
HENRYK STAŻEWSKI

Late Style

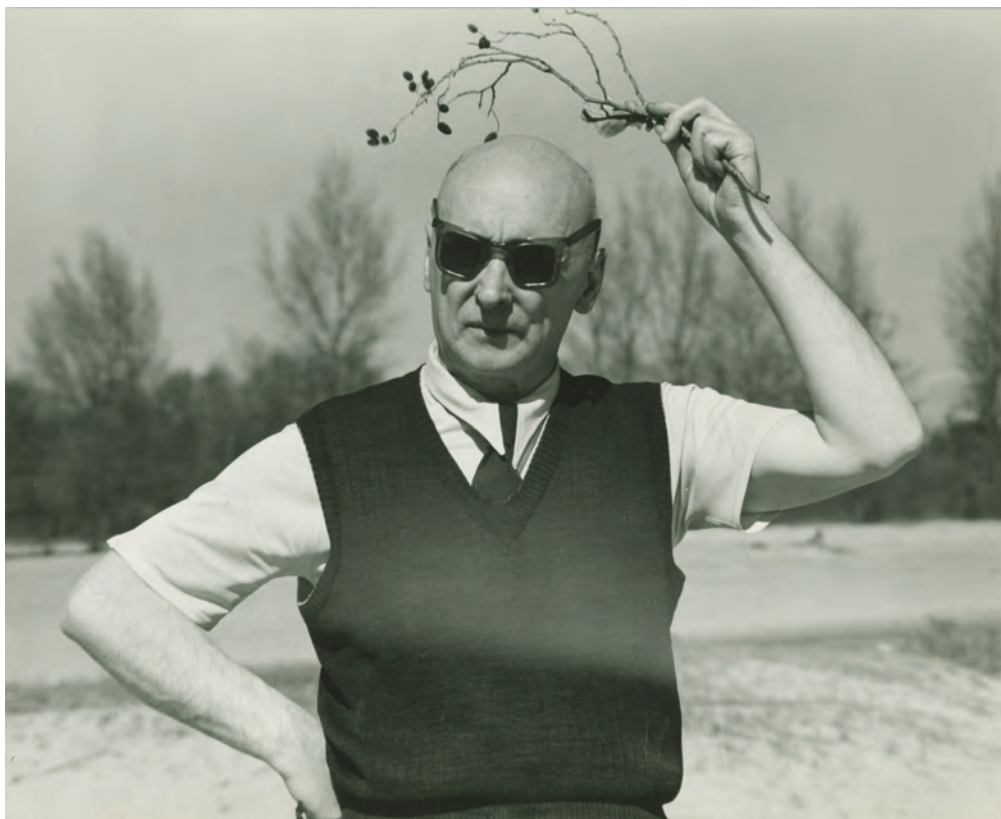
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**HENRYK
STAŻEWSKI**

Late Style

21.04–27.08.23



Zbigniew Dłubak

Henryk Stażewski's portrail, 1950

© Armelle Dłubak / Fundacja Archeologia Fotografii

Henryk Stażewski: Late Style

Henryk Stażewski was fifty-six when this photograph was taken in 1950. After spells in Paris, a career as an editor of avant-garde magazines published in interwar Poland, and a member of international groups, including *Cercle et Carré*, founded in 1929 to champion abstract art, he was reviving his career as an artist in the People's Republic.

Over the nearly four decades that followed, Stażewski displayed a keen interest in the new, and little nostalgia for the past. His art was stirred by the invention coursing through Polish art, and he was disdainful of the meager ambitions set for culture in the People's Republic. With a talent for camaraderie, Stażewski also formed creative and personal ties with the young and with neo-avant-garde artists. They saw in him a connection to the “authentic” avant-garde and a model of artistic autonomy. Works by many of them feature in this exhibition.

