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47 –  
Kobro, Strzemiński, 'Excerpts  
from Composition of  
Space: Calculations of Space-Time  
Rhythms', op. cit., p. 661.

48 –  
Ibid., p. 661.

typography. This cancels the distinctions between previously distinguished genres of art. The transition from unistic painting to unistic sculpture means also a transition from a phenomenon that is precisely delineated (by its four sides and flatness) to a boundless – infinite – one ('it has no natural limits'<sup>47</sup>). Just as 'unism in painting tends towards flat visual unity, closed in upon itself and indifferent to its environment', so 'unistic sculpture aims at accomplishing the unity of the sculpture with the surrounding space, a spatial unity'.<sup>48</sup>

While writing *Unism in Painting*, Strzemiński completes the first series of the *Unistic Compositions* and creates the *Architectural Compositions*, which feature forms composed in reference to the painting's innate data (it is only in the second *Unistic Compositions* series that shapes disappear to give way to a texture-and colour-wise unification of the pictorial field). For this reason, he also reflects on the relationship between the forms appearing in paintings and the painting's shape as a whole. Rhythm becomes the means of unification.

Writes Strzemiński, 'Rhythm is most uniform when built according to a uniform numerical expression. The concept of rhythm denotes a certain relationship of separate shapes. This relationship produces a sequence of rises and falls of the power of shapes. Sequence, and thus rhythm, are the more uniform, the closer they are to the mathematical type.'<sup>49</sup> Then he adds, 'The identical rhythm of all shapes' numerical ratio of proportions is their most genuine connection. When beginning the construction of a picture, its basic dimensions – width and height – should be taken as a point of departure for defining the width and height of every shape, as well as its place.'<sup>50</sup> A similar, partly almost identical, passage appears in the context of architecture:

Today, however, when modern architecture takes into account the totality of life and its functions, it is no longer possible to squeeze human life into the tight constrictions of symmetry. The rises and falls of functional energy correspond with a symmetrical rhythm of the rises and falls

of the energy present in architectonic shapes. This rhythm, dependent on great shapes following each other, can be lent greater expression by colouring various planes differently and using materials of a different content of visual energy. Forming a continuation of functional rhythm, this visual rhythm becomes a human rhythm, a rhythm integrated with man's life, with the result of this life. Not a decoration, unnecessarily added, but life itself.<sup>51</sup>

51 –  
Strzemiński, 'Architektura  
współczesna na tle wystawy  
Stowarzyszenia Architektów  
Polskich', in idem, *Pisma*, op. cit.,  
pp. 66–67.

The rhythmic pattern is worked out in an exclusively spatial (though two-dimensional) art that is painting, and through sculpture is expanded to include the whole of the three-dimensional reality. Laws established for unistic painting are applied to spatial composition and through it, are to be embodied. Based on the model of architectural and unistic compositions, through the mediation of spatial composition, rhythm is to become a means of composing life, of awarding it a homogeneous form.

Spatial composition, of which the fundamental, natural or innate law is infinity, operates not only by isolating a fragment of the plane, but by dividing space, separating visual elements in space.

The device which provides a piece of sculpture with uniformity without isolating it, is the spatio-temporal calculated rhythm. By rhythm we mean a regular sequence of shapes in space. The rhythm of a unistic sculpture is a complex rhythm of spatial shapes and of coloured planes. The regular sequence is attained by reducing the mutual relationships of consecutive shapes to a common numerical formula. Through reducing the problem to a numerical formula of the relationships of consecutive sizes we make the rhythm an open one, capable of growth in both directions: towards greater and towards smaller shapes. This peculiar rhythm of unism, the open rhythm, links the shapes, while at the same time linking them to space. This rhythm of shapes can grow in any direction; it can add new extensions to existing ones, not contained by the work. These new shapes,

52 –  
Kobro, Strzemiński, 'Excerpts  
from Composition of  
Space: Calculations of Space-Time  
Rhythms', op. cit., p. 661.

53 –  
Andrzej Turowski, 'Rytmologia  
stosowana', in idem, *Awangardowe  
marginesy* (Warszawa: Instytut  
Kultury, 1998), p. 114.

54 –  
Henri Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis.  
Space, Time and Everyday Life*,  
transl. Stuart Elden, Gerald Moore  
(London – New York: Continuum,  
2004), p. 77.

55 –  
Ibid., p. 77, 78.

being a logical consequence and continuation of the series of already existing shapes, must be placed in the space surrounding the sculpture. Thus, an open rhythm arising from the sculpture extends to the space, relating it to the work.<sup>52</sup>

As Andrzej Turowski stresses, rhythm is one of the key categories for prewar avant-garde artists.<sup>53</sup> Trying to turn rhythm into a major analytical tool, Henri Lefebvre asks, 'What is rhythm?'.<sup>54</sup> In reply, he states, among other things, that rhythm is a 'unicity of diverse relationships' and that it is connected with movement and repetition – movement being regulated by the principle of repetitiveness and the organisation of movement (stops, intervals, resumptions) being defined by the 'law'.<sup>55</sup> For Lefebvre, rhythm is an attribute of life, of the individual, social and cosmic body, something identifiable with pulse, or pulsation. Moreover, for Lefebvre, rhythm is, in fact, a function of the unconscious. Whereas Strzemiński would agree with the necessity of law as a regulator of rhythm, he believes that movement should be removed from spatial composition. Movement, as a symptom of dynamism, is reconcilable with neither unistic painting nor unistic sculpture. Sculpture, as spatial composition, should be an organisation of that which is immobile, and therefore in Strzemiński the concept of rhythm describes rather the relationships between the elements of the division of space. Movement, just like time, is but an epiphenomenon of the arrangement of spatial forms. Movement is an attribute of the form in which it takes place. This form, however, should be free of movement. The goal of unistic sculpture, as of unistic painting, is to eliminate time (as well as all that is connected with it, like movement, but also history). In the case of spatial composition, the goal would be to compress space-time into a solely spatial phenomenon – an immobile and immutable one. Rhythm is to define statistics. Moreover, it is to be an expression of the subordination of the whole of reality to consciousness.

