www.msl.org.pl Kabinett der Abstrakten

grupa "a.r.'

27.02.20 27.02.20 27.02.20 Société Anonyr

Музеи Художественной Культуры



Katarzyna Kobro
Spatial Composition (6), 1931
© Ewa Sapka-Pawliczak and Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

THE AVANT-GARDE MUSEUM

The avant-garde wanted to demolish museums, believing they served to petrify and cultivate the past, which needed to be thrown away in the name of a better tomorrow. But the avant-garde also dreamed of its own museums, as places governed not by history, but by the future. They were imagined as laboratories where the artist would experiment with new forms and means of expression, and the viewer would learn to experience and understand reality in a new way. The museum became a vehicle for fulfilling the avant-garde utopia—the promise of a world where everyone has the right to and conditions for a creative life.

The history of avant-garde museology begins after the October Revolution, when the Russian champions of new art proposed the establishment of a network of Museums of Artistic Culture. Not much later, a group of New York-based modernists and Dadaists start the Société Anonyme, a collective that sought to establish the first American museum of modern art. The successive chapters of this story were written by the Russian Constructivist El Lissitzky, who designed the *Kabinett der Abstrakten* at the Hanover Provinzialmuseum, and by the avant-garde a.r. group, whose efforts began the International Collection of Modern Art at the Łódź museum now known as the Muzeum Sztuki.

We mention these facts not only because they are an important, yet neglected part of the avant-garde legacy. First and foremost, we believe that the ideas that informed the founders of avant-garde museums and the solutions that they implemented still raise vital questions. What should the museum be like? What role should it play in society?

MUSEUMS OF ARTISTIC CULTURE

The Origins of Museums of Artistic Culture

In the wake of the 1917 revolutions, Russian avant-garde artists acquired an unprecedented opportunity to reshape the nation's artistic life. Supported by state funding, they began their efforts to establish a network of museums of contemporary art. These were called the Museums of Artistic Culture. Their intended purpose was to develop and popularize "artistic culture," defined as artwork based on experimentation and contributing to continuing progress in art. Conceived as educational and research institutions, they not only collected and exhibited work, but were also meant to serve as "laboratories" of artistic production and to disseminate the ideas of new art among the masses. They were to be run by artists themselves. Among those behind the first conceptions of the museums of "living art" were Vladimir Tatlin and Kazimir Malevich. The latter proposed to establish a central museum in Moscow, which would "spread contemporary values to all the museums in the provinces."

The building of a network of Museums of Artistic Culture began in earnest after the First Museum Conference, held in Petrograd in February 1919. The State Museum Fund was established, and its Acquisitions Committee, initially headed by Wassily Kandinsky, acquired nearly 2,000 works from 143 artists. Between 1919 and 1921, the Museum Bureau, headed by Aleksandr Rodchenko, distributed 1,150 works between thirty-two local museums and art schools around the country. However, only in a few cases did these collection lead to permanent museum facilities for contemporary art.

Władysław Strzeminski played an active role in reorganizing artistic life. He participated in committees appointed for this purpose, and in early 1919, was put in charge of the All-Russian Central Exhibition Bureau. The Bureau's task was to popularize a new visual culture throughout the country with travelling exhibitions.



Part of the Museum Bureau of IZO Narkompros collection, end of 1919. Works by Malevich, Goncharova, Larionov, Kandinsky, Rodchenko, and others image © Encyclopedia of the Russian Avant-garde, 2013–14

The Museum of Painterly Culture in Moscow

The Museum of Painterly Culture in Moscow first opened to the public on June 10, 1920. Its collection was initially installed by Wassily Kandinsky, Robert Falk, and Aleksandr Rodchenko, with an emphasis on formal and technical innovation. In October 1920, Kandinsky was replaced as the head of the museum by Rodchenko, who approached the collection as a store of "living forms," able to inspire the further evolution of art.

From its inception, the Museum of Painterly Culture operated in close conjunction with the theoretical and pedagogical activity of avant-garde artists at the Institute of Artistic Culture (GINKhUK) and the Higher Art and Technical Studios (VKhUTEMAS), where artists developed platforms for Constructivism and Productivism. After two changes in directors and enduring two moves, the museum reopened in the VKhUTEMAS building in October 1924.