Late in life, Stażewski's art often took on a mystical dimension, in contrast to his early and forceful avowal of rationalism, and his adoption of a regular “system” of forms based on straight lines and squares in the late 1960s. As cultural critic Edward Said once said: “Late style is what happens if art does not abdicate its rights in favor of reality.”

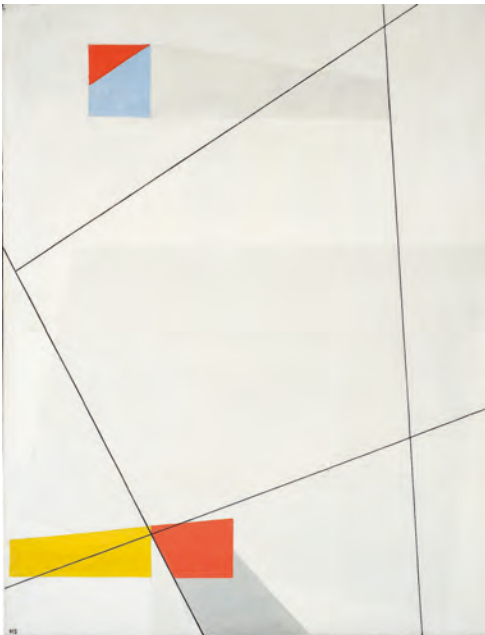


Henryk Stażewski

Co-operation (Crane)

1950

Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie



Henryk Stażewski

Composition

1950

Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie

56 Years, 1 Month

The early 1950s was a time of anxiety. With the official policy of Socialist Realism in place, Stażewski was uncertain about how to reconcile the political imperatives driving the reconstruction of the country with his ideas about modern art. Although not personally vilified by Stalinist ideologues, his canvases were taken off display at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, along with works by Władysław Strzemiński and Katarzyna Kobro.

Reporting on her February 1950 interview with Stażewski, Irena Jakimowicz described his ambivalence to the new directives for art:

“ ... we do not yet know how today's realism should look. We need to tolerate a wide variety of artistic trends to create the realism we seek. The artist [Stażewski] breaks with abstraction, tries to rid himself of formalism, though he believes we should not entirely negate the formal traditions of abstract painting. He admits he still has the greatest difficulty in taking up the themes and modifying form for the new aims. Although abstract compositions gave him a full artistic experience, he finds more richness in figurative compositions where the achievements of abstract painting can be applied.”

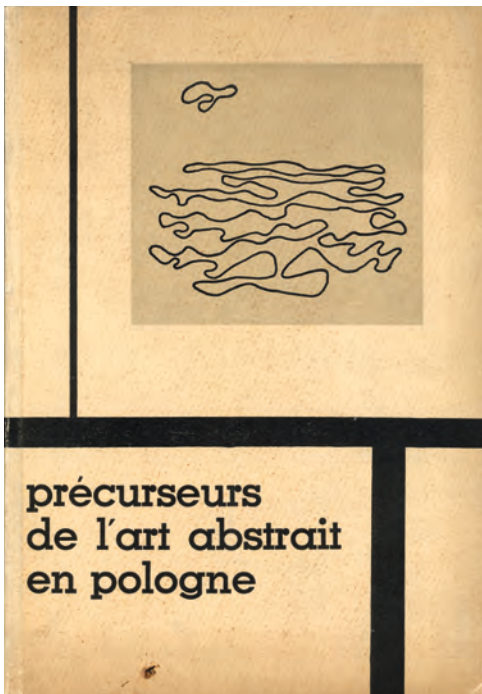
An unpublished interview with Henryk Stażewski,
ISPAN archive, Warsaw.



