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“The further we go, the more faithful we are to tradition,” Władysław Strzemiński wrote in one of his essays. He meant artists, but his words can be applied as well to those trying to describe and interpret the artistic tradition. They can also be considered as a directive for those dealing with the legacy of Strzemiński himself, as an appeal for a readiness to forsake entrenched interpretations and an invitation to develop new ones. With this publication, we are trying to respond to this appeal and confront again the oeuvre of one of the most outstanding figures of the 20th-century avant-garde, respecting all that has been said on the subject so far, but not confining ourselves to the safe haven of existing views and exegeses.

Władysław Strzemiński. Readability of Images is a collection of essays documenting an international conference organised by the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź in October 2011. The publication commemorates the 60th anniversary of Władysław Strzemiński's death and marks a culmination of several years' work aimed at reinterpreting and updating his legacy by embedding it in new contexts and confronting it with new artistic and intellectual phenomena. This work began in 2009 with the project *Neoplastic Room. Open Composition*, referring to one of the artist's most famous works: a museum room designed for exhibiting European avant-garde art from a collection created on his initiative in the 1930s. From its launch in 1948, the Neoplastic Room remained for decades the centrepiece of the Muzeum Sztuki's permanent exhibition, pretty much defining its character. The situation changed in 2008, when the collection was moved from its hitherto location to ms², the museum's new space. This stripped Strzemiński's room of its previous status, but at the same time opened the possibility of its recontextualisation. As part of the *Neoplastic Room. Open Composition* project, it became a catalyst and a reference point for contemporary artworks. Artworks that, engaging in a dialogue with Strzemiński's design, were meant to creatively develop and contemporise its meanings, while drawing attention to its less acknowledged aspects. Among the artists who have participated in this open-ended project so far are Daniel Buren, Monika Sosnowska, Liam Gillick, Nairy Baghramian, Grupa Twożywo, Jarosław Flicieński, and Magdalena Fernandez Arriaga. The fact that artists representing so widely divergent genealogies and attitudes decided to approach Strzemiński's opus confirms once again that its value cannot be reduced to historical significance alone.

Another important stage in the process of the reinterpretation of Strzemiński's work was the monographic exhibition *After-images of Life. Władysław Strzemiński and Rights for Art*, conceived by two Muzeum Sztuki curators, Paulina Kurc-Maj and Jarosław Lubiak. The show's conceptual framework was defined by three ideas sourced from Strzemiński's theoretical writings, namely those of “afterimage,” “architectonisation,” and “law.” Reinterpreted, they allowed the curators to formulate, in an original way, the relationships between artistic praxis, theory, and life (construing these three worlds as overlapping “afterimages”), to define the process of how Strzemiński developed solutions in one area and then applied them to another (e.g. applying those originally meant for painting to design and social organisation), and finally to highlight the special character of his “lawmaking” – both that pertaining to the inner order of the artwork and that concerning the place of art in the world and its significance for human life.

In this attempt to reconfigure Strzemiński's legacy, the curators were supported by Katja Strunz, an artist who in her practice has long been involved in reworking the 20th-century visual idioms and artistic ideologies, particularly those of avant-garde derivation. Designing a conceptually sophisticated exhibition architecture, Strunz proposed her own reading of Strzemiński's work focused on her concept of *Zeittraum*; a concept referring, on the one hand, to space-time as the crucial point of the artist's reflection and, on the other, emphasising dreaming as a moment defining its utopian horizon.

Despite its distinct, more academic and discursive, character, the conference *Readability of Images* in fact complemented the exhibition projects in question. What they shared was an openness to new perspectives and a search for new contexts that would allow Strzemiński's work to continue as a reservoir of updatable ideas. The conference's organisers intentionally invited the participation of researchers, theoreticians, and thinkers who are keenly interested in the artist's oeuvre, yet who until then dealt with it only incidentally. Inviting them, we hoped to broaden the spectrum of interpretations, to confront Strzemiński's legacy with phenomena and issues that had been largely ignored by research projects to date, having been considered irrelevant. Among the conference participants, only Andrzej Turowski dealt – and continues to deal – systematically with the artist's work. However, as a researcher he has proved on numerous occasions his openness to new inspirations and a readiness to rework existing models of its interpretation, including his own. In the conference, putting an accent, as it were, on moments of continuity as much as on rupture, Turowski's participation was thus very much understandable, not to say symbolic.

The articles collected in this volume demonstrate that the conference debates focused, above all, on highlighting those aspects of Władysław Strzemiński's art and theory that transgress the model of the artwork as a timeless construction of forms – a “simultaneity of the spatial-optical phenomenon,”¹ as explicated in the premises of his theory of Unism. The texts strive to reveal the deeper – extra-optical – semantic layers of Strzemiński's selected works, making use of the artist's reflections on the physiology of vision, correlated with the notion of organicity upon which his artistic practice and theory were founded. They contrast the halting of visual activity – a kind of immobilisation of the gaze – required for the reception of Unist paintings, with modes of perception tying visual content to the physiological rhythm of the organism and emphasising their rootedness in historical contexts. They inscribe the optical mechanics of “seeing” in the organic process of “looking” (Levinger),

shifting the “visual content” of an image to the more general level of the perceiving subject's “visual consciousness” (Nader).