Its display adhered to the pedagogical principles of the school. The museum now also included a comprehensive library and an analytical cabinet; discussions and lectures were organized. The Museum attracted international interest; among its visitors was Alfred H. Barr, the future director of New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). At the end of 1928, the Museum of Painterly Culture was closed, its collection was partially merged with that of the Tretyakov Gallery and partially dispersed or destroyed.

The Museum of Artistic Culture in Petrograd

The Museum of Artistic Culture in Petrograd was established to popularize innovative artistic achievements among a broader public and to explain the avant-garde artists' intentions. Its key players were artists, such as Tatlin, Malevich and Mikhail Matiushin, but also the critic and curator Nikolai Punin. The Petrograd museum opened its doors on April 3, 1921. The works were grouped "according to typologies" rather than by artist, demonstrating the development of artistic culture from Impressionism to Dynamic Cubism. Another exhibition, launched in November 1922, put Tatlin's work in the spotlight. Its title, Ways out of Cubism, echoed Punin's recent book.

In 1923, Malevich was appointed director of the Petrograd museum. Soon he incorporated it into a research institution, the State Institute of Artistic Culture (GINKhUK), and redesigned its presentation, combining museum material, i.e.



Kazimir Malevich at the Museum of Artistic Culture, Leningrad, 1925 Photography Archive, State Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

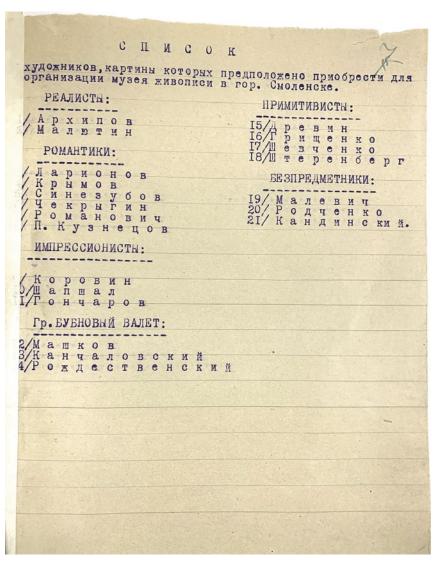
"finished" artworks, with "laboratory" material, i.e. objects illustrating the successive stages of formal experiments. The idea was to demonstrate the logic of art's evolution, culminating in Suprematism. Artists explained the presentation with personal guided tours, regular lectures, and courses.

Works from the collection began to be transferred to the State Russian Museum in 1922, forming the basis for its collection of new art. This led to the Department of Newest Trends being established in 1926. Nikolai Punin was its curator until 1932, ensuring some of the innovative museological principles of the Museums of Artistic Culture were transferred to the structure of the traditional museum institution

Władysław Strzemiński in Smolensk

On October 15, 1919, Strzemiński moved to Smolensk where he and his fellow artist and partner, Katarzyna Kobro, ran an Arts Studio and was active in political work on behalf of the fledgling socialist state. Throughout his time in Smolensk, Strzemiński maintained close ties with his teacher, Kazimir Malevich, who lived in the neighboring town of Vitebsk. Their work as artists, teachers, organizers of exhibitions, and promoters of new art had certain parallels. In Vitebsk, Malevich systematized his understanding of the evolution of artistic systems, from Cézanne to Suprematism, in a new theoretical treatise, New Systems in Art, which Strzemiński ordered for his students in Smolensk. When, in early 1920, Malevich and his students in Vitebsk founded the UNOVIS (Affirmers of New Art) collective, Strzemiński and Kobro made their Smolensk studio one of its branches.

Strzemiński was elected head of the Arts Section of the Regional Department of Education. His teaching activity went hand-in-hand with organizing exhibitions, notably the First State Art Exhibition in Smolensk in 1920. Strzemiński was also involved with the Smolensk Art Gallery, which opened on May 1, 1920. The Museum Bureau in Moscow sent 118 works by Russian avant-garde artists to Smolensk. Forty-seven of them were on view when the museum opened, showing the systematic development of "painterly culture," ending in abstraction. Strzemiński frequently lectured in the museum galleries. This extensive activity laid the foundations for his subsequent work in Poland, including the establishment of the a.r. International Collection of Modern Art in Łódź.



