Julian Przyboś
Władysław Strzemiński
and Katarzyna Kobro
ca. 1930–31

table of contents

foreword

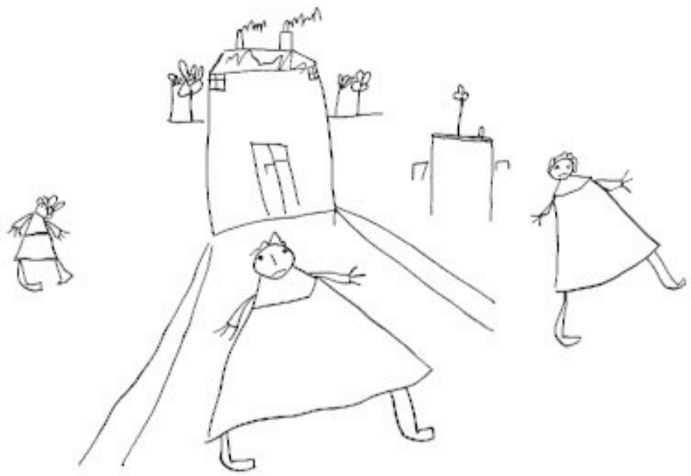
Daniel Muzyczuk

Three years after the end of World War II Władysław Strzemiński returned to an avant-garde movement that had long since died in Poland. He set to work on designing the Neoplastic Room, for the new seat of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź—in an urban palace that had belonged to pre-war textile factory owners before it was nationalized and converted into exhibition rooms. On its second floor the director of the museum organized an exhibition presenting the linear evolution of modern art starting from impressionism and concluding with abstract art. The culmination of the narrative came with Strzemiński's Neoplastic Room, meant to stand as proof that avant-garde art had been successfully emancipated from objecthood. He constructed a space that was meant to create the ideal conditions for contemplating the work of his peers.

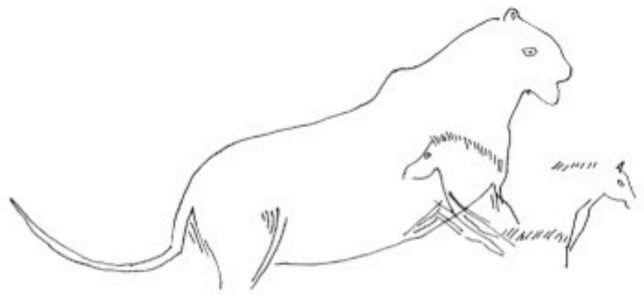
The renewal failed. Only two years after the opening of the museum, the show was altered. The room was painted white and figurative paintings replaced more progressive works. It was the result of the 1949 introduction of socialist realism as the official state doctrine of art, which deemed abstract pieces counterrevolutionary. Strzemiński was removed from his post at the Higher School of Plastic Arts and Design in Łódź and died of pneumonia in 1952. He did not see the restoration of the room that would happen only eight years later, when abstract works were again allowed to be presented in state institutions after Stalin's death.

A more liberal politics opened the door for another of Strzemiński's late works: a treatise on the history of art. The book that was published

2
Child's drawing



This exclusive consciousness of only one component — contour — the reduction of nature as a whole to solely this alone — is manifested in the fact that the contour is, as it were, also called upon to express other elements of form — not only those that are directly contoured. For example, in order to express that a whole object is yellow, its contour line is drawn in yellow, instead of filling the whole object with yellow colour, which would seem natural to us today. The colour of the contour line was to indicate the colour of the whole object. We find this model of seeing principally in the Palaeolithic era. Such is also the starting point for a child's drawing. No wonder, then, that when an individual at this stage of visual consciousness finds in his hands a photograph, he will see nothing more than dissolving patches of light and shade, as he will be searching for a clearly delimiting contour line, corresponding to his visual consciousness. Experiences of this kind are recounted by explorers of primitive countries, even those in which seeing had entered a superior, more advanced stage. This model of contour seeing is related to the historical formation of the primitive community. It is here that we must look for an explanation of how and to what degree it reflected the existence of its social base. The subject matter of this art was connected with the struggle for survival. The drawings of animals have a specific character. They are animals that one fights, defeats, and consumes. Their every potential, lurking move threatens death and must be understood.



