approach will be introduced as the categories are not exclusively based on the chronology of creation of works, but on their artistic features and means of plastic production used, such as: color, texture, distinction between the figure and the background.

Through juxtaposition and critical analysis of compositions created between 1923 and 1934, the reader will get acquainted with the Unist painting and will be able to track the development of Strzemiński’s work from this period.

1.4.1 pre- Unist works

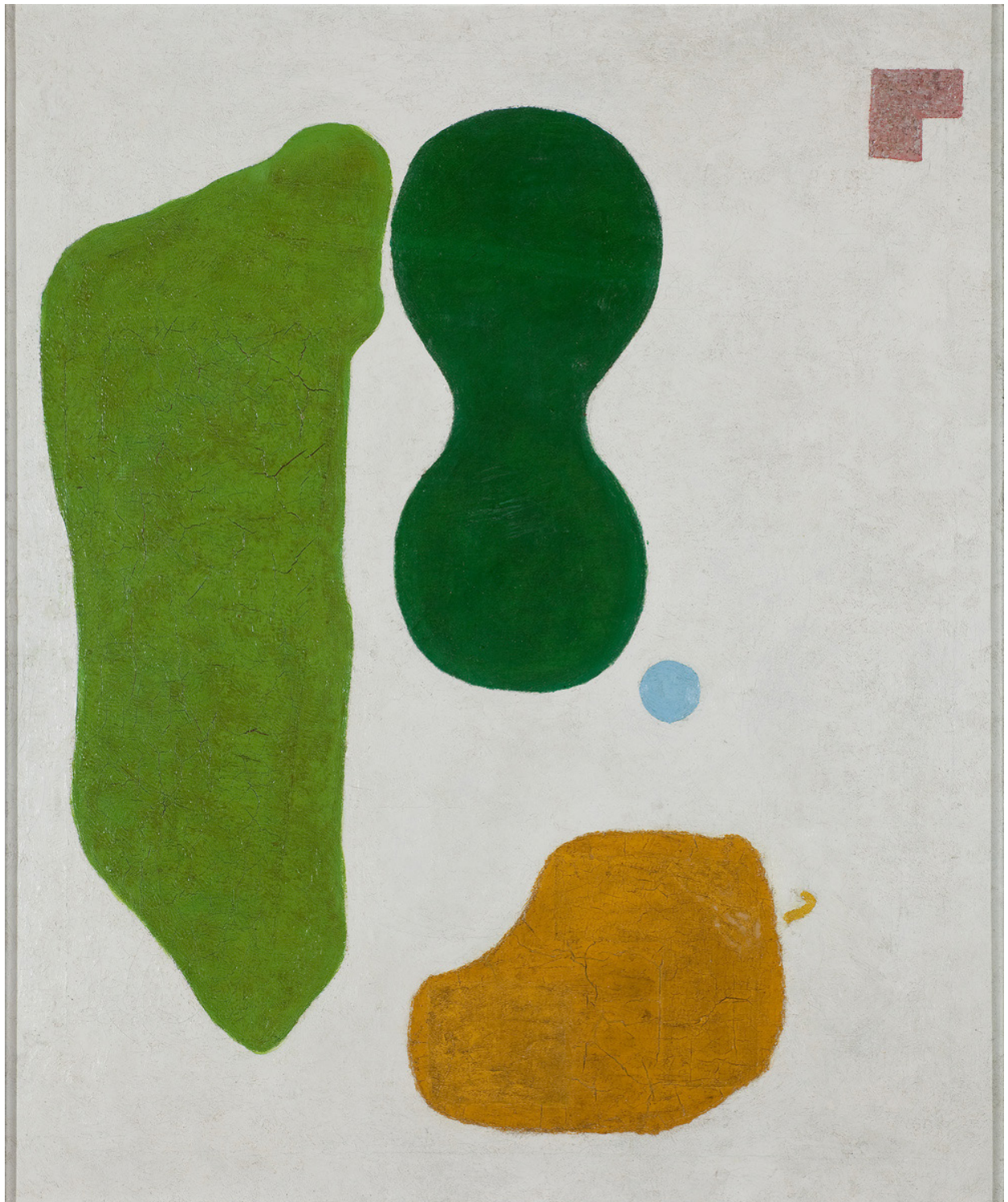


Figure 4. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja syntetyczna 1 (1923) (eng. Synthetic composition 1)



Figure 5. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja postsuprematystyczna 2 (1923) (eng. Postsuprematist composition 2)

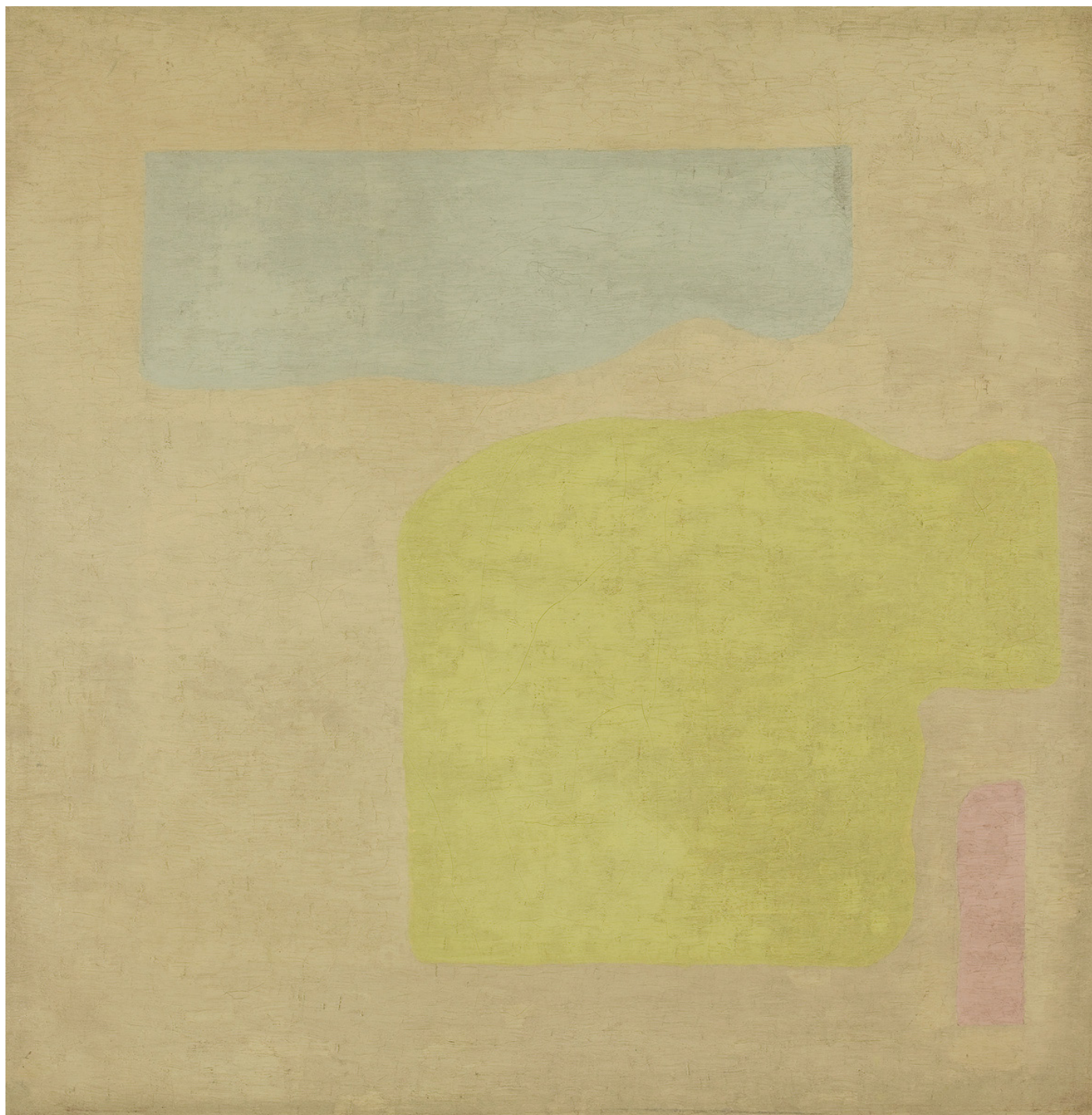


Figure 6. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja unistyczna 4 (1925) (eng. Unist composition 4)