List of artists whose paintings were marked for acquisition to organize a painting museum in Smolensk (a document attributed to Strzemiński), 1920 State Archive of the Smolensk Region (GASO), Smolensk Władysław Strzemiński took part in the reorganization of artistic structures, first in Moscow, where he headed the All-Russian Central Exhibitions Bureau from 1918 until 1919, and subsequently in Smolensk, where he lived and worked from November 1919 until the end of 1921. In 1920 it was probably he who drew up a list of artists to be exhibited at the newly established Smolensk Art Gallery. The proposed selection and sequence of artists follow the logic of the gradual evolution of artistic culture, based on formal innovation: from the Realism of Abram Arkhipov through the Impressionism of Konstantin Korovin, the Cézannism of Ilya Mashkov, and the Primitivism of David Shterenberg, to the abstract art of Kazimir Malevich and Aleksandr Rodchenko.

SOCIÉTÉ ANONYME

Société Anonyme Inc. Museum of Modern Art

The Société Anonyme was an organization founded in 1920 in New York by activist, painter, and collector Katherine S. Dreier, and artists Marcel Duchamp and Man Ray. To promote modern art, they organized exhibitions and lectures, but their main focus was on building a collection. The name, a French term for a public limited company, was an allusion to the Impressionists, who used the phrase in their 1874 show to emphasize an objective selection of artists and works. Registering the society, the New York Secretary of State added a redundant "Inc." to the name; Dreier added "Museum of Modern Art" to indicate what the Société Anonyme was ultimately meant to be.

The Société Anonyme operated much like professional or artistic associations, funded by membership fees. Its mission and scope of activities were presented in a promotional brochure, *Its Why & Its Wherefore*, which stressed the need to establish a place where the public would be able to experience new art through exhibitions and a library of publications.

The Société Anonyme organized over eighty exhibitions, featuring more than seventy artists. These shows were held at the foundation's space, as well as in museums, schools, workers' clubs, or community centers. It published



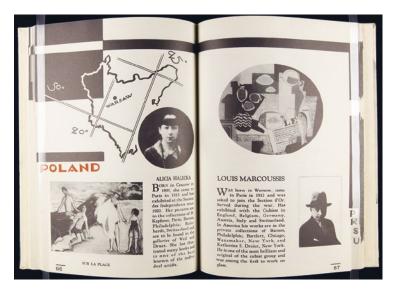
Portraits of the Société Anonyme Board Members, Marcel Duchamp (Secretary) and Katherine S. Dreier (President), 1920 Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

monographs on artists such as Wassily Kandinsky or Joseph Stella, as well as critical essays by Dreier and others, including *Western Art and the New Age:* An Introduction to Modern Art.

The International Exhibition of Modern Art

The Société's most ambitious project was an exhibition at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926: America's largest presentation of modern art since the 1913 Armory Show. As part of her curatorial research for the show, Dreier travelled extensively around Europe, visiting Paris, Dresden, Prague, Rome, and Venice, among other places. The show was structured differently from the accompanying catalogue. In the exhibition, the arrangement of the works ignored the country of origin, chronology, or artistic affiliation, whereas in the catalogue the artists were divided by country, indicated by hand-drawn maps by the catalogue's designer, Constantin Alajálov.

Inspired by El Lissitzky's exhibition designs, Dreier contacted the visionary architect and designer Frederick Kiesler, who proposed an "image transmission" installation he called the "Tele Museum." While this project never came to be, Dreier did install rooms demonstrating how art could become a part of daily life. Using furniture borrowed from the nearby Abraham & Straus department store, a bedroom, dining room, living room, and library or study were arranged, mingling typical middle-class furnishings with works by Lissitzky, Alicja Halicka, Jean (Hans) Arp, and other modern artists.



Catalog accompanying the International Exhibition of Modern Art arranged by Société Anonyme at Brooklyn Museum. Layout by Katherine S. Dreier and Constantin Alajálov (New York: Société Anonyme, 1926)
Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

10

The Brooklyn Museum show was also the site of the first public presentation of Marcel Duchamp's famous *Large Glass (The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even)*, alongside paintings by Fernand Léger and lesser-known artists, such as Ragnhild Keyser. The show drew over 52,000 visitors. It had three smaller iterations, of which the second one, at the Anderson Galleries in Manhattan, probably featured Kiesler's Tele-Museum—a kind of projection room that screened reproductions of historical masterpieces.