Rhythm is a synonym of the articulation of spatial continuity, defining the relationships between the elements of its division. By rhythm Strzemiński and Kobro mean at this point the proportion, numerical relationship, between

56 –  
Mario Livio, *The Golden Ratio:  
The Story of Phi, the World's Most  
Astonishing Number* (New York:  
Broadway Books, 1987), p. 101.

57 –  
Ibid., p. 85.

58 –  
Matila C. Ghyka, *Le nombre  
d'or. Rites et rythmes pythagoriciens  
dans le développement de la civilisation  
occidentale* (1931).

59 –  
'Hence, the first thing to settle is the  
standard of symmetry, from which we  
need not hesitate to vary. Then, lay  
out the ground lines of the length and  
breadth of the work proposed, and  
once we have determined its size, let  
the construction follow this with due  
regard to beauty of proportion, so that  
the beholder may feel no doubt of the  
eurythmy of its effect.' Cf. Vitruvius,  
*The Ten Books on Architecture*, transl.  
Morris Hickey Morgan (IndyPublish,  
2007), p. 158.

60 –  
Kobro, Strzemiński, *Kompozycja  
przestrzeni...*, op. cit., p. 56.

61 –  
Livio, *The Golden Ratio...*, op. cit.,  
pp. 172–173.

62 –  
Lefebvre, *Rhythmanalysis...*,  
op. cit., p. 16.

the individual elements. As a starting point for the divisions of the painting in the *Architectural Compositions* and of space in the *Compositions of Space*, they choose the 8:5 ratio. All forms can undergo further divisions, provided the ratio is maintained. The two figures come one after another in the Fibonacci sequence, which is an arithmetic equivalent of the geometric division of a segment known as the golden ratio.<sup>56</sup> Most of the *Architectural Compositions* start with a form known as the 'golden rectangle',<sup>57</sup> and the more detailed calculations, beside 5 and 8, feature also the number 3, also one of the Fibonacci sequence (which begins like this: 1, 1, 2, 3, 5, 8, 13, 21, 34...). Strzemiński had to arrive at the golden section, because, according to Matila Ghyka, who also studied the problem at the time, it defines the 'only geometric progression' that is also an arithmetic sequence.<sup>58</sup> Thus, the golden section constitutes a geometric as well as arithmetic law, in accordance with which one can divide space, that is, organise life. All the relationships between the reality-comprising elements are subjected to the rule of the golden mean, known also as the golden number. This number, represented in mathematics as  $\phi$ , in Strzemiński and Kobro expressed as the 8:5 ratio, is the ultimate law.

This law defines the proportion of the sides of the unistic painting, of the relationship between the elements of the division of space, be it a small sculpture piece by Kobro or an architectural object. The idea of subordinating architecture to the 'divine proportion' is a traditional solution – in Vitruvius, combined with symmetry, it allows achieving eurythmia in architecture.<sup>59</sup> While Strzemiński rejects 'symmetrical representationalism' on behalf of 'asymmetrical functionalism',<sup>60</sup> he still abides by the striving towards eurythmia, believing in the need for subordinating architecture to a system of proportions (just like Le Corbusier, in fact, after he had read Ghyka's book<sup>61</sup>). Lefebvre distinguishes eurythmia as one of the key concepts of his envisaged new science of rhythm analysis, the others being arrhythmia, isorhythmia, and polyrhythmia. Eurythmia, he says, occurs when 'rhythms unite with one another in the state of health, in normal (which is to say normalized!) everydayness',<sup>62</sup>

# To Create a Work of Art as an Organic Plastic Entity<sup>1</sup>

Paulina Kurc-Maj

<sup>1</sup> –  
Władysław Strzemiński, 'B=2',  
transl. Wanda Kemp-Welch, in  
Between Worlds: A Sourcebook of  
Central European Avant-gardes  
1910–1930 (Cambridge – London:  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art,  
MIT Press, 2002), p. 498.

30 –

As Jonathan Crary argues, the discoveries made by 19<sup>th</sup> century experimental psychology concerning the subjective basis of vision also paved the way for a mechanisation of vision and its instrumental exploitation, as in the Romantic belief in a 'creative' potential of vision, connected with its 'inner', corporeal sources. Cf. J. Crary, *Techniques of the Observer. On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, MA – London: MIT Press, 1992), p. 141. Despite his positivistic, behaviouristic explanations, Strzemiński feels closer to the latter line of thought.

31 –

Cf. L. Moholy-Nagy, *Malarstwo-fotografia-film*, transl. M. Leyko, typescript; K. Hiller, 'Nowe widzenie', in *Forma*, no. 2, 1934, p. 3.

manipulating it and of illusion would, of course, have dented the faith in the physiological 'truth' of vision and its 'liberating' significance.<sup>30</sup> Speaking of painting as an expression of corporeal vision, Strzemiński completely ignores the issue of technologically determined changes of perception driven by environmental changes, a faster rhythm of life, the presence of film and photography as a substance of the contemporary iconosphere. *A Theory of Vision* makes only one reference to photography, in order to illustrate the mechanics of the human eye. This means that everything that avant-garde artists enthusiastically emphasised by using 'new vision' slogans in the 1920s and 1930s remains outside the scope of Strzemiński's discourse.<sup>31</sup> Technological prostheses and modern forms of stimulation would have been an alien element in a space of organic continuity, disrupting the homogeneous rhythm of the process of vision. They also would have probably called into question the sovereign, subjective status of 'visual consciousness'.