This focus on analytical reading, highlighting the various aspects of Strzemiński's works by showing their embedment in complex theoretical and historical contexts, an approach fundamentally different from a striving to synthetically frame their formal qualifications, corresponds with a problematisation of the concept of the image as proposed by Georges Didi-Huberman. This problematisation, he writes, provides for a “return to a questioning of the image that does not yet presuppose the ‘figured figure’ – by which I mean the figure fixed as representational object – but only the *figuring figure*, namely the process, the path, the question in action, made colours, made volume: to the still-open question of knowing just what . . . might *become visible*.”² In other words, it transposes a reflection on the image to the field of tension between updated representation and its making, between “visibility” and “visuality.” Whereas the visible is, according to Andrzej Leśniak's description of the elements of the opposition, a “uniform, stable subject of knowledge,” visuality is connected with a sphere of potentiality, “defining what we can see but cannot immediately subordinate to the instances of cognition, the tools of iconography and iconology.”³ Didi-Huberman construes the visual as an element of a “constraint of negativity within which images are caught, catch us.”⁴ This is bound up with “knowing how to remain in the dilemma, *between knowing and seeing*, between knowing something and not seeing another thing in any case, but seeing something in any case and not-knowing some other thing.”⁵ Approaching an image, according to him, is a “matter . . . of proceeding dialectically: of thinking the thesis *with* its antithesis.”⁶

The kind of “learned ignorance” postulated by Didi-Huberman with regard to the image can be applied to the articles contained in this volume. Most of them focus on highlighting the critical points of Strzemiński's oeuvre, or the aporias inscribed therein, which the artist himself seems to be pointing to in his works. The articles connect Strzemiński's paintings with the scopes of possible meanings comprised in the notion, spanning his visual and theoretical work, of organicity. They search for the origins of the concept, contrasting it, on the one hand, with the dynamism of the formal structure of the works of Russian Suprematism (Milner) and, on the other hand, associating it with the unifying character of the solutions developed in the West by evolutionary biology and the pictoriality connected therewith, inspiring artistic agendas and formulas employed by French artists (Finch). They focus on the concept's selected visual manifestations, connecting it with the specificity of the

¹ W. Strzemiński, “Unizm w malarstwie,” in: E. Grabska, H. Morawska, *Artyści o sztuce. Od van Gogha do Picassa* (Warszawa, 1977), p. 449.

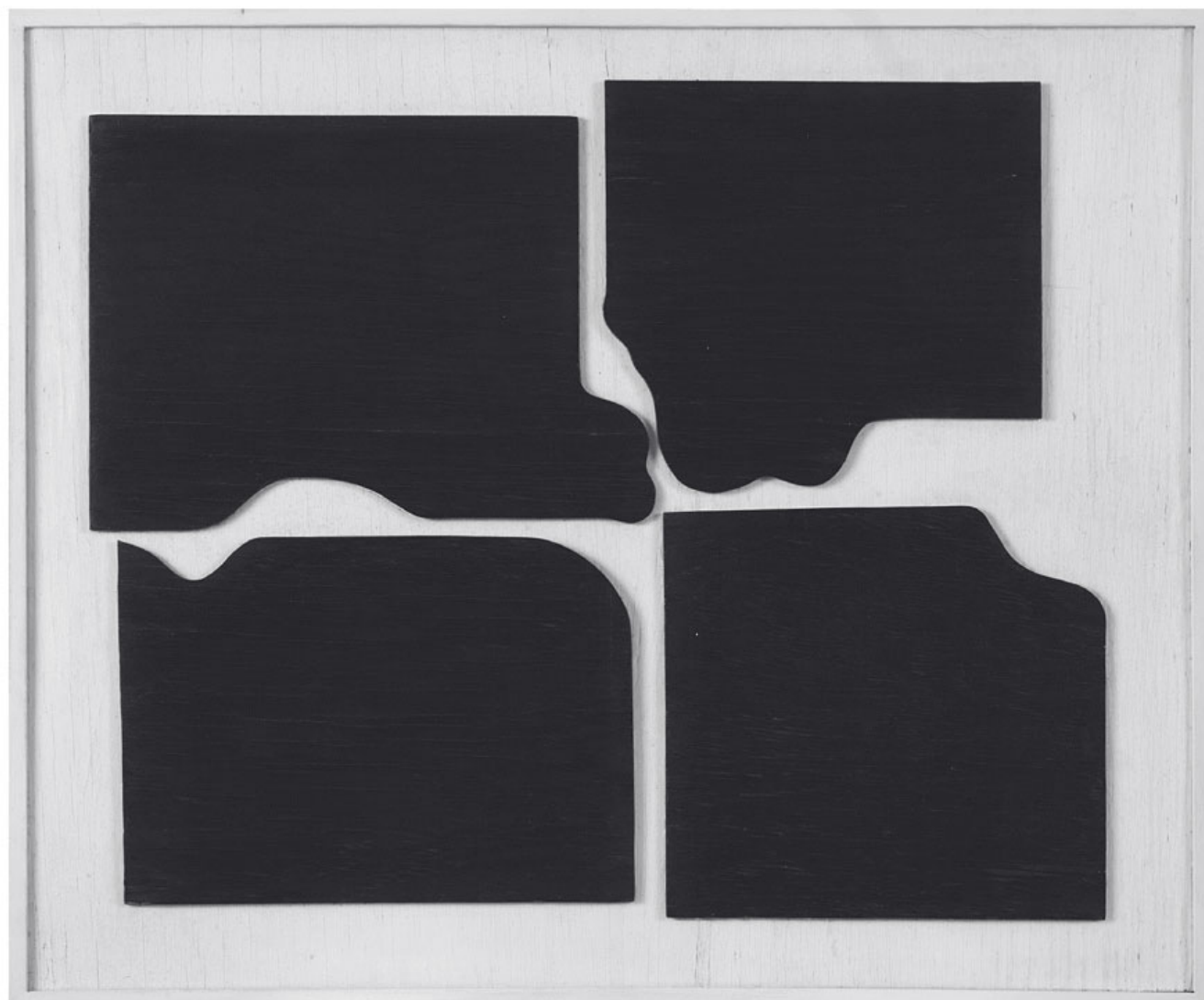
² G. Didi-Huberman, *Confronting Images: Questioning the Ends of a Certain History of Art* (University Park, 2005), p. 141.

³ A. Leśniak, *Obraz płynny, Georges Didi-Huberman i dyskurs historii sztuki* (Kraków, 2010), p. 42.