Henryk Stażewski

Abstract Composition

1936/1956
Muzeum Narodowe w Krakowie



Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne,
exhibition catalogue, Galerie Denise René, Paris,
1957, designed by Marian Bogusz

Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

63 YEARS, 11 MONTHS, 13 DAYS

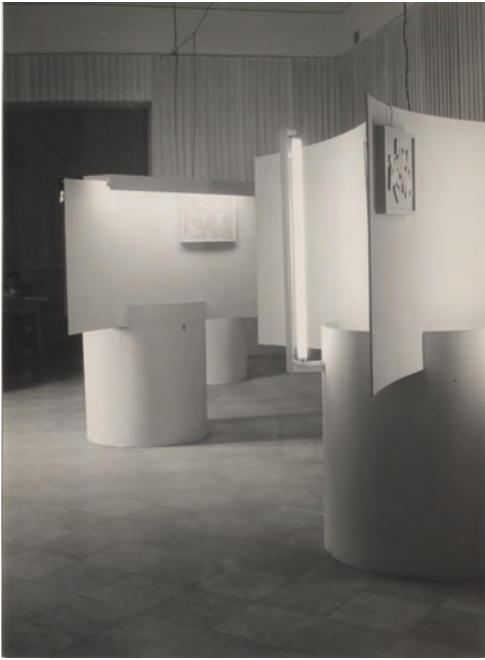
In November 1957, an exhibition entitled *Precursors of Abstract Art in Poland* opened at Galerie Denise René in Paris. It featured works by the late artists Kazimir Malevich, Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński, and Henryk Berlewi, then resident in France, and Stażewski.

As well as showing new canvases, Stażewski exhibited copies of paintings that had been destroyed in his studio when Warsaw was bombed in 1939. The double dates of these canvases signaled Stażewski's commitment to abstraction in the present, as well as his role as a pioneer in the avant-garde before the Second World War.

Abstract art was controversial even in the turbulent period after Stalin's death in March 1953, when philosophers, artists, and writers demanded freedom of thought and expression. To emphasize its progressive character, Stażewski revived the prewar claim that abstraction best expressed the modernity of the age:

“Abstract art does not present the external aspect of an ‘object’; it maintains contact with the phenomena and concrete facts of the external world, because it is the sum of impressions and observations. It senses the climate of modernity and is an expression of the dynamism of life today, a lyrical image of an era in which upheavals are taking place, shaping great social movements, inventions, and discoveries, such as the splitting of the atom, etc.”

Henryk Stażewski, unpublished manuscript, ca. 1952–53.



Henryk Stażewski's exhibition in Kordegarda Gallery, Warsaw, May 1959 designed by Stanisław Zamecznik

Photo: Wojciech Zamecznik / Fundacja Archeologia Fotografii



Installation of a sculpture with stainless-steel-plates by Henryk Stażewski (standing on the right) near the Old Town, part of the First Biennale of Spatial Form in Elbląg, 1965

Photo: Bogdan Łopieński / Ośrodek KARTA

71 Years, 5 Months, 22 Days

In a series of exhibitions mounted between 1959 and 1965, Stażewski sought to heighten the experience of viewing his art by means of lighting, scale, and movement. Flat canvases evolved into “reliefs,” drawing closer to sculpture.

Exhibition design in this period was what one commentator called “a laboratory of experiments,” and Stażewski worked with young designers, including Stanisław Zamecznik, to create environments that would stimulate the senses and encourage gallery visitors to treat viewing as a kinesthetic experience.

In the catalogue of his 1965 exhibition at Zachęta Gallery in Warsaw, Stażewski claimed his work to be an extension of the theories of Unism advanced by his avant-garde ally, Władysław Strzemiński, in the 1930s:

“The Unist image eliminated any illusion of depth and clearly suggested that it was completely and consciously flat. If it were possible to reintroduce a three-dimensional space, this could only be through the dimensional properties offered by a relief. The relief provides completely new effects, such as shadows formed by lighting changes. This introduces the volatile picture principle, enhanced by the viewer’s movement ... One can talk about the relative kineticism of this kind of art. The next phase of kineticism will be a fully moving picture.”

From the catalogue of *Henryk Stażewski Exhibition of Works*,
CBWA Zachęta, Warsaw, 1965.



