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Constructing the canon: exhibiting contemporary Polish art abroad in the Cold War era

Abstract

The article focuses on the attempts of constructing and presenting the canon of Polish modern and contemporary art in the West after World War II. Initially, the leading role was played by Colourists – painters representing the tradition of Post-Impressionism. After 1956 the focus shifted towards artists who drew in their practice on *tachisme* and *informel*. However, the most enduring effects brought the consistent promotion of the interwar Polish Constructivism and its postwar followers. The article discusses the subsequent stages of this process, from the famous exhibition at the Paris Galerie Denise René in 1957, through exhibitions such as *Peinture moderne polonaise. Sources et recherches (Modern Polish Painting. Sources and Experiments)* from the late 1960s, up to the monumental *Présences polonaises (Polish Presences)* from 1983 (both in Paris), showing that these efforts contributed to securing a permanent position of Polish Constructivism within the global heritage of 20th-century art.

Keywords: art in Poland after 1945, Polish art abroad, exhibition's history, constructivism, canon

Introduction

Any discussion of the way the canon of Polish art was constructed and presented in the West during communism must be preceded by identification of a relevant timeline. When the conceptual underpinnings of this practice are considered parallel to the employed strategies and tactics, in other words, when both the process of formulating the objectives and the means used to achieve them are given sufficient attention, it transpires that the basic structure of the canon was constructed in

the 1950s and '60s. This text concentrates on this particular period, which does not mean that artworks from other decades are not considered. On the contrary, numerous such examples are mentioned, yet their discussion is less of a systematic presentation and more of a list of examples that illustrate the existence of permanent features of exhibiting practices during communism and their consequences for the present.

At the start, it has to be noted that this analysis does not concern the issue of the actual success of the canon-forming practices, since this would require in-depth research of the international reception of Polish art that reaches beyond the scope of this text. However, the need for undertaking such inquiry needs to be emphasised. A fundamental issue is at stake here: the effectiveness of inserting Polish art, or even East-Central European art, into the Western and later global art historical narrative. Hopefully, an account of events presented in this text is another step towards such research. Meanwhile, the main objective of this text is to offer an answer to the question why at that point in time Polish authorities chose their specific *modus operandi* to construct the canonical image of modern Polish art for international viewers.

As far as exhibiting modern art outside Poland during the political division into Eastern and Western Europe is concerned, the notion of the "canon" would need to be understood as a list of representative artists whose work was most often featured at official exhibitions of Polish art. However, this kind of understanding of the term is merely a preliminary diagnosis of the problem, for it is far more important to identify the ideological message behind the promotion of Polish art abroad. Therefore, the way it was presented requires, on the one hand, a reconstructive perspective that would use distinct examples to retrace the logic of the process that shaped it. On the other hand, it welcomes reflections on the stability and nature of this process.

Two dominating types of exhibitions are among the shows that need to be considered. One involves those organised for Biennale events. Apart from the Venice Biennale also two other international art exhibitions were significant during the discussed period: the São Paulo Biennial in Brazil, with its first edition in 1951, and the Biennale de Paris, initiated with great energy in 1959. Another is prestigious exhibitions of Polish art presented on the occasion of important events such as national anniversaries. While the nature of the first type of exhibitions (overviews of recent trends in art) favoured the selection of artists currently active, those organised to accompany particular celebrations tended to highlight the genealogy and transformations of Polish modern art over a longer period.

The canon was constructed around three main movements in art: Colourism, "modern" art (mainly non-geometrical abstraction and figuration promoted as metaphorical art), as well as constructivism and its contemporary variations. Examination of each subsequent exhibition suggests that the Polish authorities focused on the latter of the listed movements quite early on. It is hardly surprising, then, that exhibitions of constructivism constitute the central interest of this text. Other listed events, although given much attention and effort, ultimately stand as a "prelude" to making constructivism the central reference for the canon of Polish

modernity. For this reason, the text omits several exhibitions of contemporary art, particularly those organised in the 1970s and '80s, because they did not bring any significant revisions of the canon. Meanwhile, analyses of contemporary exhibitions that placed Polish constructivism as a central element (organised after the political transition of 1989), discussed in the following part of this text, serve to emphasise their consistency but also to highlight their difference from the preceding shows.

The fact that at the time Poland had a canon of modern artists who were consistent, albeit not very coherently featured at discussed shows is particularly surprising when we realise that it developed fully when the doctrine of socialist realism was dismissed in Poland and artists keenly observed stylistic developments of Western art. Artists, and later art critics and historians who served as curators, confronted their prior experience in art and exhibition-making with categories developed by Western art, engaged in their reception and adaptation to more or less autonomous local contexts. When these circumstances are taken into consideration yet another question has to be put forth: can the effort of constructing the modern canon be seen as a process whereby Polish art was adjusted to fit the Western model, or rather as an attempt to manifest certain independence or at least specificity of Polish art?

Generally speaking, the issue discussed here can be explained in terms of what Piotr Piotrowski described as the reluctance of the so-called art of the margins to succumb to the complete domination of the Western stylistic "purity". Piotrowski insisted on the existence of "local artistic canons" related to the multiplicity of the margins and remaining in a certain relationship with the centre; he also identified their specificity through stylistic categories. He found illustrations of his thesis in the art of Russian cubo-futurism, Polish formism, local variants of surrealism and various global manifestations of conceptualism.¹ For instance, in the case of the latter, Piotrowski was convinced that although no one questions the Anglo-Saxon paradigm of conceptual art, it proves insufficient to describe and explain conceptualism in non-Western countries. Such research perspective – he claimed – "allows for recovery of the historic, political and contextual specificity of the work produced in each area by addressing particular local resonance of its meaning, its diachronic character and function within given societies".² In other words, what is at stake in Piotrowski's view is to preserve this specificity so that it is not completely lost when a Western-centric analytical perspective is applied. These remarks find their confirmation in the examples discussed below. What was consistent in these exhibitions was that despite the changing sets of featured artists they always made distinct efforts to demonstrate that Polish art was part of the Western European canon, while its uniqueness, that is, its originality and specificity was emphasised at the same time. How successful were these efforts?

