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Discussions of modernism have repeatedly identified the theme of its rationalism and progress, both social and technological, entangled in a dialectical model of thinking, based on mutually exclusive contradictions. The avant-garde, its driving force being a desire to transgress the status quo, is identified with the contestation of the historical models of culture. This contestation—or rebellion—bears the markings of emancipatory work, but also of efforts to realise utopian ideas, which often produce unwanted consequences—the dehumanisation and disciplining of new dimensions of life. Such a perception of the avant-garde is, to some extent, due to its very specificity: by employing dualisms, it explained its own *raison d'être*. As numerous researchers have stressed, such an optic is insufficient, especially when we are interested in showing the duration and continuity of the avant-garde model in 20th- and 21st-century culture.

A duality-based rhetoric collapses when we look at modernism, and at the avant-garde in particular, as a reaction to the changing paradigms of reality. There was a good reason why anti-naturalism and the affirmation of abstraction were among the key themes recurring in the various incarnations of the avant-garde movements of the early 20th century. They were a consequence of a larger issue—the accrual of knowledge about nature and man's role resulting from the rapid gains made by the natural sciences in the 1800s. In this context, *Superorganism. The Avant-Garde and the Experience of Nature* is an attempt to highlight previously underappreciated or marginalised visions inspired by the natural or by artistic or philosophical interpretations of the modern entwinement of the biological with the cultural. They demonstrate that at the basis of many seemingly highly rational, strictly old-vs.-new attitudes, there rest fundamental questions about man's role in the world. These questions are unique insofar that they appear at a moment when new discoveries in the field of biology reveal a close affinity between people, animals, and other natural creations. It is then

Superorganism. The Avant-Garde and the Experience of Nature is the first in a series of exhibitions organised by the Muzeum Sztuki in 2017 as part of the centenary of the avant-garde in Poland, aimed at examining its legacy from the contemporary perspective.

that questions about the scope and consequences of this affinity—to this day fuelling debates about man's status among animals—are asked for the first time. Interestingly, in the avant-garde era they elicit various answers, some of which could indeed be considered within the context of both contemporary posthumanist theories and those that still insist on a humanist perspective. Some are closer to materialism, while others are holistic, vitalistic, or actually metaphysical in nature. This is doubtless also a time of a rise in nature-centric or, as some researchers prefer, bio-centric (focused on life) tendencies, views, theories, and perspectives. In modernism, it is the natural order and the fascinating complexity of natural processes that are viewed as a source of inspiration, and analogies between the life of animals and humans become highly influential—suffice it to mention Maurice Maeterlinck's "insect trilogy" (*The Life of the Bee*, 1901; *The Life of Termites*, 1926; *The Life of the Ant*, 1930). Reading Maeterlinck's essays, we see in them not only scholarly knowledge, but also the encouragement to apply animal relationships to human experience. It is narratives such as Maeterlinck's that cemented natural-cultural analogies, which should be viewed with proper critical distance (though not necessarily rejected altogether). The famous popular scientists, historians, and philosophers of the era were often persons with a background in the natural sciences, who used metaphor as a means of demonstrating interdependencies between the *Homo sapiens* and its environment, as well as to emphasize inter-species similarities and the uniqueness of every living being.

The term "superorganism" is one of such natural-science metaphors aimed at highlighting the tension between individual and collective potential, between autonomy and dependency, specialisation and efficiency. It denotes a social unit of organisms that as individual entities do not necessarily display any special survival skills, but in collaboration with others comprise a powerful "superorganism." Examples include certain eusocial insects

(ants or termites) or slime moulds. The latter occur all over the world, from the North Pole to the South Pole. They are neither plants, nor fungi, nor animals, but possess characteristics of them all. In certain conditions, they can form a superorganism that creeps, pulsates, and even grows limbs. The secret of insect societies, in turn, is the strong functional division of their members. Only one group, or "caste," is capable of reproduction; the others work for, protect, heal, or feed the colony.

The superorganism metaphor is useful when seeking to evoke the postulates that the avant-garde (which actually did not use the word) made with regard to man's significance, role, and responsibility. Mankind as a self-organising species that operates as a whole may be seen in this perspective as a metaorganism that is something more than the sum total of its parts. Using his intelligence, creativity, strong social skills, and expansive nature, man has colonised almost the entire planet. Inhabiting virtually all climate zones, he has adapted to life in the hot tropics as well as in the Arctic cold. At the same time, he has been changing Earth at a faster pace than the millions of years of geological evolution. The era of this expansion has been termed the Anthropocene—the "human epoch"—and it has seen not only rapid civilisational progress, but also the dangerous degradation of the environment in many parts of the globe. In a way, modernism was aware of man's crucial role in the shaping of nature, though not quite of its negative consequences. It held a positive view of efforts to organise the environment, seeing these efforts as a way of transforming it that lends a direction to the blind forces of nature and involves a responsibility for the world. For this reason, modernist attitudes may be considered as an archaeology, as it were, of contemporary environmental debates.

Using the term "superorganism" requires making a reference to the still highly influential notion of the organism, as well as to concepts such as organisation or the organic. It needs to be remembered that the division into

organic (i.e., animate) and inorganic (i.e., inanimate) matter was made only as recently as the late 18th century. The organic was supposed to be bound up with production, growth, and reproduction, whereas the inorganic connoted death. Michel Foucault brought attention to the consequences of establishing a fundamental distinction between life and death by distinguishing the specificity of the former. It is also an argument for the superiority of the organic over the inorganic, one that influenced intellectual formations in 19th- and 20th-century social and political sciences, visual culture, and art, where the notion of the organism carried new connotations: of parts working on behalf of the whole, of balance, harmony, and autonomy. The organism was both metaphor and a (biological, ideological, and empirical) concept that was even used in the context of metaphysics.

Both the exhibition and this publication are an invitation to look, from the perspective of the sensitive apparatus that is art, at the history of man's relationship with the environment. Examining but a short fragment of that history—the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries—we can see how greatly the development of the natural sciences and technology, as well as philosophical texts and art, contributed to an understanding of the complexity of the world. The conceptual framework of the exhibition and publication has been informed by the research of Olivier Botar, Fae Brauer, Linda Dalrymple Henderson, and Isabel Wünsche, among others, who in recent years have proposed new perspectives for interpreting the relationship between the avant-garde and science, technology, and nature. The project owes its character to an analysis of those propositions and to an examination of the avant-garde through the prism of contemporary philosophy and nature studies.

