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1:
Debora Vogel:
The Architect of the World

¹
A. Turowski, *Budowniczość świata. Z dziejów radykalnego modernizmu w sztuce polskiej* (Kraków: Universitas, 2000).

²
A few attempts have been made in Poland to address this. In the context of the present exhibition it is worth mentioning another exhibition organised by the same institution – *Polak-Żyd-artysta. Tożsamość a awangarda* (Pole-Jew-artist: Identity and the Avant-garde), ed. J. Suchan (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2010).

³
Compare, for example, D. Boyarin and J. Boyarin, “Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity,” *Critical Inquiry* no. 4 (1993), p. 697, where these issues are discussed in a much broader context, also in comparison with the category of femininity. They write: “the ‘progressive’ idealization of *Jew and woman*, or more usually, *Jew and Woman*, ultimately deprives difference of the right to be different.” See also in the context of feminism: J. Bednarek, *Linie kobiecości. Jak różnica płciowa przekształcała literaturę i politykę?* (Warszawa: PWN, 2015), p. 37, who also discusses Vogel’s work.

⁴
Certainly, there are some exceptions. See, for example, M. Bartelik, *Early Polish Modern Art: Unity in Multiplicity* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2005).

⁵
Lviv. City. Architecture. Modernism, eds. B. Cherkes, A. Szczerski (Wrocław: Muzeum Architektury, 2016). Here also A. Sobota’s text about photography.

⁶
To read more on the subject see S. Czekalski, *Awangarda i mit racjonalizacji. Fotomontaż polski okresu międzywojennego* (Poznań: Wydawnictwo PTPN, 2000), pp. 311–329. Tomasz Szerszeń’s photoproject asked the question about the (non) presence of the Surrealist idiom in Polish art: *Byłem pierwszym polskim surrealistą. Prace z lat 1929–1939* (2010).

The order of the works printed in the catalogue reflects the order of subjects discussed in the texts. It also corresponds with the range of artistic phenomena described by Debora Vogel—from abstract art and photo-montage to socially engaged art. The works presented at the exhibition are numbered: 2, 11, 31, 66, 70, 107, 111, 114, 132, 133, 134, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141, 142, 143, 144, 145, 146, 147, 151, 152, 153, 155, 156, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 164, 166, 167, 168, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 175, 207, 208, 209, 210, 211, 212, 213, 214, 215, 216, 217, 219, 220, 221, 237, 270, 271, 272, 273, 274, 275, 276, 277, 278, 279, 280, 281, 282, 284, 285, 286.

Debora Vogel belonged to the generation of “architects of the world,” as Andrzej Turowski called the avant-garde artists who believed in – to use Vogel’s words—“the legend of Constructivism,” at the same time expressing a sense of the imminent catastrophe in their art.¹ Yet Vogel herself remained in obscurity for a long time. At best, she was mentioned alongside members of the masculine, Polish avant-garde and modernist movements, like Witkacy and Bruno Schulz who were her close friends. The force and innovation of Vogel’s theory and praxis, an artistic experiment and social critique at once, were not appreciated enough during her lifetime.

There are a few reasons for this, one of them the marginalisation of women in the history of the Avant-garde. What is more, Vogel’s project was multilingual, which became yet another obstacle to the reception of her work. She wrote in Polish, Hebrew, German, and above all, in Yiddish (which she learned as an adult), a language and culture that contributed to the history of the Polish and international Avant-garde, although we often forget about this fact.² In the theory of modernism the category of *Jewishness* as difference and experience (of exile), detached from the actual cultural and social contexts, has acquired a central position, occasionally also perceived as a subversive element.³ In this context, real historical Jewish experience became marginalised and was often framed as reactionary. Although the Avant-garde—especially in the realm of the fine arts and theatre—functioned as an important platform of Polish-Jewish cultural contact, the Yiddish side is still insufficiently represented in non-specialised publications; neither is it considered an important part of broader historical and theoretical discussions in the field of both arts and literature.⁴

Debora Vogel’s (1900–1942) biography, works, and attachment to Lwów (Ukr. L’viv, Yid. Lemberg, or Lemberik) provide excellent material for (yet another) attempt to reconfigure the Avant-garde’s history. Vogel herself moves within liminal space, between different languages, cultures, groups, and places. Lwów is similar—on the one hand, until recently, the city was not a central focus of historians of avant-garde art; on the other, however, it was an important spot on the map of modernist architecture and photography,⁵ a site for Polish quasi-Surrealism⁶ as well as modernist thought—philosophy, mathematics, literary theory, music, theatre, and film. From this perspective,

Lwów seems indeed an inspiring site for different experiments, but it was also a site of social and ethnic conflicts.⁷ Thus, it is important to remember that the city was also significant for the history of the Polish political and artistic left. It was among Lwów intellectuals and artists, during the period of rising chauvinism and antisemitism in Poland, that the idea of an inclusive, hybrid, and open culture was formed. Ariko Kato elaborates on that in her essay about the milieu of the leftist journal *Sygnaly* (to which Vogel belonged) and its cultural politics. These diverse threads intertwine also in the exhibition.