1 Cf. P. Piotrowski, *Art and Democracy in Post-Communist Europe*, transl. A. Brzyski, London, 2012, p. 32.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

First the colourists

Colourists featured at the first official post-war presentation of modern Polish art abroad that took place at the Musée d'art moderne in Paris in 1946, as part of an international exhibition of contemporary art organised under the auspices of UNESCO.³ According to Natalie Adamson, the French organisers of this large exhibition sought to emphasise the role of the École de Paris in global art. This purpose was served by additional exhibition spaces works by foreign artists based in Paris were on display: the Spanish artists of the École de Paris, as well as Hungarian and Polish artists.⁴ The exhibition of Polish art included also artists based in Great Britain, so ultimately three geographical locations where Polish artists were active were singled out: France, Britain, and Poland.

The shape of this exhibition can partly be reconstructed on the basis of an account by Wanda Ładniewska, at the time a permanent correspondent of the Paris edition of "Gazeta Polska".⁵ The part that presented artists based in Poland was quite unified. Each of the thirty artists showed one work. Among them were works by five artists who were active before the war but passed away before it was ended: Olga Boznańska, Tytus Czyżewski, Roman Kramsztyk, Józef Pankiewicz, and Waław Wąsowicz. The exhibition also featured works by a younger generation of Polish artists, mostly colourists. Ładniewska emphasised the impact of the French school on this group, particularly distinct among the students of Pankiewicz – in the painting of Jan Cybis and Hanna Rudzka-Cybisowa. Other artists included in the national group were Eugeniusz Eibisch, Jerzy Fedkowicz, Konstanty Mackiewicz, Artur Nacht-Samborski, Zbigniew Pronaszko, Zygmunt Radnicki, Stanisław Szczepański, Waław Taranczewski, Czesław Rzepiński and Jerzy Wolff.⁶

3 See: *Exposition internationale d'art moderne, peinture, art graphique et décoratif, architecture*, ex. cat., Musée d'art moderne, Paris, 18 novembre – 28 décembre 1946.

4 N. Adamson, *Painting, Politics and the Struggle for the École de Paris, 1944-1964*, Ashgate, 2009, pp. 95-96.

5 W. Ładniewska, *UNESCO – Międzynarodowa wystawa sztuki współczesnej*, press cutting from the Paris edition of "Gazeta Polska" from 2 December 1946, in: *Archiwum Wandy Ładniewskiej-Blankenheim, Towarzystwo Historyczno-Literackie / Biblioteka Polska w Paryżu*, BPP 1838. See also: P. Majewski, „Artyści polscy w Paryżu w publicystyce Wandy Ładniewskiej”, in: D. Kudelska, E. Kuryłek, eds., *Wyjazdy "za sztuką". Nadzieje, zyski i straty artystów XIX i XX wieku*, Lublin, 2015, pp. 325-337.

6 At the UNESCO exhibition Polish artists based in Britain were represented by eight names, among them: Jankiel Adler, Janina Konarska, Piotr Tadeusz Potworowski, Franciszka Themerson, Feliks Topolski and Marek Żuławski (each artist showed two works). Meanwhile, at the exhibition, there were eleven Polish artists based in Paris (each showed one work). In her account of this part of the show, Ładniewska divided the artists into two groups. One included Zygmunt Dobrzycki, Stanisław Grabowski, Władysław Łopuszniak (the only Polish artist who showed non-figurative compositions, as the author emphasised), Zygmunt Olesiewicz (Jean Olin), Zofia Piramowicz and Kazimierz Zielenkiewicz (Caziel). Another group, in her opinion, was formed by individualists who "walked their own path". This one included Alfred Aberdam, Władysław Jahl and Ludwik Lille. Additionally, two printmakers presented their work:

The exhibition, which Ładniewska described as “an event of utmost significance for global painting”⁷, offered the first post-war opportunity for a presentation of Polish art for an international public. For many years to come, the colourists were to play the key role at international exhibitions, while the period of domination of this movement in exhibitions of Polish art abroad came to a close also in Paris, in 1961, with *12 Modern Polish Painters* show at the Musée national d’art moderne.⁸

In trying to answer the question why in this period colourist painting was chosen to represent Polish art abroad one needs to consider a seemingly insignificant detail from the Paris exhibition of 1946. The Polish delegation was headed by representatives of the Ministry of Culture and Art led by the vice minister Leon Kruczkowski, while the group of delegated artists included Eugeniusz Eibisch – recently appointed the rector of the Academy of Fine Arts in Krakow. This fact demonstrates the strong position of colourists for the new Polish authorities. After the war, colourists were employed at many art academies in Poland. As artists who were directly involved in the shaping of the new post-war order, they used their privileged position to participate in official exhibitions of Polish art abroad.

However, from 1956 onwards, Colourism has gradually marginalised abroad due to a growing expansion of modern art. A strong wave of modern art in Poland emerged as a result of certain liberalisation of the political system in the entire Eastern Bloc, bringing diverse attempts to approximate Western culture after the period of Stalinist isolation. This important process, which introduced a new group of Polish artists into global exhibitions of contemporary art, occurred on two levels. On the one hand, right after the Iron Curtain became less impervious, the West made attempts to demonstrate the significance of the achievements of the Polish constructivist avant-garde. On the other hand, Polish abstract painting was exhibited with greater confidence. A good example of that was the exhibition of Tadeusz Kantor at the Le Gendre gallery in Paris in 1959, which showed the Polish artist’s fascination with Paris-born *tachisme* and *informel* painting.

Discovering Polish Constructivism

It was Julian Przyboś who was responsible for the organisation of the exhibition of Polish constructivist artists in Paris in 1957, titled *The Precursors of Abstract Art in*

Konstanty Brandel and Stefan Mrozewski. All artists based in Paris represented the pre-war immigrant community.

⁷ Ładniewska, op. cit.

⁸ See: *Douze peintres polonais modernes*, ex. cat., Musée national d’art moderne, février – mars 1961. Artists: Jan Cybis, Tytus Czyżewski, Eugeniusz Eibisch, Tadeusz Makowski, Piotr Potworowski, Wacław Taranczewski, Zygmunt Waliszewski as well as – representing the post-war generation – Tadeusz Brzozowski, Stefan Gierowski, Aleksander Kobzdej, Jan Lebenstein and Andrzej Wróblewski. Curators: Jean Cassou from the French side, and Stanisław Lorentz from the Polish side.