The comprehensive and multifaceted material has been divided into sections to closely examine the cultural contexts in which modern artistic attitudes emerged. Titled *The Postnatural Landscape*, *Biophilia*, *The Fourth Dimension*, *Embodied Vision*, *Microcosm*

and Macrocosm, and *Evolution*, they broaden the stereotypical notion of the avant-garde as a space of conflict between the rational and irrational, the materialistic and the spiritual, the pro- and the anti-technological. We try to demonstrate that both the work of particular artists and the specificity of entire artistic movements were far more complex than these dichotomous categories would suggest. Moreover, the issues that avant-garde artists and intellectuals grappled with have not lost their currency: a fascination with the potential of technology coupled with a reflection on environmental hazards, nature as an inspiration for designing both individual objects and entire systems, the impact of technology on human evolution and the study of various kinds of matter or interspecies boundaries, or finally the development of nature-informed ethics and the search for spirituality in materialistic philosophies—these are but some of the issues that are tackled within these sections. Each section consists of a mini-essay and a selection of exhibited works. This publication includes also larger essays by Fae Brauer, Isabel Wünsche, Iwona Luba, and Jacob Wamberg, discussing selected themes connected with the exhibition's subject matter. Fae Brauer examines Darwinist narratives and processes she calls "naturizing evolution." Isabel Wünsche analyses how artists of the Organic School of the Russian avant-garde defined nature and the modern man's place in it. Iwona Luba writes about the Polish avant-garde in the context of environmental reflection, while Jacob Wamberg wonders how much the Benjaminian "second nature"—engineering and technology—changed the character of avant-garde art, anticipating contemporary discourses of posthumanism or the Anthropocene.

The book and exhibition comprise, therefore, a panorama of complex relationships between the avant-garde and the environment, which reveal the attitude of modernity to nature and culture. They form an intriguing picture of the fascinations, anxieties, illusions, reflections, and affects that

we experience in connection with nature and which, due to the universal and constant character of that experience, remain topical. On the one hand, they confirm the Faustian myth of the man-as-creator, building his world that has no limits. On the other hand, they belie the notion that the avant-garde manifested itself solely through the negation of nature and affirmation of the works of man, encapsulated in the triad of "metropolis–mass–machine." Finally, they ask questions that have been raised in the past and will likely continue to be posed in the future: about the relationship between man and the environment, its role and significance. These questions were aptly summed up by Herbert George Wells in his screenplay for the 1936 sci-fi film *Things to Come*: "But for man, no rest and no ending. He must go on, conquest beyond conquest. [...] And when he has conquered all the deeps of space... and all the mysteries of time... still he will be beginning. [...] Poor humanity—so fragile, so weak. Little—little animals. [...] And if we're no more than animals, we must snatch each little scrap of happiness... and live and suffer and pass... mattering no more than all the other animals do or have done. [...] All the universe or nothingness."

We all know well the story from the Book of Genesis, in which God places man in the Garden of Eden to tend it and to watch over it. The garden provided the first people with food and shelter, and they dwelled in it as an indissoluble, harmonious whole. But the perfect world crumbled, and they had to leave Eden. Man was torn from the state of innocent harmony and sentenced to a laborious struggle for existence, the barren land yielding nothing but thorns and thistle. A dream of returning to the home of nature lingered, and the garden became a metaphor for the co-dependence between man and his environment. In the age of Enlightenment, a question arose: what does it mean to be a good gardener? For instance, Johann Hermann Knoop, the Dutch pomologist and horticulturist active in the mid-eighteenth century, described himself as a “gardener, lover of mathematics and science.” His views were shared by Jacques-François Blondel, a classicist French architect wedding science with gardening and the management of nature. At the time, a well-kept garden became the exemplar of the reign of reason over nature, and good gardening was associated with refinement and composition. It was the “third nature,” discussed since the Renaissance, after the reintroduction of Cicero. In his work *On the Nature of the Gods* (45 BCE), Cicero described “second nature” as a result of the conquest of the “first nature,” one that existed without the interference of man. “Total dominion over the produce of the earth lies in our hands. We put plains and mountains to good use; rivers and lakes belong to us; we sow cereals and plant trees; we irrigate our lands to fertilise them. We fortify river-banks, and straighten or divert the courses of rivers. In short, by the work of our hands we strive to create a sort of second nature within the world of nature,” wrote the philosopher. But the aforementioned “third nature” meant more than exploitation. It stood for the idea of the garden—a work of art, but also of reason, where nature is refined, fully controlled, and ordered, perfectly coexisting with man in its best possible form. It is a somewhat civilised version of nature, where man becomes its maker, governing it with scientifically describable higher rules and creating a world of higher order, where symbiosis of culture and nature reigns. This modern concept of the postnatural landscape, characteristic mostly of the Enlightenment era, was still vital in modern times. The avant-garde did not significantly change its basic form, but gave it a much more mechanistic overtone.