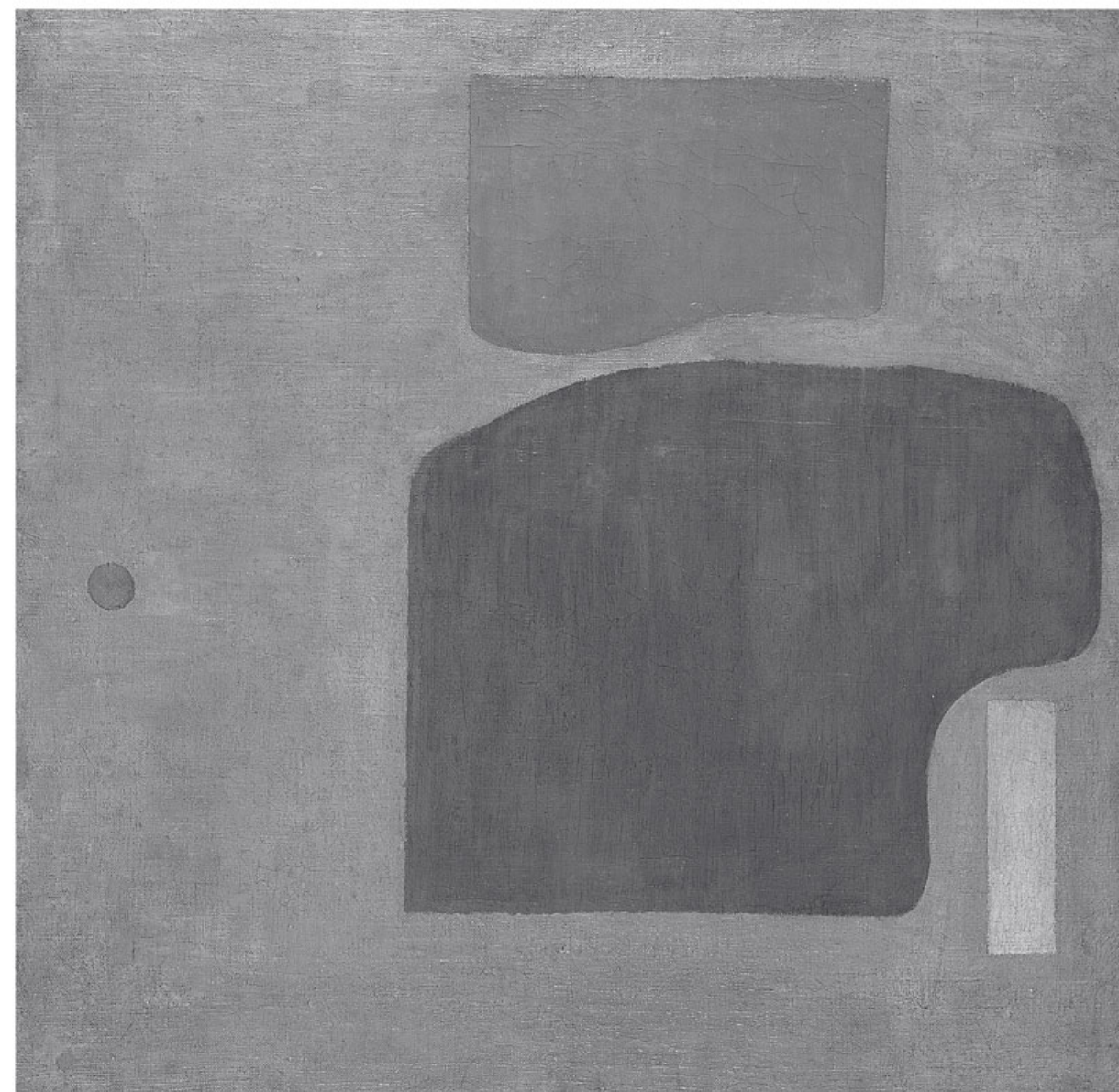
⁴ Didi-Huberman, op. cit., p. 143.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid., p. 144.



Władysław Strzemiński, *Konstrukcja płaska (rozbięcie czarnego prostokąta)* (Flat construction [Division of a black rectangle]), 1923, relief and oil on wood, 52.5 × 63 cm, Dr. Werner Jerke Collection



Władysław Strzemiński, *Kompozycja postsuprematystyczna 2*, (Post-Suprematist composition 2), 1923, oil on canvas, 65 × 66 cm, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź



Władysław Strzemiński, *Kompozycja syntetyczna 1* (Synthetic composition 1), 1923, oil on canvas, 62 × 52 cm, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

SOME POSSIBLE CONSTELLATIONS

Mick Finch

Strzemiński's *Synthetic Composition 1* of 1923 is a work at the height of his achievement. As an early work it lies "in-between" his years in Smolensk and the Unism works that properly begin in 1924. Thus it can be viewed as a transitional work where, through pictorial practice, he was developing a studio strategy that has parallels with diverse groups of his works from the 1920s and the 1930s. *Synthetic Composition 1* [fig. 47] raises a series of questions that reveal the complexity of what he was formulating in the early 1920s. On the one hand, and on his return to Poland from his years in Russia, there is a questioning of Suprematism and UNOVIS positions. The label "Post-Suprematism" for this work is not merely a marker on the time line of his transition to Poland. It is clear from another work, *Still Life 3* [fig. 48] from the same year that he is simultaneously working through his relationship to cubism, the critique of which will become central to his thinking. By default the beginning of his formulation and critique of Baroque painting, with which Strzemiński would associate Cubism, has its seeds here. In short, the thinking we find in his *Unism* essay of 1928¹ for which "B=2" from 1924² can be seen as a draft, appears to be at work in the paintings from 1923. There seems to be another series of questions that need raising before entering into a discussion about this painting as somehow being at a moment where Strzemiński is simultaneously attempting to distinguish pictorial construction from the Baroque, Cubism, and Suprematism.

