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Migrating ideas / migrating images. Networks of the avant-garde(s)

This study explores the issue of reception and migration of forms, ideas, things, and images between Polish and Western European interwar avant-garde circles, and focuses on a few selected case studies related to this topic. The analysis traces however the paths followed not by artefacts themselves, but mostly by their visual representations. Instead of an approach focused on a one-way flow from a centre to a periphery, the text presents a network of the European avant-garde as a ‘moved’ map, in which the vectors of exchange between West and East are aligned in different directions. In this way, the proposed perspective challenges unidirectional vertical art historical narratives based on a principle of subordination and dependency. In addition to the methods of analysis from the field of art history, the methodological foundations introduced in the paper also include approaches developed within the historical disciplines of *Kulturtransferforschung* [cultural transfer research], *histoire croisée* [crossed history], as well as a cultural historical perspective introduced by Aby Warburg as part of his ‘image science’.

Keywords: Avant-garde, migration of images, *histoire croisée*, cultural transfers, Katarzyna Kobro, Abstraction-Création

Introduction

As Jean-Louis Cohen stated, a history of modern architecture cannot be limited to a history of aesthetic ‘influences.’¹ This statement is valid not only for architecture, however; it applies also to the field of art and therefore, it is worth considering art and architecture history not necessarily in terms of alleged implicit influences, but from the perspective of reception and migration of forms, ideas, or things – and, last but not least, the movement of images. The web of artistic connections, or this ‘moved’ and fluid map, challenges the unidirectional vertical narratives

¹ Cohen (2012): 14.

that are prevalent in studies of modern art or architecture, which are based on a principle of subordination and dependency. Instead of a relationship between an active, pattern-setting subject and a passive, model-adopting object, the perspective focused on cultural crossings and migration highlights the agency and subjectivity on both sides of this connection. It also exposes the arbitrariness of architectural and art historical research based on notions of unidirectional flow of artistic ideas. The phenomenon of migrating concepts, works, or images forms an important, though not often emphasised enough, part of the history of modern art and architecture. This kind of country-crossing art historical narrative reminds us that political boundaries did not necessarily coincide with those that described the cultural map.

The below paper will be zoomed in on the migration of images between Polish and Western European interwar avant-garde circles and explore a phenomenon in which a cultural-artistic map unfolds, characterised not so much by a one-way flow from a centre to a periphery, but by vectors of movement that are aligned in different directions. In the paper, I trace the paths followed not by artefacts themselves, but mostly by their visual representations, and present a few selected case studies related to this topic. In addition to methods of analysis from the field of art history, the methodological foundations introduced in the paper also include conclusions and approaches developed within the historical disciplines of *Kulturtransferforschung* [cultural transfer research], *histoire croisée* [crossed history], as well as a cultural historical perspective introduced one hundred years ago by Aby Warburg as part of his 'image science'. This kind of methodological background, with its focus on points of contact, should open up art history to a perspective that moves beyond isolated, individual, autonomous biographies (i.e., of particular architects, artists, or works). Instead, it prioritises narratives centred around the connections, crossings, and intersecting of routes followed by ideas, thoughts, projects, people, or reproductions. This all helps to reveal interpenetrations that characterise the realm of modern art in interwar Europe. It also highlights the avant-garde as a supranational artistic force that emphasises the universal dimension of artistic endeavours

rather than focusing on questions of national art – a feature that should not be overlooked.