Poland.⁹ The poet and critic skilfully used the liberalisation of Polish cultural policy and the loosened grip of the Iron Curtain to realise his objectives – rehabilitate Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro after a long period of rejection by the state whose policies followed the programme of socialist realism. Przyboś first successfully pushed for the organisation of a retrospective show of Kobro and Strzemiński in Łódź and Warsaw, and then he made efforts to ensure the success of the exhibition of Polish constructivists in Paris. The weight of this show was further enhanced by the presence of Kasimir Malevich among the “Polish precursors” of this movement, whose work featured next to those by Strzemiński, Kobro, as well as Henryk Stażewski and Henryk Berlewi. Even if the inclusion of Malevich at an exhibition of Polish art might not have seemed fully adequate, it certainly contributed to its greater prestige. The same concerned the venue – Galerie Denise René, which specialised in broadly understood geometrical abstract art of avant-garde provenance and successfully promoted the newest achievements of the contemporary followers of this movement. For the first time after the war, the exhibition made the elite of artistic Paris aware of Strzemiński’s idea of Unism, Kobro’s idea of spatial forms, and Berlewi’s theory of mechanofaktura. The achievements of the Polish interwar avant-garde were received with appreciation, becoming a part of the process of the artistic continuum that marked the transformation of the historical avant-garde.

Iwona Luba was right to emphasise the paradox of the situation when the first post-war exhibition of the Polish avant-garde art in Paris, in fact, of abstract art, was an official event.¹⁰ This testified to a revolutionary transformation at work in Poland after the years of socialist realism. At the same time, the exhibition highlighted the originality of Polish artists in creating new concepts of visuality and art of the future. In the exhibition catalogue, Cassou wrote:

For the observers who seek to bring some order to the most recent experiments and manifestations of contemporary art it is interesting to note the existence of some original artistic practices that they had missed until now. [...] justice must be [...] done to the Polish art milieu, completely original and spontaneous, which right after World War I showed the world its passion, enthusiasm [...] and its appetite for innovations and renewal.¹¹

However, Przyboś’s undeniable success coincided with a debate about the direction of development of modern art in Poland, which intensified after the Second Exhibition of Modern Art was opened in Warsaw in autumn 1957. Przyboś’s famous polemic with Kantor and Mieczysław Porębski saw two concepts of abstract art clashing.¹² Taking the stance developed by Strzemiński in his *Teoria widzenia*

9 See: *Précurseurs de l’art abstrait en Pologne*, ex. cat., Galerie Denise Réne, Paris, novembre – décembre 1957.

10 I. Luba, “Kobro and Strzemiński: Łódź – Warsaw – Paris”, *Ikonotheka* 2016, No. 26, p. 160.

11 J. Cassou, [untitled], in: *Précurseurs*, op. cit., p. 10.

12 See: J. Przyboś, „Sztuka abstrakcyjna – jak z niej wyjść”, *Przegląd Kulturalny* 1957, No. 45, p. 5; M. Porębski, „Jak nie wychodzić? (Uwagi polemiczne)”, *Przegląd Kulturalny* 1957,

(Theory of Vision) Przyboś identified new possibilities for the “language of geometry” in global art, at the same time voicing sharp criticism of what he considered the dead-end of *tachisme* favoured by his adversaries. He tirelessly urged artists to walk the path paved by Strzemiński, recognising the opportunities for Polish art in embracing the postulate of “artistic perception of things”. Nevertheless, his voice was solitary. In the years to come it was his adversaries that were to define the shape of the Polish canon.

However, contrary to what Piotr Piotrowski suggested, it does not seem that *Precursors* exhibition was a “result of the local controversy around informal”.¹³ This polemic coincided with the exhibition planned by Przyboś and emerged as a result of his efforts to bring back the memory of the Polish pioneers of the constructivist avant-garde. Undoubtedly, Przyboś wished to give deserved credit to the art theory proposed by the *Precursors*. The choice of Paris for this purpose was hardly coincidental. Piotrowski writes (rightfully so) that “Paris was still a major reference point for Eastern European artists”.¹⁴ However, this was not decisive for this choice of location. There were several direct reasons, such as the pre-war connections of Polish constructivists with the international group of Cercle et Carré located in Paris, the fact that Henryk Berlewski, one of the protagonists and co-organisers of the exhibition, was based in the French capital, as well as other Parisian connections of Przyboś, particularly with Jan Brzękowski. Finally, equally significant was a favourable political climate that made it possible to organise the exhibition with powerful official patronage that helped achieve the objective set forth by Przyboś. This objective was to permanently instate the group of Polish constructivists inside the circuits of international art. On the other hand, it was beneficial for Denise René to host a show of the Polish pioneers of abstraction because it fit in with the gallery’s strategy to present ground-breaking historical exhibitions.¹⁵

In the period before the political transition of 1989, the initiative to promote Polish constructivist tradition through exhibitions organised abroad was taken up and developed by Ryszard Stanisławski. Since 1966, as a director of the Muzeum Sztuki (Museum of Art) in Łódź, he treated this task as strategically important for his institution, for Polish art of the 20th century, as well as for the heritage of 20th-century visual culture at large. The process of realising this task analysed in the following parts of this text on the example of the 1969 Paris exhibition *Nowoczesne malarstwo polskie. Źródła i poszukiwania (Modern Polish Painting. Sources and Experiments)*, curated by Stanisławski, involved several stages. However, before this

No. 46, p. 6; T. Kantor, „Abstrakcja umarła – niech żyje abstrakcja”, *Życie Literackie* 1957, No. 50 (“Plastyka” supplement, No. 16), p. 6.

13 P. Piotrowski, *Globalne ujęcie sztuki Europy Wschodniej*, Poznań, 2018, p. 116.

14 Ibid.

15 In March 1957, the gallery opened the first French retrospective show of Piet Mondrian, while right before the *precursors* show it hosted a Josef Albers exhibition, *Hommage au carré*, which was the first solo show of this artist in Paris. See: D. René, *Mes années cinquante*, Paris, 1988, p. 65; *Denise René l'intrépide. Une galerie dans l'aventure de l'art abstrait 1944-1978*, ex. cat., Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 2011, p. 41.

complex effort was undertaken, Polish modern art was promoted through diverse versions of non-geometrical abstraction, while the culmination of this “expansion” of abstraction from Poland ensued around 1960.