These questions risk introducing what might appear to be a stereotypic morphological relationship to a term that Strzemiński repeatedly employs in his 1928 *Unism* text. For example in the *Contrast of Shapes* section he says:

None of the shapes is derived from a clear necessity of its existence; it is needed indirectly for other shapes but not for itself and for the picture. By looking for contrasts one will not find a connection between shapes that would ensure a uniform painterly organism. The opposing shapes will always remain inimical, forever alien, producing the tension of a condensed, rich, and powerful form, full of dramatic contrasts of shapes, the form that forces a unity of external connections through coercion but which will never result in a painterly organism whose parts are connected through inner logic.³

Later in the text he says: "The analysis of all painting in the Baroque tradition should lead to the conclusion that the Baroque

¹ W. Strzemiński, *Unizm w malarstwie* (Unism in painting) (Warsaw, 1928).

² W. Strzemiński, "B=2," *Blok* (November–December 1924).

³ W. Strzemiński, *Unizm w malarstwie*, op. cit., p. 9.

fig. 47 – p. 144

fig. 48 – p. 154

has not been capable of creating a genuinely uniform painterly organism."⁴

Organic and organism are peppered throughout Strzemiński's writing and seem to point to, not only the idea of unity and autonomy, but also from where they are derived. Yve-Alain Bois, in his essay on Strzemiński and Kobra⁵, also brings attention to this term but in the guise of *organicity*. His discussion pulls toward how it can be seen as part of the radicalization of notions of medium and specificity. However, *organicity* suggests a wider frame of reference that subtends this formal reading. Where is it derived from? What other contexts does it evoke? How, if at all, was it put to work in Strzemiński's practice?

As suggested, in 1923 there are many contrasts and conflicts at work in the world Strzemiński found himself in. The move from Russia also spelt a distancing from central tenants of UNOVIS and Suprematism; the aftermath of Cubism brought with it many questions, the Poland Strzemiński finds himself in is a diverse intellectual and artistic hub looking to forge a radical culture yet simultaneously responding and aware of what is happening in Paris, Italy, Russia, and Holland. In 1923 there were also the beginnings of radical artist groups in Poland that would later manifest themselves as *BLOK*, *Praesens*, and *a.r.* By 1922 the journal *Zwrotnica* had commenced publishing. The role of the journals associated with these movements is crucial here. The Polish avant-garde, like all of the "utopian" movements of that time, saw themselves within an international intellectual context. *a.r.* believed that there should be an international collection in Poland, an ambition that Strzemiński was instrumental in achieving subsequently in Łódź. Strzemiński would have seen Cubist works in Russia as well as witnessing the production and practice of the resident radical artists. An additional element to this context is the means, dissemination, and reception of ideas from elsewhere in Europe and particularly from Paris.

In the *Unism* text Strzemiński makes an interesting remark. He says:

...applying the same test of an objective form to cubism, we have to state that Cubism in its early stages – in particular those preceding the important breakthrough of Ozenfant and Jeanneret around 1918 – is (essentially) the Baroque, consciously applying the principles that distinguish Baroque painting, though in a purified and intensified form.⁶

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Y.-A. Bois, "Strzemiński and Kobra: In Search of Motivation" in *Painting As Model* (Cambridge, Mass., 1990) pp. 123–155.

⁶ W. Strzemiński, *Unizm w malarstwie*, op. cit., p. 5.

Quite what Strzemiński is referring to here when he points to the “important breakthrough of Ozenfant and Jeanneret around 1918” is left open here, but 1918 seems to point to the publication of *Après le cubisme* in that year. It was also around this time that Gaumont produced a newsreel about Cubism, its final section was titled *After Cubism, Purism*. Ozenfant boasts of this in his text, *The Evolution of Purism*. The intrigue here is the form of the reception of a set of ideas that were probably instrumental in forming Strzemiński’s own position. Ozenfant and Jeanneret’s *Après le cubisme*, although very different from the complex critique of Cubism in his *Unism* text, points to a powerful position from which Strzemiński’s thinking evolved. It would seem reasonable to speculate that Strzemiński’s response is in some part through contact with the publication of *Après le cubisme*, when he would have been in Russia. I have found no evidence in my readings that Strzemiński was ever in Paris, and it seems unlikely he was there between 1918 and 1923, the year *Synthetic Composition 1* was painted.

This is perhaps to make a very obvious point. The circulation of ideas at this time was in the form of secondary sources and particularly journal and book form as much, possibly more after his stay in Russia, than having a sustained contact with actual avant-garde works of art (Strzemiński would have had contact with key works in Russia of the active generation of artists there but also of Cubist works. It is also probable that in Russia he would have had an early contact with Bogdanov/Pavlovian physiological ideas, which could have played a later role in his *Theory of Vision*).

By 1922, the year of his crossing into Poland, there is a dramatic change. In that same year Strzemiński had published his “Russian Art – Notes” in the Polish journal *Zwrotnica* and in 1924 he was the co-founder of the BLOK association of artists and the publisher of the journal of the same name. Tadeusz Peiper, who was at the centre of *Zwrotnica*, seems to play a key role in these years. He had spent time in Paris up to the outbreak of the First World War, the significance of which I will return to later. Context for Strzemiński in these years is as much a turn toward the form of the journal for the dissemination of his own ideas, and feasibly the circulation of journals is reasonably also a conduit informing him about what is taking place elsewhere. 1918 is the publication of *Après le cubisme* and 1920 is when publication begins of Ozenfant and Jeanneret’s *L’Esprit nouveau, Revue internationale de l’activité contemporaine* (to give it its full title).