Figure 7. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja Unistyczna 7 (1929) (eng. Unist composition 7)

Kompozycja syntetyczna 1 (1923) (eng. Synthetic composition 1)

The earliest work recognized by critics as Unist (or pre- Unist) painting, created in 1923 (1 year before the publication of "B=2" and 4 years before the publication of "Unism in painting") represents the earliest stage of development of the theory and can be seen as a harbinger of a fully developed Unism.

"Shapes natural as the nature itself." [5] Strzemiński quoted these words of Malevich (his mentor from youthful age), in the text "B=2", but despite the great respect he had for his countryman living in Russia he criticized Suprematism, to move towards his own art theory. His main objection to the Suprematist postulates and practice was its adherence to the dichotomous relationship of figure and background. He accused Malevich and his supporters of using forms that did not result from the inherent features of painting, since they were "scattered" in white space of the background, completely indifferent to the physical, rectangular shape of the canvases- "Suprematism did not define the concept of a painterly shape. Its basic shapes result from spatial thinking (not plastic) [...]" [1].

Strzemiński's painting from 1923 still shows the enormous influence of Suprematist thought, however some distinctive features of this work herald a revolution in thinking about the composition. Forms are spread over the canvas unevenly, but they all stay in balance with each other and borders of the canvas. Artist was clearly aware of the importance of the boundaries of composition, he did not treat the background as an infinite, abstract volume, but as a concrete paint-covered surface with particular dimensions and proportion. Figures fill the given space in a thoughtful way instead of levitating loosely. However, one can easily observe that the formal concepts were not fully developed yet- the contrast between the brightly colored, organic objects and the white background is still significant.

Kompozycja postsuprematystyczna 2 (1923) (eng. Postsuprematist composition 2) Kompozycja unistyczna 4 (1925) (eng. Unist composition 4)

„Postsuprematist composition 2" from 1923 is the next big step in Strzemiński's liberation from the intellectual influence of his master. The background is painted in brownish, dirt-like color, emphasizing the physicality of the painting way more than clinically spotless backgrounds used by Malevich. Colorful forms, forming the composition are dispersed with exceptional attention. A particularly fascinating element is the blue shape at the very top of the composition, because its upper edge runs along the edge of the canvas. One year after finishing this painting, Strzemiński wrote: "Each form must be adapted: a) to the border of the image, b) to the background of the image- by shape and color" [5]. While the blue figure still contrasts strongly with the background in terms of color, its shape clearly indicates a direct relationship with the border of the canvas.

"Unist composition 4" can be perceived as a form of continuation of formal considerations from 1923. Both shapes and colors are slightly different, but the general expression and proportions are immensely comparable. The main difference between these pieces is the saturation of colors- in the more recent one the contrast is reduced to a great extent, as it suggestively approaches the monochrome. While these two paintings from are still preliminary examples of Unism, they exemplify an unprecedented case in which the artist repeated the composition idea (not completely accurately) in two separate works.

Strzemiński perceived Suprematism, along with cubism, as the last "Dualistic" art form when he wrote that "The last effort of Suprematism was: reconcile dynamism with the limitedness of the image" [5]. These two paintings may be seen as a part of process of symbolic transition from postsuprematist fascination towards the distinct and innovative Unist approach.

Kompozycja unistyczna 7 (1929) (eng. Unist composition 7)

An interesting example of a later work returning to the initial techniques. Although the painting was created in 1929 it resembles more the initial pre-Unist investigations than developed, monochromatic paintings created around 1930 (see "Kompozycja unistyczna 10" from 1931). Contrasting color palette and the brown background are direct reminiscences of "Postsuprematist composition 2". The composition is closer to the more advanced examples of Unist painting created at a similar time, however it has a fundamental quality that is in straight contradiction to the Unist credo, published 2 years earlier- central composition. "[...] the central structure, resulting in arrangement of shapes gravitating towards the center does not create any connection to the boundaries of the image, it forgets about the boundaries, because the thought is only absorbed in the binding of shapes." [1]- how is it possible that two years after publishing these word Strzemiński painted "Unist composition 7"? Problematic tension between the edges of shapes

emphasizing the rectangularity of the frame and the central, almost oval center of gravity seems to remain unsolved. This unorthodoxy makes "Unist composition 7" presumably the most mysterious work of the period. The innovative aspect of this painting was the introduction of shapes directly touching and bordering each other. An intriguing decision made by Strzemiński was the differentiated design of the borders between figures and the borders between figures and brown background. In the first case the imaginary line separating the color fields is quivering, restless and organic, while in the second it is straight and definite.

1.4.2 Organisation of shape



Figure 8. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja unistyczna 5 (1927) (eng. Unist composition 5)