“The Polish wave” – contemporary artists at international exhibitions

The term “Polish wave” was coined by Michel Ragon in a short article that took note of an increased presence of Polish contemporary artists at exhibitions in Western (mainly Paris-based) centres and galleries of art around 1960.¹⁶ After 1956, the so-called “moderns” (“nowocześni”), favoured by the state, could count on its support in organising exhibitions outside Poland. These names were to form the new canon of artists who represented Polish art abroad.

The changing paradigm can be partly observed at work at the Venice Biennale. Two years earlier, in 1954, following the official doctrine, Juliusz Starzyński, the curator of the Polish pavilion in Venice, promoted realism, which was treated synthetically yet was remote from any attempts that declined from “life-affirming” representation. Starzyński, exhibiting sculptures by Xawery Dunikowski as well as prints and drawings by Tadeusz Kulisiewicz and Aleksander Kobzdej, expressed this way his criticism of surrealism that was ubiquitous in Venice at the time.¹⁷ Two years later, the Polish pavilion, although eclectic, did to some degree reflect the changes in the country’s cultural policy.¹⁸ As Joanna Sosnowska argues, this eclecticism stemmed from the choice of participants, among them modernists active since the interwar period, Zbigniew Pronaszko and Marek Włodarski, as well as artists who debuted after the war: Jerzy Nowosielski and Tadeusz Dominik, the latter a painter and printmaker, the youngest artist in this group, supported by Jan Cybis. Exceptional in this set dominated by figurative work was Adam Marczyński, who with his abstract compositions came the closest to the non-figurative trends that dominated in Venice in 1956. Even though those responsible for the Polish pavilion, i.e. Starzyński and assisting young curators and art historians (Mieczysław Porębski, Ryszard Stanisławski and Aleksander Wojciechowski), recognised the need to draw Polish art from isolation and to connect it with the trends in universal art, that is non-figurative art, due to the remnants of the Stalinist system of culture management in Poland that rejected abstraction they were unable to make this type of postulate fully operational. When in 1958 Porębski accompanied Starzyński at the Venice Biennale again, the triumph of abstraction among the generation of young European artists was already certain. According to Porębski, young followers of Wols “practiced *tachisme*” and all kinds of “different art”, while the greatest suc-

16 M. Ragon, “Les vagues polonaises et espagnoles”, *Arts* 1961, No. 810, p. 8.

17 See: J. Sosnowska, *Polacy na Biennale Sztuki w Wenecji 1895-1999*, Warsaw, 1999, pp. 96-97.

18 “Eclectic” was the term used by Joanna Sosnowska to define the Polish exhibition in Venice in 1956, see: *ibid.*, p. 102.

cess among them was enjoyed by Spanish artists: Manuel Rivera, Eduardo Chillida, Manolo Millares and Antonio Tàpies.¹⁹ Nevertheless, the Polish exhibition – developed along the idea proposed by Starzyński and his assistant Zdzisław Kępiński – found itself again in the shadow of the mainstream, effecting the tactic of compromises and adjustments, already tested two years earlier, that involved the combined presentation of Polish Colourism (Artur Nacht-Samborski, Waclaw Taranczewski) with lyrical abstraction by Maria Jarema.

Preparing the Polish participation for the São Paulo Biennial in 1959 Porębski faced the necessity of yet another such compromise and had to include the state-approved and supported the art of Colourism. The strategy of compromise tested at the Venice Biennale, whereby Polish Colourism was shown next to abstraction, determined the choice of participants for the exhibition in São Paulo.²⁰ It comprised a large solo show (with 40 paintings) of Jan Cybis whose art – as justified by the curator – “was shaped by the complex climate of the interwar years, having now reached its mature and powerful completeness of intention and expression”.²¹ Yet the curator of the Polish exhibition in São Paulo put the focus on the most recent experiments in Polish art, informed by the reception of international, or more specifically Western art that verged on figuration and abstraction. This was a radical and unprecedented step in the history of official exhibitions of Polish art abroad. This way Porębski determined a new direction for such shows and revised the list of “export artists” to be included in international exhibitions henceforth. Among the representatives of most recent painting were Tadeusz Brzozowski, Aleksander Kobzdej, Jerzy Nowosielski, Stefan Gierowski, Jerzy Tchórzewski and Jan Lebenstein. Thereby the exhibition curator contrasted two approaches: the naturalist variant of colourist expressionism, developed in the interwar years on the roots of postimpressionism, to which he emotionally referred in his *Notatnik 1959*, as well as the contemporary movement represented by the members of the young generation.²² He wrote about the originality and specificity of the latter group as follows: “The work of Brzozowski, Kobzdej, Nowosielski, Gierowski, Tchórzewski and Lebenstein began to shape in the climate of regeneration and renewal of the avant-garde, which took place in Poland during the war and in its aftermath thanks to artists such as Maria Jarema and Tadeusz Kantor. What distinguished this art was the rejection of a one-sided outlook on painting controlled by «nature», a dogma of the colourists, in favour of an artistic process based on the mechanism of automatism and «surprise» that was discovered by surrealism on the one hand, yet, on the other, was founded upon the strict discipline of abstract thinking that had strong independent traditions in Poland”.²³

19 See: M. Porębski, *Pożegnanie z krytyką*, Krakow–Wrocław, 1983, pp. 19–28.

20 See: *5 Bienal de S. Paulo*, ex. cat., Museo de Art Moderna, São Paulo, Setembro – Dezembro 1959.

21 Typescript of the introduction to the Polish exhibition at the 5th São Paulo Biennial. Archiwum Mieczysława Porębskiego [Mieczysław Porębski Archive], MOCAM, Krakow.