The question being made here is how far does Strzemiński’s turn to ideas emanating from France go beyond the forming of his critique of Cubism and the Baroque? How far do they also play a role in his repeated deployment of *organism*, as a term and concept? Before turning to Ozenfant and Jeanneret as a possible source here, it is important to return to the poet Peiper’s role on the scene in Poland at this time. Peiper was a cosmopolitan, had spent many years in Paris, attended lectures by Bergson,⁷ and was completely conversant with the artistic developments taking place at that time in France and beyond. On his return to Poland his contact with Paris was clearly manifest in his essay “Modern City, Mass, Machine” published in 1922 in his journal *Zwrotnica*.⁸ In section II of this essay he develops an argument that opposes the “concept of organicity” to that of “geometricism” (an opposition he cites as being at work between geometry and *un-form*). He says:

The question arises, if there is possible some form of artistic order that, not being supported on more and more dull geometricism, could still become the principle of a strict and logical construction of a work of art. It seems to me that such a form of order is possible and that sooner or later it will find its way into the field of art. It is the concept of organicity which is such a form. It is an organism that some day will become the model for the construction of a work of art. The several parts of a work will be related to each other by a strict functional dependence which will constitute the unity of the work.⁹

It’s not just that in Peiper’s essay we find a very comprehensive expression of organism at work that predates Strzemiński’s use of it by about two years. We also find an expression of the extent this biological concept goes beyond a formal and morphological naturalism.¹⁰ Peiper, later in the text, links organicity not only to natural organisms but also to an expression of the mass in society. He says: “A work of art will be socially organized. A work of art will be the society.”¹¹

Like Strzemiński’s unreferenced deployment of organism in his writing, Peiper gives no firm indication what he is referring to specifically by organism, what the origin of this term might be, and who the key references are. There is much that can be inferred here. And many connections to a Paris-based context can be linked to Peiper as a conduit of an over-arching background of

⁷ In Andrzej Plauszewski’s biographical note on Peiper, *Constructivism in Poland* (Essen and Otterlo, 1973), p. 132.

⁸ T. Peiper, “Modern City, Mass, Machine”, in *Constructivism in Poland*, *ibid.*, pp. 59–65.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

¹⁰ See Bois’s discussion about this concept in *Painting as Model*, *op. cit.*, pp. 154–155.

¹¹ T. Peiper, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

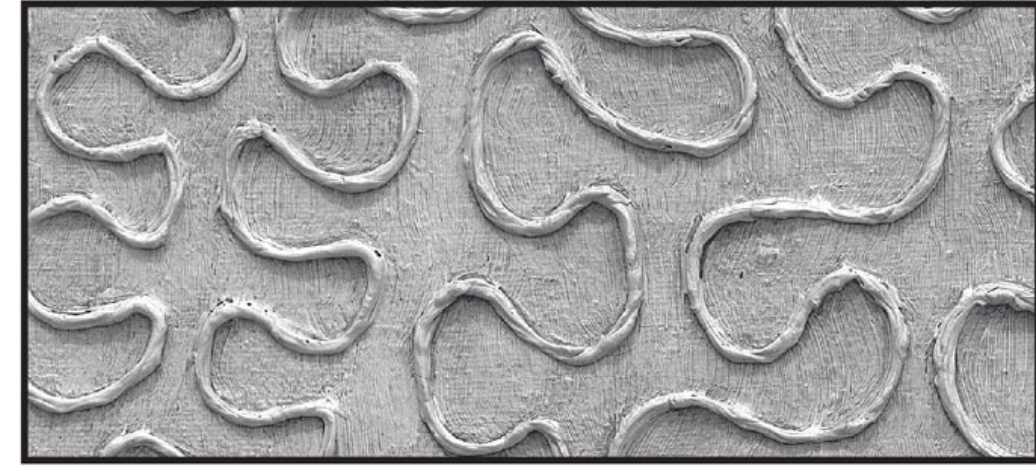
Difference, repetition and rhythm, like the opposition and contrast that Strzemiński rejected, expand beyond painting as such, since they could apply across the arts and to life itself, but at the same time he emphasizes the singularity of the individual painting. It is notable in this respect that the Unistic paintings form groups but not series. There are commonalities in approach, but at the same time each painting stands for itself. Further, if the art forms have their own laws, which develop from within the practice, they cannot be subsumed as a moment in a larger progressive history, a stage that will be superseded. And indeed, for all his quasi-scientific assertion of the laws of art, and the historical schemas from the Baroque through Impressionism/Cézanne/Cubism that he created to justify his Unistic painting as some kind of culmination of and break with this tradition, the temporality of Strzemiński's own oeuvre does not appear to be that of a sequential development, neither internally, nor in its relation to history. This may be seen in the context of the growing political pessimism of the 1930s, but it already seems implicit in Strzemiński's earlier work, and may be related to his distinct position in relation to Soviet Constructivism, eliminating dynamism, and rejecting both the transcendental references of Malevich's school and the Productivists' subsumption of the artwork to the larger social whole, while wanting to maintain a utopian potential in the paintings themselves.¹³

In *Unistic Composition 13* Strzemiński presses the experience of vision right into the painting. The divergence of the wavy vertical bands forms the appearance of a bulge towards the middle of the painting, as if an optical illusion were registered in the picture, in such a way that inner vision and outer reality coalesce. This is an exaggeration of the physical effect of looking at parallel lines, when a bulge is created towards the centre of the field, as a result of the different distances of the lines from the centre of the spherical eyeball. Thus the apparent bulge in *Unistic Composition 13* seems to marry the surface with the eye: the eye seems to be extended beyond the optical, phenomenal experience in order to be embedded in the materiality of the paint. Jaromir Jedliński writes of Strzemiński's later "solaristic" works that "he identified the field of the painting with the retinal image which appears in the eye" and that he once spoke metaphorically of "the eye at the end of the brush."¹⁴