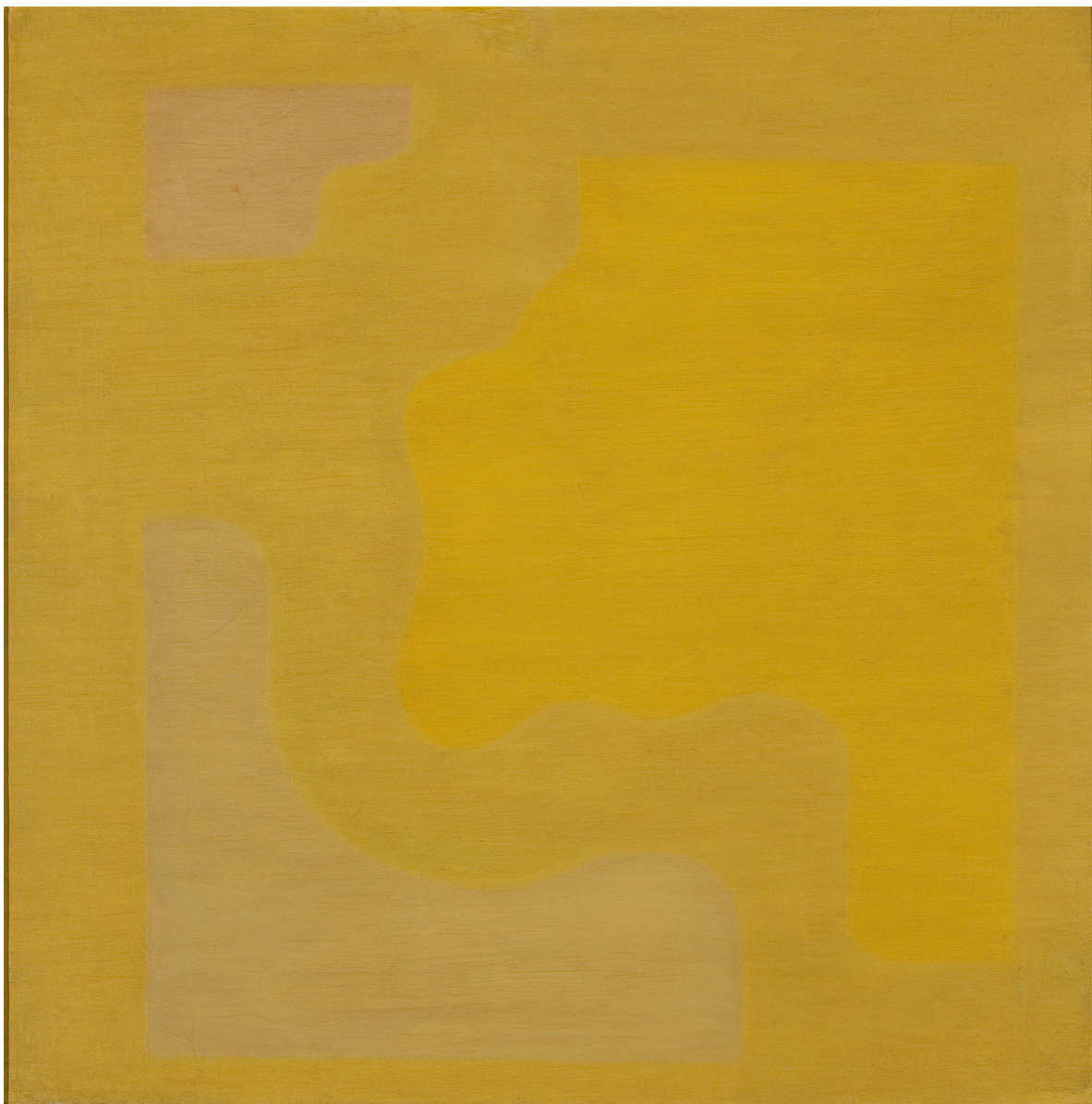


Figure 9. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja unistyczna 6 (1928) (eng. Unist composition 6)

Kompozycja unistyczna 5 (1927) (eng. Unist composition 5) and Kompozycja unistyczna 6 (1928) (eng. Unist composition 6)

These works created one year apart signify similar tendencies and remarkable progress in Strzemiński's work, both in terms of composition and color studies. On one hand, their exceedingly limited color palette tends towards monochrome painting in an obvious way, but at the same time subtle differences in the treatment of individual shapes show the mastery and color sensitivity that is characteristic only of the most talented visual artists in history. Despite the impression of an almost monochromatic surfaces at the first glance, these intricate structures reveal their complexity after further examination (it is obvious that for the full experience the contact with physical work, not the reproduction is required). One of the most intriguing aspects of these pictures is that each form has its own unique color, often paradoxically incompatible with the image. "Unist composition 5" seems to be kept in warm orange-like tones, but the largest figure in the lower right corner is slightly green, which, however, does not create the impression of contrast and fragmentation of the whole painting. Similarly, the small spot in the top left corner of "Unist composition 6" is powder pink, which does not evoke the feeling of imbalance or dynamism. The difference between figures and background is barely visible, but still exists.

In terms of composition, paintings from 1927 and 1928 seem to be based on similar formal ideas, since they both contain 3 shapes facing the center of canvas with their organically shaped edges and the boundaries of it with more orthogonal brinks, parallel to the rectangular frames. The idea of dichotomous design of the forms may have been an attempt to reconcile the disjunction between center and margins of composition. Individual shapes do not touch at any point, but they create a whole series of minor tensions on the entire surface by approaching and moving away from each other at various points. Shapes have a clear relationship to the borders of the surface, since every one of them has at least two edges parallel to the boundaries. Varied brightness of individual color fields creates a sense of internal tectonics of the paintings, even without diversifying the brushstrokes.

1.4.3 Introduction of texture



Figure 10. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja unistyczna 8 (1931) (eng. Unist composition 8)

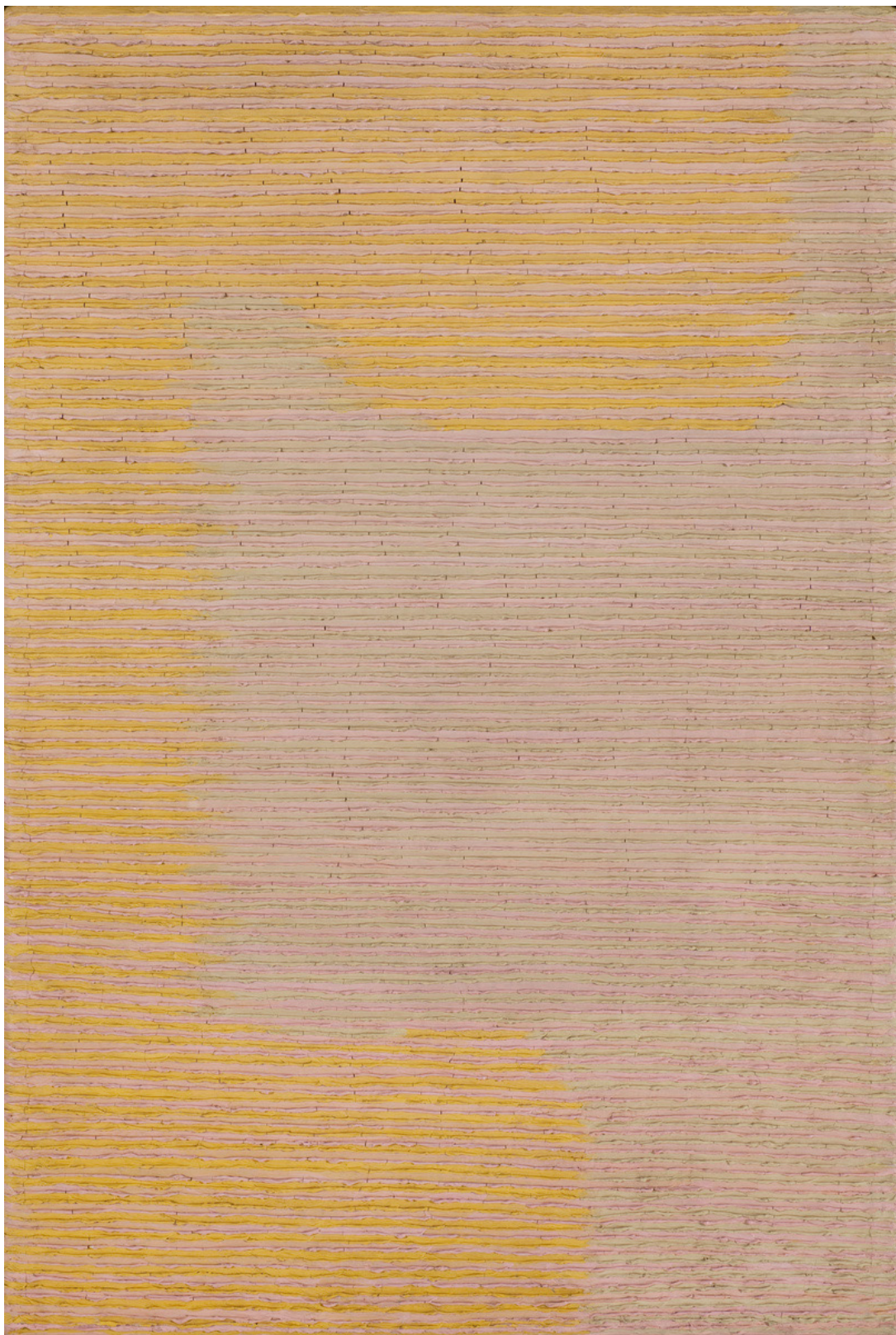


Figure 11. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja unistyczna 9 (1931) (eng. Unist composition 9)