It seems that at present, from the perspective of the second part of the twentieth century and early twenty-first century, we are better equipped to analyse Vogel's potential in a more critical way. "Debora Vogel's montages occupy a separate and considerable position in the literature of modernity"—Kornelia Grafowa foretold in 1936.⁸ As is commonly known, "contemporaneity" is a deictic expression; perhaps today, as we look from a distance at the hundredth anniversary of the Avant-garde in Poland, Vogel is more modern than in her own time. The growing number of excellent interpretations of Vogel's work, in different languages, demonstrate that this could be the case.

Our exhibition attempts to look at Vogel's works, confronting her ideas and biography with visual and historical materials of her time, interpreted in light of contemporary historical and theoretical reflections. Three layers intertwine here: first, Vogel's theory and practice, her interests and fascinations. Second, the idea of montage understood as one of the most important avant-garde practices of combining, compiling, and comparing, and which includes Cubist collages as well as Constructivist montages, Surrealist works and photographic and film experiments. Third, the modern city and its iconosphere projected onto the space of Lwów and drawing inspiration from it.

2: Vogel's Theory-Praxis

Debora Vogel, although still not a very well-known figure, was an original theoretician and writer and a strong personality in the interwar Polish-Jewish artistic scene. She thought of herself as an "ambassador of modernism" and performed this role through her numerous reviews, lectures, and talks. The artists of the Avant-garde, members of the Lwów "artes" and Kraków Group with whom Vogel collaborated, saw her as a spokeswoman for their artistic programmes. She had a wide network of connections in Europe and Amer-

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7

On ethnic tensions in the city, see C. Mick, *Lemberg, Lwow, and Lviv 1914–1947: Violence and Ethnicity in a Contested City* (West Lafayette, Indiana: Purdue University Press, 2016).

8

K. Grafowa, "Akacje kwitną," *Przegląd Społeczny* nos. 1–2 (1936), p. 30.

19

ica, mostly within Jewish modernist milieus, and was loosely associated with the New York Yiddish "Inzikh" (In-oneself) group. Although she was quite a traveler, her whole life was firmly established in Lwów, where she was active in Yiddishist, Hebraist, as well as Polish progressive circles, worked as a teacher, was active as a critic and writer, and where, finally, she was murdered, together with her whole family, in the Lemberg ghetto in August 1942.

Vogel studied philosophy, psychology, and Polish philology at Jan Kazimierz University in Lwów with Kazimierz Twardowski, the founder of the Lwów-Warsaw school of logic, and Juliusz Kleiner, an important literary historian and theorist. She earned her doctorate at the Jagiellonian University after submitting her thesis entitled *Znaczenie poznawcze sztuki u Hegla i jego modyfikacje u J. Kremiera* (The cognitive significance of art in Hegel and its modifications in the work of J. Kremer) (1926). The question of the correlation of form and worldview, the dialectics of transformations of art forms and their cognitive significance—these are matters that greatly interested her and that she analysed broadly in her work on avant-garde art. Vogel contextualises them further in reflections on the contemporary urban experience, with its characteristic phenomena, both visual and social. She offers reflection on mass culture and the commodification of experience, women's presence in the public space and sphere, social exclusions and colonialism, the psychology and rhetoric of anti-Semitism, the role of the intelligentsia.

Vogel thoroughly studied the writings of her contemporaries, theoreticians of literature and art, while forming her own original theory-praxis—in her essays, reviews, projects of, as she called it, the lyricism of cool stasis, prose montages, and the later engaged poems arising from them. She observed contemporary artistic phenomena and intertwined the different threads of both Polish and international experimentation into her own works. We see a dialogue emerge with the theories of Kandinsky, and the Purists, Witkacy, Chwistek, Kobro and Strzemiński. This does not just concern theoretical texts, but also her poetry and prose montages, where visual associations refer to the specific practices of artists, opening up discussion on Cubism and Constructivism, photomontage, the new realism and engaged art, the poetics of the everyday, and the theory and practice of kitsch. Paweł Polit writes about some of these contexts in his analysis of the movement of concepts in Vogel's aesthetics and their relation to avant-garde practice. Paweł Mościcki also contributes in his consideration of Vogel's montages in the context of cross-sectional experimental films from the late 1920s and early 1930s.

Vogel has a characteristic analytical method—she treats specific works and theories as elements of her own composition, assembled from different,

and re-montaged. It is a space where identities are negotiated while artistic, ethnic, and gender dichotomies are problematised.

Karolina Szymaniak’s essay also contributes to this discussion. In her text, Szymaniak loosely refers to the category of deterritorialisation of Deleuze and Guattari¹⁶ and a third space by comparing Vogel’s text on Jewish Lwów with Moshe Vorobeichic’s photo-project on Jewish Wilno (Lith. Vilnius, Yid. Vilne). Montage and the aesthetic of the everyday becomes a method that makes engagement with the so-called “Jewish theme” possible, thick as it is with stereotypes and clichés, and indeed allows for its (and the subject’s) denaturalization or deterritorialisation, and the renegotiation of a sense of belonging.