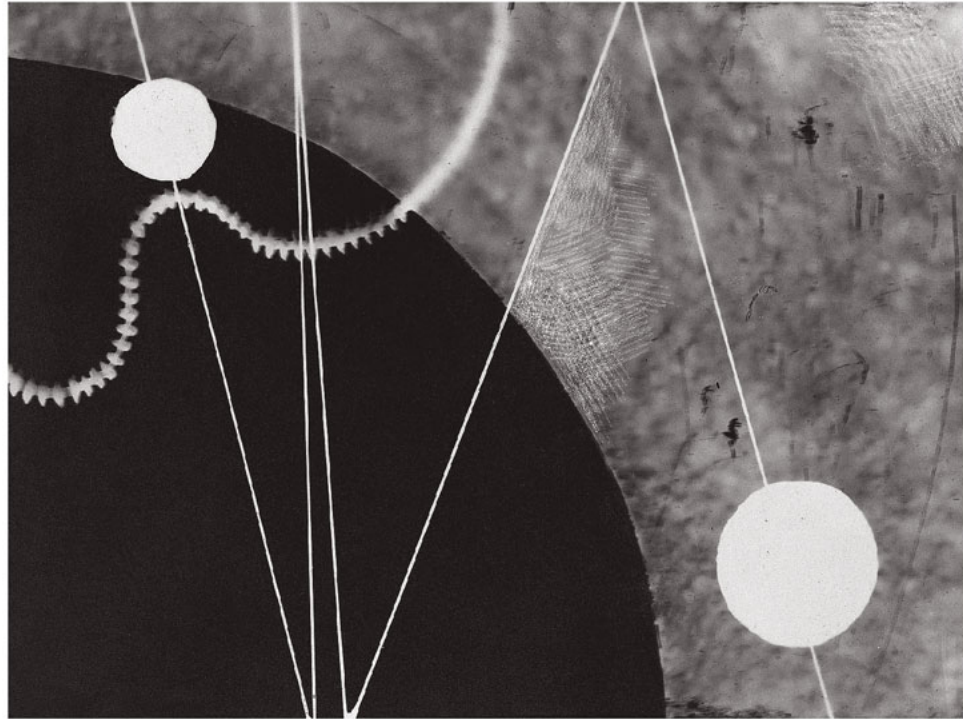
Rapid industrialisation resulted in an unprecedented urbanisation and utilisation of nature in the nineteenth and at the turn of the twentieth century, bringing expansion of factories, industrial mining, excavation pits, and trash heaps and rapid growth of cities, transforming and utilising natural resources. The pastoral landscape of the eighteenth century was replaced by grim, technical industrial buildings and installations, monumental silos,

cargo terminals, and ports, as well as the nearby green areas polluted with leaks, fumes, and industrial waste. Farmlands were strewn with telegraphic and electric posts; roads, aqueducts, and canals were erected; more and more bridges and locks cut through rivers; dams and artificial reservoirs were established; the railway network evolved. To grasp the scale of the latter, one should realize that at the beginning of the interwar period, there were 16,000 kilometres of railway lines in Poland (there are 19,000 presently). Deforestation also transformed the landscape tremendously—in the eighteenth century, forest land covered almost half of Poland, only to diminish to 21% in 1945. The environment was organised to ensure the best possible technical solutions in a never-ending parade of progress. During modernism, the constant success in the conquest and domination of further natural lands boosted confidence in the scope of human enterprise. Many went along with this, fascinated by the latest developments and the overall leap forward in civilization. Teresa Żarnower, an artist associated with the Polish avant-garde group Blok, wrote in 1923, “The impressions obtained from technology are replacing impressions derived from nature, and in a sense are perhaps closer to us. Machines delight us with the simplicity and logic of their design.” Mankind and nature were considered efficient devices requiring proper study and mastery. The chaos of biology was ordered not by the higher laws of the world’s mathematics, but in the efficient build of an organism, where each element has its meaning and purpose, developed over many years of evolution. Functionalism was one of the most significant repercussions of such a standpoint, and was a symptom of its time. Projects following function, based on the principle of organic form, shaped not by aesthetics, but by the demands of the project, were regarded as “natural” and close to “nature.” Mies van der Rohe, director of the German Bauhaus and a prominent figure of the radically functional and raw modernist architecture, was in that respect inspired by the Viennese botanist Raoul Heinrich Francé, who believed that engineering should obey and conform to the rules of nature. His propositions anticipated the development of biotechnics. Francé was convinced that prototypes of all technical accomplishments are to be found in natural creations. Huge engines of progress, such as the aeroplane or the turbine, were all based on living organisms. Distinguished figures of the avant-garde circles, such as László Moholy-Nagy, El Lissitzky, and Ernő Kállai, were inspired by his ideas. In his work *Bios: Die Gesetze der Welt* (*Bios: The Laws of the World*, 1923), Francé described “bios” as a universalistic natural system, where all parts are organised with regard to one another. The world, an integral ecosystem, is governed by the laws of maintaining optimal equilibrium, and the people, with their culture, part of this world as they are, should exist in accord with it. Francé promoted the search for balance

between human and natural activity. The harmony of a biosystem thus understood was to be based on cooperation, not competition. In this way, the ideal of organic construction, traceable in the views of many avant-garde artists, gravitated towards the ideas of Peter Kropotkin, the Russian explorer of Siberia and revolutionary, who, as early as the beginning of the twentieth century, introduced such concepts as aid and support into the discussion of the laws of evolution, considering them important factors of progress, and reevaluating the image of man, seeing him as a social and naturally altruistic being. On the other hand, the issue of the organic construction of human creations stemmed from the nineteenth-century doctrine of Organicism, according to which the functioning of separate parts depends on the whole. According to Herbert Spencer, Organicism meant that the principles of evolution and the struggle for survival are universal laws, determining the functioning of living organisms and nature as a whole, as well as the cosmos and human culture. And so the implementation of Organicism in the field of urbanism, where the city is viewed as an integral organism, embedded in the world and the surroundings on which it depends, became the basis of functionalist space planning, resulting in long-range effects and the redefinition of man's position in the world. Precursory to cybernetics, Alexander Bogdanov's Tektology, the first discipline studying systems and organisation, in which the Russian philosopher, moving towards praxeology, aimed to explain exhaustively the rules of the functioning of organisms, was conceived with reference to "organicity" thus understood.