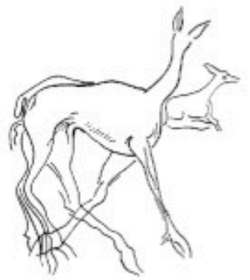
3
Engraving on a rock,
Font-de-Gaume,
Palaeolithic

4
Engravings on a rock,
Norway, Neolithic

One has to understand the lactation of a reindeer, the rhythm and character of its movements, since the ability to supply food depends on it.

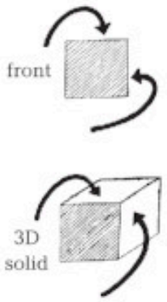
Of the multitude of various visual sensations, only those that detect danger and the presence of food are valuable and socially beneficial — those that directly assist in the struggle for survival. Seeing, used as a tool in the struggle for survival, rejects all unnecessary, complicating visual sensations, confining itself to those that allow one to tell whether an object exists or not — to the contour delimiting the object.

The contour, resulting from socially determined needs, is the simplest and, chronologically, the earliest means of expression of human visual consciousness. The realism of contour seeing is the first and the simplest model of realism.



5
Engraving on a block
of ston, Les Eyzies,
Palaeolithic

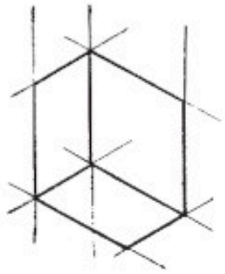
New components of observation appear alongside the existing scrutiny of the flat front of the object — as a result of looking beyond the face of the object at its sides.

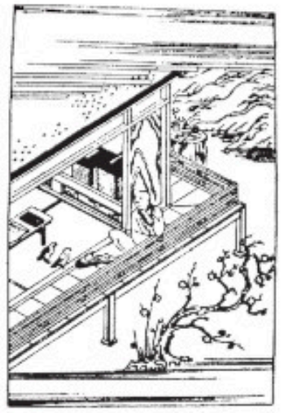


99
Wall painting,
Pompeii,
first c. CE

In this way, the following variants of **oblique perspective** came to be formulated (in place of parallel-line-projection perspective):

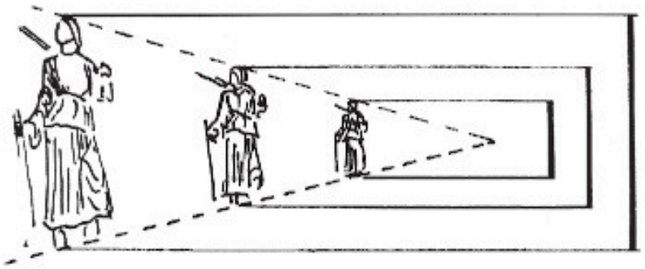
1. **Oblique parallel projection perspective**, where the spatiality and depth of the object were expressed by observing them from an oblique angle so that we see the front and depth of every object at the same time. Objects further away are located higher in the picture than those in closer proximity, but their size remains unchanged. They remain commensurate, as in silhouette perspective. We come across this perspective in Persian, Japanese, and Chinese art.





100
Woodcut,
Japan,
eighteenth c.

2. **Converging projection perspective** developing in states with a Hellenistic culture. The diminishing of the size of objects with distance, placing objects on different levels (the higher the further away) made the formulation of a new model of perspective possible — three-dimensional linear, which is currently considered to be traditional perspective. This is no longer a perspective of commensurate dimensions. The sizes of objects are subject to change depending on distance. One cannot juxtapose one object with another to compare them and to establish their size; one has to sketch out a whole complicated geometric construction and only then can one define, indirectly, by mathematical reasoning, the real sizes and proportions of objects located at different distances.



101
Wall painting,
Rome,
40–30 BCE

155
Rembrandt (studio of),
Self-portrait,
seventeenth c.

156
Tintoretto,
St. Mark Rescuing a Saracen,
detail,
sixteenth c.

A regard for the play of light and shade (hitherto rejected as elements immaterial to and uncharacteristic of the material nature of the object) shatters the entire extant system of Renaissance form. The object is no longer Renaissance paintings' object, isolated from its background. As an effect of the play of light and shade, it partially melts into the background. The object is in sharp focus in some places, while, in others, contours melt into the background.