A selection of Debora Vogel’s texts, which reference the exhibition’s major threads, are at the end of the catalogue. They allow us to see the evolution of Vogel’s aesthetic theory—from pure Constructivism to New Realism, (photo)montage and engaged art, her ideas about applied aesthetics and interior and book design, as well as appreciate her peculiar language and imagery. They appear here for the first time in English.¹⁷ Although this is not a thorough critical edition of these writings, they are accompanied by what we see as an indispensable commentary.



il. 1
Debora Vogel (1902–1942)

Archive of the Department
of Philosophy and Sociology
University of Warsaw

¹⁶ In her inspiring and absorbing work *Linie kobiecości*, Joanna Bednarek undertakes the task of consistently and polemically applying Deleuze’s and Guattari’s concepts into her analysis of Vogel’s works. Anastasiya Lyubas makes similar attempts in her work on Vogel.

¹⁷ It is worth mentioning that a large selection of Vogel’s texts is available in German: Debora Vogel, *Die Geometrie des Verzichts. Gedichte, Montagen, Essays, Briefe*, trans. and ed. A. M. Misiak (Wuppertal: Arco Verlag, 2016).

Translated from the Polish by
Paulina Duda & Jodi Greig

il. 2
Aleksander Krzywobłocki (1901–1979)

Wanda Diamand’s Studio—Lwów, 1930
black and white photograph, 13 × 10.5 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź



“Bewitched by the charm of a misshapen miniature toy, a person wanders the little streets with their unbelievable names. Here and there, the white, renovated façades of apartment houses, plastered and sober, glance down upon the passer-by. And while the houses here are more miserable and sort of more haphazard than on Boimów or Serbska, here, too, we ask: what’s this plaster for? After all, it doesn’t do any good, and it only makes it harder to decipher the actual soul of these houses.” “Lwów’s Jewish Quarter,” 1937.

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Photograph from Przerwana Street 4, where it branches off from Słoneczna, 1931.