Moved map

The 1920s and 1930s can be seen not only as an era of great individuals shaping the image of modern art and architecture, but also as a period of flourishing international cultural networks. By participating in congresses and exhibitions, by writing each other hundreds of letters, by exchanging the pictures of their own works, by publishing and distributing periodicals, by writing manifestoes, statements or reviews, modern architects and artists developed structures going far beyond national borders and actual geopolitical logics. Their wide-ranging engagement within such platforms as self-published cahiers, exhibitions, or competitions, has become a marker for art and architecture to be considered modern. The media, such as periodicals, were largely contributing to the mutual exchange and to the flux of ideas between different artistic milieus. As Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács noticed, ‘the small magazines [...] often published excerpts from one another as well as promoted one another in advertisements. Written and read at café tables and in ateliers, avidly exchanged among artists of different regions, these publications are an essential part of the historic fabric.’² Numerous self-published periodicals have become an important platform for artistic manifestations and a tool for independently creating cultural narratives. Referring to the architectural field, Beatriz Colomina remarked that ‘the history of the avant-garde can’t be separated from the history of its engagement with mass media. It is not just that the avant-garde used media to publicize its works; the work did not exist before the publication. [...] In fact, during this period there was a full-blown explosion of little architectural magazines, which investigated a radical transformation in architectural culture by generating many manifestoes.’³ The manifestoes Colomina is writing about can, however, be understood

² Benson and Forgács (2002): 17.

³ Colomina (2014): 1, 5–6.

not solely as textual ones, based on the usage of words, but also visual ones, where the image – a reproduction of a work of art – was replacing the text or at least going along with it. The internationalisation of ideas was also supported by photographs – a widely available tool for promoting, showcasing, and even staging works. Photographs not only captured existing works, but also documented those that were lost or never intended for production. The role of photography- and text-based manifestoes in avant-garde periodicals was crucial for raising public awareness and building visibility of one's work. Not uncommonly, it preceded the establishment of one's professional position, as was the case with Le Corbusier, whose manifestoes published in *L'esprit nouveau* (1920–1925) largely contributed to the development of his later career.⁴ It is not surprising that the photographs of art or architectural works published in magazines or journals were often given comparable amount of page space as the text. Both the visual and the textual layer were developing their logic of compositional appearance. Images allowed new buildings, structures, paintings, or sculptures to become manifestoes in their own right.

Polish artists, critics, theoreticians, and architects were part of this wide international stream too, not only importing ideas or pictures from abroad, but also sharing their statements and images of latest achievements with their colleagues from such countries as – just to name a few – the Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany, and France. A striking example of this mutual exchange can be mentioned here, of Helena and Szymon Syrkus – an architect couple who played a prominent role in the interwar avant-garde milieu in Poland. Since they were both Polish delegates for CIAM, the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (Helena was not only a CIAM member, but also its secretary and in the years 1947–1954 its vice-chairwoman), they entertained close relationships with well-known figures in the CIAM circle such as Walter Gropius, Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud, and Sigfried Giedion.⁵ These lively and close

⁴ Colomina (2014): 3.

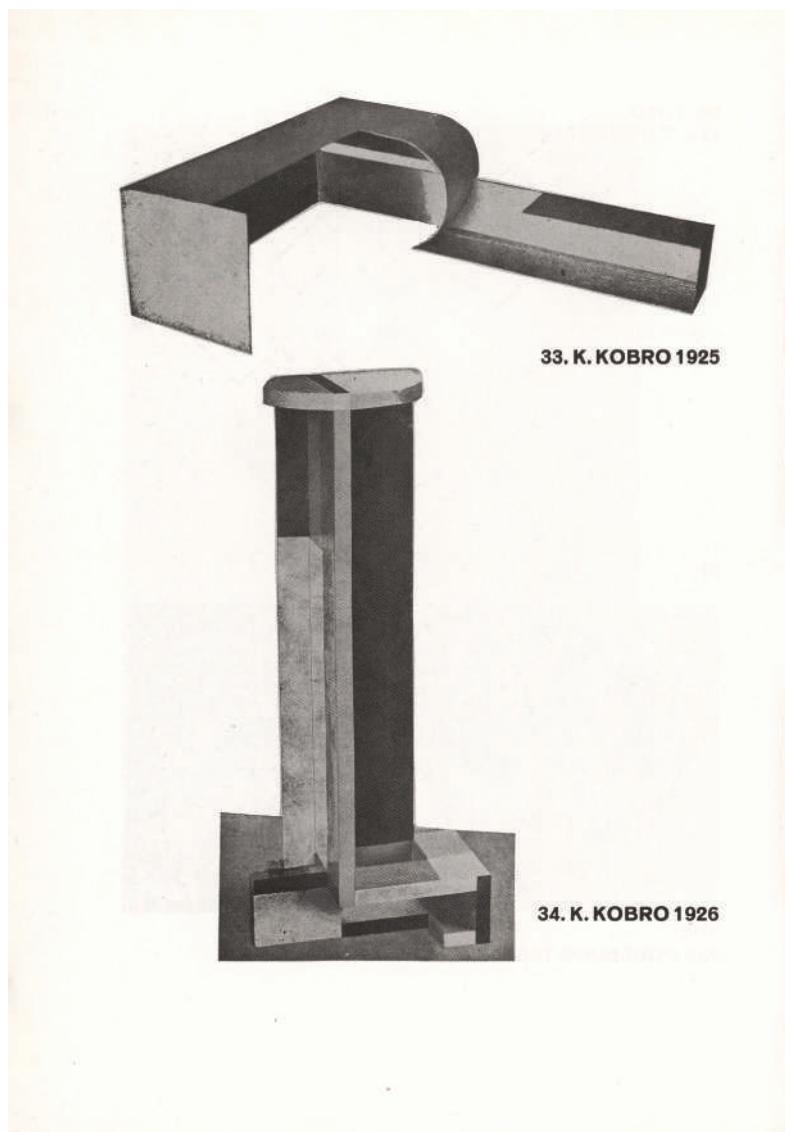
⁵ Czerner and Listowski (1981): 83; Kohlrausch (2019): 112, 161.