Theoretically, the modernist landscape was based on scientific, objective studies. The latest discoveries in the field of biological sciences, related to the aforesaid consequences of industrialisation and Darwinism, but also to the study of the development of organisms, have determined the rationalisation and scientification of the experience of nature. What the eighteenth-century theoreticians of landscape architecture considered to be a mathematical model materialized in the discoveries of Gregor Johann Mendel, who, as early as the 1860s, had already defined primary laws of inheritance, discovering the possibility of transforming and controlling nature on the basis of mathematical rules. Thereby, the "second" and "third nature," described in modern times, were backed not only by the rules of biological purposefulness, but also by modern technological advancements, allowing nature to be modified and refined on an unprecedented scale. The techno-optimism of the avant-garde went hand in hand with a belief that technology was able to transform the socio-political sphere, becoming something of a "second nature" and improving the quality of life. On the other hand, Walter Benjamin postulated that people should learn how to use it in accordance with nature. In 1939 he wrote, in a Marxist spirit, "The conception [...] of the exploitation

of nature by man is in fact the reflection on the exploitation of man, spoken by the owners of the means of production." He viewed the "second nature"—the world of the humans—as strictly dependent on the "first nature," that is, the relationship between man and nature. While the human social systems of the pre-industrial age were determined by people's struggle to control nature, in the age of technological progress it was technology that determined the human organisation of the world. Progress and development were still tied to access to technology. The modernist postnatural landscape was an utterly technological one. Similarly to Benjamin, many avant-garde artists deemed it positive and beneficial for development. Even if it was already known in the 1930s that technology is not entirely neutral, and that nature turns out to be only partially mechanistic, the potential catastrophes envisioned were rarely ecological. More often, they were of a purely social nature and concerned the collapse of the happy human world or the diminishing of social justice. The concept of the "fourth nature," or the "zero nature," according to which man and his creations become a part of a larger system that self-organises in a larger, cosmic sense, will emerge later on, along with the dream of a more general restoration of nature's wilderness, vigour, and growth, far from human existence—a possible return to the mythical Eden.



Karol Hiller (1891–1939)

Kompozycja heliograficzna (II) | Heliographic Composition (II), ca. 1928–1930
 heliography on photographic paper, 8.7 x 11.6 cm
 collection: Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź
 photo: Department of Scientific Documentation, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź



Karol Hiller (1891–1939)

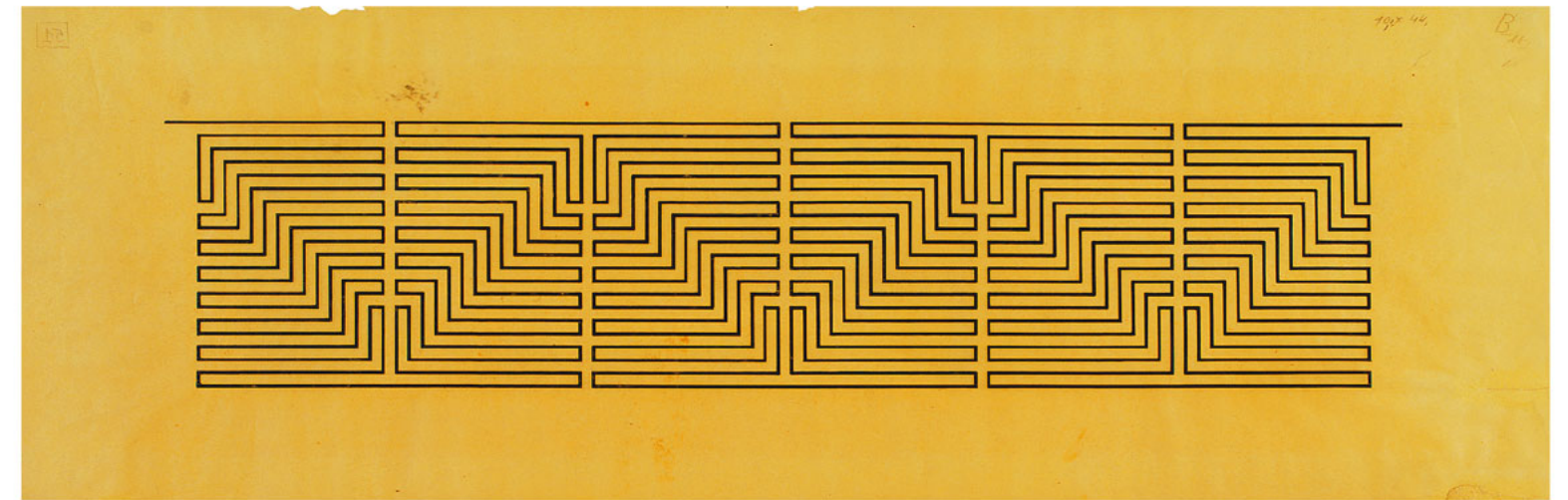
Kompozycja heliograficzna (III) | Heliographic Composition (III), ca. 1928–1930
 heliography on photographic paper, 9 x 11.6 cm
 collection: Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź
 photo: Department of Scientific Documentation, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź

Karol Hiller was interested in the genealogy of the universe and the forces that rule it. He had read the works of Henri Bergson, but, having studied chemistry at the Darmstadt University, also had an extensive knowledge of the natural sciences. In his search for the unity of man, nature, and the cosmos, Hiller employed new technologies such as heliography. In his printing process, conceived by the artist himself, he covered celluloid film with white tempera paint and impressed shapes on photographic paper. Heliography can also be executed through placing objects on a photosensitive material and irradiating them. The “revolt of matter” appearing in the picture was a result of the artist’s objectives and the uncontrollable chemical process. Hiller strived to visualise phenomena which could never be captured by two-dimensional modes of representation. The light, sound, electricity, magnetism, and gravitation always act towards the materiality of the ecosystem and towards themselves. Hence, the specificity of these forces and energetic waves could be utilized in painting—to “revolutionize” substance through mixing, extracting, irradiating.

A.J.