Henryk Stażewski

Relief 17

1967

Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź



Henryk Stażewski's exhibition at the Foksal Gallery, Warsaw

June 1967

photo. Eustachy Kossakowski, © Paulina Krasieńska

73 Years, 4 Months, 23 Days

In June 1967, Stażewski had his first solo show in Warsaw's Foksal Gallery, an exhibition space that had opened in the former library of the Pracownie Sztuk Plastycznych (Workshops of Visual Arts) in Warsaw the previous year. Founded by critics Wiesław Borowski, Anka Ptaszkowska, and Mariusz Tchorek, with artists Zbigniew Gostomski, Tadeusz Kantor, Edward Krasiński and Stażewski, the venture was governed by an ethos outlined in *Introduction to a General Theory of Place*, a declaration against the ossified conventions of the gallery.

In this spirit, Stażewski's 1967 Foksal Gallery show was an environment into which visitors could step. His brightly colored reliefs hung on black walls and large geometric panels filled the floor and were suspended from the ceiling.

The effect of color was his primary preoccupation at this time of experiment, as he told *Odra* magazine in 1968:

"I use illustrative scientific tables in my painting. Several of my works were based on the circle of colors – a spinning top. I gradually move from cold hues to warm colors according to their wavelength, from pure hues to gray, from light to dark, using vertical and horizontal combinations. This gives me infinite varieties. It happens, however, that I have to interrupt the monotony of these scientific tables. Then I introduce surprises, like when a square is placed in a regular row of squares diagonally ... We have to keep searching for laws governing color, in which more secrets are hidden than we suppose."



**Maria Ewa Rogoyska-Łukiewicz in the
apartment at ul Piękna, Warsaw**

1950s

Photo: Irena Jarosińska, Ośrodek KARTA



Eustachy Kossakowski

Pracownia / The Studio

1969

Archiwum Eustachego Kossakowskiego,
Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesne, Warszawa
© Paulina Krasieńska

68 Years, 11 Months, 23 Days

In 1963, Stażewski moved from an apartment he had shared with painter Maria Ewa Łunkiewicz-Rogoyska and her husband Jan Rogoyski on Piękna Street in Warsaw to another on the top floor of a high-rise on Świerczewski Avenue. The new apartment-studio was a site of creativity and busy sociality, opening its doors to poets, philosophers, and artists. Like Stażewski, Łunkiewicz-Rogoyska abandoned figuration: her abstract paintings took on a soft organic quality at the end of the 1950s.

After Łunkiewicz-Rogoyska and Rogoyski died in 1967, Edward Krasieński moved in (at her behest). Krasieński's sculptural work often engaged with the furnishings and spaces of the Świerczewski apartment in wry and playful ways.

A resident of a modernist block, Stażewski changed his mind about the Constructivist dream of uniting art and life:

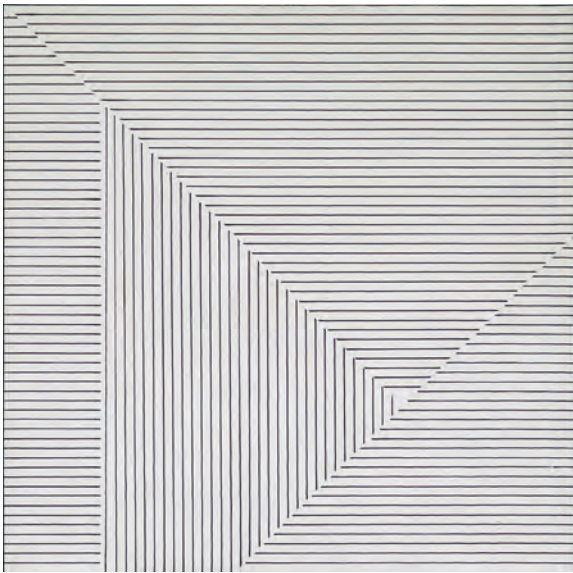
Wiesław Borowski: What is it about, this inclination for a large scale, to go beyond the studio?