contacts can be traced, for example, in the voluminous correspondence that the Syrkus couple and members of CIAM carried out for years – not solely during the interwar period. However, there were not only letters but also images that circulated between Poland and Western Europe, as evidenced by publications that appeared in Poland and abroad at the time. A striking example of this phenomenon of the travelling of images is the book *Composing Space: Calculating Space-Time Rhythms* written and published by couple Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński.⁶ Kobro and Strzemiński were artists and important figures of the Polish avant-garde milieu. Kobro studied in Moscow – in 1917 at the School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture, and between in 1918–1920 at the city's Free State Art Studios. Strzemiński was a painter, art critic, and art theoretician. In the early 1920s, the couple left the Soviet Union to finally settle in Poland, where they were engaged in organising and consolidating the local avant-garde milieu and in establishing contacts with international artists. In Poland, Kobro and Strzemiński were further developing their artistic theory and practice – Kobro's concept of sculpture understood as a spatial composition, and the idea of unism formulated by Strzemiński.⁷ Their ideas about art, especially Kobro's sculptural explorations, became the core of the book *Composing Space: Calculating Space-Time Rhythms*, which was print-ready in 1929, but first published in 1931, and aimed at providing a theoretical base and historical background for modern sculpture.⁸ It is striking that a significant part of the publication was overtaken by reproductions of sculptural works, with a very clear focus on the newest achievements, exemplified by sculptures of such artists as Georges Vantongerloo, László Moholy-Nagy, and Alexander Archipenko. Works by Kobro were also included in the book. The importance of this visual aspect introduced by photographs for the publication can be inferred from Strzemiński's letter to poet

⁶ Kobro and Strzemiński (1931); Kbro and Strzemiński (Spring 2016): 12–74.

⁷ Although their artistic practice was focused on sculpture (Kobro) and painting (Strzemiński), they were also engaging with other disciplines, such as architecture, typography, and design. See Jędrzejczyk and Słoboda (2021).

⁸ Kbro and Strzemiński (1931): 12–74.



1. Page 103 from: Katarzyna Kobro, Władysław Strzemiński, *Kompozycja przestrzeni. Obliczenia rytmu czasoprzestrzennego*, 1931

Julian Przyboś, in which the painter wrote about the details of acquiring from other artists images of their latest works, as well as the high costs of making and printing high-quality reproductions.⁹ The book is therefore an example of a publication in which images are not just an addition to the text, but are part of the content and build up understanding of what modern sculpture is according to Kobro and Strzemiński. This is not an isolated case, since more art-publishing projects of this type can be found in the interwar period. Other examples are *Von Material zu Architektur* by László Moholy-Nagy, or *Die Kunstismen 1914–1924*, edited by El Lissitzky and Hans Arp.¹⁰ Each of the three books mentioned above presents original and individual graphic design. And yet, some of the solutions implemented there, such as the typographic layouts and the way in which photographs of artworks are presented, show a similar way of working with photographic material, which involves focusing on the object by isolating it from its context and presenting it against a strongly contrasting bright abstract background.