Figure 12. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja unistyczna 10 (1931) (eng. Unist composition 10)

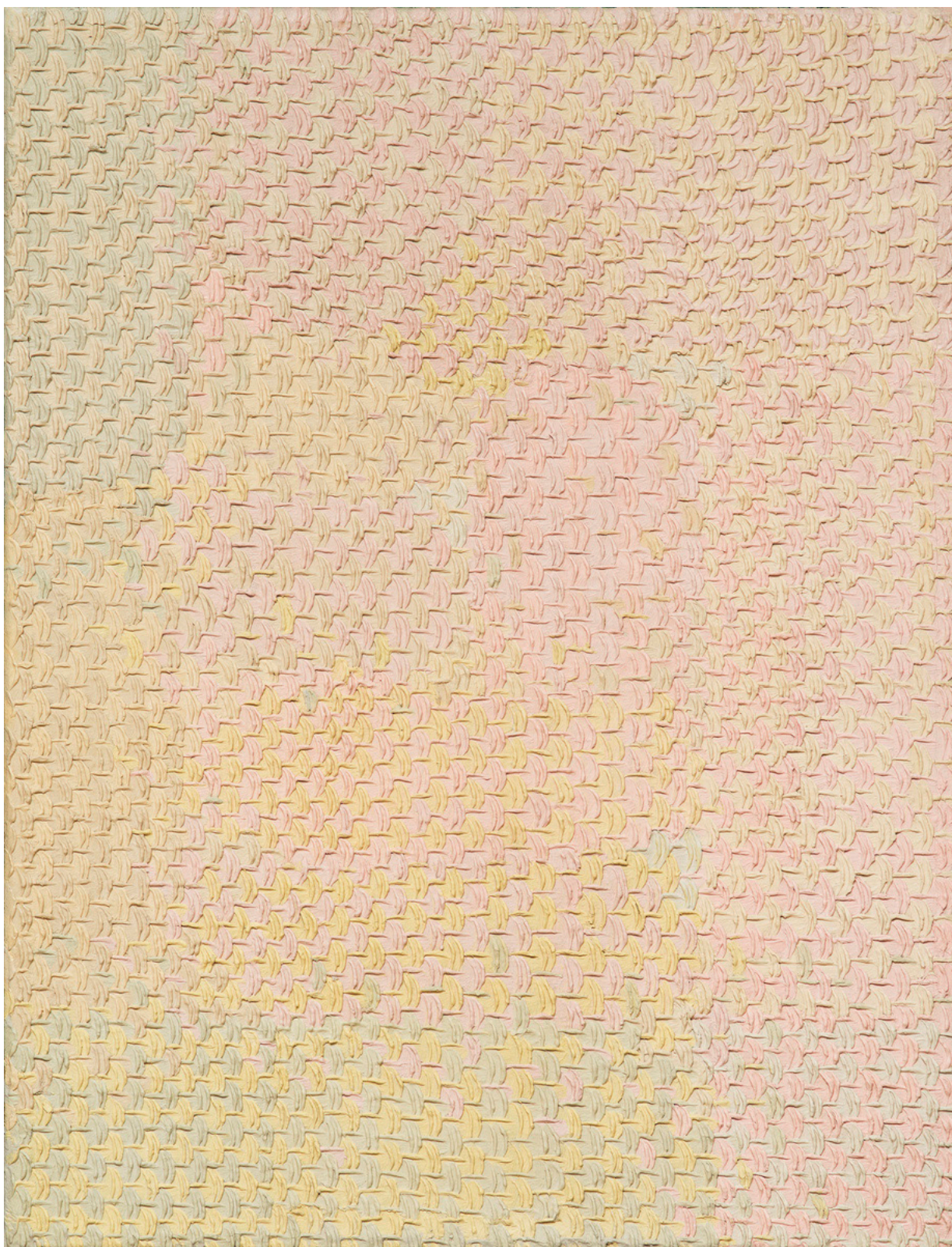


Figure 13. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja unistyczna 11 (1931) (eng. Unist composition 11)

Kompozycja unistyczna 8 (1931) (eng. Unist composition 8), Kompozycja unistyczna 9 (1931) (eng. Unist composition 9), Kompozycja unistyczna 10 (1931) (eng. Unist composition 10)

These three works created at the same year mark an important point in the career of Władysław Strzemiński. For the first time in Unist period the texture became an important, perhaps even a key element of the images. He conceptualized the technique and meaning of texture in 1928 "Unism in painting" [1] when he recognized it as an exceptional achievement of cubist movement, but it was only in his 1931 Unist works that he made it principal quality of a painted surface. He mentioned in his book, that "On how the paints are applied depend color impressions so diverse that by no combination of colors can we achieve this impression." [1], however he accused Cubists of using texture as another mean to build dynamism and contrast instead of surface unity. Here one can examine a series of explorations focused on the repetitive gesture and the tectonics of paint application. Fan-like paint drops of "Unist composition 8", horizontal furrows of "Unist composition 9" or grain- like texture of "Unist composition 10" illustrate the continuity of the search for the ultimate painting solutions.

Moreover, paintings from 1931 show a significant breakthrough in terms of composition. The conflict between shape and surroundings disappears thanks to the introduction of a spatial organization method based on the division of the plane of the image on distinct color fields connected to the frame. This type of composition was already used by Władysław Strzemiński since 1926 when he started his series of "Architectural compositions", on which he worked simultaneously with Unism. The color fields are still possible to recognize, however they are no longer unequivocally defined because each field is composed of the background color and the texture applications on top of it (in case of "Unist composition 8" and Unist composition 9") or a complex color mélange with an additional layer of paint on top ("Unist composition 10").

Kompozycja unistyczna 11 (1931) (eng. Unist composition 11)

"Unist composition 11" stands out among other textured paintings from 1931, because it ultimately disintegrates the idea of shape. Color, form, and gesture are unified in an image built by the repetition of single paint drops, created one after another in repetitive action and summing up in this intriguing painting. One can no longer spot clear boundaries between color fields, as the painting becomes one unified surface, filled with singular drops of paint, which in case of larger accumulation may suggest some sort of shapes, but they are not ultimately defined and flow one into the other. This is presumably the first Unist painting whose composition cannot be described by "numerical expression of the whole image" [1]. While in 1928, when Strzemiński published "Unism in painting" he still believed that the state of Unity and harmony can be achieved by choosing the right proportion and forms of color fields in relation to the dimensions of the canvas, in "Unist composition 11" he shows a radical shift in his approach. The dimensions of color patches and their spatial relationships cannot be reduced to a simple mathematical proportion, since the boundaries between individual figures disappear in a series of gestures. This work can be considered a milestone that paved the way for the creation of monochromatic compositions in the final stage of Unism. Interestingly, already in 1924 text "B=2" Strzemiński stated that the painting should be "Not the activity of one form in relation to other, but the complete simultaneity of the phenomenon." [5], which was clearly achieved for the first time in "Unist composition 11"- all the previous works, no matter how subtle, always contained an element of interrelation of forms.