22 See: Porębski, *Pożegnanie z krytyką...*, pp. 46–54.

23 Ibid., p. 52.

However, in this configuration of events and relationships, it was neither Venice with its strong political involvements, nor São Paulo with its geographical distance from Europe, but artistic Paris that became the stage where Polish modern art tested its strength in confrontation with European and global art.²⁴ The Polish section during the first edition of the Biennale de Paris in 1959 was dominated by artists who represented abstract art. In the introduction to the catalogue, Stanisław Teisseyre, general curator of the Polish section and then the rector of the State Higher School of Fine Arts in Gdańsk, emphasised that due to the limitations of the number of artists representing each country, the Polish exhibition presented a fragmentary picture of young painting and sculpture in Poland.²⁵ The age limit for competition participants, set at thirty-five years of age and below, resulted in the first international exhibition for many years where the Polish section did not include the colourists. However, among the paintings on display were many works of former students of colourist artists: two works by Stefan Gierowski, Bronisław Kierzkowski, Teresa Pałowska, Jan Tarasin and Rajmund Ziemiński, and five works by Jan Lebenstein, all of them abstract or situated on the verge of abstraction and figuration. Sculpture had two female representatives: Alina Szapocznikow, well known in Paris, who showed her *Mary Magdalen* made in bronze in 1957, and Magdalena Więcek, who sent her *Duo (Les deux)* from 1959. The contents of the Polish section were completed by prints by Halina Chrostowska-Piotrowicz and Józef Gielniak, in keeping with the modern style, which further emphasised the coherent nature of the Polish section. Noteworthy, the work of two participants of the Biennale – Gierowski and Lebenstein – were shown at the same time at the São Paulo Biennial. Furthermore, at two exhibitions of Polish painting organised in Venice (in September) and Geneva (in October and November) the same year Ryszard Stanisławski showed works by five Polish artists featured at the Paris Biennale: Gierowski, Lebenstein and Tarasin, as well as Szapocznikow and Więcek. It is clear, then, that at the time these artists formed a small group of Polish artists most intensively promoted abroad.

Polska – 50 lat malarstwa (Poland – 50 years of Painting), a now relatively forgotten exhibition in Venice and Geneva, is worth discussing because while preparing it Stanisławski took up an unprecedented effort to construct a representative canon of Polish art of the last fifty years.²⁶ Its goal was to demonstrate the continuity of Polish modern art, starting with the “classics” and leading up to contemporary artists. Consequently, it offered an impressive panorama that involved (1) the pioneers of metaphorical painting (Stanisławski used that term at the time), artists such as Witold Wojtkiewicz, Tadeusz Makowski and Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, as well as Kamil Witkowski and Jan Spychalski, (2) postimpressionist Colourism

24 For a detailed analysis of the exhibitions of Polish art in Paris in that period see: P. Majewski, *La Vague polonaise. Migracje artystów i wędrówki dzieł sztuki and Sekwanę w czasach żelaznej kurtyny (lata 1955-1969)*, Lublin, 2020.

25 S. Teisseyre, „Pologne“, in: *Première Biennale de Paris, Manifestation Biennale et Internationale des Jeunes Artistes*, ex. cat., Musée d'art moderne de la ville de Paris, 2 – 25 octobre 1959, p. 91.

26 See: *Pologne 50 ans de peinture*, ex. cat., Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneve, 24 octobre – 29 novembre 1959.

(represented by Cybis, Nacht-Samborski and Potworowski), and (3) the radical avant-garde, embodied by both the constructivists (Strzemiński and Stażewski), as well as the intriguing experimentalist Karol Hiller and Marek Włodarski, representing the pre-war Lviv-based “Artes” group whose ambition was to disseminate constructivist and surrealist avant-garde art. From among the artists who linked the pre and post-war Polish art Stanisławski distinguished Jonasz Stern and Maria Jarema. Apart from the listed artists of the young generation, there were also many others. Notably, Stanisławski avoided any special focus on abstraction and included abstract painters among the group of metaphorical artists, identifying also several parallel trends. Figurative painting was represented by Jerzy Nowosielski, Gabriela Obremba, Kazimierz Mikulski and Arika Madeyska, while realism by the work of Andrzej Wróblewski who died tragically two years earlier. Moreover, the exhibition featured sculpture and prints as well. This way the curator avoided demonstrating stylistic links between abstract art in Poland and the West, and instead highlighted autonomous processes of transformation of Polish art on the basis of the country’s tradition. As further examples will demonstrate, from then on Stanisławski consistently developed this line of “interpretation” of Polish art.

The Grand Prix for Jan Lebenstein at the Paris Biennale drew the attention of international critics to young art from Poland and, in fact, marked the beginning of the “Polish wave” that was soon so enthusiastically welcomed by Ragon. It brought a short-lived yet intense presence of Polish art in international art circuits, which witnessed numerous solo shows at commercial art galleries in Paris and other Western European art centres, as well as subsequent exhibitions in the most prestigious institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

In 1961, with certain difficulties mounted by the state officials and without their participation, the curator of the New York museum Peter Selz opened the exhibition *15 Polish Painters* that covered the work of the artists of the “new canon”.²⁷ To some extent, the model of presentation of Polish painting resembled the concepts realised by Polish curators on other occasions.²⁸ The exhibition started with the paintings by the pioneers of constructivist avant-garde and Colourism – Henryk Stażewski and Piotr Potworowski. It continued with works by two Polish painters best known in the West – compositions by Tadeusz Kantor, which resembled the American action painting, as well as “axis figures” by Jan Lebenstein, the laureate of the Biennale de Paris. Further on, abstract and textural compositions by Stefan Gierowski, Aleksander Kobzdej, and Bronisław Kierzkowski, as well as *quasi*-figurative works by Tadeusz Brzozowski and Tadeusz Dominik. The exhibition featured also the work of Teresa Pałowska, Wojciech Fangor, Jerzy Nowosielski, and Jerzy Tchórzewski as well as — added at the last minute — collages by Teresa Rudowicz and Marian Warzecha.

27 See: K. Niemira, “Political Contexts of ‘15 Polish Painters’ Exhibition (MoMA, 1961)”, *Ikonotheka* 2017, no. 26, pp. 167-191; K. Niemira and M. Słomska, “15 Polish Painters”. 4 obrazy z najważniejszej powojennej wystawy sztuki polskiej, Warsaw, 2015.