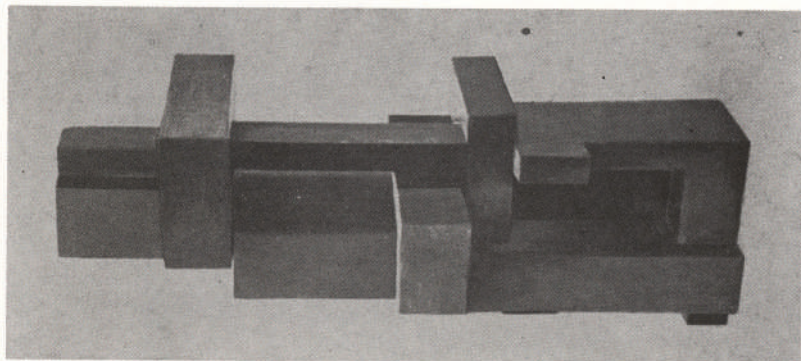
Moreover, in some cases they contain the same images, as was the case, for example, with the photograph of George Vantongerloo's sculpture from 1921 reproduced in both – in *Die Kunstismen* and in *Composing Space: Calculating Space-Time Rhythms*.

Also, in *Moderne Plastik: Elemente der Wirklichkeit, Masse und Auflockerung* – a book by Swiss art historian Carola Giedion-Welcker devoted entirely to modern sculpture – its rich illustrative material can be seen as part of the actual content expressed not only in words, but also through evocative photo combinations, which in some cases take up the entire page space, leaving no room for margins. In the German-language edition of Giedion-Welcker's book, the author included a picture of Katarzyna Kobro's *Spatial Composition (9)* from 1933.¹¹ In addition to the fascinating juxtaposition of Kobro's work with a photograph showing the dancer Gret Palucca in the midst of a leap, it is also interesting to read the

⁹ Letter from Władysław Strzemiński to Julian Przyboś on 23rd of March 1930, in Turowski (1973): 232, 238.

¹⁰ Moholy-Nagy (1929); El Lissitzky and Arp (1925).

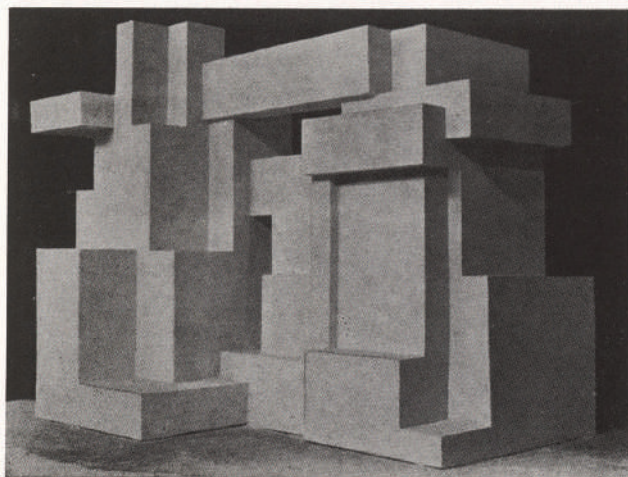
¹¹ Giedion-Welcker (1937): 147.