Stażewski: Above all, there is a lot of misunderstanding. The greatest of them concerns composing oneself into the surroundings we live in (architecture, town planning, landscape) or composing a life space. I am interested in crossing the line dictated by life and my utilitarian surroundings. The work of art should not melt into the surroundings, nor decorate or enhance anything. It should dominate them artistically. ...

Borowski: What is your attitude to the integration of the arts, that is the painter collaborating with the architect, the industrial designer, etc.?

Stażewski: I don't believe in such things.

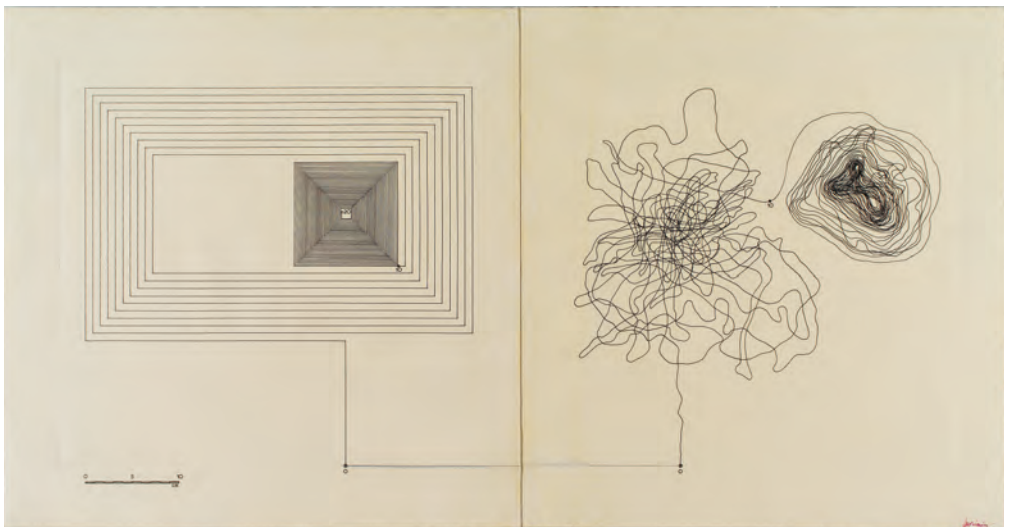
From an interview published in the exhibition catalogue,
Henryk Stażewski, Galeria Foksal, Warsaw, 1969.



Henryk Stażewski

19

1974
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź



Zdzisław Jurkiewicz

Shape of Continuity: 4 x 10 m

1971
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

78 Years, 7 Months, 23 Days

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, a new generation brought conceptualist and minimalist impulses to Polish art. In their explorations of human perception and the limits of a medium, they disdained the idea of art as a field of subjective expression. Often described as the neo-avant-garde, artists associated with Galeria pod Moną Lisą in Wrocław like Zdzisław Jurkiewicz, or “structural” film-makers like the Workshop of Film Form in Łódź, discovered a rich trove of ideas about vision and objectivity in the art and writing of the prewar avant-garde, even if they now approached the once-cherished idea of utopia as an impossible fantasy. They sought out Stażewski.

This interest was mutual, with the former associate of Strzemiński, Kobro, and Malevich reflecting on the ideas of the neo-avant-garde in his writings and sharing some of their concerns in his art. He also supported efforts to publish the work of Jurkiewicz and the visual poet Stanisław Dróżdż.

Often monochrome and concerned with the exactitude of the line, his own paintings also took on an austere and minimal form at this time.

“At present I am employing lines mechanically, at equal intervals or linear, industrial patterns from a raster; and in white paintings I am also employing a variety of smooth surfaces with mechanically scratched ones. I am often inspired by the trifling, trivial things I find in my environment. One has relax rigor to avoid becoming doctrinaire ... Anyway, I treat my paintings rather as charts to explain my ideas on the work of art, not as autonomous art objects or fetishes meant for contemplation.”