28 Nb. Ryszard Stanisławski was an unofficial Polish consultant for Peter Selz.

The entire venture was distinctly political. As Selz noted, dominant in the United States was a conviction that abstract art was an expression of the freedom of the West, whereas inside the Iron Curtain art followed the Soviet socialist realism.²⁹ The exhibition proved that the situation had radically changed, while a new painting from Poland realised the Western model of art. The lack of participation of Polish authorities in organising the New York exhibition resulted from the same factor that inspired American enthusiasm, yet the values attached to this situation were entirely reverse. In the East, abstraction in Poland was perceived with complete disdain, which found its confirmation in the Polish participation at the exhibition of socialist countries in Moscow in 1958.³⁰ At the exhibition, abstract compositions by Marczyński were read as a threatening attack of the Western imperialism on the Soviet socialist realism. The Moscow directive of limiting abstraction at exhibitions organised in Poland must have brought a correction of the canon of art presented abroad, which was manifested in group shows from the late 1960s. To a great degree, those resulted from the search for a new formula of exhibitions in Poland that would include more examples of figurative painting. The new model of the exhibition, first employed at 1962 *Metafory* (Metaphors) exhibition in Poland curated by Ryszard Stanisławski, displayed a vague understanding of the titular metaphorical art that was subsequently used at international exhibitions, while Stanisławski was to become the chief architect of the change of the canon.

In search of synthesis

“The Sunday Times” from February 1968 introduced the exhibition *Six Polish Artists* at the Royal College of Arts in London as a presentation of art from Eastern Europe that had not yielded under the Stalinist pressure.³¹ The paradox was that its curator, Ryszard Stanisławski, enjoyed good relations with the communist authorities and for a long time, back then, had been representing Poland internationally as a curator of official exhibitions at consecutive editions of the São Paulo Biennial, and had for two years been developing his practice as the director of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź.³² In his introduction to the exhibition, Stanisławski explained that

29 See: Peter Selz on *15 Polish Painters* exhibition in an interview by Sharon Zane from 14 February 1994, MOMA Oral History Program, https://www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/learn/archives/transcript_selz.pdf [accessed 10 July 2018].

30 See: P. Kucharska, „Kłopotliwy gość. Polska ekspozycja na międzynarodowej wystawie w Moskwie (1958/1959)”, <https://culture.pl/pl/artykul/klopotliwy-gosc-polska-ekspozycja-na-miedzynarodowej-wystawie-w-moskwie-19581959> [accessed 19 December 2018].

31 [author unknown], “Art”, *The Sunday Times* 1968, No. 7551 (from 18 February 1968). Archiwum Ryszarda Stanisławskiego [Ryszard Stanisławski Archive], Instytut Sztuki PAN.

32 The work of Ryszard Stanisławski as a curator of Polish exhibitions at the São Paulo Biennial in Brazil in 1961-1969 is discussed by A. Szczerski in his article “Polska nowoczesność na eksport – Ryszard Stanisławski, São Paulo, Paryż i Łódź”. See: idem, *Cztery nowoczesności. Teksty o sztuce i architekturze polskiej XX wieku*, Kraków, 2015, pp. 169-188.

it presented merely a small selection of a broad panorama of Polish art but that it represented “certain lyrical and romantic passion” inherent in the painting brought together at this show.³³ According to the curator, this “mood”, “common quality” were present in all the works, even though they were produced by artists of diverse generations, milieus, and conventions. The show opened with the works by Tadeusz Makowski, presented as a singular figure from the École de Paris, as well as “uniquely transformed” landscapes by Piotr Potworowski, which owed much – as the curator emphasised – to the landscape of Cornwall. The same lyrical and emotional power was to be present in the work of a younger generation: Eugeniusz Markowski, Tadeusz Brzozowski, Jerzy Tchórzewski and Aleksander Kobzdej. On the basis of this configuration of artists, Stanisławski attempted to create a picture of the “Polish national school”. Even though in his opinion, it was difficult to defend such an approach in the face of the general developments of contemporary art, he insisted that some unchanging and dominating values remained vivid on individual national art scenes. Therefore, in the work of Polish artists, he identified both universal elements, common for the art of this period, as well as individual traits resulting in singular investigations made by “numerous peripheral artists” who ceaselessly sought to break the routine and the basic rules of various trends. Moreover, the exhibition spoke against “contemporary iconoclasm and anti-painting” by featuring, on the one hand, two traditional modern painters, and on the other hand, four active painters who developed their unique and original style. This time, Stanisławski purposefully excluded constructivism and its opposite – Colourism. In fact, his goal was to produce a larger show of selected six Polish painters who were seen to share the “Polish lyrical mood” and a belief in painting as a means of expression of – he insisted – “the most contemporary values”.³⁴ This exhibition preceded a much larger display of Polish art that Stanisławski organised a year later at the Musée Galliera in Paris. This show was to celebrate the 1000th anniversary of the Polish state as a parallel event to the monumental exhibition of old masters of Polish art on show at the Petit Palais.

At the planned exhibition of *Polish Modern Painting – Sources and Experiments* Stanisławski used as a reference point the models of presentation of Polish art employed in Paris over the preceding ten years.³⁵ He counted among them two official exhibitions: of figurative painting at the Galerie Charpentier as well as the already mentioned show of colourists and their followers at the National Museum of Modern Art (both in 1961). Moreover, he listed exhibitions of various trends of contemporary Polish art at consecutive editions of the Biennale de Paris. Finally, Stanisławski mentioned solo exhibitions of Polish artists at several different Paris

33 R. Stanisławski, “Introduction”, in: *Six painters from Poland*, ex. cat., Royal College Art Galleries, London, 22 February – 23 March 1968, n.p.

34 See: Typescript of the introduction to the exhibition. Archiwum Ryszarda Stanisławskiego [Archive of Ryszard Stanisławski], Instytut Sztuki PAN.

35 See: *Peinture moderne polonaise. Sources et recherches*, ex. cat., Musée Galliera, Paris, 1969. Script for exhibition at the Musée Galliera, Archiwum Ryszarda Stanisławskiego [Ryszard Stanisławski Archive], Instytut Sztuki PAN.

galleries. All those initiatives, although valuable and positively received by the critics and the public, did not adequately contribute – in his view — to increased knowledge of the actual development of the tradition of Polish painting of the 20th century, and instead created a situation where recent works of Polish artists were seen as a “passive echo of relevant trends in European art”. In the face of this perception of Polish art as imitative and in order to improve what was seen as unsatisfactory, incoherent, and rather chaotic presence of Polish art abroad Stanisławski proposed an exhibition of 20th-century Polish painting that would intentionally emphasise its originality as well as highlight the input of Polish art to the development of European art. He planned to develop the exhibition on the basis of the collections of three National Museums (in Warsaw, Krakow, and Poznań) as well as the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, which was the official organiser of the show.