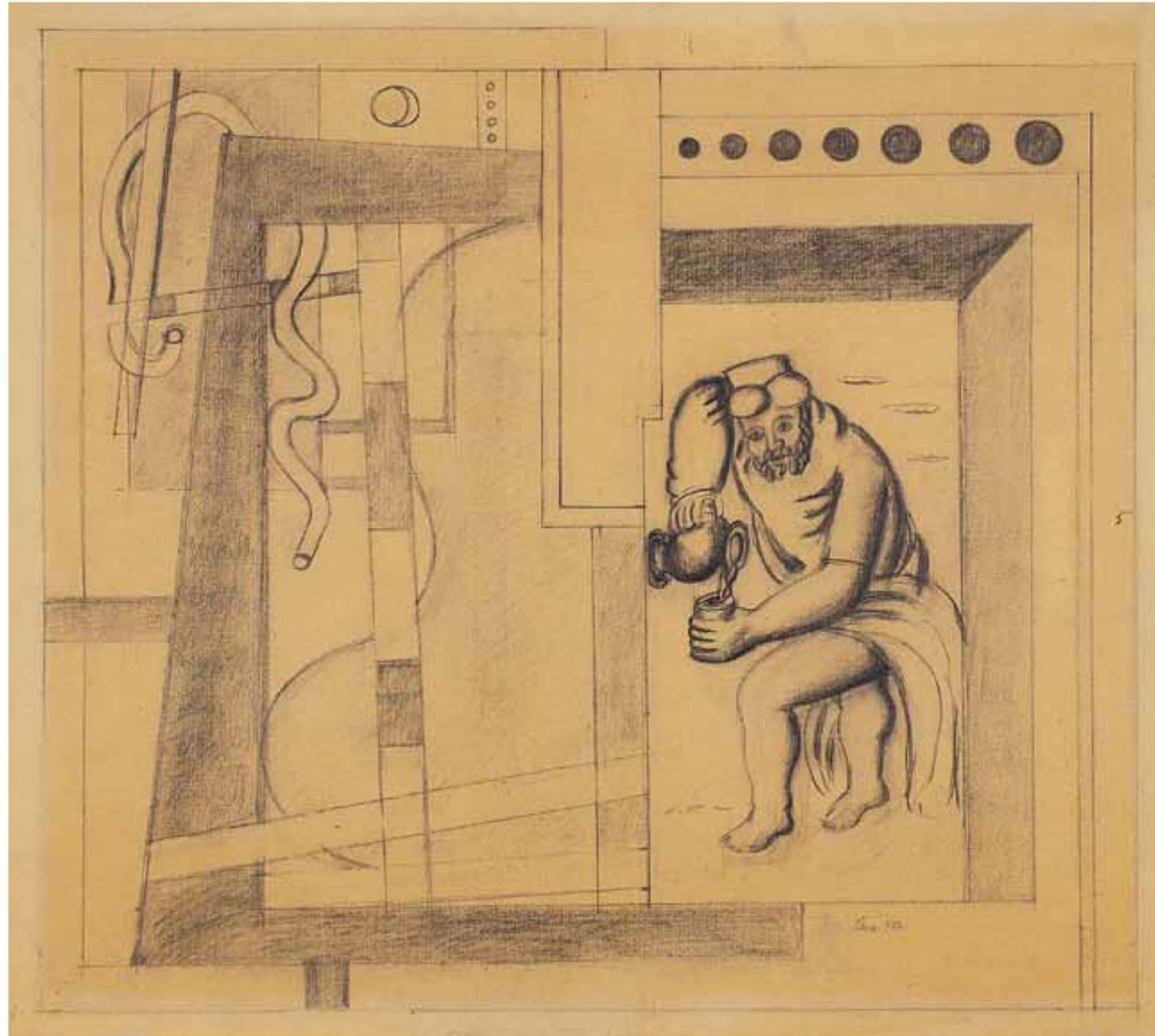
49

Photograph of posters at the corner of Słoneczna Street 30 (July 1937).



il. 28

52



il. 31

Henryk Streng [Marek Włodarski], sketch for *Lejący wino* (Pouring wine), 1927, pencil, paper, 41.6 × 46.2 cm, collection of Piekary Gallery, Poznań

“Amongst the resolute spread of furniture, standing before the mirror, the large painting barely fits on the easels, as though it were a meteor that had fallen right through the balcony doors straight from Paris. ... The painting—contrasting forms flying at one’s throat for a kilometre, painted straight from the tube, shaded with black [—] is a product of mechanistic culture. If it comes to it, one can make out the outline of Moses pouring water from a jug. A motif from the Krupnicza sign-board, or the Starozakonna.” Jerzy Janisch, *Memoirs*.

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Advertisements at Vesela (former Wesola) Street 5 (April 2017).