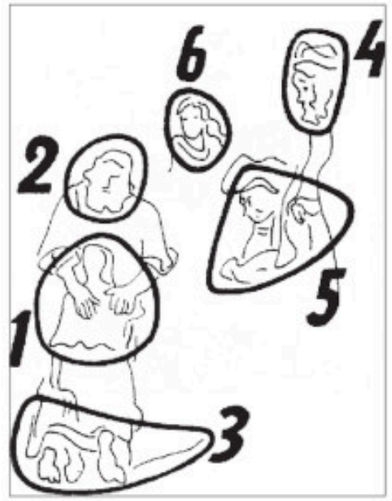
157
Rembrandt,
Path over a Bridge,
drawing,
seventeenth c.

158
Tintoretto,
The Probatic Pool,
detail,
sixteenth c.

181
Rembrandt,
The Return of the Prodigal Son,
seventeenth c.

Thus, we are able to identify the particular points in the picture that attract attention. Depending on the number of gazes cast, we are able to determine their meaning and the force with which they catch our eye.

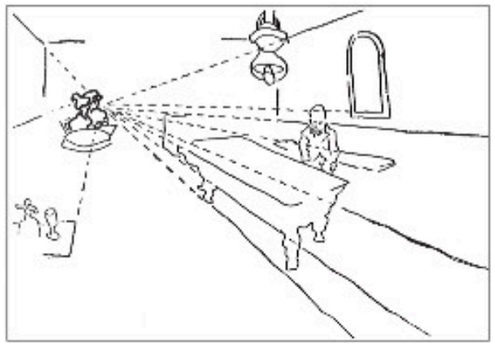
Looking at the picture, we see the strongest compositional clue best, i.e. the first, which attracts most gazes. The number of gazes attracted by each successive point in the painting will depend on how strongly it stands out. The result is that the eye does not look at the painting by wandering at random over its surface, but passes, in turn, from one compositional clue to another until all there is to see in the picture has been exhausted.

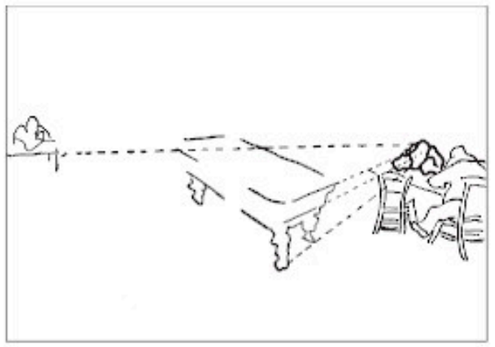


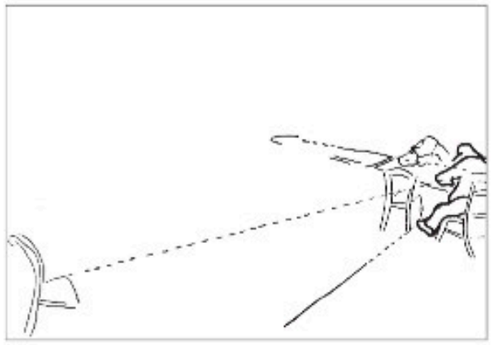
This imposed, organised order of viewing emphasising what the artist suggests as being **most important** in the picture (the content of the compositional clues) — gives a clear expression of the picture's content. The various forms in the picture do not speak all at once but in order, as organised and appointed by the artist. This is why the main content of the picture (found in the main compositional clues) is perceived before secondary content. Expressed by means of chiaroscuro-seeing, nature is elaborated by way of compositional clues. Some points are emphasised (we see these foremost), while others are weakened (and hardly penetrate our consciousness as we barely perceive them). The use of compositional clues simplifies the decoding of the picture's intentions.