Henryk Stażewski interviewed by Wiesław Borowski
(later published in a revised version in
Studio International, September 1974).

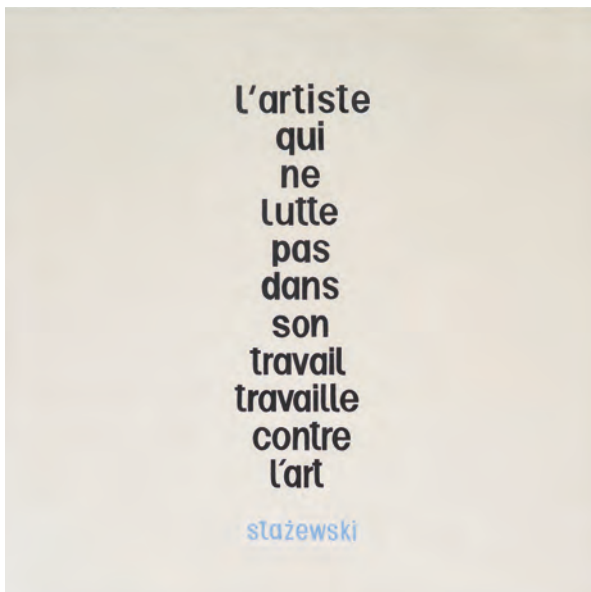


Henryk Stażewski

painted sign for Andrzej Partum's
Poetry Office, Warsaw

1971

Collection: Andrzej Bonarski and
Barbara Kabala-Bonarska



Henryk Stażewski

*L'artiste qui ne lutte pas dans son
travail travaille contre l'art*

1970

Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

77 Years, 5 Months

Stażewski wrote reviews and philosophical texts for art magazines throughout his life. Around 1970, he began writing short texts and copying them out by hand, passing them out to friends and acquaintances. Occasionally, they formed the basis of artworks too. Some of these texts had an abstract and philosophical character and others were mischievous parodies of high-minded theory. Another type of texts he called aphorisms were anecdotal and relayed scenes from everyday life.

Stażewski's texts have affinities with concrete poetry and mail art, new forms of text art that appeared in Poland in the 1970s. He collaborated with Andrzej Partum, the founder of the Poetry Office, in his small apartment in Warsaw, a site of intellectual exchange where artists and poets would gather and text art was archived.

Partum was the author of numerous manifestos and provocative maxims, as well as performances and textual interventions, including his famous banner that stretched between the university and the art academy in downtown Warsaw in April 1974, declaring "The Silence of the Avant-Garde" (an accusation assumed to be directed at the Foksal Gallery nearby). Like a parody of the bureaucratic management of culture in the People's Republic, Partum kept detailed files, including one containing many of Stażewski's aphorisms.

"The world of the microbes, though invisible to us, might have once possessed a culture and civilization not unlike ours, with a Shakespeare of its own."

Henryk Stażewski, aphorism, 1978.



Henryk Stażewski

Geometric analysis of Georges de La Tour's painting, *The Newborn*

1975

Photo: Tadeusz Rolke
© Agencja Wyborcza.pl



Ryszard Waśko

Action on the Glass

1975

Black-and-white photograph
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

82 Years, 1 Month, 11 Days

In February 1976, Stażewski exhibited studies of Georges De La Tour's paintings in Warsaw's Współczesna Gallery. He overlaid lines of geometry on photographs of the Baroque artist's genre and biblical scenes to draw attention to their underlying compositional principles and perspective effects. Other artists might have served Stażewski's purpose, but De La Tour's paintings explored light, one of his key preoccupations as well.

Stażewski was also interested in the activity of making copies, a theme that can be traced back to his own practice in the mid 1950s. A major exhibition of De La Tour's paintings in Paris in 1972 triggered considerable discussion about which works could be considered "authentic." Stażewski presented his De La Tour series in a portfolio with the words "20% of the works by De La Tour on display are reproductions. This is this how we view the art of the seventeenth century today."