## EMANCIPATION OF VISION

The liberation of vision could not, therefore, mean its technological expansion; rather, in an attempt to place vision in the context of social change, Strzemiński tried to interpret it as a factor of class emancipation. Besides *A Theory of Vision*, a prominent example of reflections in this vein can be found in the text *Explaining Impressionism*, published during the writing of *A Theory*. Arguing that Impressionist painting wasn't solely 'formalistic' and 'corrupt', Strzemiński saw a hallmark of its 'progressiveness' precisely in the bold gesture of 'liberating' vision from the historical hegemony of the object. Whereas in the thematically hierarchical artwork of the Baroque or Rococo, despite a tendency to a more optical approach, the painter's 'vision stopped in front of a face or object in a respectful pose and viewed that face with humble and immobile vision',<sup>32</sup> the Impressionists' vision moved completely away from the respect-demanding 'unity of the model' and could run 'in all directions, unfettered by the reasons of feudal hierarchy'.<sup>33</sup> The Impressionists'

34 –

Ibid., p. 419.

vision thus not only proved 'truer' – as a 'realism of mobile vision'<sup>34</sup> – but also, by turning its back on bourgeois tastes, through its newfound appeal and vividness, it was to re-enfranchise the 'working people' with their daily routine-immersed, ordinary environment.

It seems, however, that even in this risky attempt to connect Impressionism with the 'class struggle', Strzemiński's interest in the style leads him to different regions, closer to the modernist conceptions of 'pure vision'. While Strzemiński doesn't accept the compensational function of art as a form of sensual 'relaxation', for him vision still has a goal unto itself – entangled in the dialectics of history, it is to constantly free itself from social and ideological constraints. The 'development of visual consciousness' appears, to a certain extent, to be an inwardly oriented process towards full, reflective vision. As Rosalind Krauss stressed in her interpretations, such thinking was one of the cornerstones of the modernist discourse; searching for the autonomous foundations of painting in the rules of vision, it strived to neutralise the represented subject, to lose it in the phenomenal dimension of vision. The object would dissolve in the entirety of the 'visual field', construed similarly to the empty, open surface of the painting. This model of vision, entrenched by the Impressionists and taken further by 'light and colour' painters such as Delaunay, did away with the former, empiristic, notion of perception, shifting the emphasis from objective observation to a reflective consciousness of sensations.<sup>35</sup> Consequently, painting was to reflect the rules governing the perception of colour rather than any concrete objective reality. We find Strzemiński taking on a similar position on the 'content' of vision, although the neutralisation of the object doesn't go as far: the visual field doesn't appear to him as completely homogeneous – it is determined 'from the inside' by the properties of the looking eye (e.g. the difference between peripheral vision and the centre of view) and at the same time 'from the outside' by attractive 'points of interest', marked by 'the greatest congestion of visual stimuli'.<sup>36</sup> With some phenomena, however, such as the sea, clouds or monotonous rural landscapes, when there is a 'strong similarity between the viewed objects', there

35 –

R. Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (Cambridge, MA – London: MIT Press, 1994), pp. 11–16, p. 124. Idem, 'Antivision', in *October*, vol. 36, Spring 1986, p. 147.

36 –

Strzemiński, *Teoria widzenia*, op. cit., p. 197.

howling crimes that triumphed. He was a realist and always considered the facts but he could not approve of the world of crime, and he always stressed that he was not a German but an Austrian — and this leap away from the central point of the existing system contained the act of his disapproval.

And when Czesiek, seeing in Murin premeditated ill will divided into separate stages of action, explained to me how a worm becomes a chrysalis so that it might next turn into a machaon of crime and cadaverous poison, I knew: Murin should not be judged using the Catholic criteria of morality, but rather the categories of class struggle.

The 'sanacja' ['cleansing'] regime came to power in Poland when a certain balance between conflicting classes prevailed for a longer period of time. Shifting its weight one way or the other the 'sanacja' bureaucracy tried to preserve this state of uncertain balance and prolong it — in its own ruling interest — forever.

Hence the sharpened feeling of balance as the highest form of life knowledge and the school of breaking people. Because he who cannot defend humanity in himself must always back away from the most important and significant questions and tumble down as low as the total negation of himself. Down to his own erasure.

So precisely drawn by the chemist and writer Czesław Czempik, his line of absolute lack of cooperation with the reality of Nazi crimes, suspended in the form of the most daring arch of the parable of earthly existence, did not, however, bring expected results, because the facts of life do not develop along a predictable straight line, running from intention to its target, but they move by leaps, by the force of the dialectic collection of opposites which at some point cross out the entire effect of human action — and reduce the result of human life to zero.

How could he know that the impersonality of abstract ethics, which had grown inside him together with the numbered chapters of his studies, and the universality of one justice and equal rights for all, would be brought down by dialectic progress, and that the standard of living of an intelligent-sia family, where the husband shared his glamour with his wife and vice versa, would turn into its opposite? Could he have foreseen that his wife's last name — a name from the eastern part of Poland, smelling of steppe tracts after sundown (Matejko's *Wernyhora* — how beautifully the flowers smell) — would be an unimportant thing compared to the concealed sound of his mother's name?