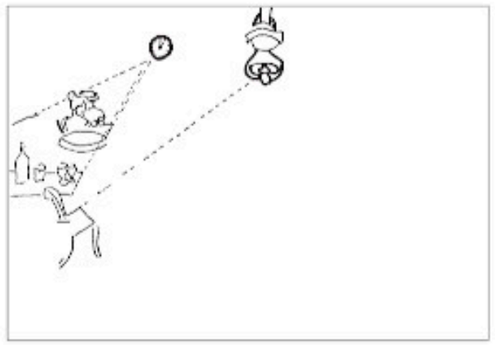
Analysing Rembrandt's *Self-portrait with Saskia*, we will define its compositional clues. These are found in areas of contrasting light and shade, and their ordering depends of the strength of these contrasts.

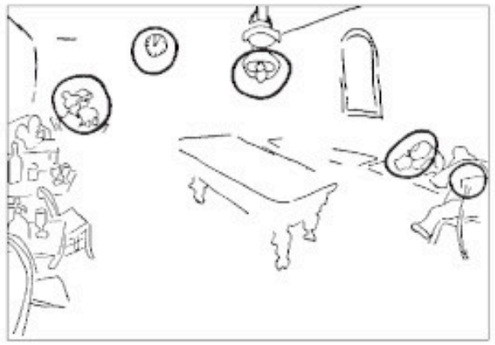
The image received in this way is in reality a complex of several images, derived from several different gazes overlaid on top of each another. For every reality we look at, we see not one, but several images.

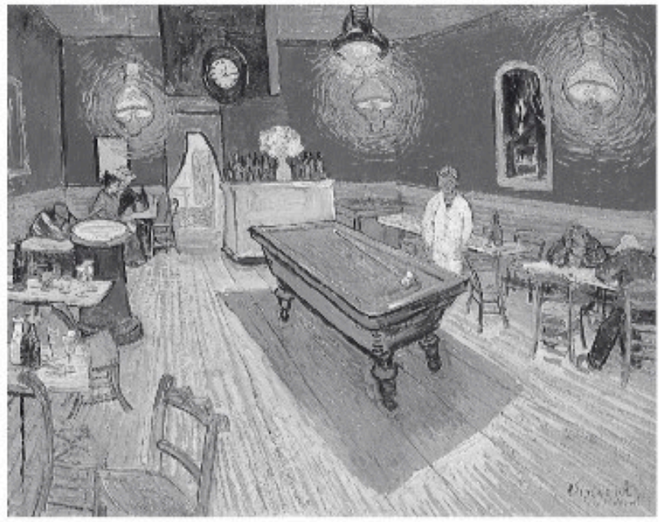






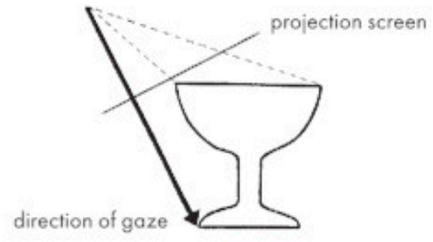




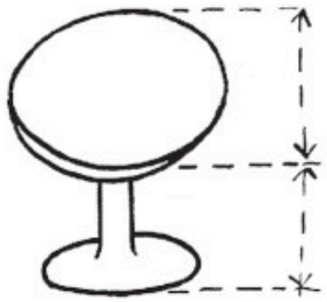


206
Van Gogh,
The Night Cafe in Arles,
nineteenth c.

The opening of the vase is less wide and its height is considerably greater, proportionately, than before. If we level our gaze at the point beneath the vase, then we receive yet another account:

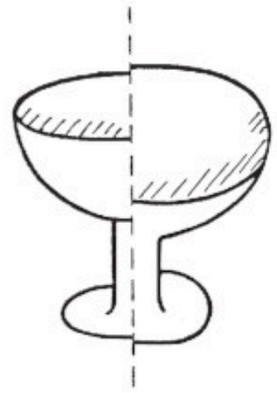


In this account, the projection of the height of the vase is smaller than its depth. As a result, we will obtain the following drawing on the projection screen:



in which the opening of the vase is greater than its height. From the three gazes levelled in different directions, we received as many as three different accounts of the same vase — all equally true and all geometrically verifiable. If the basic thesis of three-dimensional perspective was that from a single point of observation we receive only one image of the object, then the perspective of the mobile gaze, the perspective expressing the reality of the process of seeing nature, results in quite a different thesis: each gaze gives us a different image of the same nature.

