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Between Moscow and Paris: Łódź and the Transnational Avant-Garde Network in 1921-1939

My dissertation, "Between Moscow and Paris: Łódź and the Transnational Avant-Garde Network in 1921-1939," positions the industrial city of Łódź, Poland as a crucial site of artistic exchange between Russia and Western urban centers, in particular Berlin and Paris. I study multi-ethnic artists who worked in the city: Russian-educated, Polish painter and art theoretician Władysław Strzemiński (1893-1952), Russian-German sculptor Katarzyna Kobro (1898-1951), and Polish-Jewish painter and designer Henryk Berlewi (1894-1967). They maintained a lifelong commitment to abstraction, which was reflected not only in their artworks, but also through self-publishing, pedagogy, and involvement in organizing collections and archives of contemporary art.

My focus on Łódź, a former industrial center of the Russian Empire that belonged to independent Poland since 1918, allows me to map a larger creative network that has been obscured by the dominant narratives in Art History. These narratives were either told from the perspective of Russian émigrés to the West or emphasized the origins of Constructivism in Moscow. I intend to trouble the center-periphery structure of studying European modernism by arguing that while Łódź was never 'the center' of modernism, its artistic production was still central to the development of abstract art, modern art education, and contemporary museology in Europe.

After emigrating from Russia to Poland in 1921, Kobro and Strzemiński (a married couple, who also maintained a professional partnership) settled in Łódź, where they practiced experimental art pedagogy as teachers and co-founded the city's International Collection of Modern Art, the first permanent display of abstract art in a European museum that was solicited and curated by artists. I argue Kobro's and Strzemiński's commitment to educating the public about modern art stems from their experience in Moscow and Vitebsk, where they worked in multicultural avant-garde circles. A working-class Łódź provided a receptive ground for their experimental art and civic engagement. Kobro and Strzemiński formulated a singular theory of *Unism* (1928), which stressed the specificity of medium and the purity of abstract form and promoted their ideas internationally through self-published books and magazines.

They rejected the dominant models of nationhood, and their social work offers a counter-model to both Russian imperialism and Polish nationalism.

Henryk Berlewi, who is almost unresearched in modern art history, began his career in Łódź, emigrated to Berlin in 1921, and, eventually, to Paris in 1928. He engaged with the key avant-garde movements of his time, from Jewish Expressionism to Suprematism, and formulated the concept of *mechano-faktura* (1923), based on the rhythmic juxtaposition of geometric shapes in abstract painting. After World War II, Berlewi maintained an archive of Eastern European art and design and exhibited his works on both sides of the Iron Curtain. He warrants closer study as one of the key figures through which East European art and ideas circulated in the West.

Methodologically, I rely on visual analyses of artworks and close readings of pedagogical programs, theoretical writings, and other relevant primary documents. I treat the artists' writings as a product of their intellectual ambitions on par with their art. Of equal importance is a social-historical account of the institutions through which artists disseminated their ideas across shifting national boundaries, such as schools, museums, and publishing houses. I am eager to test the value of psychoanalytic theory for understanding the impact of migration on individuals, particularly as artists reshaped their identities, internalized various influences, and self-censored in response to political repression. In addition, I will use the oral histories of Strzemiński's former students to consider the impact of Eastern European history on the survival and accessibility of knowledge.