The Provincial Museum of Visual Education

Works from the collection assembled by the artists were presented in exhibitions organized by Katherine S. Dreier and leased to other institutions, including New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), which opened in 1929. The Société Anonyme made several attempts to secure a space for itself. In the early 1940s, Dreier planned to use her Connecticut estate, The Haven, as a base for the Provincial Museum of Visual Education, which was to include the Société Anonyme collection and private ones as well. Archival photographs show how Dreier displayed works from the collection around her home and garden, with modern artworks surrounded by living-room, bedroom, office, and library furnishings.

Among the institutions that Dreier approached to support her project was Yale University, located not far from her estate. The sums she required were substantial, however, and the project fell through. A meeting with university officials yielded a different solution—the Société Anonyme.

The Société Anonyme Collection

The Société Anonyme collection was meant to chronicle the "new age." An eclectic collection, it was built according to its founders' preferences, which, as they stressed, were free of prejudice. What mattered was neither the artist's renown nor nationality nor artistic affiliation, but rather a subjective sense—mainly Dreier's and Duchamp's—of a work's artistic merit, as well as the recommendations of their artist friends.



View of the main gallery, International Exhibition of Modern Art arranged by Société Anonyme, Brooklyn Museum, 1926

Katherine S. Dreier Papers / Société Anonyme Archive. Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Yale University

Among the works by artists from all over the world secured for the collection, there were those by French-based Poles, Alicja Halicka (Louis Marcoussis's wife) and Gustaw Gwozdecki, the latter as a donation. There were also other donors, such as Jean (Hans) Arp.

THE A.R. GROUP AND THE NEOPLASTIC ROOM

International Collection of Modern Art

The a.r. group was founded in 1929, on Władysław Strzemiński's initiative; it was also comprised of visual artists Katarzyna Kobro and Henryk Stażewski and poets Julian Przyboś and Jan Brzękowski. The International Collection of Modern Art, the germ of the future museum, would prove its most lasting legacy. It opened for the public at what was then the J. and K. Bartoszewicz Municipal Museum of History and Art in Łódz in early 1931.

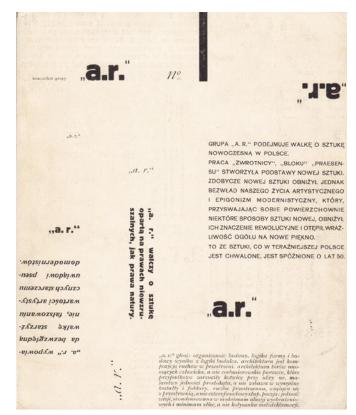
The idea of establishing a museum of modern art was first floated in the Polish art community at the beginning of the 1920s. It was, however, only at the end of that decade that the conditions became ripe for making it a reality. It was then that the Łódz city hall agreed to allow the newly formed municipal museum to feature a permanent exhibition of modern art.

The a.r. group was entrusted with the task of securing the necessary works. The group used their contacts to persuade many Polish and international artists to support the initiative and donate their works. Jan Brzękowski and Wanda Chodasiewicz-Grabowska, who were based in Paris, as well as Henryk Stażewski, a frequent visitor there, were particularly active in securing works. Their connections with members of the collectives Cercle et Carré (e.g. Michel Seuphor, a Belgian, or Joaquín Torres García, an Uruguayan) and Abstraction-Création (e.g. Theo van Doesburg, a Dutchman, Jean Hélion, a Frenchman, or Georges Vantongerloo, a Belgian) played a vital role here.

Strzeminski, the initiator of the a.r. collection, envisaged it would boost public approval of modern art. Strzeminski saw a close connection between society's aesthetic preferences and its civilizational attitude. A society open to modern art would, he believed, be willing to support an agenda of modernization.

The permanent exhibition of the a.r. collection at the Łódz municipal museum opened in February 1931. The fact was reported, though briefly, in the Polish and French press. In the following years, the collection expanded further. In 1935, the exhibition was reinstalled as per instructions from Marian Minich, the museum's new director.

Only one photograph of the collection's first display has been preserved. It suggests that the works were not arranged chronologically; rather, the



Bulletin of the a.r. group no. 1, design by Władysław Strzemiński (Cieszyn: 1930) Archive of the Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

© Ewa Sapka Pawliczak and Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź



Members of the a.r. group (from the left): Julian Przyboś, Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro, ca. 1930–31 Archive of the Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź



Permanent display of the International Collection of Modern Art of the a.r. group at the J. and K. Bartoszewicz Municipal Museum of History and Art, 1932 Photo by Włodzimierz Pfeiffer Archive of the Muzeum Sztuki. Łódź



Theo van Doesburg *Counter-Composition XV*, 1925 Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

installation was probably meant to illustrate the various formal/structural issues explored by avant-garde artists.