His wife did not agree to sign the *volkslist* like her mother, but she increased the disproportion between the Polish and German food coupons

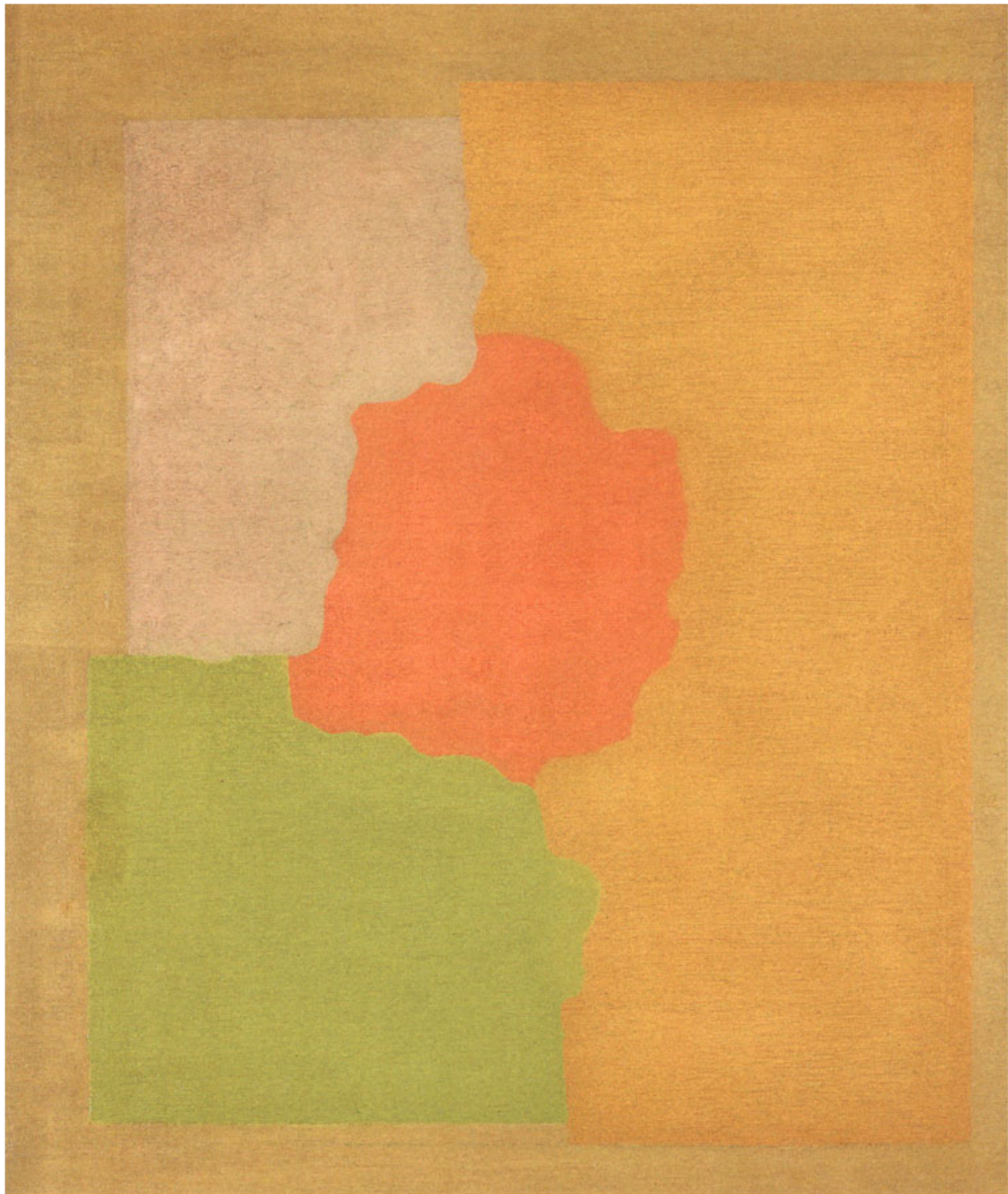
## Władysław Strzemiński

ze studentkami na plenerze  
w Nowej Rudzie, 1947

## Władysław Strzemiński

with students at painting session  
in Nowa Ruda, 1947



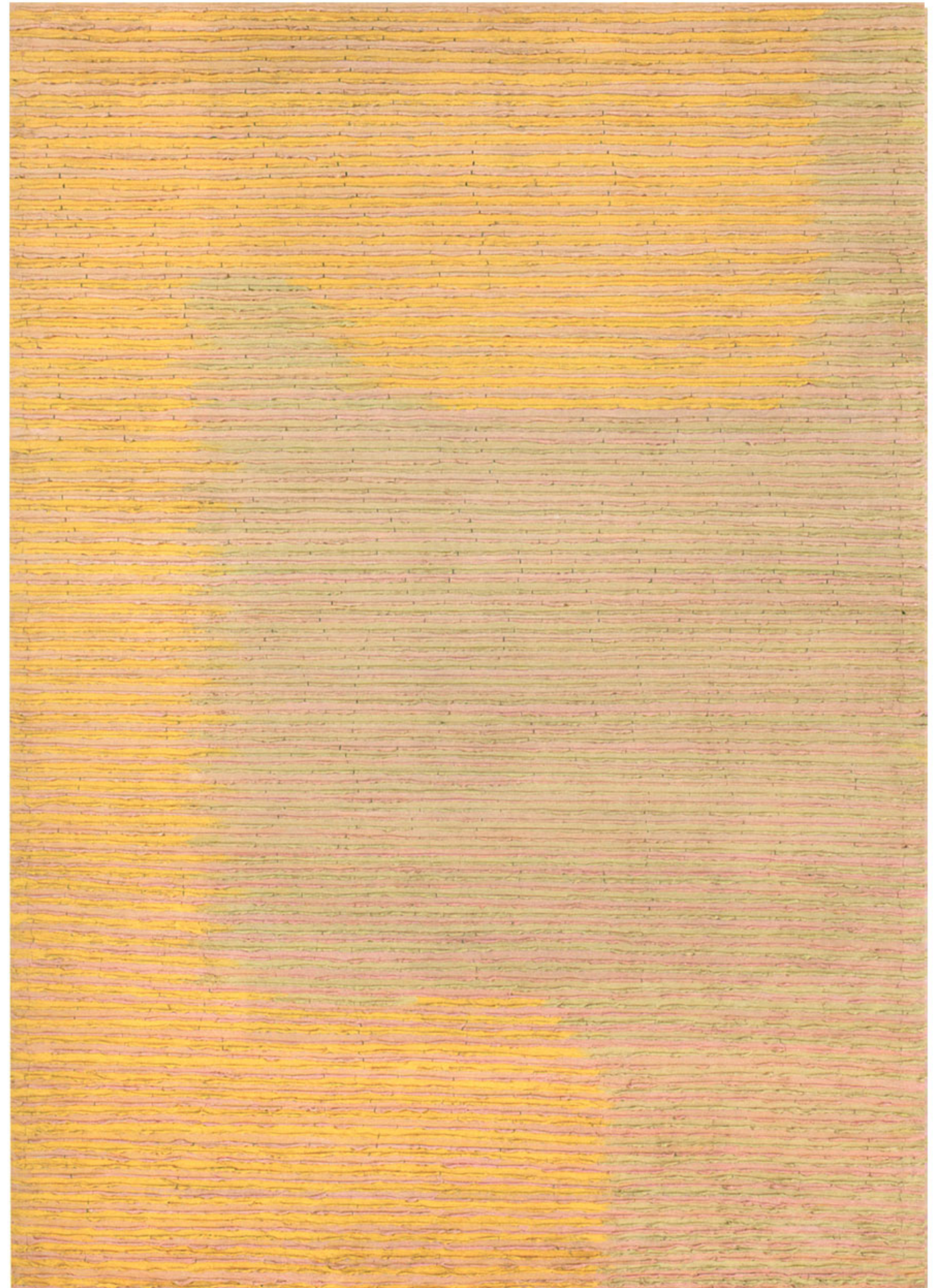


**Kompozycja unistyczna 7**

1929, olej, płótno  