il. 32



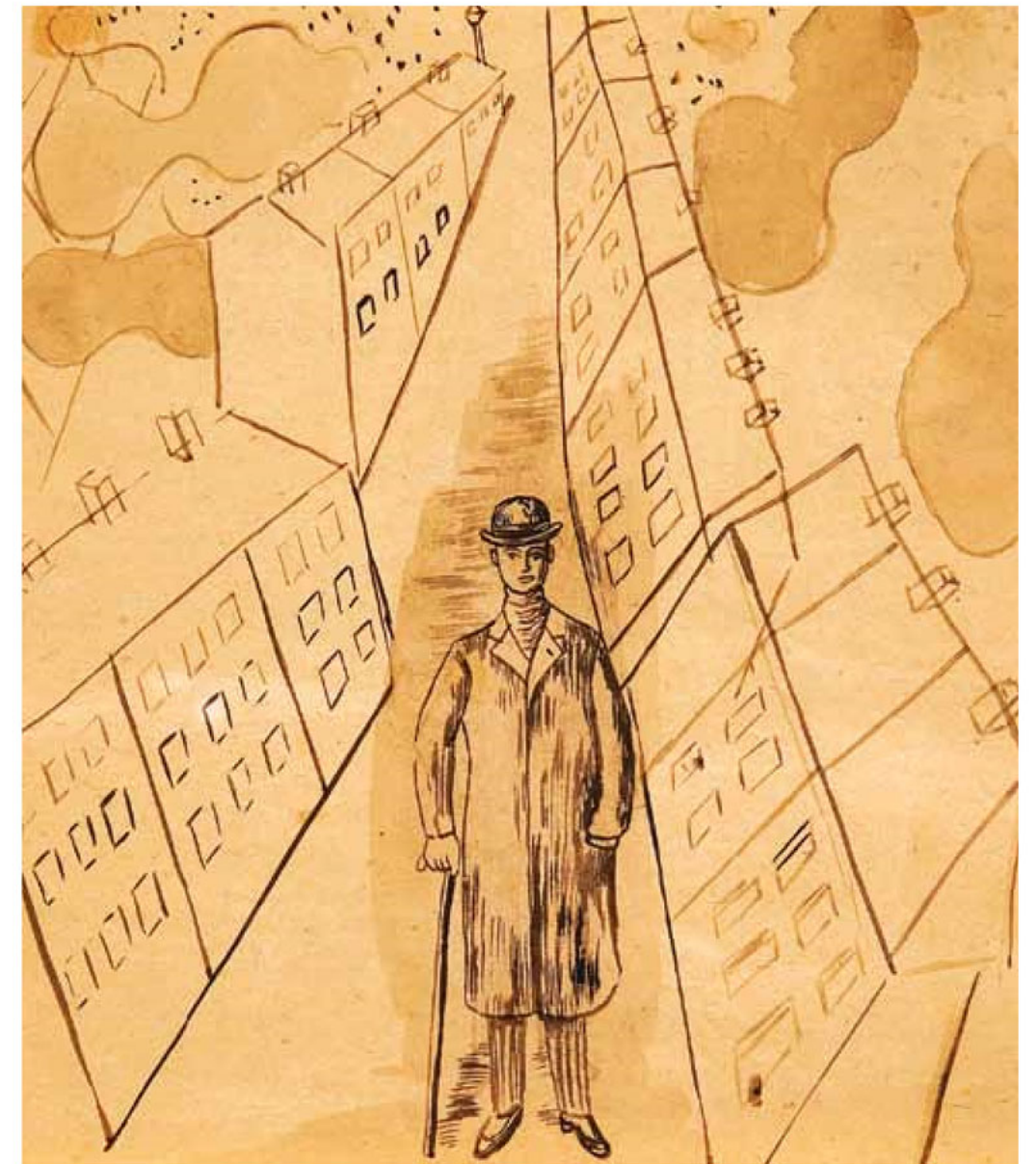


il. 153
Henryk Streng
[Marek Włodarski] (1903–1960)

Drawing with Hats, 1939
pencil, coloured pencil, gouache, paper,
26.5 × 19.5 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

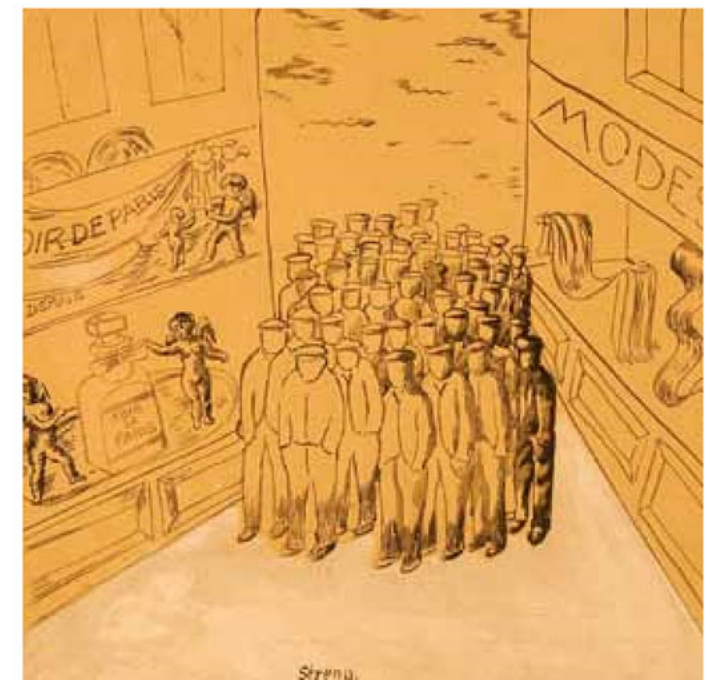
il. 154
Henryk Streng
[Marek Włodarski] (1903–1960)

Man with a Bowler Hat and Cane, 1929
sepia, paintbrush, paper, 19.5 × 17 cm
Piekary Gallery collection, Poznań



il. 155
Henryk Streng
[Marek Włodarski] (1903–1960)

Men in the Street, 1929
sepia, paintbrush, gouache, paper, 17.6 × 17.3 cm
Piekary Gallery collection, Poznań





Travel:

The exotic and the anti-exotic

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In the beginning of 1939, while discussing with Bruno Schulz the differences between the two of them and the “others,” those for whom “an assemblage of details arranges itself into a figure full of logical sense,” and those like themselves, who live in abstraction, Vogel added:

And we, like them, have, beyond the human, grey and eternal life, or rather before it—a certain dose of romanticism, adventure, terrible mistakes, and catastrophes; we too have a certain measure of exoticness, arriving in the form of travel, of visiting unknown, foreign cities and quarters, and in the form of unexpected encounters. And this journey doesn’t necessarily have to encompass six months of distance in order to experience—quintessentially—its essence¹²

The exotic evoked in the letter is the promise of momentary release from the rhythm of daily life, always with the prospect of return. It is a kind of space-time of adventure and excess, an ejection from one’s locality, from one’s spatial positioning. Travel is the insertion of difference into the domain of identity, putting it into motion, subjecting it to a critical examination. Perhaps this is what Vogel’s, almost slogan-like, postulate means: “Foreign cities must become a source of recreation for us.”¹³ What is important is that this is a momentary exoticness, leading back to a point of departure, revealing the illusion of movement and the desire for difference.

However, these reflections on the exotic require us to pause for a moment, as they introduce associations with Vogel’s significant contemplation of the danger of exoticisation, the tradition of European imperialist travel and the colonial gaze, which the author critically analyses. Vogel was very sensitive to the ramifications of exoticisation, false representations of those excluded, deprived of a voice, subjected to oppression—treated as primitive. Her sensitivity was apparent whether the discussion was on the European colonial tradition, the paternalistic concept of proletarian art as art “for the (working) people,” a simplified concept of children’s literature, or about representations of ethnic difference. Vogel’s discourse on the anti-exotic is developed in her reviews of children’s books, her discussion on the subject in art, or critical analysis of the representations of Jewish culture that draw from cultural imperialism and the harder-to-grasp impulses of irrational ethnic otherness.