"...nigdy linja, płaszczyzna lub objętość pozioma nie może być użyta bez swego równoważnika pionowego. Dokładne znalezienie stosunku tych dwóch elementów wzajem do siebie i do całości dzieła jest istotą wartości dzieła sztuki..." (G. Vantongerloo)

25.
G.VANTONGERLOO
1921

KONSTRUKCJA STOSKÓW BRYŁ



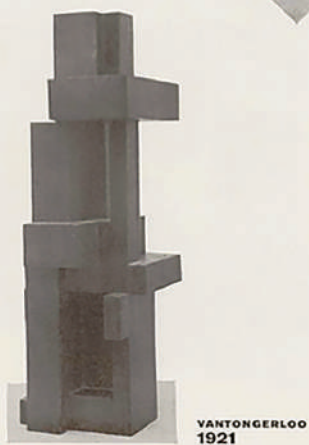
26. G. VANTONGERLOO
1926

KONSTRUKCJA STOSKÓW BRYŁ POCHODZĄCA Z ELIPSOIDY

NEO-PLASTIZISMUS

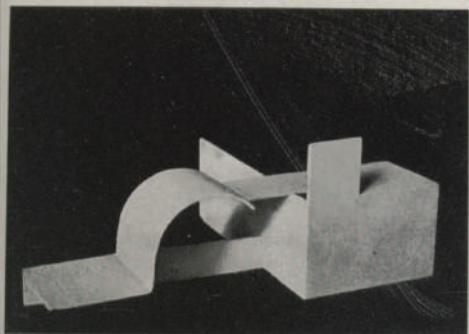


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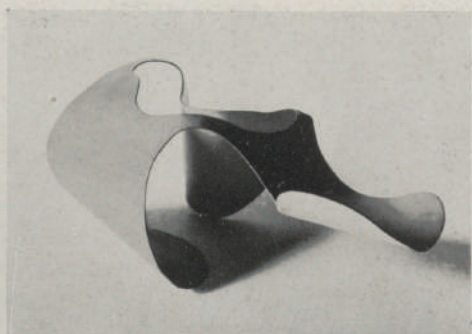


3. Page 14 from: El Lissitzky, Hans Arp, *Die Kunstisten 1914–1924*, 1925

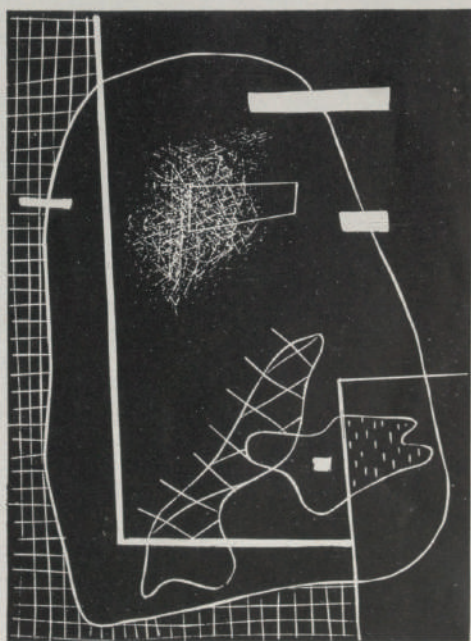
← 2. Page 89 from: Katarzyna Kobro, Władysław Strzemiński, *Kompozycja przestrzeni. Obliczenia rytmu czasoprzestrzennego*, 1931



Kobra



Kobra



Veronesi

note at the end of the book, suggesting that the photograph was kindly provided to Giedion-Welcker by the artist herself, which may prove at least some loose contact between the two women leading to this transfer of the image.¹²

Kobro and Strzemiński were members and also partial co-founders of three influential Polish avant-garde groups: Blok, Praesens, and 'a.r.'. The Blok group was issuing a periodical devoted to problems of contemporary architecture and art tightly linked to problems of modernisation, new technologies and industrialisation; therefore an important part of the magazine constituted photographs that depicted not only pieces of modern art and architecture, but also images of tanks and automobiles. The *Praesens* magazine, published by the eponymous group of artists and architects, was similarly lavishly illustrated with photographs of architectural projects and works of art. Since both journals regularly featured extracts from theoretical texts and images of works by artists from the De Stijl circle, above all by Theo van Doesburg, they are an important testimony to the flow of ideas and images between the West and the East. The direct contacts with this milieu and the migration of photographs, texts, and periodicals between Poland and the Netherlands are evidenced also by the surviving correspondence between Theo van Doesburg or Jacobus Johannes Pieter Oud and the members of Blok (i.e., Mieczysław Szczuka) or Praesens (Szymon Syrkus).¹³ Their mail exchange resulted in a rich set of illustrations showing Oud's architectural projects and van Doesburg's paintings, which were published along with the texts by both artists in the first issue of the *Praesens* magazine.¹⁴ However, these transfers did not take place in only one direction, towards Poland. For example, the pages of the Dutch magazine *Het Bouwbedrijf* contain articles by van Doesburg richly illustrated with photographs presenting

¹² Giedion-Welcker (1937): 166.