1.4.4 Organic monochromes



Figure 14. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja unistyczna 12 (1932) (eng. Unist composition 12)

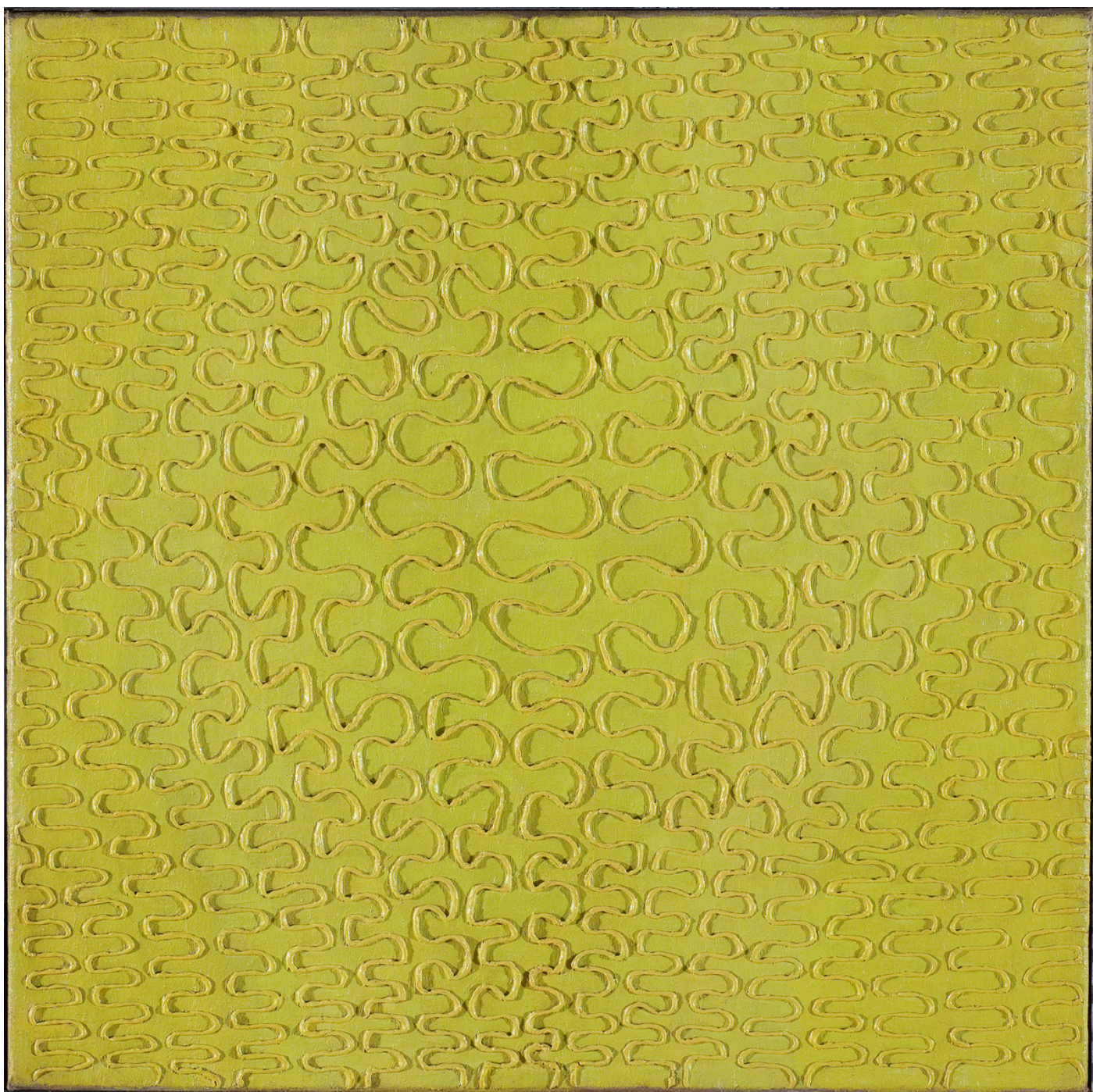


Figure 15. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja unistyczna 13 (1934) (eng. Unist composition 13)

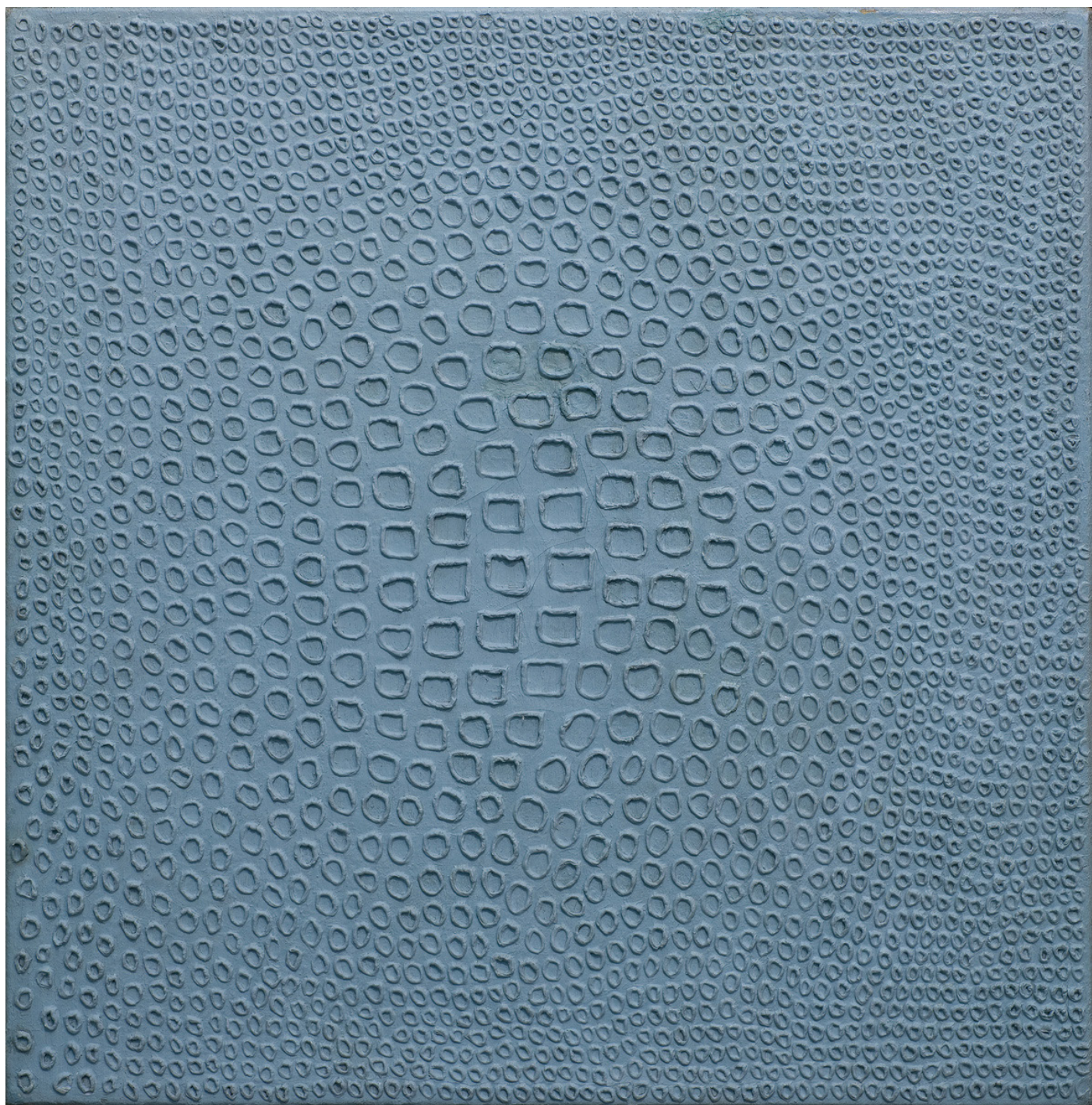


Figure 16. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja unistyczna 14 (1934) (eng. Unist composition 14)