¹² Debora Vogel to Bruno Schulz 7 December 1938, in *Księga listów*, pp. 270–271. Emphasis mine.

¹³ Ibid., p. 261.

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Vogel considers these last issues using the example of the representation of Jewish culture framed as foreign, savage, and primitive in Wanda Melcer’s *Czarny Ląd* (Dark continent), a report from Warsaw’s Jewish Quarter, presenting it as a space of backwardness, religious and cultural obscurantism.¹⁴ In her text, Vogel transforms the term “(dark) continent” into a notion of critical discourse, to speak of constructions of space that emphasise otherness. This specific understanding of the term is echoed in the phrase about “all the continents (Polish *lądy*) of Africa, America, and Europe” that wait “for the revision of prejudices that pretend to be logical judgements.”¹⁵ Through this anthropomorphism, Vogel not only points to the role the spatial plays in oppressive constructions of otherness, but also gives the oppressed voice, and empowers them to speak back.

As Celia Brickman points out, “the rhetorics of colonialism and antisemitism converged.” In European culture, Jews were “variously described as ‘Oriental,’ ‘primitive,’ ‘barbarian,’ ‘white Negroes,’ ‘mulatto,’ and ‘a mongrel race.’” Eastern European Jews were constructed as a typical example of a dark-skinned race.¹⁶ Vogel’s assessment resonates with the analyses of contemporary researchers: “One doesn’t have to search for blacks for this. There are Jews.”¹⁷ Of course, to a certain extent this construction of otherness and difference was also a Jewish self-construction,¹⁸ in which the image of the Eastern European Jew, traditional Jewish culture, and its spaces (the small town [*shtetl*], the Jewish district [ghetto]) played an important role. Literature, journalism, and art, including photography participated in the perpetuation, reproduction, and dissemination of these images.¹⁹

Photomontage: abolishing difference?

In 1931, a small volume appeared in Zurich in the *Schaubücher* series, entitled *Ein Ghetto im Osten*. It was created by the photographer Moishe Vorobeichic, born near Vilnius and a student at the Bauhaus who had attended the Académie Moderne with Josef Albers and Fernand Léger. He was also the author of the work *Paris* (1931),²⁰ which attained cult status in some circles, but today it has been largely

¹⁵ D. Vogel, “Ludzkie egzotyki,” p. 151.

¹⁶ C. Brickman, *Aboriginal Populations in the Mind* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), p. 163. Brickman is quoting here also: S. L. Gilman, *Freud, Race, and Gender* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

¹⁷ D. Vogel, “Ludzkie egzotyki,” p. 151.

¹⁸ S. L. Gilman writes about the mechanisms of some of these constructions in: *Jewish Self-Hatred: Anti-Semitism and the Hidden Language of the Jews* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986).

¹⁹ For more on this topic see C. Zemel, *Looking Jewish...* particularly chapters 1 and 3.

²⁰ *Paris. 80 photographies de Moï Ver*, introduction by F. Léger (Paris: Editions Jeanne Walter, 1931). The artist’s third large project *Ci-contre* (1931) was sent to Franz Roh, the director of the Fotothek in Munich, who prepared it for publication but, for political reasons, and later because of wartime turmoil, it only appeared in 2004. The Fondation Henri Cartier-Bresson exhibited a retrospective of Vorobeichic’s work entitled *Moï Ver* (12 September–23 December 2012).



il. 214
Aleksander Krzywobłocki (1901–1979)