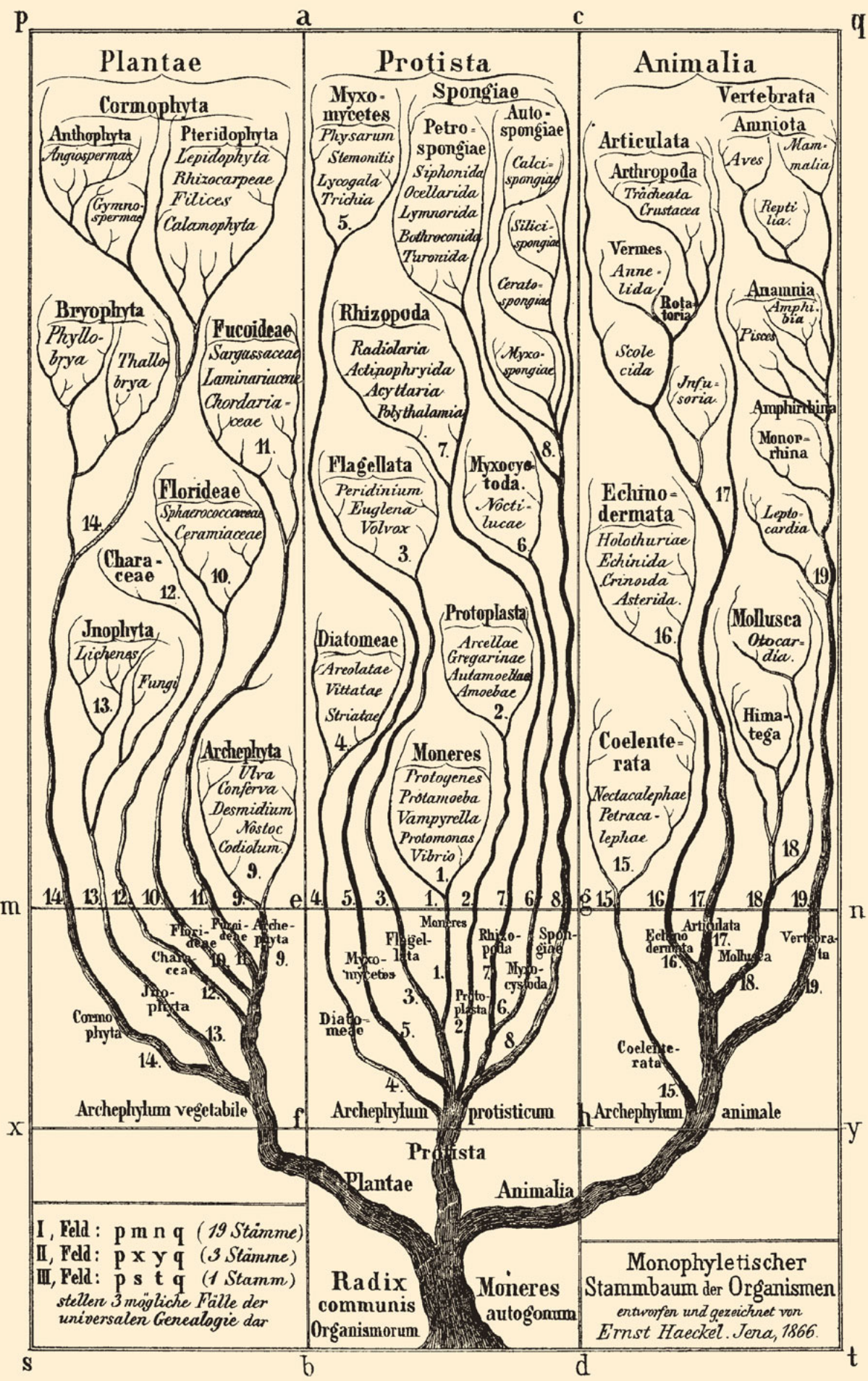
Starting from little sketches in notebooks, each one of Szpakowski’s *Rhythmic Lines (Linie rytmiczne)*—created between the years 1900–1954—was drawn with one single, uninterrupted line. The most important set, divided into a series denoted by letters from A to F, was created in the second half of 1920s. The lines’ most important characteristic was their homogenous construction and 1.0 mm-thick lines with 4.0 mm spacing. The artist duplicated continuous broken lines in many variations, transforming “a chaos of broken lines” into “visual harmony based on steady rhythmicity,” as he put it himself. Szpakowski related his works to geometry and music, searching for broader interdependencies and rhythms in the surroundings. For all that, *Rhythmic Lines* are a part of a cognitive process and a wide-ranging scientific programme. The artist’s notes reveal references to photography and architecture, scores of sounds produced by vibrating telegraphic wires, and the clacking of pebbles, descriptions of hurricane and thunderstorm rhythms, together with depictions of clouds. Szpakowski believed that the whole world, both natural and man-made, was underpinned by an invisible, but discernible, order of life, and that the process of drawing the lines accompanies its cognition. As a result, a composition became an image of “nature’s geometry,” a representation of vitality, transformation, nascence, passing, revival, the development of all processes, the structure of being, and the truth about the structure of the world. As the artist’s daughter put it, “When showing me a picture, Father made me look at it, saying, ‘Look, here’s the beginning—now follow the line. Very well, go ahead.’ And when I had reached the outlet, dizzy, weary from the all the turnabouts, unexpected U-turns and congestions, he would say, ‘See, how easy it was?’ And to think, that one needs 935 movements to find the meaning.”

P.K.-M.



Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973)

B 11, from the cycle *B*, 1924–1925
 ink on tracing paper, 19.5 x 58.5 cm
 collection: Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź
 photo: Department of Scientific Documentation, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź

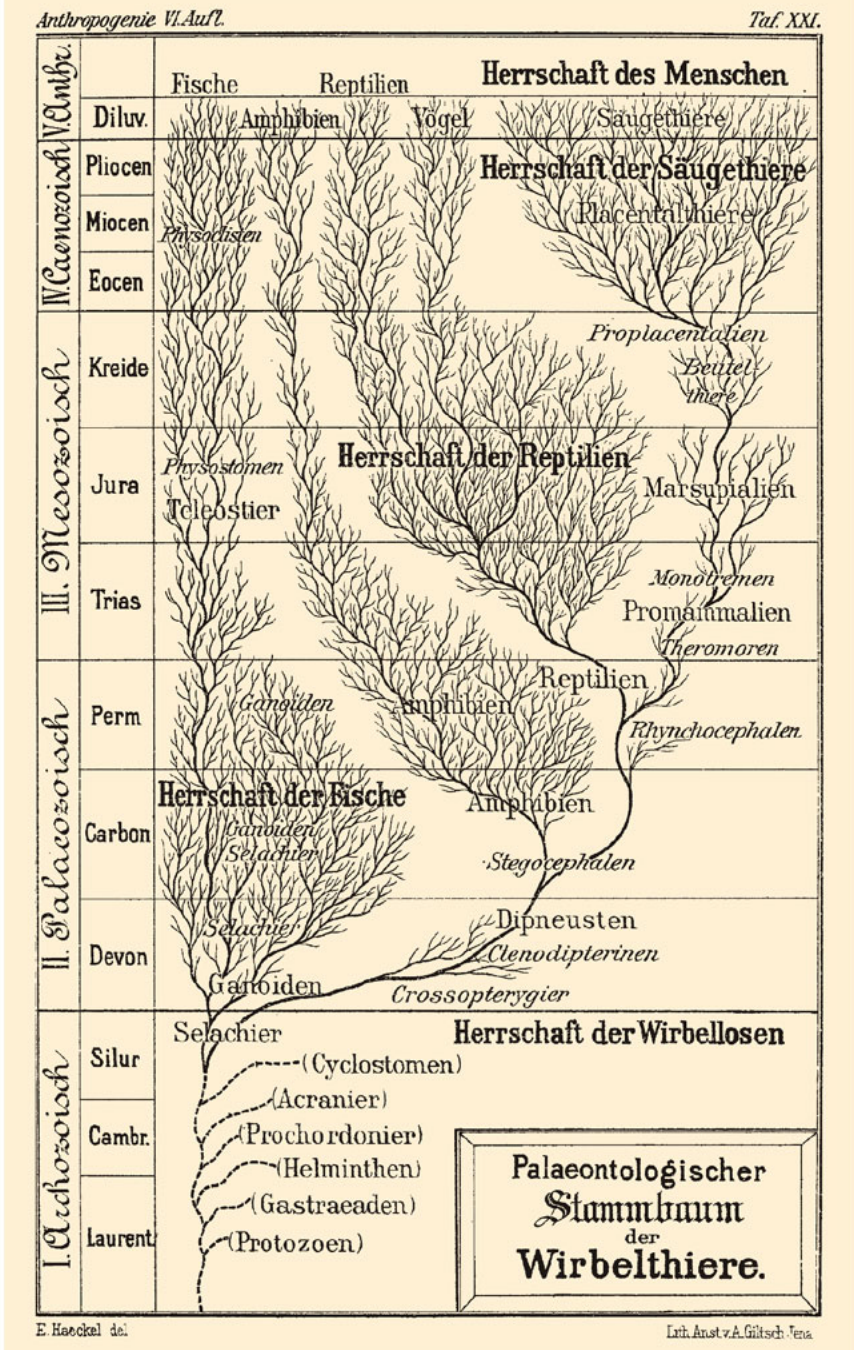


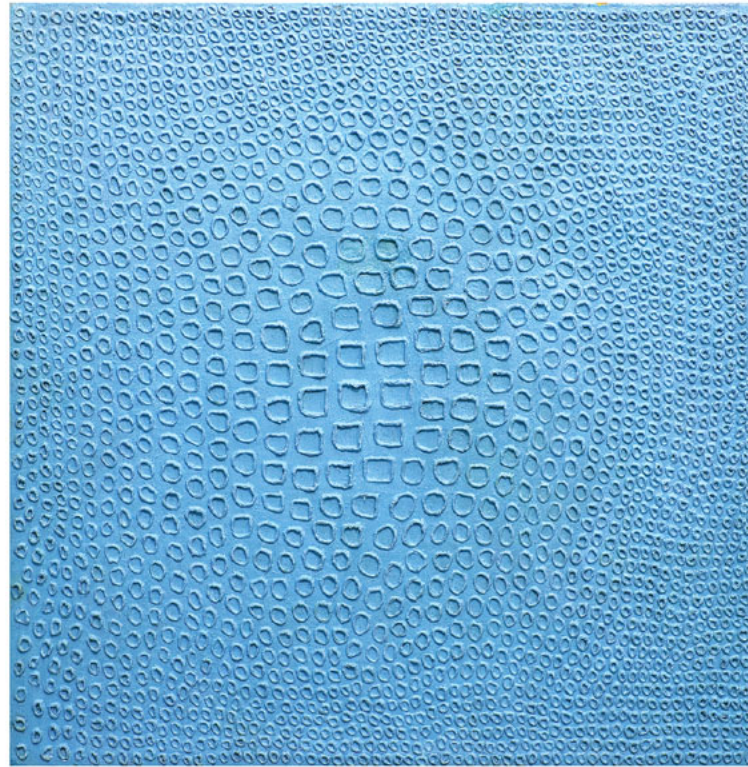
7

Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919)
 Paläontologische Stammbaum der Wirbelthiere |
 Paleontological Tree of the Vertebrates
 plate XXI from:
 Anthropogenie: oder, Entwicklungsgeschichte
 des Menschen | Anthropogeny:
 Or, the Evolutionary History of Man
 Leipzig: W. Engelmann, 1874
 photo: The Internet Archive, public domain online

6

Ernst Haeckel (1834–1919)
 Monophyletischer Stammbaum der Organismen |
 Monophyletic Genealogic Tree of Organisms
 plate I from:
 Generelle Morphologie der Organismen |
 General Morphology of the Organisms, vol. II
 Berlin: Verlag von Georg Reimer, 1866
 photo: The Internet Archive, public domain online





1

Władysław Strzemiński (1893–1952)

Kompozycja unistyczna 14 |
Unistic composition 14, 1934
 oil on canvas, 50 × 50 cm
 collection: Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź
 photo: Department of Scientific
 Documentation, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź
 © Ewa Sapka-Pawliczak & Muzeum Sztuki