¹³ Wenderski (2017): 82–87, 106–109.

¹⁴ *Praesens* 1 (1926): 3–7, 46, 48.

← 4. Page 9 from: *Abstraction-Création: art non-figuratif*, no. 4 (1935)
Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

current developments in the field of art and architecture in Poland.¹⁵ Moreover, in the Archive of Theo and Nelly van Doesburg in The Hague, letters have also been preserved in which van Doesburg asks several Polish artists (including Andrzej Pronaszko, Henryk Stażewski, and Władysław Strzemiński) to send him reproductions of their works.¹⁶ Some of the images received by van Doesburg are still to be found in the Archive, including photos of works by Katarzyna Kobro, Maria Nicz-Borowiakowa, and Szymon Syrkus.¹⁷

A flow of images also took place between Poland and France, for instance between the members of the 'a.r.' group and the Abstraction-Création circle – an international association of artists who joined forces to promote non-representational art via exhibitions and an annual eponymous cahier issued in Paris. Kobro and Strzemiński were part of this international association too and their works were reproduced several times in the pages of the *Abstraction-Création* magazine. One can mention, for example, issue 4 (1935) which featured both photographs of Strzemiński's paintings and Kobro's sculptures.¹⁸

Interestingly, among the images reproduced, there can be found the same photograph portraying *Spatial Compositions* (9) as was included in Giedion-Welcker's book *Moderne Plastik*. This image was also used by Kobro in the magazine *Forma*, published by the Professional Union of Polish Artists in Łódź.¹⁹

Cross-cultural vehicles

The practice of reproducing and publishing images of artworks can be traced to the moment of emergence of a systematic registration, preservation, and dissemination of artefacts by means of photographic representation. Obviously, this process began much earlier than 1920s

¹⁵ Wenderski (2017): 83.

¹⁶ Wenderski (2017): 83.

¹⁷ The notes on the reverse of the reproduction of work by Kobro resemble the artist's handwriting.

¹⁸ *Abstraction-Création: art non-figuratif* 4 (1935): 19.

¹⁹ *Forma* 6 (1938): 24.

and was not a discovery of the avant-garde. It was at the turn of the 1850s and 1860s, so not long after the invention of photography, that reproductions of sculptures, paintings, and photographs showing architectural objects began to appear in large numbers, which was made possible by the development of the wet collodion technique.²⁰ Such images were intended to provide and popularise knowledge about the past and to support disciplines devoted to historical research. However, photographic reproductions of artworks or of cultural heritage were not only used as a medium shaping historical research. At the same time, they became an important tool of entertainment, being also entangled with the interests of power and political ambitions.²¹ These forces set images and, indirectly, artefacts themselves in motion – repeatedly reproduced, transmitted, sometimes crossing deserts and oceans, they travelled from hand to hand, from eye to eye. By doing so, the photographs had the power not only to shape memory or knowledge of what had passed. They also modelled awareness of the present and formed a way of looking at the world.²²

The phenomenon of travelling images can be considered not only within the framework of homogenous national cultures but also within non-homogeneous, culturally-shaped spaces. This kind of approach was crucial for Aby Warburg's 'image science', in particular for his latest and unfinished project: the Mnemosyne Atlas.²³ In his magnum opus, Aby Warburg was tracing recurring visual themes and patterns across time, from antiquity to the Renaissance, and beyond to contemporary culture. His genealogies were not restricted to a succession of artworks. With his studies, Warburg developed a method of articulating similarities

²⁰ Wróblewska (2022): 21.

²¹ Wróblewska (2022): 56–58, 130–132.