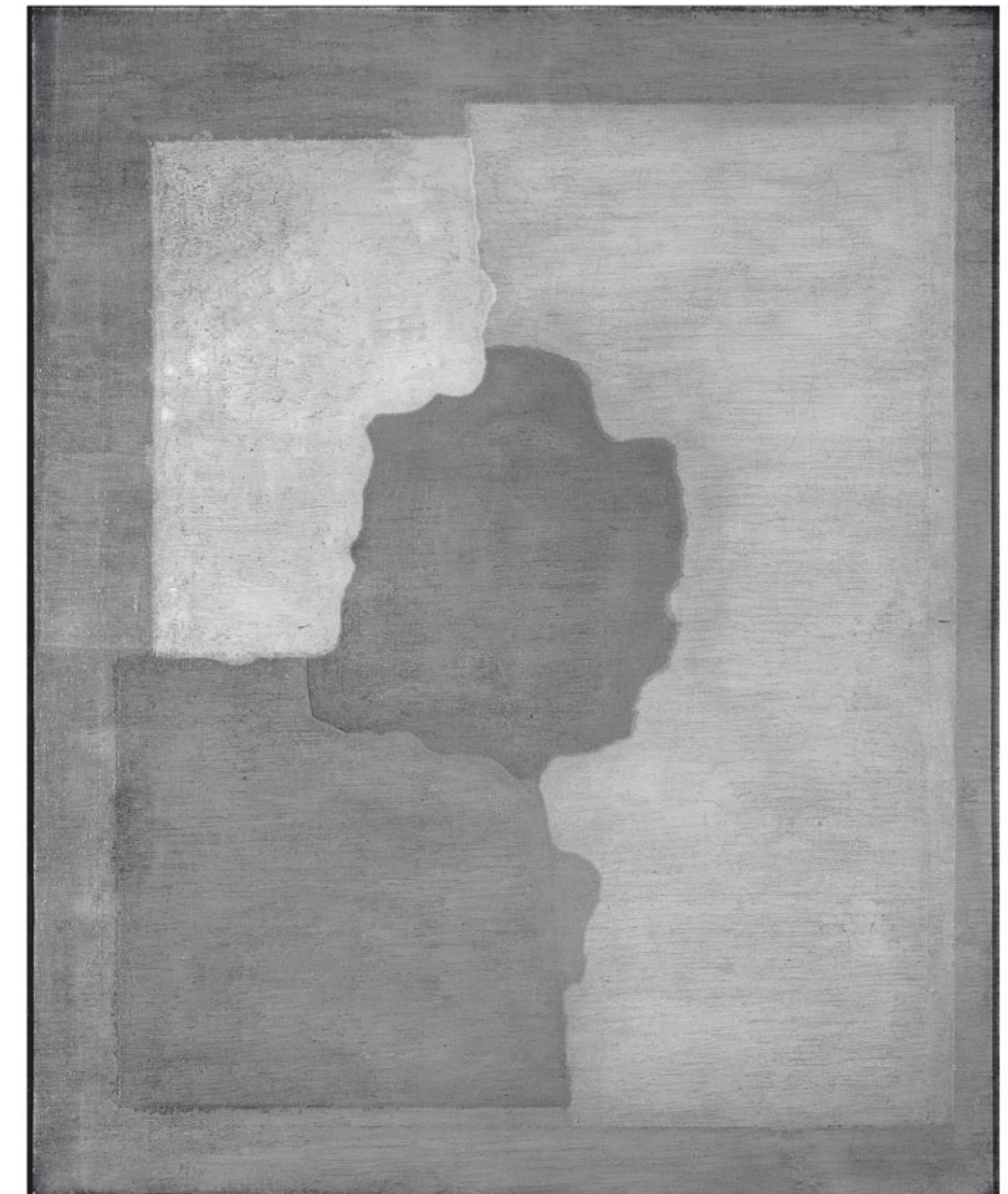
Seeing is shown to include a dimension that goes beyond – or better beneath – opticality. We could consider this something like a "literal" materialization of vision, somewhat analogous to the materiality of the text discussed by Paul de Man: this physical

¹³ See J. Ładnowska, "The Open Work of the Master Builder," *Władysław Strzemiński, 1893–1952: On the 100th Anniversary of His Birth*, op. cit., pp. 25–27.