77 x 63 cm

**Unistic Composition 7**

1929, oil, canvas  
77 x 63 cm

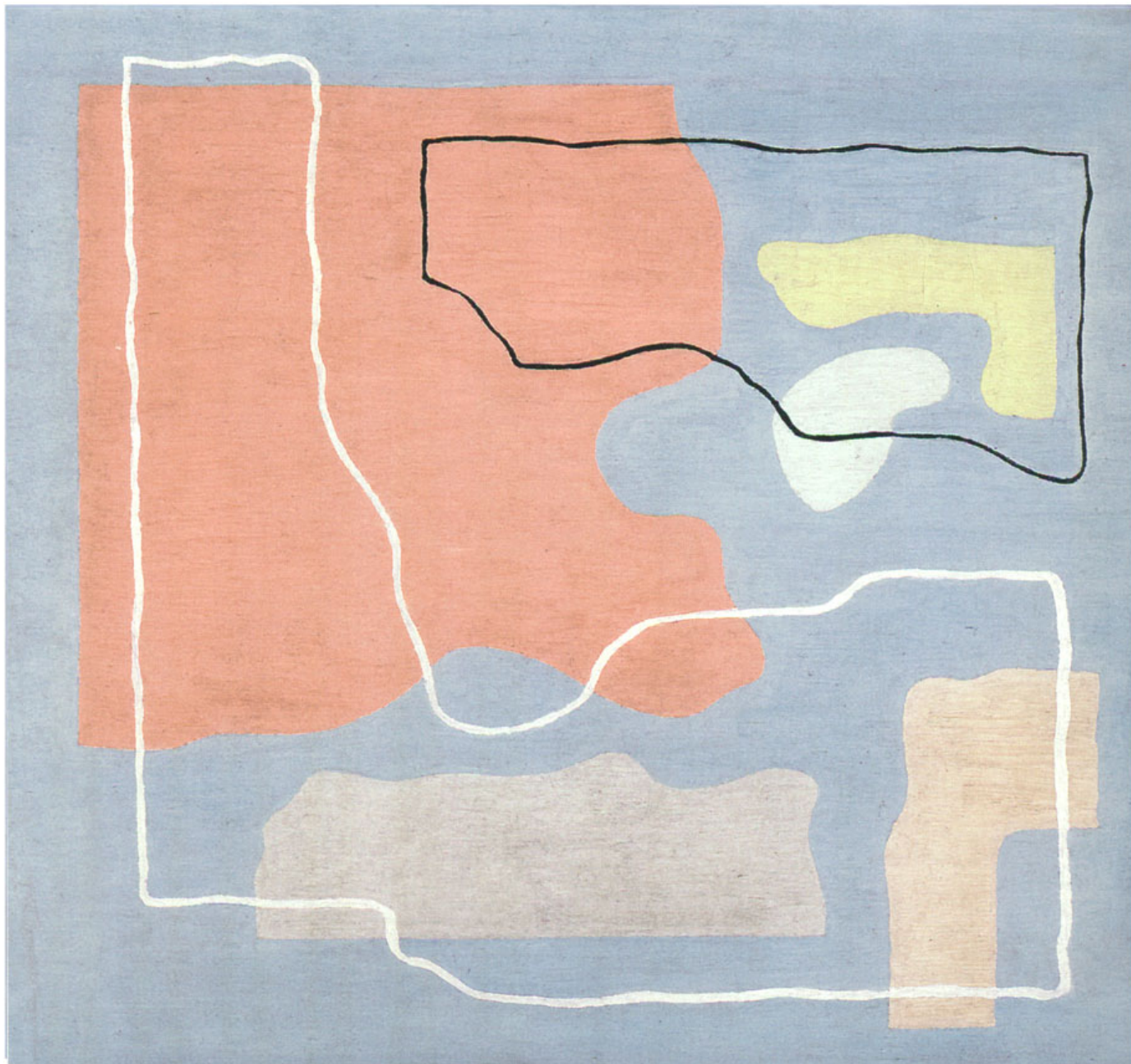


**Kompozycja unistyczna 9**

1931, olej, płótno  
48 x 32 cm

**Unistic Composition 9**

1931, oil, canvas  
48 x 32 cm

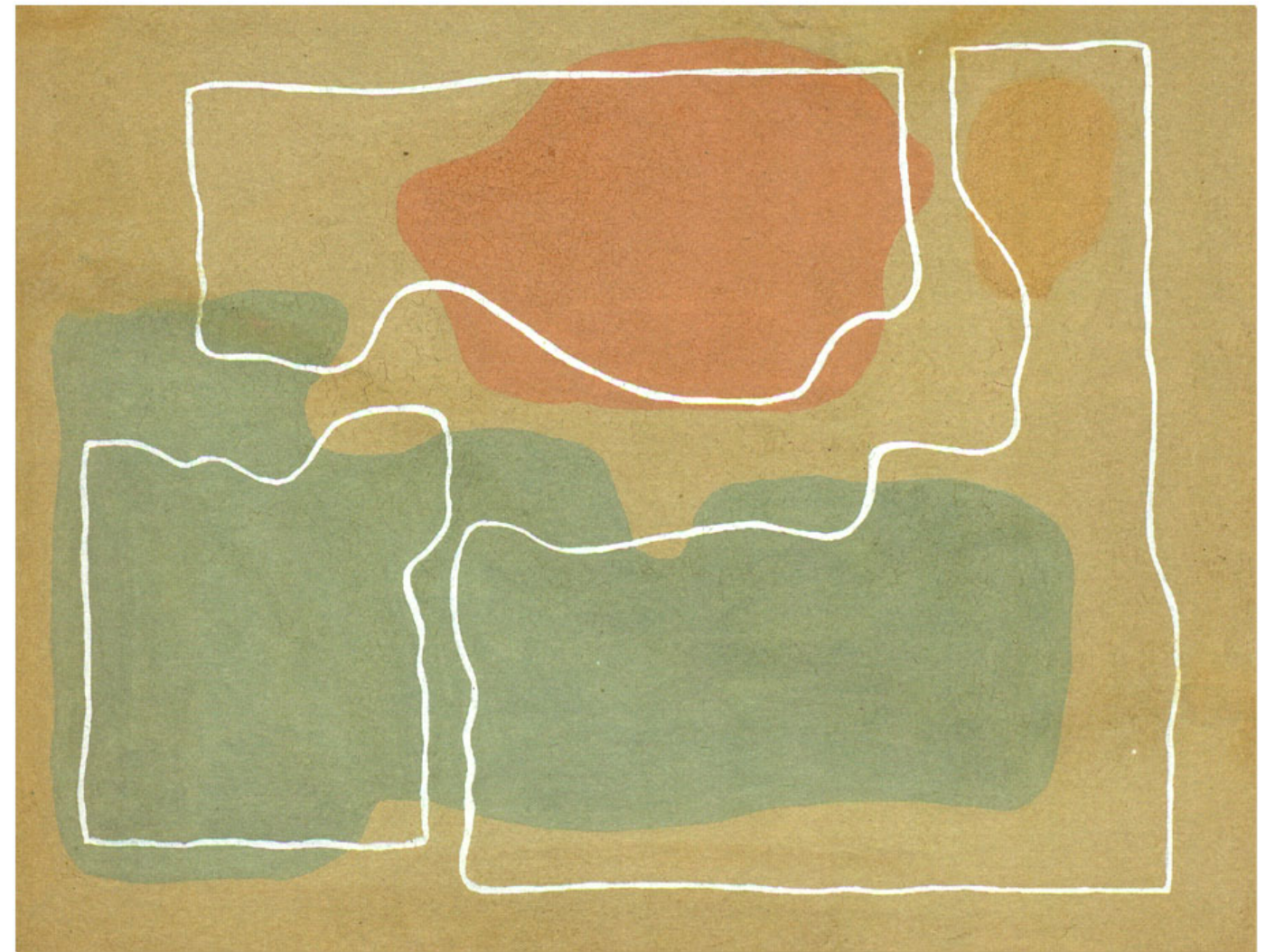


# Kompozycja abstrakcyjna

1933, olej, płótno  
64 x 64 cm

# Abstract Composition

1933, oil, canvas  
64 x 64 cm

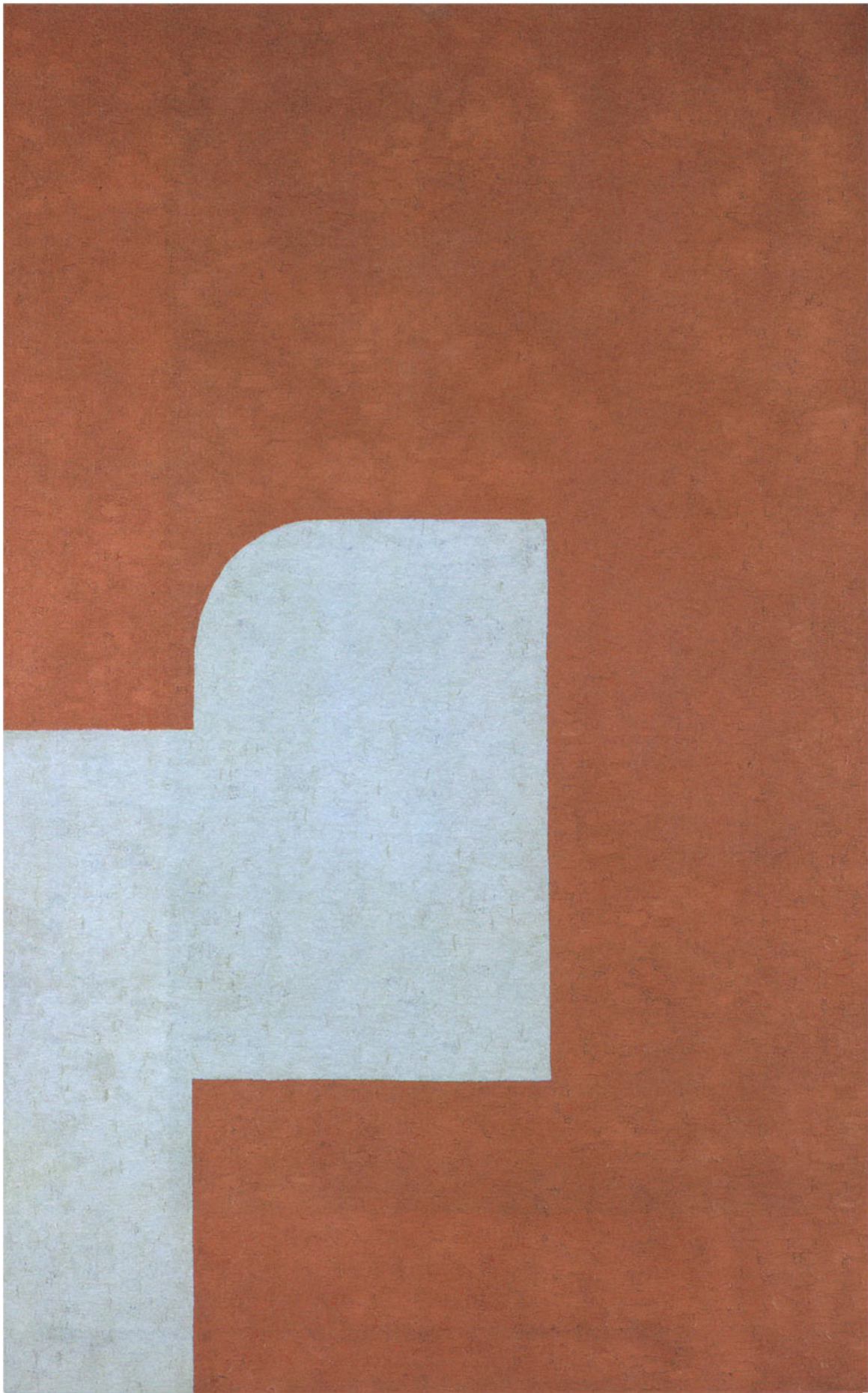