Kompozycja unistyczna 12 (1932) (eng. Unist composition 12), Kompozycja unistyczna 13 (1934) (eng. Unist composition 13), Kompozycja unistyczna 14 (1934) (eng. Unist composition 14)

These three last Unist paintings ever created may be naturally perceived as the materialization of the most mature, comprehensive form of the theory. The most conspicuous characteristic of this works is that they are monochrome in a very literal sense, as the author has abandoned the spectacular color experiments in favor of a uniform, well- defined tones. The composition of lines and shapes is unified with the background because all elements are just thickening or flattening of the same, single-colored paint- the most primary, rudimentary matter of visual arts.

While the pattern on "Unist composition 12" seems to be still somewhat random, Unist paintings from 1934, especially "Unist composition 14", appear to be clinically accurate, well thought and perfectly executed. Noteworthy, radical simplifications and attempts to objectify image never resulted in the creation of schematic and mechanical art for Strzemiński- one can even argue that the more limited the means of expression were used by the artist, the more intriguing and non-obvious the effects of his work became. The surfaces of these last Unist paintings pulsate like a living matter and even despite declarations such as: "Each cm² of the image is equally important and participates in the construction of the image to the same extent." [1], no piece of canvas is the same. Even the tiniest spot of paint is crucial to the unified expression of the composition and all decisions made by the painter make up the final artistic effect.

Władysław Strzemiński's works from 1934 are presumably one of the most excellent, intellectually engaging paintings ever created. They are the culmination of many years of intensive reflection on the deep nature and meaning of image and the act of painting. Last Unist compositions fulfill the assumptions and premonitions defined in previous years in theoretical works, as they are finished in their form, unified and explicit. The viewer's mind is not confronted with a system of geometric tensions between separate shapes, as it was in the painting of previous times, but with a holistic, simultaneous plastic phenomenon filling the entire space of painting.

Chapter 2. Interpretation

2.1 Method

In the following chapter three interpretations of Unism will be proposed. The presented positions by their nature contain an aspect of speculation, however they are all based on primary sources in the form of quotes from the artist's own texts or historical materials related to Strzemiński and Unism, such as Kobra's texts or correspondence with Leon Chwistek. The role of Kobra and other artists associated with the "group a.r." in the development of Strzemiński's thought cannot be overestimated, however, in this chapter the main issue will be the analysis of the mature form of his theory as a closed totality. The following timeframe will be used as the cut-off dates for the selection of the sources: 1923- a year of painting "Synthetic composition 1" and 1939- the year of outbreak of World War II.

Unism, Władysław Strzemiński's great invention is typically perceived as a continuation or variation of the Russian avant-garde from the circle of Malevich or the constructivist. Despite being educated in Russia and acquainted with many influential constructivist artists (for example Vladimir Tatlin) I will treat Unism as a separate phenomenon, having its own autonomy and being clearly expressed in the work of a very limited group of artists. Later works of creators of various fields, inspired by Strzemiński's theory, for example the post-war musical experiments of the composer Zygmunt Krauze or "Unist drawings" of Julian Lewin can be a separate, fascinating topic of research, yet I will not take them into account in this thesis.

2.2 The Continuum

The beginning of the 20th century was a period of profound social and political changes that caused numerous personal and social traumas. Rapid industrialization, immense geopolitical tensions caused by nationalism and militarism, an unprecedented lifestyle shift in Europe, based on new communication and production technologies, globalization of culture, and massive migration to the cities- all these irreversible transformations found their reflection in radical art and philosophy of the period. The most influential creators sought a language that would be able to express the pressure, fear, or delight caused by these changes. For many creators, the fracture in socio-economic reality was so remarkable that the culture could no longer be perceived as a form of continuity.

Władysław Strzemiński was a man who was painfully affected by the great frictions of history- as a 23-year-old man he lost an arm and a leg on the battlefield, and his later life was marked by constant migration and difficult material conditions. Despite this, his theoretical writing seems surprisingly equitable compared to the most radical approaches of his time. While in "Manifesto of Futurism" [8] published in 1909 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti called for the burning of museums and libraries, and Aleksandr Rodchenko claimed the death of painting ("I affirmed: it's all over."- famous words spoken after his monochromes were exhibited at a Moscow exhibition "5x5=25") Strzemiński, in the first paragraph of his significant "Unism in painting" wrote: "It is easy to talk about the destruction of tradition. It is easy to oppose traditional culture with one's own unculturedness, detached from a series of powerful phenomena." [1] Despite the fact that he built his theory in opposition to baroque tendencies, in the same text he expressed his admiration and respect for its creators for creating a "compact and uniformed system" [1]. In this context, the true ambition and maturity of the Unist theory can be appreciated, since it neither tried to deny or invalidate the achievements of previous eras nor searched for alternative systems of values in primitivism or catastrophic visions of the end of art. Strzemiński's objective was to compete with the great old masters and create a more coherent and perfect system as a result of consistent, enlightened evolution. "Tradition is a dead thing when we use it to imitate past things; however, it becomes alive when it opens up past issues for us (not the old ways of dealing with them) and creates in us an active attitude towards art." [9], these words express the artist's relationship with heritage, which he used as a main source of inspiration. Strzemiński believed that each art movement, each epoche can be analyzed through the lens of "expanding the visual value" [1], an ever-increasing level of complexity and sophistication of visual culture.

He criticized every individualistic, emotional work since it did not contribute to the objective, common knowledge, and practice in the field of visual arts. Unism was aimed to be an expression of the visual awareness of the epoche, the next stage in the evolution of human culture. Art history analysis was almost an obsession and main source of inspiration for him as if every theory needed to be based and reinforced by a centuries-old tradition. In a certain context, one can even perceive Strzemiński as an exceptionally conservative theoretician, since he referred only to the formalized, Eurocentric art history. His vision of history and the evolution of civilization was tremendously linear, hence he consistently discredited the value of all directions contrary or alternative to the conventional one. The negative aspect of his theory was the radical rejection of anything that would undermine the internal coherence of the vision of the development of painting as a linear process. In the correspondence with fellow painter Leon Chwistek Strzemiński condemned the appreciation for: "Children's art, drawings on the wall and in the corners of alleys, searching for the most direct expression, negating the entire legacy of centuries-old culture [...]" [10].