The idea of the exhibition relied on the model developed by Stanisławski’s curatorial practice and involved a general division of the display into a historical, retrospective part that showed the titular “sources” as well as a contemporary part that drew on these sources, but also emphasised the character of *living art* (*l’art vivant*), expressed through the notion of “experiment”. Notably, however, Stanisławski did not treat this set as a strict division into “history” and “contemporaneity” but, instead, sought to highlight the continuity of historic trends in the present. The exhibition script suggests that Stanisławski planned to expand the concept of the presentation of Polish art, develop its details and clarify its message, which he had been working on – in its historical part – since 1959, i.e. since the already discussed shows of Polish painting in Venice and Geneva. The contemporary part, on the other hand, was updated to include the most recent phenomena, representative of Polish art of the 1960s. This concept, he insisted, was also interesting for French art critics and historians, as confirmed by the conversations he had with the French organisers.

Consequently, the exhibition offered the most powerful attempt to set up the canon of Polish 20th-century art as yet, developed for a display outside Poland. Given at his disposal a relatively small exhibition space at the Galliera museum (with the space of 500 square metres) Stanisławski decided to reduce the number of participating artists to sixteen, instead offering a larger selection of their work (he planned to show a total of 150 artworks). The curator sought also to emphasise the Parisian provenance of the collection of contemporary art at the Łódź museum, which had been formed since the turn of the 1920s and ‘30s by Strzebiński thanks to his Paris “emissaries”. Stanisławski was right to think that by drawing the attention to this context of the origins of “the world’s second collection of modern art” he could attract more interest in the planned exhibition.

By the chronological order, the exhibition started with the work of Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, whose theatrical writing, as Stanisławski indicated, had been enjoying a growing recognition in France, while his work in the exhibition was to promote the formist group. Another patron of the historical avant-garde, Karol Hiller, with his painting and heliography, represented the Łódź art milieu of the interwar period, as were Polish constructivists included in the “sources” part of

the show: Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro and Henryk Stażewski. Their work, as well as this by “Blok”, “Praesens” and “a.r.” groups, was to illustrate “innovative works of Polish and global art, part of the so-called «geometrical» painting, which made an impact on the evolution of contemporary architecture”. This way, Stanisławski highlighted the position of Łódź on the map of the European avant-garde international in the interwar years. He planned to show the post-war continuations and experiments through four different trends. The first, most directly linked with Witkacy’s legacy, was represented by Grupa Krakowska with the work of Tadeusz Kantor (with the focus on his costume design for “Cricot” theatre), Maria Jarema, and Jerzy Nowosielski. The second was realist and socially engaged painting represented by Bronisław Linke, on the one hand, whose style had developed before the war, and by Andrzej Wróblewski, on the other hand, a painter of the post-war generation whose work had already gained some attention in 1959. The third trend referred to the constructivist tradition and included the work of artists on show in Paris for the first time, Edward Krasiński, Zbigniew Gostomski, and Ryszard Winiarski. Finally, the “metaphorical” trend was represented by spatial compositions by Władysław Hasior and figurative painting by the youngest participant, Jan Dobkowski.

The exhibition from 1969, prepared, as already noted, to celebrate the 1000th anniversary of the Polish state, can be seen as a laboratory study of the presentation of Polish modern art abroad and as a stage that led to Stanisławski’s subsequent initiatives. Constructivist artists (e.g. *Constructivism in Poland* exhibition in Essen and Otterlo in 1973)³⁶ became the centre of attention, on the one hand, on the other, this direction led to a spectacular attempt at a synthesis, that is, *Présences polonaises*, a famous exhibition from the period of Solidarity, shown in 1983 at the Centre Georges Pompidou.³⁷ Without going into the details of this monumental exhibition, it is worth highlighting several facts, significant from the point of view of the described attempt at constructing the canon. With more than three times the exhibition space at the Galliera museum at his disposal, Stanisławski significantly enlarged the display, yet remained in keeping with his original concept. It involved three main themes: among the “sources” section was the work of Witkacy and constructivism, while in the “experiments” section — a wide array of contemporary artists presented on a large background of Polish culture. Constructivist works were presented in great numbers at the exhibition, while the movement was discussed in detail in scholarly texts included in a large catalogue that accompanied the show.³⁸ Andrzej Turowski wrote a historical text on the work of groups such as Blok, Praesens, and a.r., placing the focus on theoretical and experimental work of

36 See: *Constructivism in Poland 1923-1936, Blok, Praesens, a.r.*, ex. cat., Museum Folkwang Essen, 12 May – 24 April 1973, Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller Otterlo, 14 July – 2 September 1973. The show travelled later to the United States and across numerous European countries.

37 The exhibition *Présences polonaises* is discussed in detail by A. Szczerski in his already mentioned text. See: idem, *Cztery nowoczesności...*, pp. 188-204.

38 See: *Présences polonaises: l’art vivant autour du musée de Łódź: Witkiewicz, constructivisme, les contemporains*, Centre Georges Pompidou, 23 juin – 26 septembre 1983, pp. 138-259.

Strzeмиński, Kopro, and Berlewi. Stanislas Zadora discussed constructivism with reference to a wide spectrum of other avant-garde movements in Poland (formism, Bunt group) and the context of the struggle for new forms of artistic expression in the interwar period. Serge Fouchereau focused in turn on the relationship between art and literature and new designs in typography promoted in Polish avant-garde magazines (such as “Zwrotnica”, “Blok”, “Preasens”, “Forma”). Janusz Zagrodzki addressed experiments of Polish constructivists in photography, photomontage, and film. He also dedicated a separate part of his text to Strzeмиński’s concept of Unism and Kopro’s “spatial compositions”. Jana Claverie discussed the problems of constructivist architecture, analysing a wide selection of architectural designs and structures by Barbara and Stanisław Brukalski, Bohdan Lachert, Helena and Szymon Syrkus, and Karol Kryński. Finally, Xavier Deryng analysed the concept and the circumstances of founding the collection of modern art in Łódź, considering the connections between a.r. and other groups of the international avant-garde, such as Cercle et Carré and Abstraction-Création, which made it possible for many artworks to find their way into the museum’s collection. In total, the part of the exhibition dedicated to constructivism comprised the work of nearly forty artists and around 450 exhibits. This way, the show offered an unprecedented panoramic picture of the Polish constructivism that highlighted its accomplishments in a variety of fields (visual arts, literature, architecture) and the context of the international avant-garde of the 1920s and ‘30s.