2

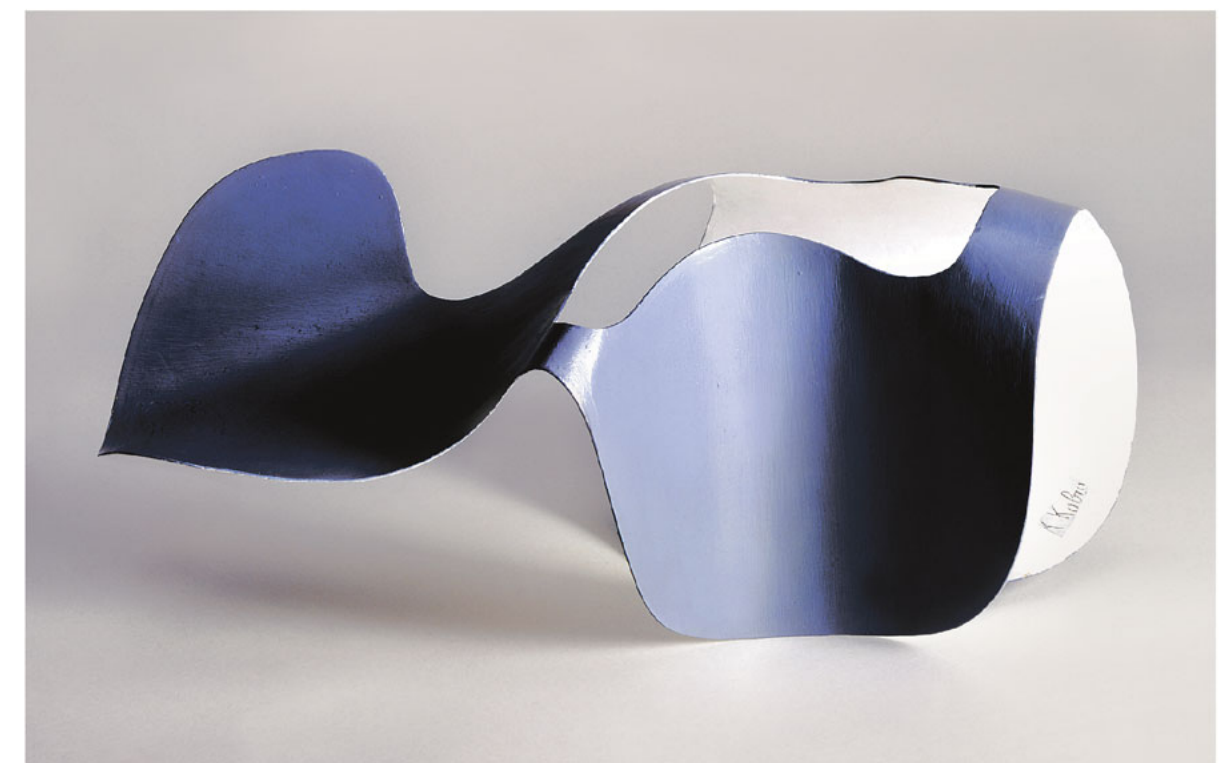
Katarzyna Kobro (1898–1951)

Kompozycja przestrzenna (4) |
Spatial Composition (4), 1929
 metal painted with oil paint, 40 × 64 × 40 cm
 collection: Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź
 photo: Department of Scientific
 Documentation, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź
 © Ewa Sapka-Pawliczak & Muzeum Sztuki

Katarzyna Kobro (1898–1951)

Kompozycja przestrzenna (9) |
Space Composition (9), [1933]
 metal painted with oil paint, 15.5 × 35 × 19 cm
 collection: Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź
 photo: Department of Scientific
 Documentation, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź
 © Ewa Sapka-Pawliczak & Muzeum Sztuki

3





4

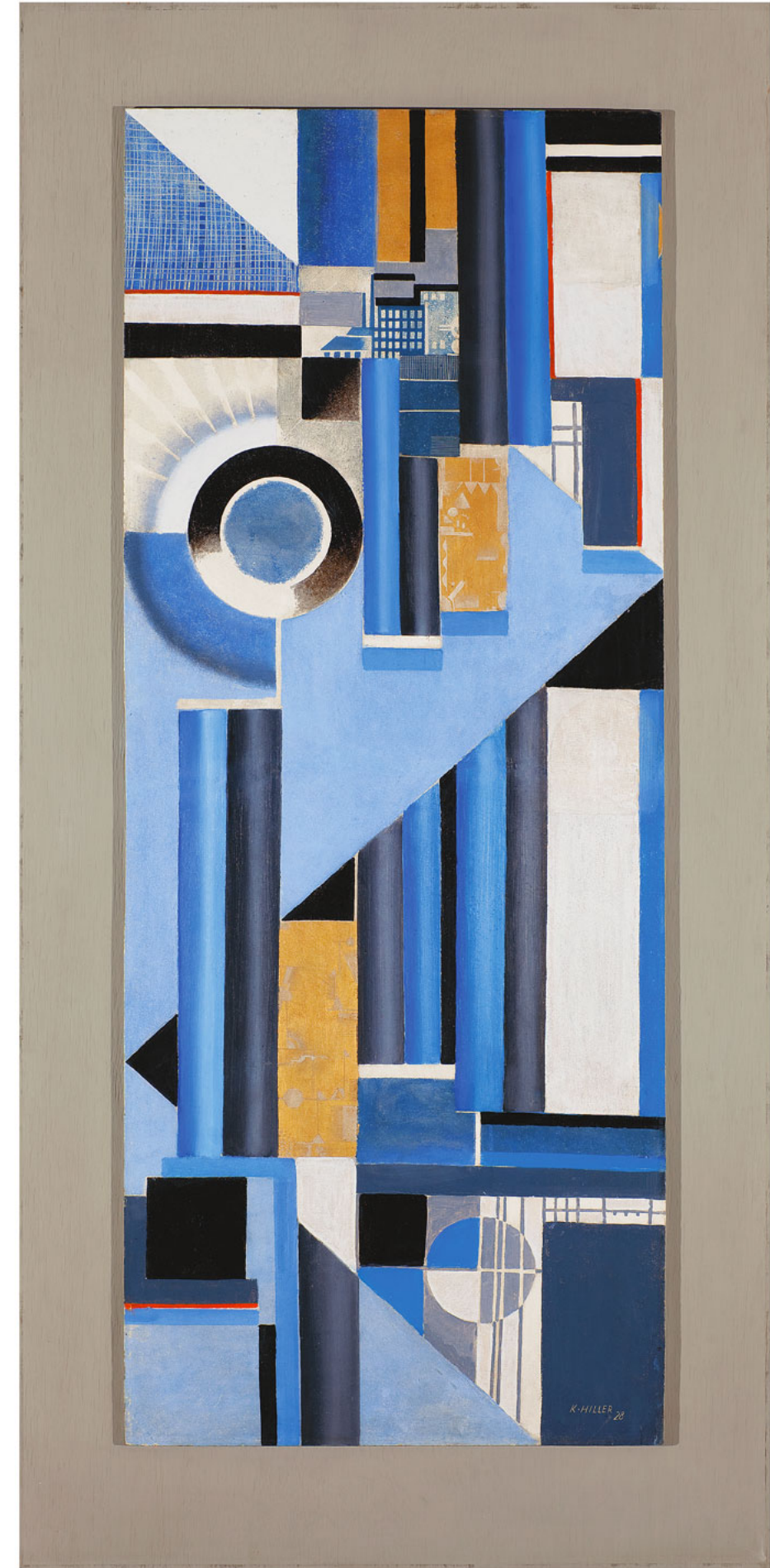
Władysław Strzemiński (1893–1952)