On the other hand, he was aware that the achievements of Unism were also temporary. He forecasted that one day the purpose of "pure art" will be fulfilled and it will only become a source of inspiration for industrial production. Yet, he was not brave or arrogant enough to be the one to claim Unism as the end of art.

2.3 The System

In one of the earliest theoretical texts "B=2" [5] Władysław Strzemiński expressed his admiration for the perfect organization of the Ford vehicle factory. The most splendid and inspiring aspect for him was the division of labor into unified moves performed by individual workers. This diversity of simplest gestures, "economy of movements" as he called it, must have delighted the painter, who at that time was still greatly influenced by constructivism. The author ended the paragraph about the factory with words: "Creation has a point of support in an already existing system, but that is why it is constantly directed towards its transformation (=improvement)" [5]. Continuing Strzemiński's industrial metaphor: it is apparent that in order to increase the comfort and safety of drivers, the factory owner employs engineers who specialize in management and improvement of the process, not fix all individual, already produced cars. In the same way, the artist should not focus on creating individual works that try to captivate the viewers with sophisticated craftsmanship or individualistic emotional charge but instead focus on creating an objective principle that allows the production of images. The key aspect, according to Strzemiński, in creating such a rule should be to base it on the accordance of the order of production to the natural laws that define the nature of particular field, which for painting were the flatness of the surface and the rectangular frame which defines borders of image and its content. The distinction and relation between the concepts of "law", as timeless, almost ontological category, and "system" meaning a set of rules and gestures resulting from the process of conscious artistic exploration was crucial not only for Strzemiński's theoretical writing but also for his practice. The constant search and tension rising from the attempt to create an "organic" (corresponding to the rules of building plastic composition) system was the filter through which the painter perceived both his art and the history of European painting. In one of the letters to Leon Chwistek he states: "The artistic justification of Unism is the pursuit of absolute uniformity of composition built based on the organic laws of pure plasticity. Cleaning art from foreign elements, handling a pure plastic element [...]" [10] Abstraction was a natural tool for him to tear off the anecdotal facade in order to reveal and study the basic laws of painting, therefore truly "organic" system may only be created based on abstract language, repetition, mechanicalness of gestures, a certain economy of labor. The painting system (ex. Unism) is not the property of a particular artist, but a contribution to common knowledge and an extension of social knowledge and "visual content" [1]. The „system” was a mean to explore and understand the „law”.

Strzemiński's collectivist assumptions were the basis of his criticism of Impressionist Academia- one of the forms of art education that he distinguished in history in his text *Sztuka nowoczesna a szkoły artystyczne* (eng. "Modern art and art schools") [9] from 1932. He perceived this extremely individualistic form of education, focused on the cult of personality-professor and his style, as harmful and destructive and claimed that "It was unable to stand firm on the ground of tradition, from which a way of acquiring new visual elements, expanding the visual content, enriching the visual culture could be derived." [9] Unism, on the other hand, as a system derived from objective traditional artistic values had the potential, according to its creator, to become a significant stage in the development of culture. Both Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro worked as educators with a strong sense of mission or even a historical necessity. They shared the belief that the rules of composition are as objective a phenomenon as the science itself, basing painting and spatial forms on the principles of mathematical proportions. This impartial point of reference allowed for the creation of a common ground and a platform for the exchange of experiences between different realms. Kobro's "Kompozycje Przestrzenne" (eng. "Spatial Compositions") series and Strzemiński's "Unist compositions" were parallel inventions for expanding visual knowledge entailing the evolution of culture and society. In the exceedingly inventive book "Spatial Composition. The Calculation of Space-Time Rhythm" [6] artists expired the rules of Unism to different fields- sculpture, architecture and design.

Strzemiński treated his whole body of work almost as one piece, a system that he has been constantly improving through an „organic approximation” to the ideal- as has been proven in this chapter, „improvement” might mean to act (create a system) in accordance with the inherent laws of art. The need to create a system that allows for almost mass production of images, with the possibility of improving it along with the increase of knowledge cannot be fully understood without the context of the geopolitical situation of Poland between 1918 and 1939. After 1918 Poland reclaimed its independence after 123 years of occupation and the efforts of the entire society and the authorities focused on creating a modern, civilized country on both ideological and very literal levels, meaning strategic investments in the infrastructure, industry, and energy sectors, the most ambitious of which was the construction of the port and modernist city of Gdynia. Strzemiński considered the knowledge of the composition and color combinations to be as valuable and utilitarian as the engineering or scientific knowledge, hence with his theory he put visual artists in the front line of building a new, modern Poland.

2.4 The Statement

In 1934, the year of painting the last Unist compositions Władysław Strzemiński wrote: “We know that each composition of lines has its content. That the house of the second half of the 19th century, by the very nature of its proportions, expresses selfish, penny-making materialism, [...] and the gloom of societies that have not been enlivened by any mass movement.” [11]. With this quote, the artist emphasizes the responsibility before himself and his fellow creators to develop a new system of proportions, more accurate and responsive to social change and perhaps even catalyzing it. If each composition expresses certain moral values and reinforces an explicit distribution of power in society, then art becomes more than a visual issue- it is a political declaration and philosophical statement. Moreover, in the subsequent text from the same year he introduces a concept quite foreign to his utilitarian, post- constructivist writing: “artistic conscience.” [12] Despite his leftist, collectivist beliefs he decided to refer to this rather ossified and inappropriate, as it might seem, category.

The importance of Unism in the framework of Strzemiński’s other works was therefore much greater because it was not only a concept from the field of visual arts but also an expression of a new social order based on egalitarianism, collaboration, and perfection of the system. In “The art of cities and machines” [13] Strzemiński pointed to the epoche of Romanticism as the source of two harmful superstitions, which, in his opinion, were detrimental to the development of the utilitarian potential of visual arts. These two misconceptions were: firstly the vision of an artist as an isolated, creative visionary, and secondly the „ideal of a spiritualized individual detached from productive life”. [13] An almost scientific or alchemic study of abstract plastic forms and their properties on canvas, instead of creating allegorical, or representational art was also a political declaration of standing on the side of progress and rejection of delusion and “magical thinking” [11]. He accused symbolic art of being a tool used by artistic charlatans for manipulating society through the narrative layer, while ignoring the real, plastic content, that can influence a new, more ethical and fair social order.

At the same time, based on the available sources, one may consider Strzemiński’s vision of the society to be closer to utopian, communist technocratism than to liberal democracy. He discussed socio-political implications of Unism in his public correspondence with Leon Chwistek published in “Forma” magazine in 1935 [10], in which he presented the concept of dividing the formal achievements of Unism into the “experiment of the form” (understandable only to a narrow circle of specialists) and the “invention of the form” (affecting the whole society). In order to explain the difference between these concepts, he gave the example of Neoplasticism: “the experiment” in that case was the formal system developed on a flat surface by Mondrian and van Doesburg, while “the invention” was the practical application and translation of this system into building forms, supported by functionalism and cost calculation (at least in Strzemiński’s opinion). However, such a view of art implies a clear division and social inequality, it puts art as a highly specialized field like complex engineering, inaccessible to the average bread eater. Returning to the research presented in previous chapters, Władysław Strzemiński did not recognize any alternative to this vision of the development of civilization once again putting himself in the position of a prophet responding to the historical call and needs resulting from natural evolutionary processes. Unism was therefore an invention necessary at this particular stage of the history of humanity and aesthetic consciousness, and the only way to abandon it would be to replace it with more perfect doctrine. Paradoxically, however, these views should not be treated as an expression of the artist’s megalomania, but on contrary as a symbol of his modesty, since he treated the artistic knowledge as a property of all humankind and the system of Unism as an expression of universal “visual awareness” [1]. Once again, the category of “conscience” can be invoked here- the use of artistic means, proportions or compositions that do not correspond to the social needs was immoral towards the whole society.