The same vase may, for example, appear before us in two images that are both equally true:

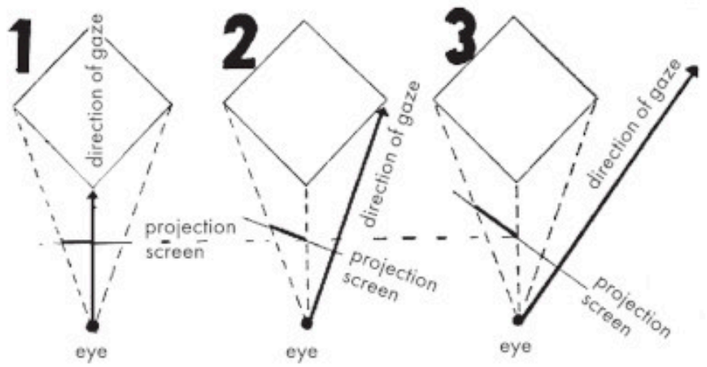


How understandable, in the light of these considerations, Cézanne's observation that "contours escape him" and "all lines shift" becomes! He observed the phenomenon, thanks to the extraordinary sensitivity of his seeing, but could not offer an explanation from the position of the mandatory theory (of three-dimensional **convergent** perspective). He was only able to contradict this apparently infallible theory by way of the truth of his seeing — observing that "contours escape him." And what was an error from the point of view of theory was actually the greatest achievement of his seeing. Thus, if we see in his pictures "deformations" of the following sort:

we then have to know that these are no arbitrary "deformations" (distortions of nature) but simply the result of the summing up of two different accounts, deriving from two different gazes levelled in different directions.

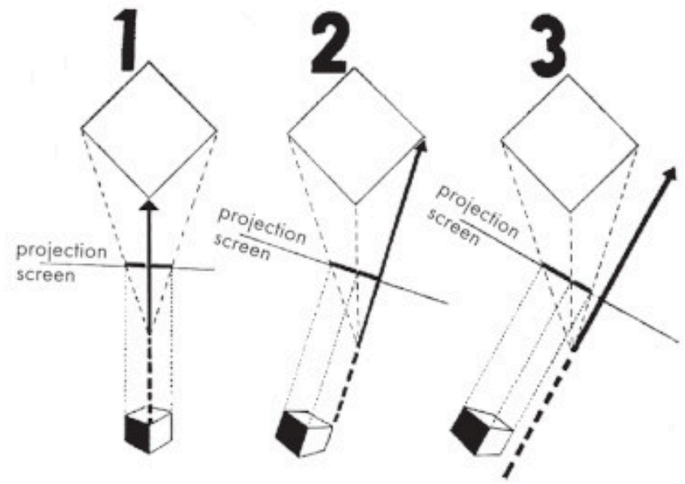
These are thus changes, shifts, occurring between two gazes levelled in different directions. To fully grasp the essence of the changes, let us analyse the problem one more time.

The observer's eye is positioned, symmetrically, in front of the cube (the horizontal projection in the drawing). However, in the first instance, the direction of the gaze falls on a protruding front edge of the cube, in the second, on the one on the right, while, in the third, it extends beyond the cube, to the right of it (as a result, the left side of the cube is in the peripheral field of view).

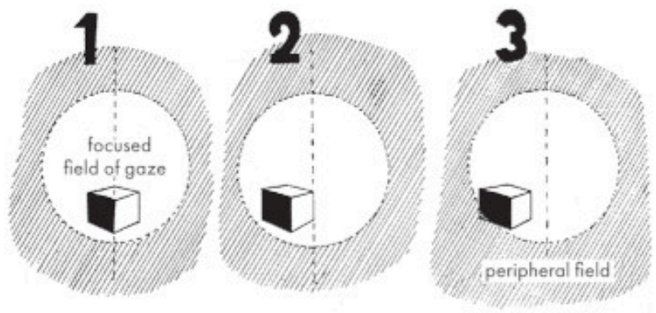


Although the eye of the observer remains in the same place, the cube is no longer the same: in each of the three cases it will be seen differently, in different dimensions and proportions. To confirm this, it is enough to look at the corresponding projection screen (in each case perpendicular to the direction of the gaze) to see how the corresponding views of the cube change. The projection of the face of the cube that lies further away from the direction of the gaze is elongated.