Some of the paintings seen in the photo were destroyed or stolen during the Second World War. Some of those that survived were put on display in 1948 in the Neoplastic Room, designed specially for the purpose by Władysław Strzemiński.

Activities of the a.r. group

"a.r. fights for modern art in Poland," proclaimed a special publication that Władysław Strzeminski called a "mix between a manifesto and an advert." The newly-founded group of avant-garde visual artists and poets it announced aimed to promote and build understanding for new artistic ideas through exhibitions, lectures, and publications. To this end, the "a.r. Library" publishing series was initiated, releasing volumes of avant-garde poetry, as well as studies devoted to sculpture and graphic design, among other topics.

Periodicals were also used to promote the group's art. One of those was L'Art Contemporain. Sztuka Współczesna, published in Paris in 1929–30 by a.r. members Jan Brzękowski and Wanda Chodasiewicz-Grabowska, who was once a student of Strzemiński's. There Brzekowski published his keynote essay, Kilometreage, presenting the genealogy of the new art and the guiding principles of its various movements. Strzeminski himself wrote profusely for art magazines, as well as for the popular press.

The Neoplastic Room

The Neoplastic Room was designed by Władysław Strzemiński on a commission from Marian Minich, the director of Muzeum Sztuki at the time. Conceived as the highlight of a permanent exhibition arranged by Minich after the Museum's relocation to its present space, it opened for the public in late 1948. Just over a year later, in early 1950, its painting decor was found to be at odds with the doctrine of Socialist Realism and destroyed; it was not recreated until 1960.

The room's composition conforms to the theoretical principles formulated at the turn of the 1930s by Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro, which said the purpose of architecture was to ensure the rational organization of human activity in space. Geometric divisions and combinations of color planes were meant to give rhythm to the movement of the human body and enhance visitors' emotions. The room's architecture focuses the viewer's gaze



Władysław Strzemiński Neoplastic Room, views of the exhibition from 2020 Photo by Anna Zagrodzka Archive of the Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

and, combined with the abstract paintings and sculptures on display, stimulates and develops their visual imagination.

The *Neoplastic Room* was also meant to demonstrate how the concepts developed by the avant-garde could be practically applied in shaping a human environment.

The Recreation of the Neoplastic Room

In the mid-1950s, cultural policy began shaking off the straitjacket of doctrine and opening up to art forms other than Socialist Realism. The avant-garde returned to the Museum, now inscribed in the narrative proposed by Minich. The purpose of this narrative was to illustrate the evolution of forms from Impressionism to contemporary art, using works from the collection accompanied by reproductions. Minich also ordered the restoration of the *Neoplastic Room*.

Its painting decor was recreated based on surviving memories and the designs of Bolesław Utkin, a student and close collaborator of Władysław Strzemiński. In 2008, the Muzeum Sztuki collection moved to a new building, the ms², and the spaces around the *Neoplastic Room* began to fill with works by contemporary artists, striking up dialogues with Strzemiński's project.

Designed in 1960 by Bolesław Utkin, Władysław Strzemiński's student and collaborator, the Small Neoplastic Room is a tribute to the master's work. The pieces it displays come from the *Architectonic Compositions* series Strzeminski made in 1924–29. Alongside Katarzyna Kobro's *Spatial Compositions*, exhibited in the adjacent room, they illustrate the structural ideas that were a point of departure for the *Neoplastic Room*. These said that a painting or sculpture, like a utilitarian object, a building, or an urban design, should constitute an organic whole. Consequently, anything inconsistent with the nature of these works should be discarded. In painting, this meant rejecting movement, time, three-dimensionality, or any external references, as the nature of the painting was defined by a flat surface covered in paint and enclosed in a frame. As a form of spatial shaping, architecture was essentially about achieving unity with a space and a harmony with the rhythm of the human activities transpiring within it.

KABINETT DER ABSTRAKTEN

Kabinett der Abstrakten

The Kabinett der Abstrakten was commissioned by Alexander Dorner, the director of the Provinzialmuseum Hannover in 1927. It was conceived as one of the two final rooms of the institution's rearranged permanent display. Dorner entrusted its design to El Lissitzky, a Russian Constructivist and Suprematist. The Kabinett was to be devoted to abstract art, but in itself it was meant to illustrate the new spacetime that abstract art was discovering in the wake of modern science.