The artist considered the richness of forms as a product of the liberal economy of previous Epoque, while Unism was supposed to be “the main call of the contemporary age” [10] and the product of well-organised, collectivistic idea of society. It may seem that Strzemiński associated the ethical aspect of art directly with the potential of using a work or its fragments in the industry when he repeatedly returned to the concept of art as a laboratory of forms. However, upon closer examination, his vision seems to be much more nuanced. His and his wife’s ideas caused a split and a conflict with the milieu of Warsaw-based, radically modernist architects, as Kobro and Strzemiński declared that “The aim of architecture is to organize the rhythm of successive movements” and “The ultimate goal of architecture is not to build practical houses [...] Its ultimate goal is to be a regulator of the rhythm of social and individual life” [14]. Underlying the importance of “rhythm” of living instead of measurable, engineering values show a basic contradiction and a deep truth about Unism. Despite Strzemiński’s declarations about the scientific aspect of building the composition, there was always room for a certain amount of intuition, speculation and humanism.

Outcome

The result of the research are a few innovative angles and observations that have not been, or have been only slightly, addressed in the existing literature on Strzemiński's art so far. It fits in with the main idea of expanding the field of knowledge and contemporary discussion on the oeuvre of Polish artist.

Firstly, juxtaposition of the concept of perceiving the history of culture and his unique relation to the past along with the ideas of other modernists (for example Marinetti or Rodchenko who were vaguely mentioned in this text) reveal how nuanced and mature was the position created by Strzemiński. The admiration he showed for the tradition of European painting and the fundamental premise that he did not build Unism on ignorant negation but on conscious dialogue and development of universal ideas gives his works a timeless dimension. The analysis of the methodology used by the artist to describe the evolution of art in history is a widely acknowledged topic addressed by scholars dealing with the heritage of Strzemiński, however the ambitious way in which Strzemiński positioned himself towards the old masters is still not widely recognized. Moreover, this thesis provides a novel, critical angle on the relationship between Unism and art history, revealing Strzemiński as a man locked in a Europe-centric vision of art history. For him, the history of art was an obligatory starting point for any creative work, while his vision of the linear evolution of "visual values" [1] excluded the possibility of creating plastical knowledge, or perhaps any form of valuable art, without inscribing one's practice into the traditional sequence of successive formalized artistic movements. The radical view of a culture as a monolith causes a fascinating ambivalence in the perception of Unism, which creates further fields for research and interpretation of Strzemiński's painting, however this subject has not yet been discussed in the existing literature. I state that the binary nature of Strzemiński's approach to history and tradition, on one hand as a fuel for inspiration, ambition and an attempt to gain a place in the pantheon of the greatest artists in history, and on the other as a tool of exclusion may be a useful tool for other researchers to use when writing on modernism and its key concept of constant progress.

Furthermore, the chapter "The System" extends the possible interpretation of this term in the context of artist's theoretical framework and points to the crucial role of relationship between the terms "system" and "law". Presumably the most comprehensive analysis of the concept of "law" in Strzemiński's writing is the work "Strzemiński. Before the Law and After the Law" by Polish art historian dr Jarosław Lubiak, published as a part of publication "Powidoki życia. Władysław Strzemiński i prawa dla sztuki." [3]. However, the results presented in my text are in some places contradictory to the ideas of Lubiak, since his text does not emphasize a clear distinction between the ideas of "law" and "system". He sees Strzemiński as a "legislator", a figure with an ambition to create and introduce the laws for new art. In my opinion, it can be inferred from the artist's texts that he perceived himself more as a meticulous seeker who discovered the eternal laws governing art by removing the layers of anecdote, rather than a person who actively created them. The role of the concept defining the conscious shaping of the material representation, the algorithm of gestures and compositional decisions is taken by the word "system", while "law" is used in a more general, almost ontological context. This seemingly minor distinction may have crucial implications for the perception of Unism and Władysław Strzemiński himself, placing him in the role of revolutionary actively pushing for a new "constitution" [3] for modern art (in Jarosław Lubiak's interpretation) or a scientist who seeks to discover the already existing truth using abstract painting as a most suitable tool (in my interpretation).

Moreover, "The Statement" chapter touches the subject of Strzemiński's political views which is usually stereotyped or misunderstood. The most knowledgeable and complete summary of Kobro and Strzemiński's political views was presented by in Jarosław Suchan's (former director of Museum of Art in Łódź) text "Avant garde and The New Politics" [15], which was first published in the catalogue for the exhibition "Kobro & Strzemiński: New Art in Turbulent Times" in Moderna Museet Malmö, 10 May- 2 September 2018. Suchan summarized the political beliefs of Polish artists in the context of Michael Foucault's "biopolitics", which means "to ensure, sustain, and multiply life, to put life in order." [15] In my text, I extended the scope of the search for the politicization of Strzemiński's art. While, the results of my research are in many ways parallel to those presented by Suchan, my text broadens the scope of looking at the theory of Unism in this context by focusing on the ideas of „artistic conscience" [13] and linking specific forms with political content and lack of rigor in the application on mathematics. These aspects of Unism, absent in Jarosław Suchan's text, highlight its deeper, evocative and ethical dimension, grasping much more nuanced and humanistic side of the theory. Finally, the organizational approach of dividing Unist paintings into 4 different sub-periods, which are: "pre-unist period", "Organisation of shape", „Introduction of texture" and „Organic line monochromes" shows that the development of Unism was not a fully linear process and it may be perceived as a series of breakthroughs or increasingly sophisticated formal experiments, the system that really followed the paradigm of "constant transformation (=improvement)" [5]. This kind of effort to isolate the minor phases of Unism has not been attempted in the previous literature.

The paradoxical situation of creating complexity through reduction finds its full expression in the art of Strzemiński and

Kobro. The endless search of the meaning and recontextualizing Unist paintings may be perceived as an attempt to map points of reference (intellectual, aesthetic, political, socio-economic) that determine the place of this theory in the history of world modernism. Ultimately, the meaning of this ascetic compositions remains undefined despite the vast base of theoretical texts to which they refer. The very act of deepening the meanings and tracing new senses, provoked by rich and sometimes contradictory oeuvre of Polish artists, is sufficient to recognize undisputed value of Unism and its investigation in contemporary debate.

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Figure 12. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja unistyczna 10 (1931) (eng. Unist composition 10)
(source: Archiwum Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi / Museum of Art in Łódź archival)

Figure 13. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja unistyczna 11 (1931) (eng. Unist composition 11)
(source: Archiwum Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi / Museum of Art in Łódź archival)

Figure 14. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja unistyczna 12 (1932) (eng. Unist composition 12)
(source: Archiwum Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi / Museum of Art in Łódź archival)

Figure 15. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja unistyczna 13 (1934) (eng. Unist composition 13)
(source: Archiwum Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi / Museum of Art in Łódź archival)

Figure 16. Władysław Strzemiński, Kompozycja unistyczna 14 (1934) (eng. Unist composition 14)
(source: Archiwum Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi / Museum of Art in Łódź archival)