Stażewski shared an interest in how geometry and perspective ordered life with contemporaries working in photography and film, not least Ryszard Waśko, the Łódź-based artist who made a documentary film on Stażewski's life and work in 1981.



Henryk Stażewski

Infinite Vertical Composition,
Wrocław

May 1970

Photo: Michał Diament /
Muzeum Współczesne Wrocław



Barbara Kozłowska

Re-enactment of Marking the Borderline, Łazy

1971

Courtesy of Zbigniew Makarewicz and Arton Foundation

76 Years, 4 Months

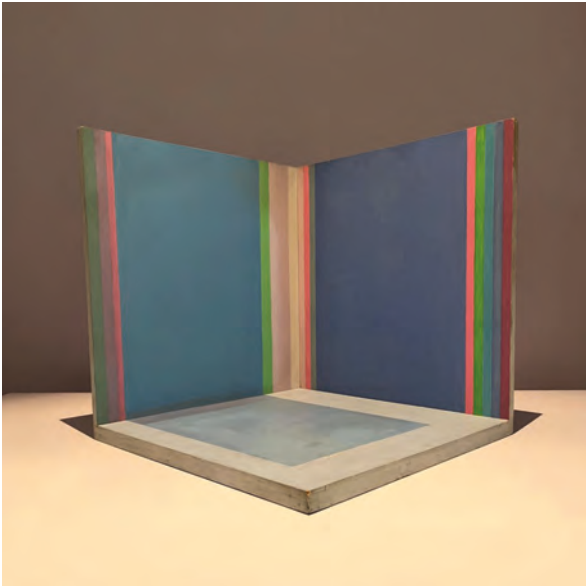
In May 1970, Stażewski created *Infinite Vertical Composition* in Wrocław, his contribution to *Symposium '70* – a series of meetings and an exhibition featuring ambitious art propositions for forty different locations in the city. Some were concrete proposals; many were fantastic or conceptual.

Infinite Vertical Composition was the only *Symposium* proposal to be realised that year. Powerful lamps with color filters cast intersecting beams of light above the city. Nine columns of light formed a spectacular, ephemeral, and immaterial artwork.

Created, ostensibly, as part of a program to commemorate the twenty-fifth anniversary of the reclamation of western and northern territories with the support of the army, Stażewski's project expressed a cosmic and planetary consciousness also found in other Polish artworks at the time.

“Just as cosmic rays dye things with invisible ultra-violet and infrared hues, causing physical changes, so the artist, using colors, can cause lasting changes to the air we breathe. We should occupy ourselves with observing the invisible world, making the mental effort to perceive such phenomena as the decay, death, or withering of the vegetal world, just as death and decay occur in the micro or macrocosm, only to rise again (everything inorganic experiences this same death in the cosmos). This goes beyond an automatic perception of everything that exists as real.”

Stażewski, unpublished statement, 1974.



Henryk Stażewski

Design of an interior

1976

**Królikarnia / Muzeum Narodowe
w Warszawie**



Eustachy Kossakowski

Visit to the hippy commune in Ożarów

1968

**Archiwum Eustachego Kossakowskiego,
Muzeum Sztuki Nowoczesne, Warsaw
© Paulina Krasieńska**

85 Years, 1 Month, 20 Days

In the late 1970s, Stażewski returned to the idea of art as a material for the creation of interiors. His paintings were reimagined as three-dimensional environments. No longer framed by the Constructivist ambition of the 1920s to transform the world, these designs were informed by his readings of psychology and perhaps even his late-1960s encounters with hippies, for whom psychedelic drugs offered entry into the interior spaces of the mind.

Interviewed by Wiesława Wierzchowska in March 1979 for *Projekt* magazine, he reflected on the psychological effects of color:

Ed.: The space you are speaking about can have a considerable emotional impact. In your studio, I can see models of interiors in various shades of blue, composed much like your paintings.