The finish of the walls made their color change with the viewer's every step, showing them that space is not a fixed reality, but—as stipulated by relativity theory—one whose properties change in time, depending on the observer's position.

Besides the color-changing walls, which encouraged the viewer to try out different perspectives, Lissitzky placed some of the paintings behind sliding panels that the viewer could move, hiding or exposing a work in whole or part. This turned the passive observer into an active co-creator of the artistic situation.



El Lissitzky Design for Kabinett der Abstrakten, 1927 Sprengel Museum Hannover Image © bpk/BE&W



El Lissitzky

Kabinett der Abstrakten,

Provinzialmuseum,

Hannover, 1927

Sprengel Museum Hannover

Image © bpk/BE&W

Lissitzky called the *Kabinett* a "demonstration room" and hoped it would serve as a model for other spaces for presenting and popularizing modern art. In 1936, the Nazi authorities ordered the Kabinett to be destroyed. Reconstructed for the first time in 1969, a reconstruction is now on permanent display at the Sprengel Museum in Hannover.

Atmosphere rooms

Alexander Dorner transformed the permanent exhibition at the Provinzialmuseum in Hanover into a sequence of "atmosphere rooms." Their décor—the color of the walls, the lighting, the arrangement of the works—was meant to evoke the atmosphere of the successive art periods, meaning the viewer learned about the past not only intellectually, but also emotionally and sensorially. Dorner wanted to demonstrate changes occurring not so much in art as in the perception and cognition of reality. The *Kabinett der Abstrakten* was meant to reflect the experience of the modern man, living in a world full of contrasts, constantly changing, multidimensional. Abstraction, therefore, as Dorner understood it, was not separate from everyday life; on the contrary, it shaped life, while reflecting its most essential principle. The links between abstract art and the everyday human sphere were highlighted by text panels in the revolving vitrines of the *Kabinett*.

Imaginary Spaces

El Lissitzky was interested in relativity theory and non-Euclidean geometries. In his works, which he called the Prouns, he sought to represent a space that had more than the three dimensions known to traditional science. These experiments went a step further with the *Proun Room* Lissitzky designed for the Great Art Exhibition in Berlin in 1923, where the objects were installed so as to distort the natural perception of space. The artist employed even more advanced solutions in the Room for Constructivist Art at the International Art Exhibition in Dresden in 1926. This room was a direct model for the Kabinett der Abstrakten, where Lissitzky first used color-changing wall slats and sliding cover panels.

He referred to these designs as "imaginary spaces" in order to emphasize the fact that space exists neither objectively, nor in the same way for everybody. Its ultimate appearance is produced in the mind and is therefore



El Lissitzky Proun Room, 1923 View of the reconstruction executed by Stedelijk Museum and Van Abbemuseum, 1965 image @ bpk/BE&W

determined by the observer's movements, which can be prompted with external stimuli (lighting, color combinations, the arrangement of forms).

In the "imaginary spaces" Lissitzky designed, the art experience was meant to become more personal, intense, and multidimensional.

msı

Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź Więckowskiego 36 www.msl.org.pl

The Avant-garde Museum

15.10.2021-27.02.2022

curators

Agnieszka Pindera, Jarosław Suchan

academic collaboration

Masha Chlenova, Frauke V. Josenhans

cooperation

Anna Karpenko, Diana Krawiec

exhibition coordinator

Monika Wesołowska

project coordinator

Maria Śmigiel

cooperation

Łukasz Broda, Martyna Dec, Agata Szynkielewska

editorial coordinator

Martyn Kramek

accessibility coordinator

Katarzyna Mądrzycka-Adamczyk

exhibition visual identity and setting of rooms with archive

Fontarte (Magdalena Frankowska, Artur Frankowski)

Kabinett der Abstrakten reconstruction supervision

Bartosz Malinowski

research for this exhibition was supported by

Terra Foundation for American Art

translation into English

Marcin Wawrzyńczak

copy-editing and proof-reading

Soren Gauger

Printed on Nautilus Classic 120g waste paper

© Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź



A cultural institution of the Lodzkie Region co-run by the Ministry of Culture, National Heritage and Sport



region

Patron of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź



opus [film

