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Xawery Dunikowski and the Problem of the “Fourth Dimension” in Polish Art

Received Ideas of Progress and Eastern European Modernism: the “Polish Fourth Dimension”

With the triumph of the Paris-centric conception of the birth of modernism and avant-gardes, the problem of the “fourth dimension” in art has been discussed mainly through the lens of movements borne out of cubism: futurism, dada, cubo-futurism, suprematism and constructivism. Such an interpretation, focused on a certain fixed notion of “understanding” of the theories of n-dimensional space can be said to follow an oculocentric, apriorical assumption, even when it criticizes certain relationships between art and science in the given period – it privileges works focused on precision, grounding its argument in a parallel visual languages of geometry and art.

The exposé aims to argue against such normative understanding of influence of the fourth dimension on art of the first half of 20th century, with its first part focusing on the art of Xawery Dunikowski (1875-1964), an artist closely related to the circle of the writer and theorist Stanisław Przybyszewski (1868-1927) in the early years of the 20th century. Dunikowski was one of the most important Polish sculptors of the time, influenced strongly by the “northern” tradition of modern art, mainly the expressionism of Edvard Munch (1863-1944) and Gustav Vigeland (1869-1943), but in a deeper sense, by the Polish literary, visionary romanticism and its reception in the modernist period. Dunikowski’s works such as *Fate* (c. 1904), and the group (now lost) called *God* (c. 1906-1908), are characterized by the strong sense of dualism that was attributed by the critics to the influence of the fourth dimension and esotericism. The spatial ambiguity and deformation, often interpreted as a feature of cubism and its “non-euclidian” interests can be shown in his work in pieces such as *Breath* (1903) that predate cubism. The exposé focuses on the context of the late 19th and early 20th century Poland and its literary circles to show the growing interest in scientific speculation and the first examples of science-fiction. The book *In the Fourth Dimension* (1912) by Antoni Lange (1862-1929) is examined to show the relationship between Dunikowski and the expressionist/symbolist fourth dimension that does not conform to the notions developed by art historians focused on the Paris-centric avant-gardes.

The second part of the exposé focuses on the two figures from the Polish avant-garde circles: Władysław Strzemiński (1892-1953) and Katarzyna Kobro (1898-1951). Special attention is paid to their interests in the fourth dimension understood as time, i.e. the space-time and the reception of Einstein's theories of relativity that gained popularity since 1919. As has been demonstrated by Iwona Luba, Strzemiński's engineering education was instrumental in his early life and provided him with tools to understand the developments in physics and mathematics. With Kobro they developed theories that predate minimalism, but crucially – can be seen as one of the first examples of relativity being interpreted as a guiding principle of art. One, related to painting, argues for a monist conception of a painting as an object shaped by internal forces of proportion and facture. Kobro's sculptures, although similarly conceived, further develop the idea of a reciprocal relationship between them and the surrounding space. Both mediums are thought of as being guided by rhythm. Curiously, they share that focus with Dunikowski and thus further consideration is given in the exposé to the relationship between rhythm and new geometries. Kobro and Strzemiński are also examined as examples of Western art history integrating Polish avant-garde into its own narratives of progress and anticipation, whilst at the same time rejecting some aspects of their practice. Especially Strzemiński's late works, which grow out of similar principles of reciprocity, but reject the strictures of geometric abstraction, are examined as one of the most important omissions that stems from paradigmatic narratives developed in the Western canon.