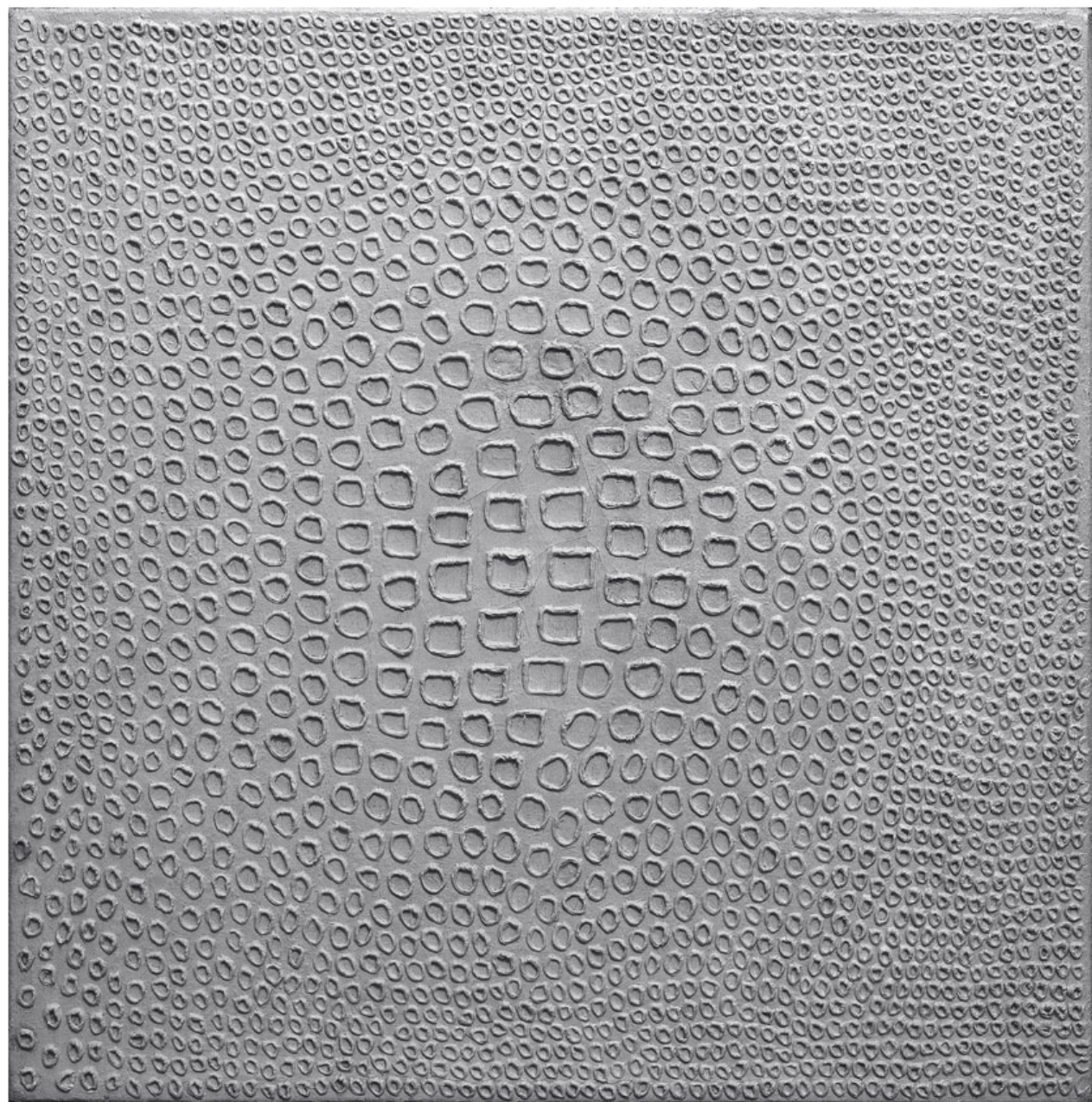
¹⁴ Jedliński, op. cit., p. 20.



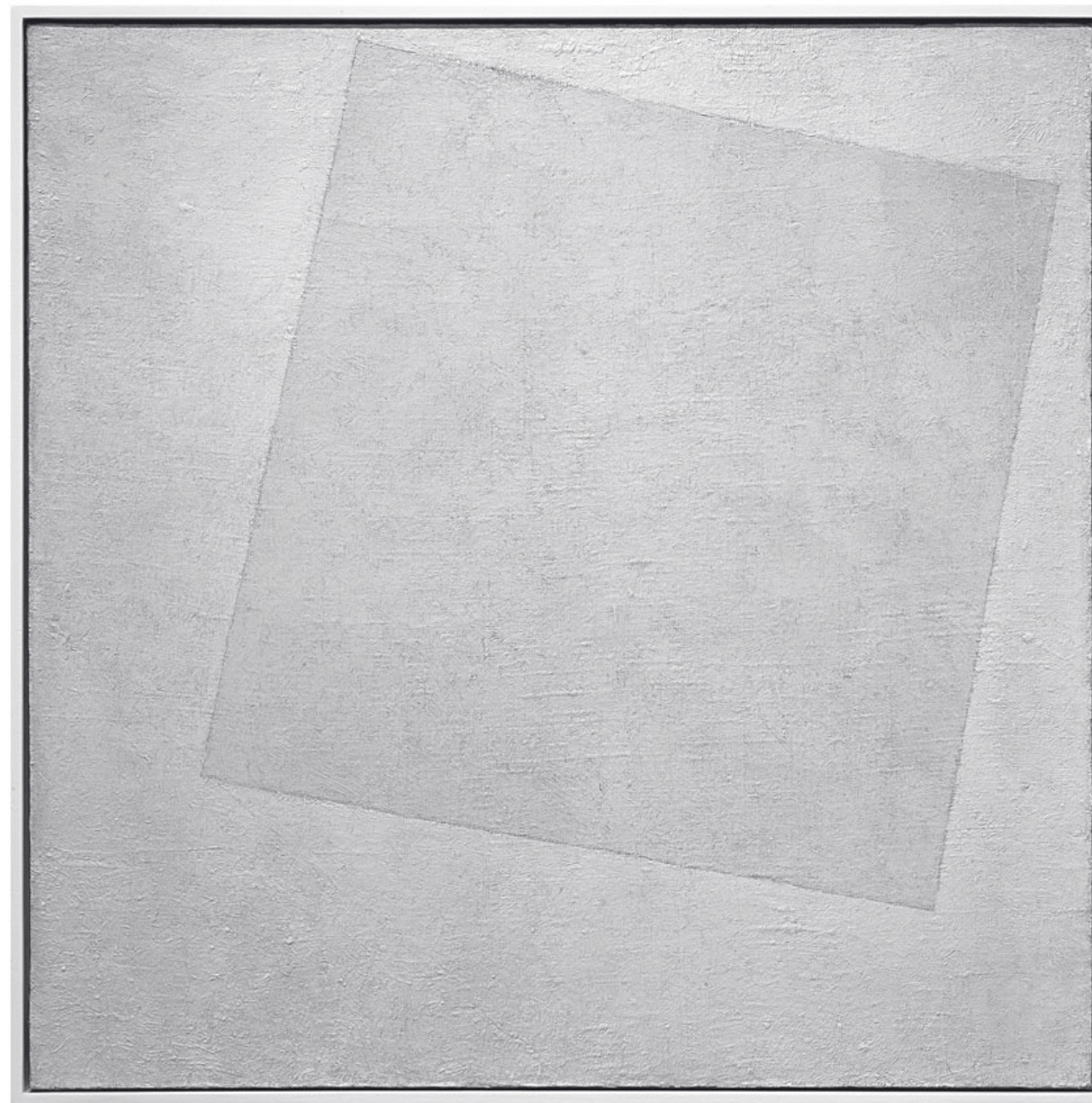
Władysław Strzemiński, *Kompozycja unistyczna 13* (Unist composition 13), detail