²² Wróblewska (2022): 14.

²³ The Mnemosyne Atlas consisted of sixty-three panels wrapped in black cloth covered with photographs of artworks, illustrations from books and photos from newspapers. Upon the author's death in 1929 it remained unfinished, but nevertheless became one of the most intriguing and insightful studies devoted to the migration of images. It marked a pivotal moment in the extension of art history towards visual culture studies. See Warburg (2012). For more about the Mnemosyne Atlas, see also Gombrich (2012): 535–580.

and connections between artefacts from different cultures and different times. It was his attempt to construct a cultural and art historical research process that knew no temporal or spatial boundaries. It also became an attempt to enrich art historical research with a cultural anthropological background. It is important to stress that in the Warburgian approach, different images (that is, implicitly artefacts themselves) are not connected only by subjective associations. For Warburg, those links were rooted in cultural collective memory seen as a depository of formulas that express cultural upheavals. According to his idea, artworks can be understood only in their interweaving with the contemporary factors of real life, and they are considered as places of imprinting of cultural tensions. Therefore, according to Warburg, an analysis of content does not suffice. Instead, it is important to find and analyse those elements that transmit or store collective cultural or – to use Warburg's term – social memory.²⁴ These elements, expressed for example in a form of the *pathos formula*, link the image to a series of other images that are not necessarily connected with each other by the represented content. Thus, the Warburgian concept implies thinking about images as migratory cross-cultural vehicles and therefore it is worth also considering this idea within the context of transnational migrations in the field of modern art and architecture. It demonstrates its great relevance for studies on the networks of the *avant-garde*, particularly the circulation of photographs. In these networks, images move and interact, continually building and renewing relationships, and sometimes even challenging established art historical narratives.

Cultural transfers

Studies focused on the role of interconnections over the last two decades have also begun to markedly gain in importance within other academic disciplines. Such research fields as memory and heritage studies, literature studies or history have significantly contributed to the formation of

²⁴ Gombrich (2012): 459–464.

cultural exchange studies, *histoire croisée*, or cultural transfer studies (French: *transferts culturels*, German: *Kulturtransferforschung*), that accentuate the phenomena of mobility and circulation.²⁵ The roots of *Kulturtransferforschung* can be traced back to the 1980s, when an interest in methods of analysing the cultural interaction between French and German societies emerged among scholars. It was the French Germanists and cultural historians Michel Espagne and Michael Werner who first set out their research programme focused around foreign references in German and French national cultures in the mid-1980s, and this proposal triggered a profound methodological upheaval in historical studies in various countries.²⁶ Although this kind of approach still has a rather marginal position within art history, it has introduced new impulses into it too.²⁷ As pointed out by Regina Wenninger und Annika Wienert, in (art-) historical studies such concepts may open up to new approaches on East-West relations, and thus might contribute to reframing the established ways of thinking about the history of modern art and architecture.²⁸

These methodological perspectives allow us to go beyond the concept of artistic influence, which on the one hand implies an existence of apparently more fertile cultures of origin and on the other hand, the target culture upon which these cultural components were spread. In the theory of cultural transfer, this approach is replaced by the idea of an internal dynamics of the reception processes between different cultural spaces and by an appropriation process actively pursued by various groups, driven by the needs of the host culture. Cultural transfers are considered as phenomena and processes that did not occur involuntarily, but are the consequences of the contact and relations of one society with another cultural group, or that emerge as a result of globalisation processes. In this sense, cultural transfer studies, which are

²⁵ See Kaelble and Schriewer (2003); Werner and Zimmermann (2006): 30–50; Arnd and Häberlen, and Reinecke (2011).

²⁶ Espagne and Werner (1985): 502–510.

²⁷ See, for example: Wenderski (2019).