If, on the basis of the projections obtained on the screen, we wish to reconstruct the view of the cube as it would look in each of the gazes, we will find that the further from the direction of the gaze and the nearer the peripheral field, the more the left face of the cube is elongated.

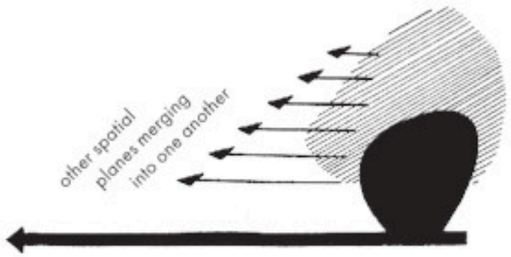


At the same time, however, the position of the cube changes in relation to the eye of the observer. From a symmetrical position (in the first gaze) it becomes increasingly asymmetrical, and the left face of the cube becomes increasingly parallel to the observer. The cube turns around, changing the foreshortening of its perspectival lines. The further we divert our gaze (with the cube thus shifting into peripheral field) the greater and the faster these changes become.



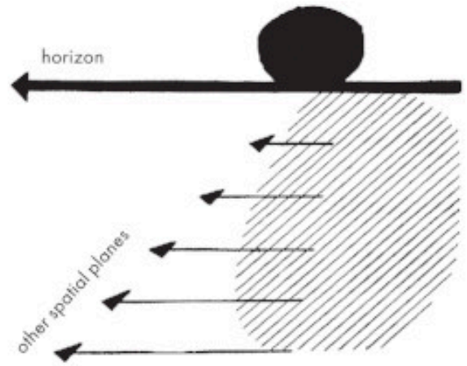
We observe the same shifts in the peripheral field if we replace cubes with cylinders (plane projection).

a single gaze, we see only one specific fragment of space, belonging to a single spatial plane. To pass to another spatial plane, we adjust our gaze to see at that distance, and then we see in sharp focus only at this distance and not at any other. Spatial planes at different distances merge together into a fairly uniform plane of colour, saturated with a space that is the colour of their common denominator. Due to the necessity of adjusting the eyesight to seeing at a specific distance, we cannot see all spatial planes at the same time. We see each spatial plane with a single gaze, skipping around, in a transitional way.



A similar phenomenon occurs if we look at one of the middle spatial planes. The nearer and further planes then merge into a single whole and the middle plane appears clearly.

And even if it is the horizon that we are looking at (despite the aerial perspective), it appears clearer than the spatial planes that are nearer and merge into one, because we have not adjusted our eyesight to focus on them.



And so the truth of our real, physiological seeing contradicts the logically inferred geometric schemas of three-dimensional linear perspective.

This is why, in Bonnard, whose seeing is not something reasoned out in accordance with the appropriate clauses of perspective but with the reality of physiological processes, we so often see a fragment of the picture against an undifferentiated, almost flat background — the space beyond the object treated like a flat coulisse, positioned vertically. These verticals are typical of Bonnard's paintings and are not the result of his inability to render "normal" spatial qualities, but because the spatial planes lying beyond the field in focus merge into a plane saturated with coloured space. But this same, apparently flat, coulisse appears differently in another part of the picture, becoming a clear and detailed outline of an object, while we now see the coulisse in the spatial plane that was previously in focus. This simply shows that moving the gaze to different parts of the picture has entailed adjusting the gaze to the viewing distance. Thus, a particular spatial plane can become the outline of an object (if we look at it) or a coulisse (if we focus on a different distance), depending on the eye's adjustment. As it moves into the depth of the picture, the gaze pauses at various points, which it sees clearly, and all the other spatial planes, positioned in various parts of the picture in relation to these points, form flat coulisses, saturated with potential space. As a result, the basic principle of convergent perspective — the principle of spatial continuity — falls through. Painterly space is where we see it and is such as we see it. Painterly space is not a function of geometry, but a function