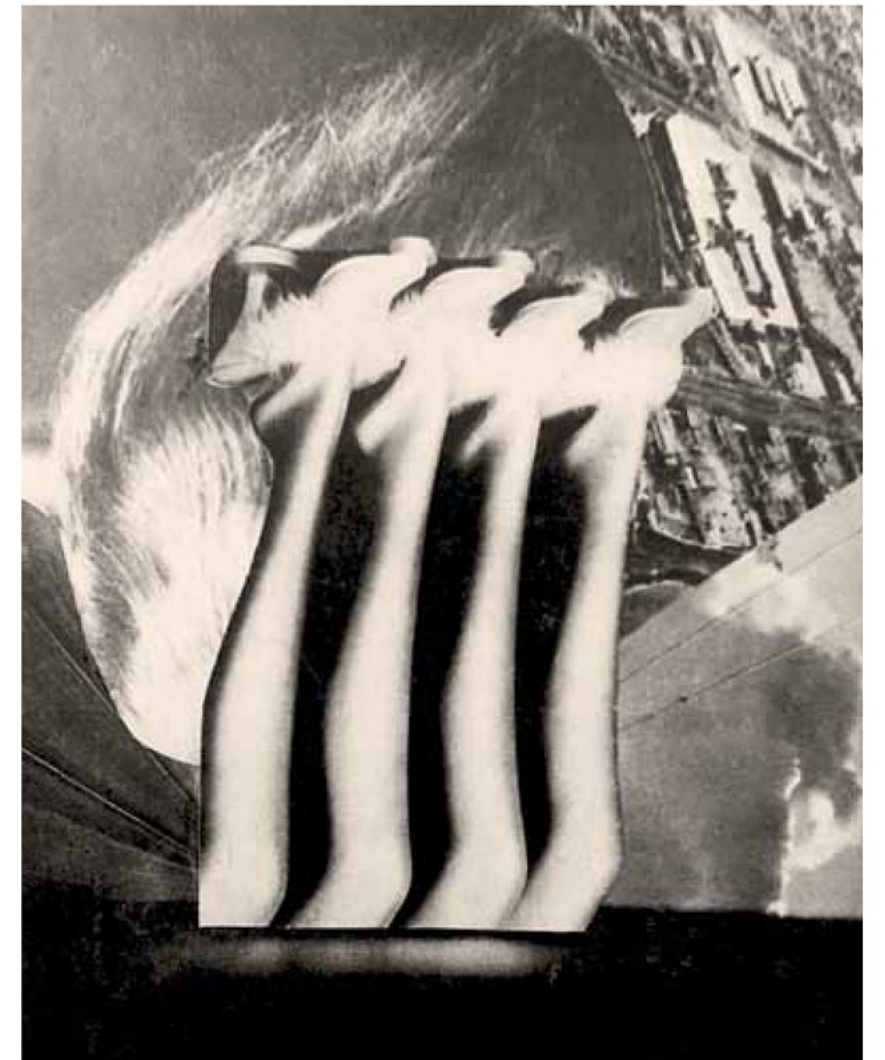
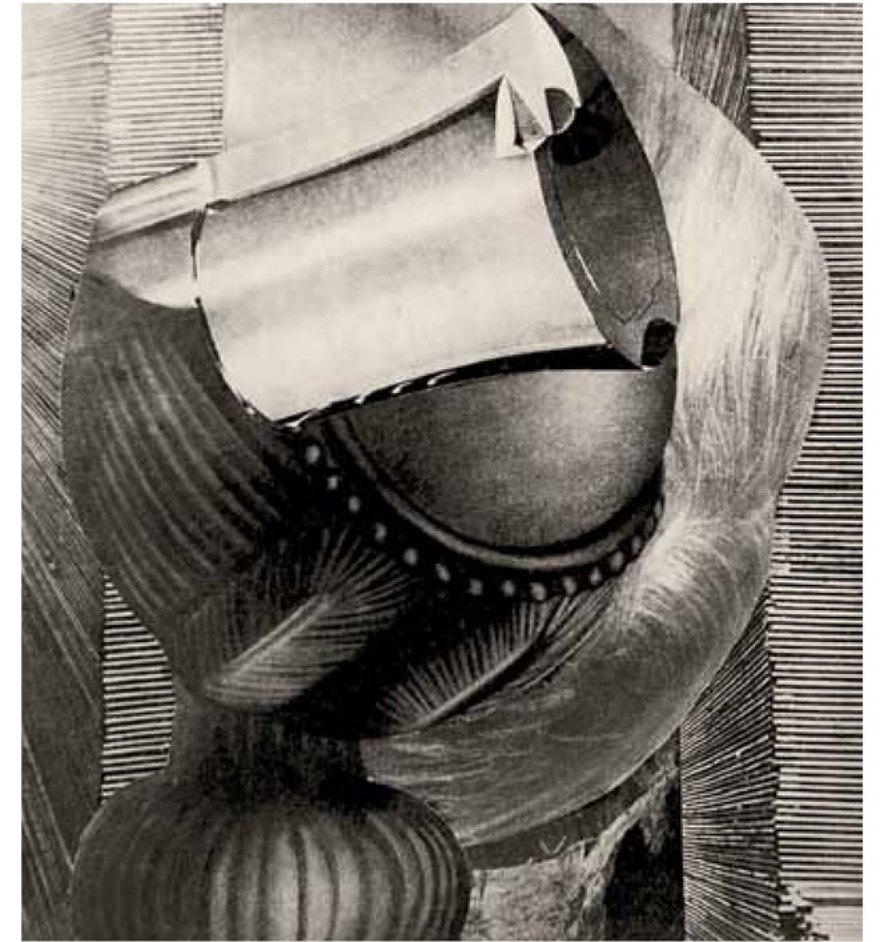
Photomontage Journey, 1930–1932
black and white photograph
of photo-collage, 15.7 × 11.6 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

il. 215
Aleksander Krzywobłocki (1901–1979)

Photomontage, 1932
black and white photograph
of photo-collage, 13.5 × 12.5 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

il. 216
Aleksander Krzywobłocki (1901–1979)