# Kompozycja abstrakcyjna

1933, tempera, tektura  
20 x 24,5 cm

# Abstract Compositition

1933, tempera, cardboard  
20 x 24.5 cm



**Kompozycja architektoniczna 12c**

1929, olej, płótno  
90 x 60 cm

**Kompozycja architektoniczna 13c**

1929, olej, płótno  
90 x 60 cm

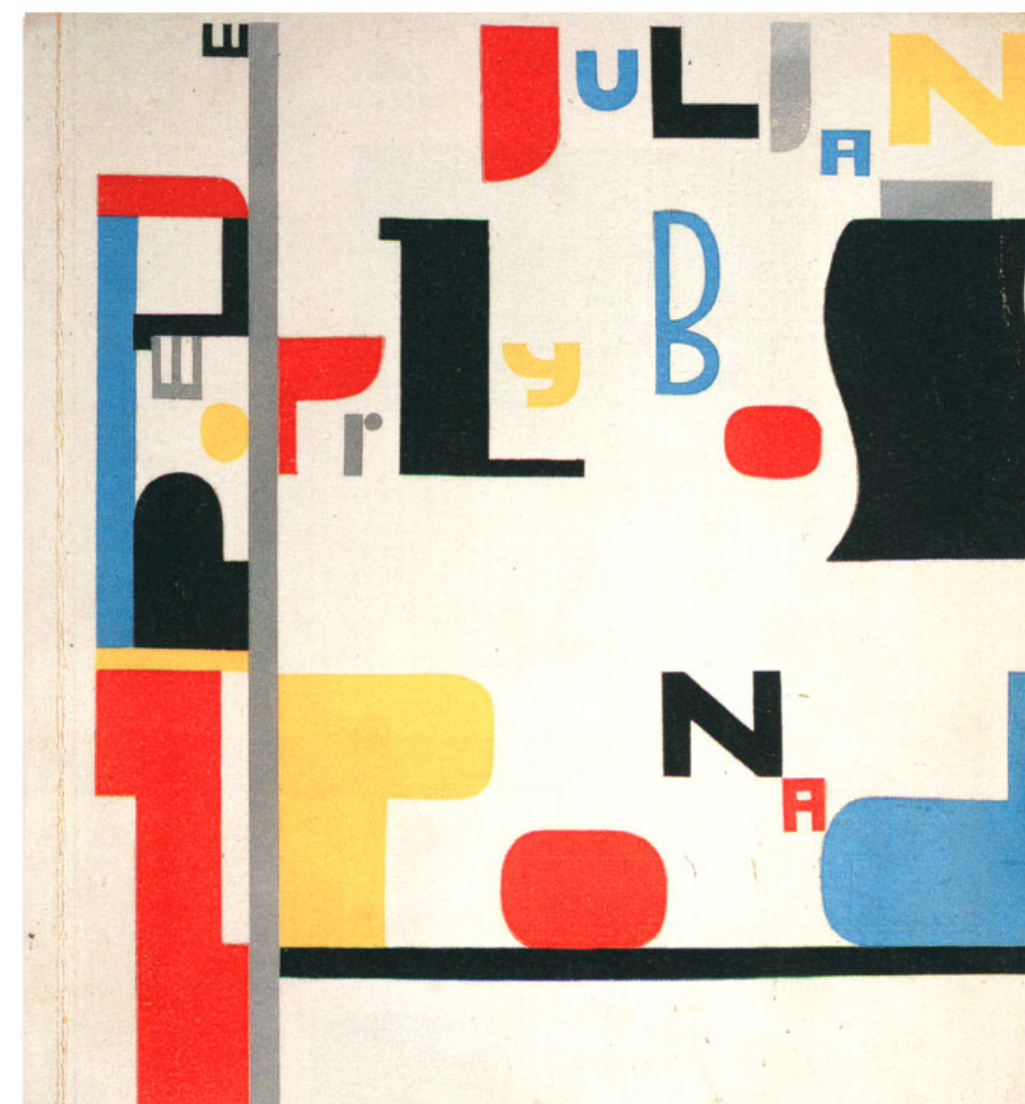
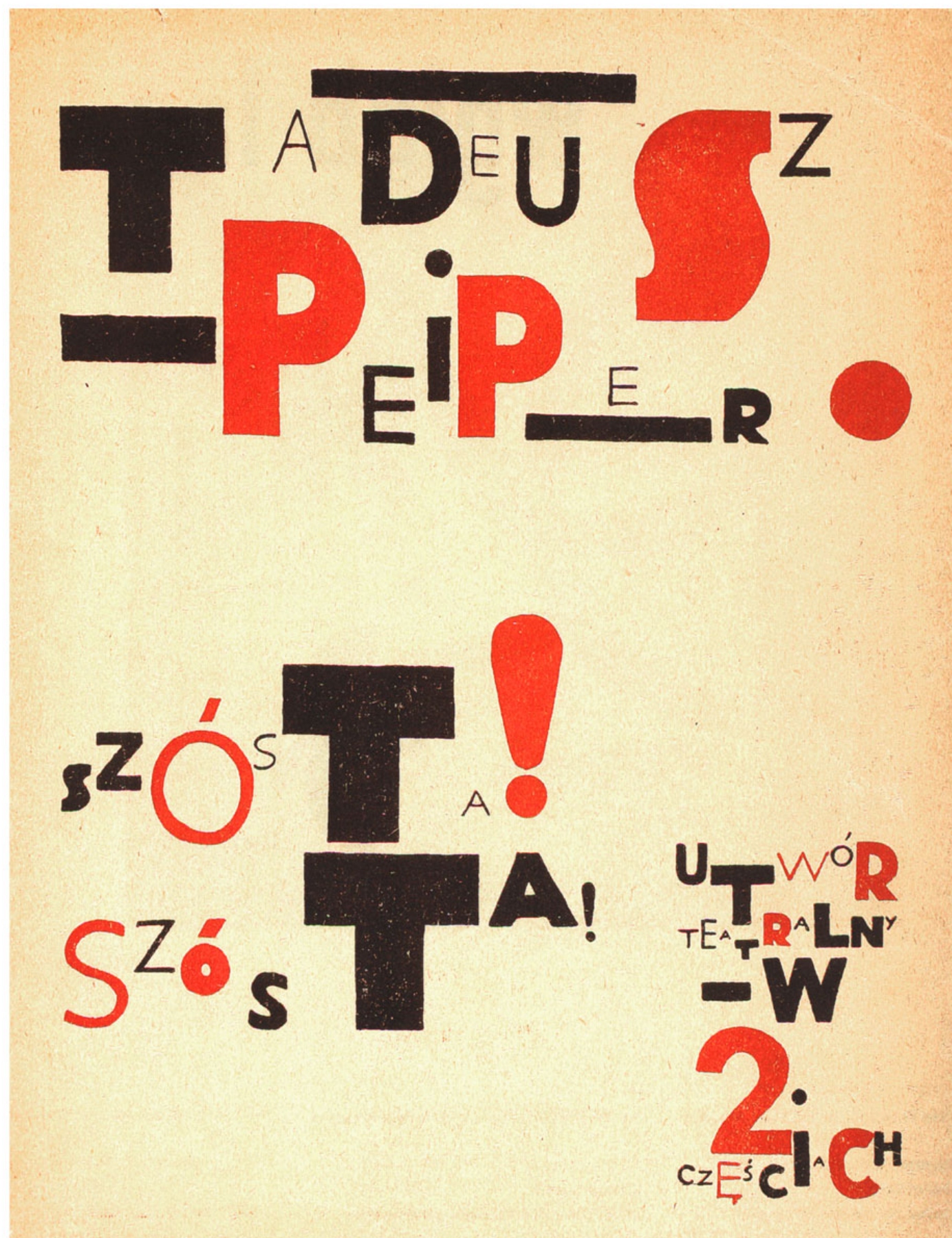
**Architectural Composition 12c**

1929, oil, canvas  
90 x 60 cm



**Architectural Composition 13c**

1929, oil, canvas  
90 x 60 cm



Julian Przyboś, Z ponad

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Władysław Strzemiński

Julian Przyboś, From Above

„a.r.” library vol. 1  
Cieszyn 1930  
cover and typography design:  
Władysław Strzemiński

Tadeusz Peiper, Szósta! Szósta!  
Utwór teatralny w 2 częściach

wydawnictwo „Zwrotnicy”  
Kraków 1925  
okładka: Władysław Strzemiński

Tadeusz Peiper, The sixth! The  
sixth! A play in 2 parts

published by „Zwrotnica”  
Cracow 1925  
cover design: Władysław Strzemiński



**Pejzaż łódzki**

12 IX 1933, tempera, tektura  
20 x 25 cm

**City-scape of Łódź**

12 IX 1933, tempera, cardboard  
20 x 25 cm

**Domy Polesia, osiedle  
Montwiłła-Mireckiego I**

31 XII 1933, tempera, tektura  
24 x 21 cm

**Houses of the Polesie District. The  
Montwiłł-Mirecki Housing Estate I**

31 XII 1933, tempera, cardboard  
24 x 21 cm