H.S.: They have been designed for a psychiatrist as interiors to help treat the mentally ill. I am particularly interested in the psyche of people with nervous disorders. They feel more intensely, their intuition is unusual, and their contact with reality very peculiar. In the interiors I design, I make use of the effect of blue, which is at once soothing and stimulating. Colors have a great power, this is something painters know by instinct. Colors express our emotions, our inner state. Likewise, lines. Straight, wavy, or zigzagging lines – what a wealth of emotional states they reveal!



Inauguration of Henryk Stażewski's *Spatial Composition*, 1967 in Łódź

November 1982

Photo: Janusz Bąkowski / Fundacja Archeologia Fotografii

© Jacek Bąkowski

87 Years, 11 Months, 12 Days

When Martial Law was declared in Poland in December 1981, ending the period of strikes and protests known as the Carnival of Solidarity, the opening of Stażewski's exhibition in the Piwna Gallery in Warsaw had to be postponed.

Stażewski had given his support to the cultural expressions of Solidarity, including the international *Construction in Process* exhibition organized in Łódź by Ryszard Waśko in the autumn of 1981. Like the *First Biennale of Spatial Forms* in Elbląg almost twenty years earlier, workers lent their skills to realising art conceived by artists from around the world for this festival of Neo-Constructivist and Minimalist art in a factory city.

Later, when Poland was in lockdown, Stażewski participated in underground culture, showing his art in exhibitions held in churches and in private apartments.

Despite his privileged status as an internationally-celebrated artist decorated with official prizes, Stażewski's attitudes to official culture had already grown dismissive over the course of the 1970s, with his aphorisms expressing frustration with life in the People's Republic.

“Anarchism is constant revolution.”

“Socialism is a system in which, INSTEAD OF WORKING, a person STANDS IN LINE.”

“In army life a man's sight comes down to what is ON THE BARREL OF A GUN.”

“THE LAW is there to protect people, but today the law NEGLECTS PEOPLE.”

Stażewski, *Aphorisms, 1978–80.*



Edward Krasinski

Atelier - Puzzle

1992

Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

94 Years, 5 Months, 1 Day

“Eternity and infinity are notions of stasis, immobility and the immeasurable. Measurement is applied where there is movement, change. Measuring time and space, the stages of change occurring in space, demand we use enormous numbers. On an earthly scale, the measurement of these changes involves tiny numbers: for the duration of a man, an animal, or a plant.”

Stażewski, unpublished text, 1978.

Created by Edward Krasiński a few years after Stażewski’s death in 1988, at the age of ninety-four, *Atelier-Puzzle* reflects on the artist’s absence in the apartment-studio on the top floor of the block on Świerczewski Avenue that they shared for almost two decades. Recalling the kineticism of Stażewski’s 1960s works, the viewer is invited to move around the work: viewed from one perspective, the square posts form a clear image of the apartment interior; from the reverse, they present an open door with the name plate of the former resident.

HENRYK STAŻEWSKI

Late Style

Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi
ms¹, ul. Gdańska 43

21.04–27.08.2023

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Henryk Stażewski in the apartment on Piękna Street, c. 1959

phot. Irena Jarosińska

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This exhibition would not have been possible without the brilliant scholarship contained in these studies:

Bożena Kowalska, *Henryk Stażewski*,
Arkady, 1985

*Henryk Stażewski 1894-1988 w setną
rocznicę urodzin*, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi,
1994

*Henryk Stażewski: ekonomia, myślenia
i postrzegania*, red. Małgorzata Jurkiewicz,
Joanna Mytkowska i Wiesław Borowski,
Fundacja Galerii Foksal / Galeria Foksal,
2005

Henryk Stażewski,
red. Andrzej Szczepaniak, Skira, 2018

Marta Zboralska “Living Color: Henryk
Stażewski’s Interior Models” (*Art Journal*,
Fall 2021)



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