This comprehensive presentation of Polish 20th-century art, organised in the context of the political tension during the period of Solidarity, provoked powerful criticism by the Polish political opposition (e.g. Anka Ptaszkowska criticised the mechanism of the state patronage and the monopolist position of Stanisławski), which was discussed in detail by Andrzej Szczerski. At the same time, it was positively received by international art critics and attracted a large number of viewers. However, the question remains, to what extent it contributed to an important correction of the perception of the canon of Polish art in the eyes of the Western viewers since the programme of the exhibition – as noted by Szczerski – proposed this canon.

One more exhibition curated by Stanisławski should be considered here; although it does not concern directly the issues discussed in this paper, yet, in a sense, it marks the closing of his exhibition narratives of Polish art, and at the same time it sets a new perspective on the art of the entire region of East-Central Europe. In 1994, then already retired director of the Łódź museum organised, together with Christoph Brockhaus, a show in Bonn titled *Europa Europa. Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarde in Mittel- und Osteuropa*. The author intended to offer a comprehensive presentation of the one-hundred-year-long history of avant-garde art and literature of East-Central Europe to uncover its “neglected aspects and fill in the gaps” that had been growing over the fifty-year-long period of Europe’s political and ideological division.³⁹ This was the first, yet not the last attempt to show a model of function-

39 Ch. Brockhaus, R. Stanisławski, eds., *Europa Europa. Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarde in Mittel- und Osteuropa*, vol. 1 (of 4), Bonn, 1994, p. 21.

ing of the modernist and avant-garde culture of this part of Europe that would present an alternative to the West-centric model. Moreover, the show sought to offer a perspective on Polish art in a wider context of the reconstruction of artistic geography, which became a reality after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Conclusion

In the period after World War II attempts to present and consolidate the image of Polish modern and contemporary art abroad were most successful when they coincided with important events in Polish political history. This was the case during the thaw, as well as during Solidarity.⁴⁰ The analysis conducted here suggests that it was constructivism that had the highest position among the three main movements of Polish art that formed the canon of art constructed during communism for international audiences. To some degree, this high esteem enjoyed by Polish constructivism within the global art history has to be seen as a result of consistent policy of promoting the work of constructivist artists outside Poland before as well as after 1989.⁴¹ Efforts in this regard continued from Julian Przyboś's initiative in 1957, through Ryszard Stanisławski's curatorial practice, to the most recent attempt to secure the place for Polish constructivists in global art history. During communism, Stanisławski played a particularly significant role in this process. Since 1966, when he was appointed the director of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Stanisławski sought to promote the history of Polish constructivism internationally. To this end, he made use of his good relations with the communist authorities and his steadily earned authority as an author and curator of exhibitions of Polish art abroad. As the head of the Łódź museum, whose roots were linked with the tradition of the Polish avant-garde, Stanisławski was able to utilise the potential of the history of this institution and translate it into a strategy employed in his curating, as well as to maintain favourable response from the authorities. As an experienced curator with broad international connections within the art world, on multiple occasions Stanisławski offered the Western audiences his authorial idea of the canon, divided into sources (history) and contemporary works, placing special focus on the work of

40 After 1989 the eyes of the global public opinion turned towards Eastern Europe in 2004 when the European Union was admitting new member states. As it was before, when the interest in this region was growing, new details emerged that defined and specified the shape of the whole.

41 Notably, the exhibition of the work of Kobra and Strzemiński, on show at the Centre Pompidou, and later at the Gemeentemuseum Den Haag in The Hague in 2018 and 2019. This event can be considered the most recent attempt to situate the work of Kobra and Strzemiński in the context of universal art history. See: J. Suchan, K. Ziębińska-Lewandowska, eds., *Katarzyna Kobra Władysław Strzemiński. Une avant-garde polonaise / A Polish Avant-garde*, Centre Pompidou, Muzeum Sztuki, Éditions Skira, Paris, 2018. On this occasion, the exhibition was part of the national programme *Niepodległa* (Independent), organised by the Adam Mickiewicz Institute to celebrate the centenary of Polish independence through a series of events promoting Polish culture abroad.

Polish constructivism. Moreover, Stanisławski never ceased in his efforts to promote Polish avant-garde after 1989, situating it in the context of new interpretations of artistic geography of East-Central Europe. Undoubtedly, the above-listed reasons: the authority of the curator, his personal involvement, and the strategy of building the prestige of the Łódź museum supported by the communist authorities all had their part in the future success.

The same cannot be said about the remaining elements of the pre-1989 canon. Although the analysis above suggests that Colourism and modern art enjoyed a positive reception at the time of their presentation outside Poland, at present, they remain almost entirely forgotten. With its roots in postimpressionism, Colourism proved too anachronistic when confronted with contemporary art. However, it was intensively promoted outside Poland due to the internal conditions of artistic life in the country. Colourists played an important role in the formation of the structures of higher artistic education in Poland. A young generation of their students chose a different path of experiment verging on abstraction and figuration, this way fulfilling a generational need to connect with the Western culture. However, identified with modernity, abstract painting was ambivalently received by the authorities who could not dismiss the ideological premises of socialist realism, albeit slightly less strict after the death of Stalin, and were still critical of the “Western” model of abstraction. For this reason, after a short period of apparent openness and support for Polish contemporary art abroad, it found itself in retreat, or at least it was no longer systematically promoted. Ultimately, to paraphrase the words of Piotr Piotrowski from the introduction, there was no one to make real efforts to explain to the global viewer the specificity of Polish Colourism or the originality of Polish abstract art in relation to the Western models after 1956. This way, Jean Cassou’s postulate to “give justice” to Polish artists was only partly fulfilled, with respect to constructivists, while with regard to other areas of Polish modern and contemporary art this is still a task that requires attention.

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