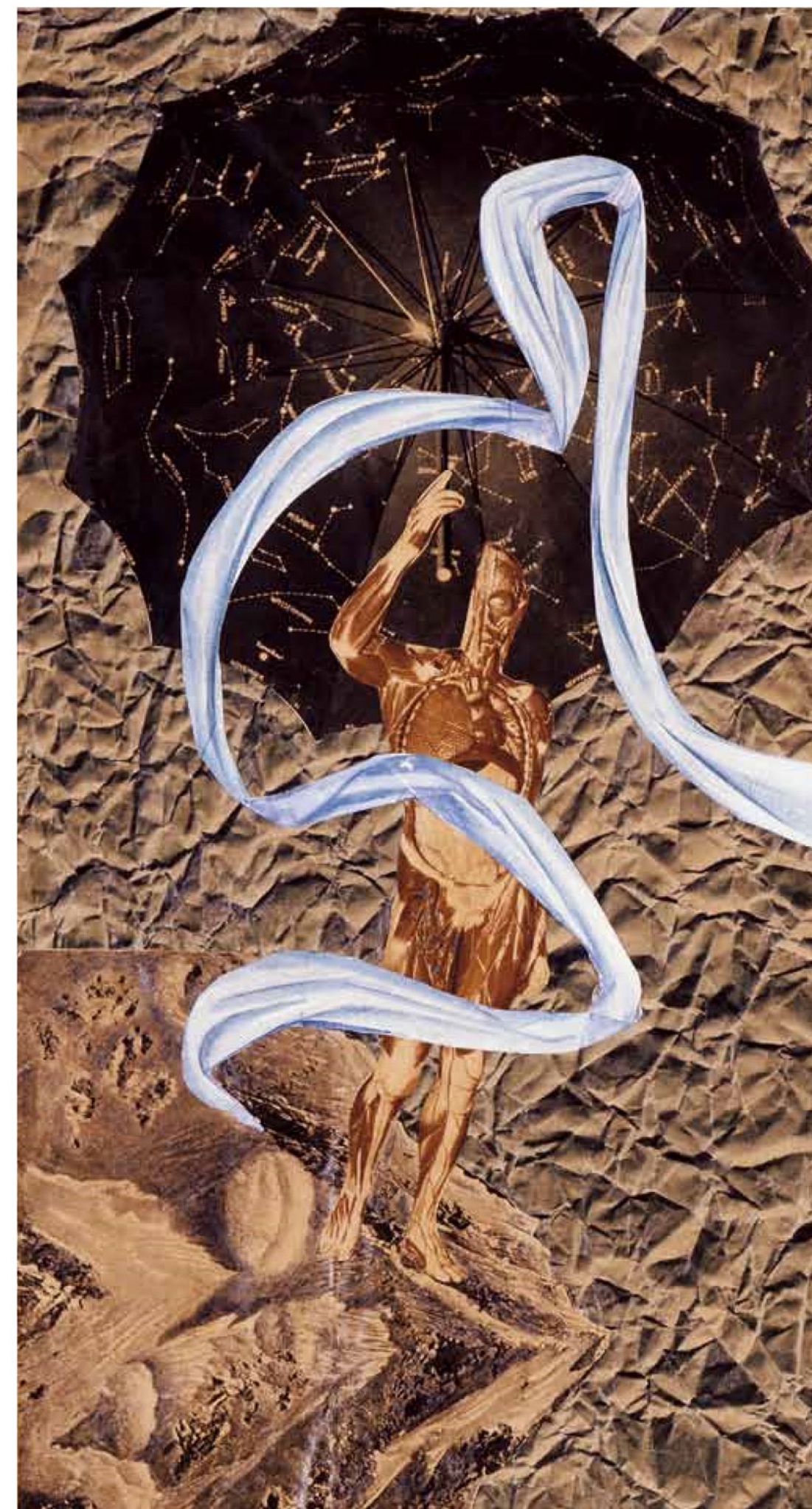
Photomontage, 1932
black and white photograph
of photo-collage, 15.3 × 12 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź





il. 220
Jerzy Janisch (1901–1962)

Sisters, 1950–1955
photo-collage, drawing, 29.3 × 38.5 cm
National Museum in Warsaw



il. 221
Jerzy Janisch (1901–1962)

Figure with a Parasol, 1930
photo-collage, 40 × 22 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź



il. 276
Stanisław Osostowicz (1906–1939)

In Front of the Cinema II, 1932–1933
coloured pencil, pencil, watercolour, paper, 19.4 × 24.2 cm
© National Museum in Warsaw



il. 274
Stanisław Osostowicz (1906–1939)

Street Scene in Krzemieniec, ca. 1936
oil, canvas, 70 × 95 cm
National Museum in Wrocław

il. 275
Stanisław Osostowicz (1906–1939)

Promenade, ca. 1933
oil, canvas, 96 × 95.5 cm
© Ligier Piotr / National Museum in Warsaw