²⁸ Wenninger and Wienert (2018): 1.

focused not only on the reception, selection, and acquisition of specific cultural content, but also on emitting and passing on one's own cultural components, may bring valuable conclusions for a way of looking at the European avant-garde's ambition of forming a vast network of cultural exchange and formulating its common visual language.²⁹ It is worth considering how the global, universalistic visual approach, shared by artists from different countries, can be understood within the discourse of nation and national identity. This is of particular importance in the post-1918 period, a time when the idea of independent nation-states was strongly emphasised in Europe, particular in Eastern Europe. Can this opening up in the field of art towards an international artistic exchange be understood in a broader cultural or identity dimension as an attempt to go beyond newly appeared geopolitical borders, and serve as an artistic statement formulated within the context of the social responsibility or political involvement of art? Were these supra- or transnational struggles one of the avant-garde's contributions to the process of building a new identity – an identity not necessarily understood through the prism of national elements, considered as 'traditional' or 'Polish' – but through supra-national, universal ones?

Conclusion

Art objects are in constant flux, if not in the literal sense of physical migration – for example by travelling from collection to collection and migrating between exhibitions – then at least in the metaphorical sense by the travelling of their visual representations. The process of migration of things is therefore not necessarily limited to the crossing geo-political borders by their authors or even of the works themselves. Pictorial representations of artworks are also in constant motion, and thanks to this mobility they can be considered milestones in fostering the circulation of ideas and building bridges between Eastern and Western European

²⁹ Wendland (2012): 45–66.

avant-garde circles. Such images, however, are not just transparent, neutral representations and this feature – or perhaps even: this power – of images was also recognised by avant-garde artists who acknowledged photography's ability to express artistic credo on a par with the written word. The selection of images, the decisions about what should be sent abroad, the way the images were contextualised, and the publications in which they appeared were therefore not neutral circumstances. They rather became an artistic choice. However, not only what was sent to Western Europe could be subjected to this process of (self) creation, but also what was received and disseminated formed part of an artistic strategy or even: artistic decision too.

An art history based on the concept of influence, which assumes an almost automatic, involuntary impact of some works/artists on other works/artists moving from one country or nation to another, fails to capture the significance of migration of works, ideas, and images between avant-garde circles. The approach that reduces the permeation of art to the idea of influence loses sight of the (material) carriers of ideas, which might write an (art) history alternative to the one written on the basis of geopolitical valuations and simplistic divisions between East and West. Looking back on the history of art not necessarily through the lens of individual figures and not from the perspectives of particular (national) states, but rather through the prism of a collective supranational network, allows for reframing and presenting art history in light of artistic mutual relations of Western and Eastern European countries. Similar to Warburgian 'image science', this approach challenges the evolutionary model of art history with its canons, replacing it with a concept that includes ruptures, iterations, discontinuities. At the same time, it opens up to similarities and parallels, and in doing so, it shows in another light the history of modern art and architecture.

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Migruojančios idėjos / migruojantys vaizdai. Avangardo(-ų) tinklai

Santrauka

Šiame tyrime nagrinėjama formų, idėjų, daiktų ir vaizdų recepcijos ir migracijos tarp Lenkijos ir Vakarų Europos tarpukario avangardo sluoksnių problema ir sutelkiamas dėmesys į keletą rinktinių su šia tema susijusių atvejo studijų. Analizuojamas ne pačių artefaktų, bet pirmiausia jų vizualinių reprezentacijų judėjimas ir keliai. Vietoj vienpusio srauto, migruojančio iš centro į periferiją, tekste pristatomas Europos avangardo tinklas, suvokiamas kaip „judantis“ žemėlapis, kuriame mainų tarp Vakarų ir Rytų vektoriai yra nukreipti skirtingomis kryptimis. Tokiu būdu siūloma perspektyva kvestionuoja vienakrypčius vertikalius meno istorijos naratyvus, pagrįstus subordinacijos ir priklausomybės principu. Be meno istorijos metodų straipsnyje taikomos metodologinės prieigos, apimančios *Kulturtransferforschung* (kultūros pernašą), *histoire croisée* (kryžminę istoriją), taip pat Aby Warburgo įvestą kultūros istorijos perspektyvą, kuri yra jo „vaizdų mokslo“ dalis.

Reikšminiai žodžiai: avangardas, vaizdų migracija, *histoire croisée*, kultūros pernaša, Katarzyna Kobro, Abstraction-Création