Władysław Strzemiński, *Kompozycja unistyczna 7* (Unist composition 7), 1929, oil on canvas, 77 × 63 cm, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź



Władysław Strzemiński, *Kompozycja unistyczna 14* (Unist composition 14), 1934, oil on canvas, 50 × 50 cm, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź



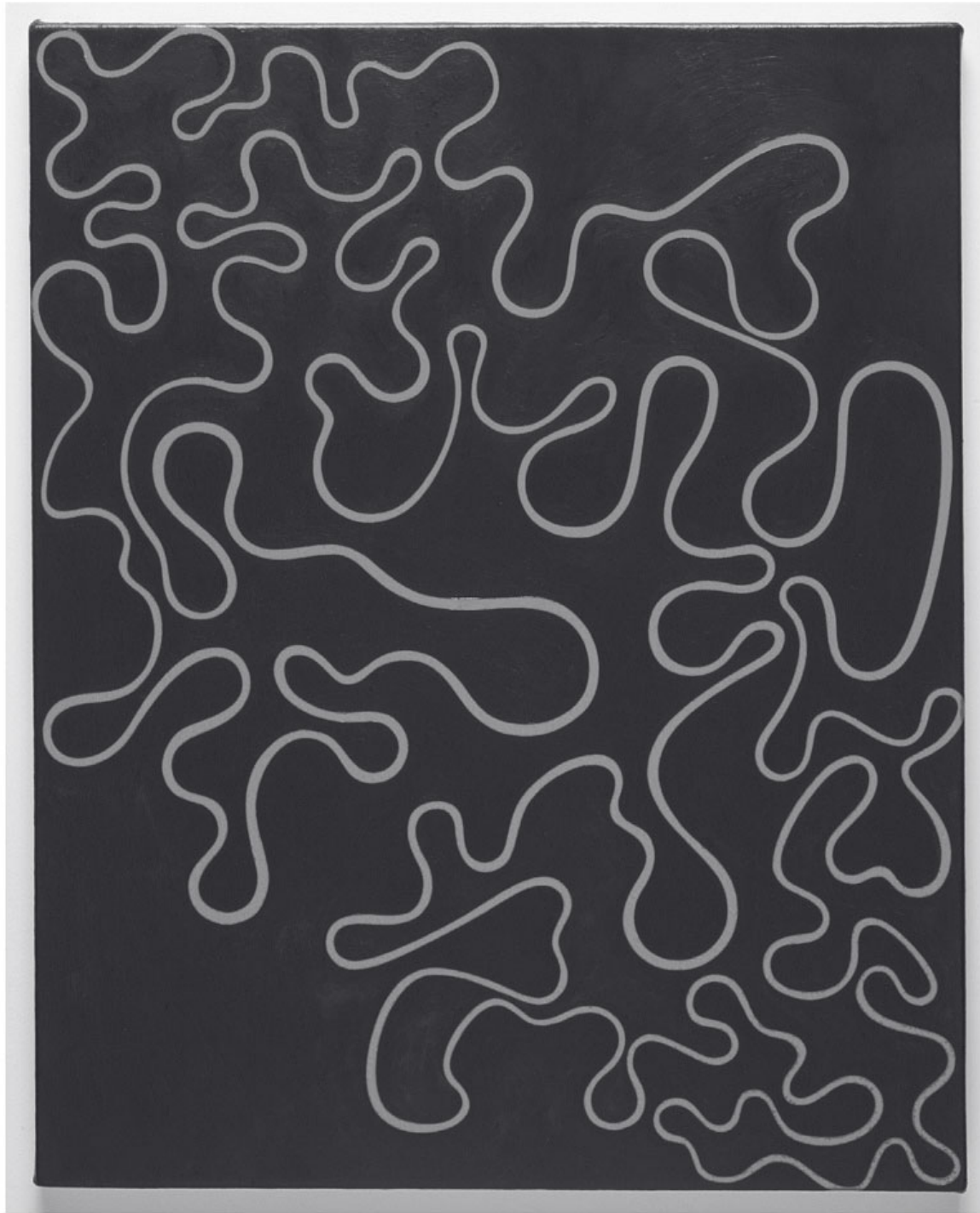
Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist Composition: White on White*, 1918, oil on canvas, 79.4 × 79.4 cm, digital image © 2015 The Museum of Modern Art/Scala, Florence



Władysław Strzemiński, *Kompozycja unistyczna 12* (Unist composition 12), 1932, oil on canvas, 50 × 38 cm, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

STRZEMIŃSKI'S “BIOLOGICAL” LINE

Brandon Taylor



Tomma Abts, *Heeso*, 2004, acrylic and oil on canvas, 48 × 38 cm, greengrassi, London

and yet preserved inside a series of superimposed layers of paint, slowly achieved and very slow to observe; a virtuoso display of "decisions lost and found," to cite a phrase from a critical review by Jan Verwoert.¹⁶ The visual consequence of such a procedure is interestingly absurd. And yet in common with Strzemiński before her, the painter has attempted to articulate the picture surface as a rhythmic object, without reference to the life of the instincts or the physiology of the artist alone. The social idealism of an earlier period may have gone into retreat. And yet for the painting's other practical dimensions, it can scarcely be doubted that the example of Strzemiński's Unism had prepared the ground.

¹⁶ J. Verwoert, "The Beauty and Politics of Latency: On the Work of Tomma Abts," *Tomma Abts* (New York and London, 2008), p. 96.