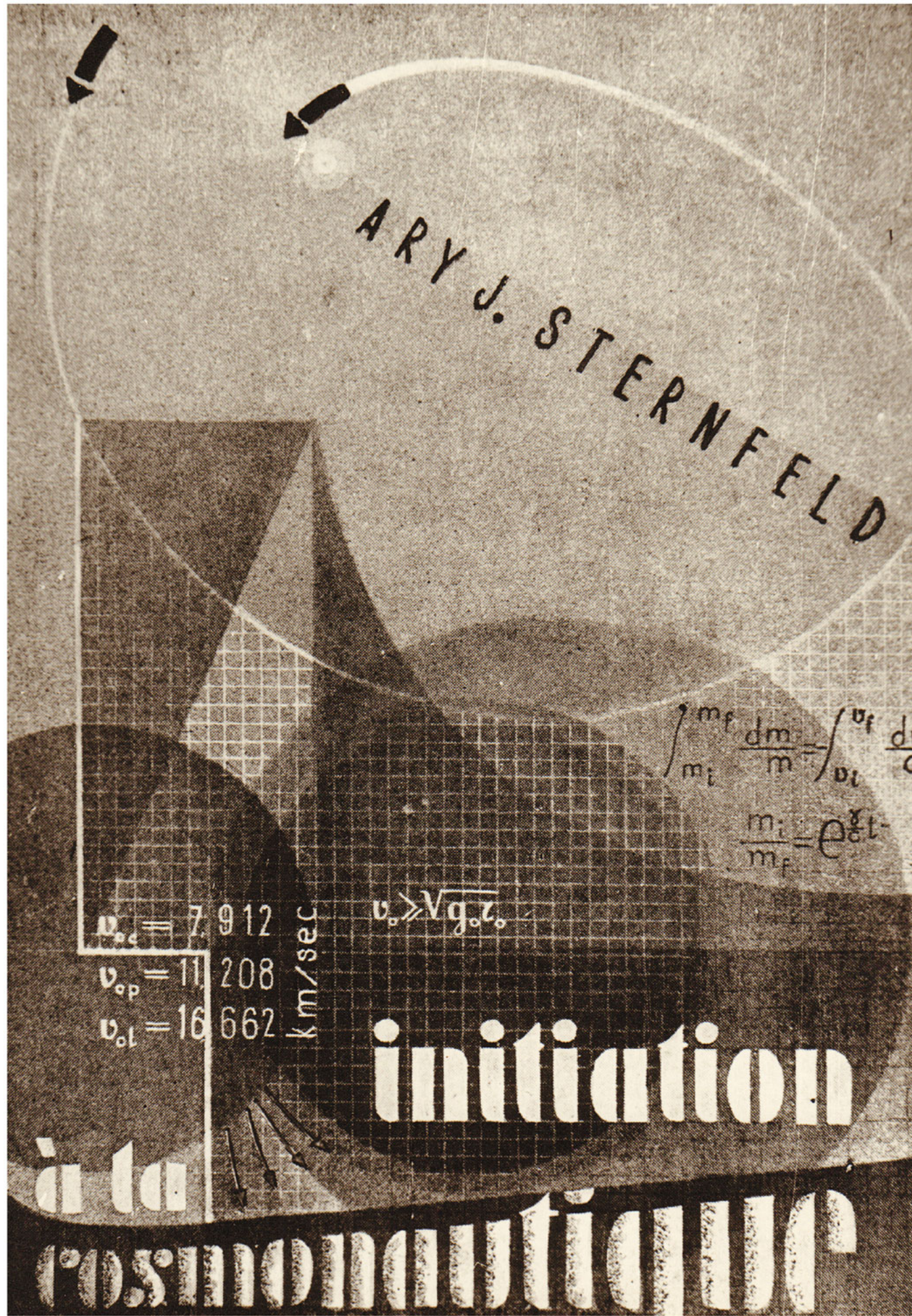
Pejzaż morski | *Seascape*, 13 VIII 1934
tempera on cardboard, 20 x 25 cm
collection: Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź
photo: Department of Scientific
Documentation, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź
© Ewa Sapka-Pawliczak & Muzeum Sztuki

5

Karol Hiller (1891–1939)

Deska 0 (Kompozycja 0) | *Board 0*
(*Composition 0*), 1928
oil and golden paint on plywood, 120 x 47 cm
collection: Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź
photo: Department of Scientific
Documentation, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź





6

Karol Hiller (1891–1939)

design of a cover for a book:
 Ary J. Sternfeld, *Initiation à la
 cosmonautique*, 1933
 photo: Department of Scientific
 Documentation, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź



7

Karol Hiller (1891–1939)

Promień | Ray, 1933
 oil on canvas, 120.5 × 60 cm
 collection: Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź
 photo: Department of Scientific
 Documentation, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź



9

Karol Hiller (1891–1939)

Kompozycja heliograficzna (XII) | Heliographic Composition (XII), ca. 1932–1934
heliography on photo paper, 39 × 29.5 cm
collection: Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź
photo: Department of Scientific Documentation,
Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź



8

Jerzy Janisch (1901–1962)

Figura z parasolem | Figure with an Umbrella, 1934
photocollage on paper, 40 × 22 cm
collection: Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź
photo: Department of Scientific Documentation,
Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź