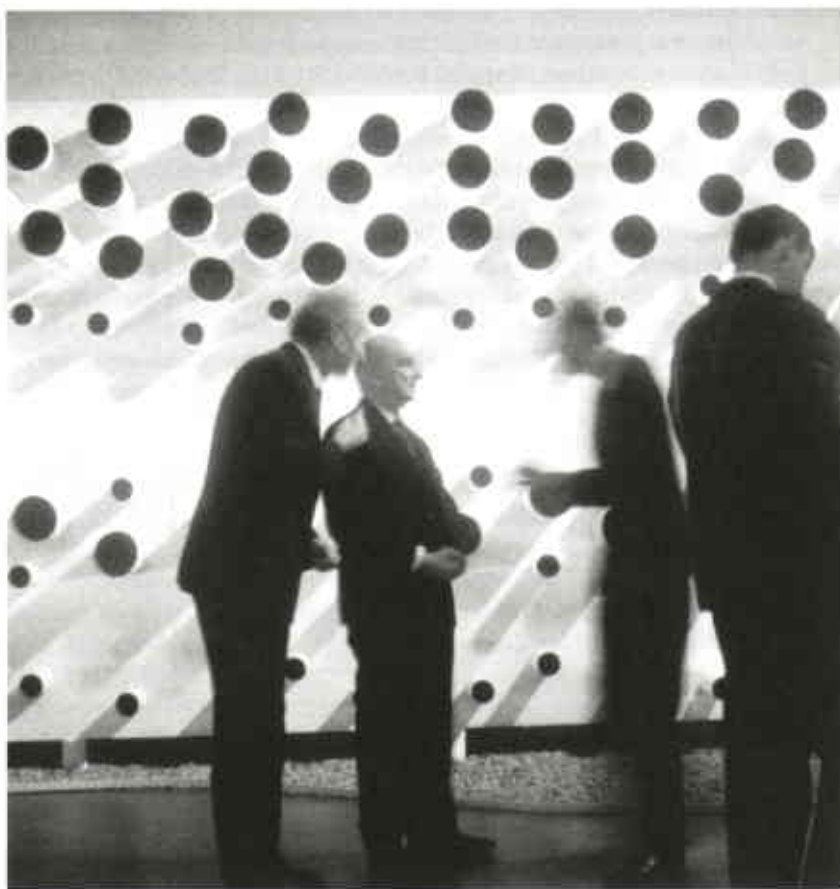


Klara Kemp-Welch

Articulating the “Between”: Stażewski’s Critical Spaces



118

Od lewej: / From left:

Adam Mauersberger, Henryk Stażewski, Edward Krasieński.

Otwarcie wystawy Henryka Stażewskiego w Zachęcie, Warszawa, grudzień 1965 /

The opening of Henryk Stażewski's exhibition at the Zachęta Gallery, Warsaw, December 1965

Not satisfied that he had achieved a “mutual neutrality of forms” in his architectonic compositions, Władysław Strzemiński had found the solution to his unist ambitions by introducing to his canvases a unifying *faktura* in the form of a winding line of thicker paint.¹ In the series of *Unist Compositions* made between 1931 and 1934, line fused together what would once have been individual planes in such a way that they could no longer be differentiated. Figure and ground dissolved into one another and boundaries became, as Henryk Stażewski later put it, “meeting points rather than divisions.”² According to Stażewski, the unist canvas had achieved its goal because it had “eliminated depth.”³ However, it had done so in ways that later seemed problematic.

In the end, it had been by introducing an element of material depth that the Polish constructivist painters had rid their canvases of spatial recession as illusion. Arguably, though, what *faktura* had accomplished — the elimination of depth — was just another illusion, this time, the illusion of the flat. And if flatness relied for its definition on depth, then unism contained within itself the potentiality of its opposite. When he began working on reliefs, in the late 1950s, Stażewski entered into dialogue with this unresolved paradox of constructivist painting.

Reflecting on his unist influenced work thirty years on, Henryk Stażewski admitted that “the beginnings of a third dimension” had already been in evidence.⁴ Unism’s unity had been based on the flickering of *faktura*, a dialectic analogous to the play of difference, refusing to resolve itself ultimately either one way or the other — a movement as intangible as it was slight. But claims for unity could only hold out against the visual evidence frontally or at a safe distance. From an angle, the tactile rows and furrows of a painting like Stażewski’s *Composition* of 1932 (113) cannot be overlooked. These perceived, time and movement enter the field of play in such a way as to make any ideal of disembodied spectatorship impossible. Although he continued to be opposed to any hierarchy of forms or individuation of elements in his abstraction of the 1960s, Stażewski’s project became differently inflected now that he had largely abandoned his former social rhetoric.

The move into relief must also have been a response to the claustrophobia of inherited definitions of the limits of painting. Strzemiński and Kobro had written in their 1931 pamphlet on *The Composition of Space: Calculations*

1 W. Strzemiński, *Unism in Painting* (Warsaw: *Biblioteka Praesens* no. 3, 1928), trans. W. Kemp-Welch, Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 1994, p. 15.

2 H. Stażewski, untitled text (*Wystawa prac Henryka Stażewskiego*, exhibition catalogue, Warsaw: CBWA Zachęta, 1965), reprinted in M. Jurkiewicz, J. Mytkowska, W. Borowski, eds., *Henryk Stażewski. Ekonomia myślenia i postrzegania* [*The Economy of Thought and Perception*], Warsaw, 2005, p. 275 [trans. revised — ed.].

3 Stażewski in “Emocje Abstrakcji (z Henrykiem Stażewskim rozmawia Zbigniew Taranienko) [Emotions of Abstraction. (Henryk Stażewski in Conversation with Zbigniew Taranienko)],” *Sztuka* 4, 4 July 1980, p. 25.

4 Stażewski, *Wystawa prac*, p. 275.

of *Space-Time Rhythm*, “Nature defines the edges of the painting as [its] natural boundary.”⁵ A few lines on, however, they wrote, “Sculpture does not possess any natural boundaries.”⁶ The openness of their definition of the sculptural field — its limitlessness — can now clearly be seen to have lent Katarzyna Kobro’s sculpture an interest that, for now at least, has aged with more integrity than Strzemiński’s claims for his two-dimensional work. Stażewski’s reliefs, I would suggest, responded to the lure of limitlessness, whilst occupying a place between these two spatial definitions. For him, the relief form was the only viable way to introduce three-dimensional space to the picture “concretely.”⁷

Historically, the relief has negotiated a relationship between pictorial and “real” space, coming to stand for a position from which to attack the conventions of both. It was no accident that some of Vladimir Tatlin’s great counter-reliefs were designed to be installed in the usually overlooked non-space of a corner, suspended at the intersection of two walls. Stażewski’s reliefs, likewise, paid consistent attention to the critical spaces of these intersections. So much so that I want to argue that his reliefs ought to be read as a series of articulations of the concept of the “between.”

Stażewski wrote, on many occasions, that the best way he could think of to describe the way the abstract artist sees the world in his mind’s eye is to think of “the movement of lines running parallel, going away from one another or intersecting, and of the nothingness between them.”⁸ His *Relief No. 18* from 1963 (114) seems to be a clear exploration of these effects. Here, the nothingness between two lines becomes another line. Stażewski elegantly demonstrates the ways in which the articulation of the difference between line and space is fraught. Rather than opposed, they are shown to be mutually dependent as well as potentially reversible. The lines articulated in the squared relief in this piece serve as geometrised versions of Stażewski’s pre-war furrows of *faktura*, operating in an equally instrumental way, but with very different aims. He articulates a non-space between two parallel lines that stop short of the edge of the limits of the picture. There is another relief line above, this one extending right to the edge of the picture space — a counter measure of the group below. It runs between the limits of the frame, as though measuring the space excised from the real space beyond. If line is an operation — a spatial function rather than an ephemeral limit — this relief clearly proposes that “nothingness” can also serve as such an operation.

Stażewski had long been fascinated with the capabilities of line: “Line is not merely the border between one object and another, or between object and background, but also has its own independent expression... For example, certain lines (irregular curves, broken lines) summon up dynamic excitement — others (straight lines, arcs) bring a feeling of peace.”⁹ Whilst he would never have made such claims for the expressivity of line, the concrete poet Stanisław

5 Strzemiński, K. Kobro, *Kompozycja przestrzeni obliczenia rytmu czasoprzestrzennego* [The Composition of Space: Calculations of Space-Time Rhythm], (Łódź: Biblioteka “a. r.” no. 2, 1931), reprinted Łódź, 1993, pp. 48–49

6 *Ibid*

7 Stażewski, *op. cit.*, p. 275

8 Stażewski, “Emocje Abstrakcji [Emotions of Abstraction],” p. 22

they marked a fundamental shift from the 1920s and 30s abstraction, which had presupposed a preordained, “right” place for each given element in a painting, determined either by the artist’s judgement or some transcendental order, whether in the service of harmony or dissonance.¹¹ He explained that in atomic physics this determinist attitude had, by 1961, been largely replaced by non-determinist mathematical concepts such as possibility and potential, calling into question both order and chance.¹² Stażewski, probably unaware of these parallel developments in science, nevertheless demonstrated the same shift away from determinism in visual terms. This, I think, is the significance of strategic Stażewski’s deployment of the raised plywood relief to cast changing shadows on the white ground.

The idea of chance relies for its definition on its opposite and vice versa. Order already implies the shadow of chance. But could there be something that is the result of neither order nor chance? Our conceptual framework is hostile to the articulation of anything that is between. Stażewski enlisted his refined abstract language in the search for this critical space. In *Red Relief on White and Grey Background*, 1960 (115), a third element enters into play. It serves as a negative companion for the two monochromatic barrels, suggesting presence and absence. The two elements seem to have emerged from a void, a variation on the ambivalence of the interrelation of the three lines in *Relief No. 18*, 1963. Just as a line can be made of a non-space space, so too can a form. The question is how to articulate the relationship between things, between things that are different, and between things that are the same, conceptually and spatially.

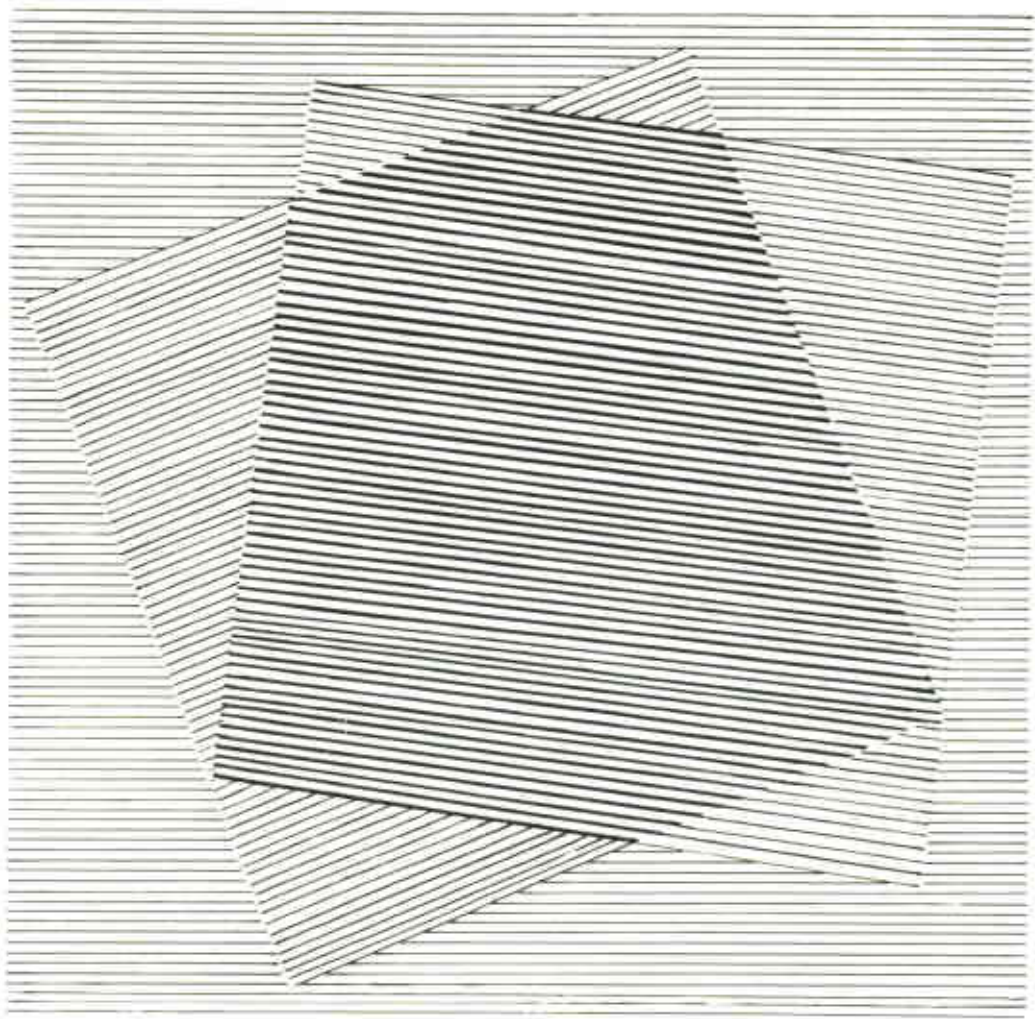
The barrel forms went on to appear in many arrangements, groupings and colours, each producing its own internal rhythm of surface and depth, shadow, form and ground. From time to time, Stażewski painted his barrel-shapes with thin stripes, suggesting a lingering nostalgia for the earlier furrowed factual solution. Likewise, when he introduced colour, it was with the same attention to levelling tonal values that Strzemiński had sought to find harmony in the architectonic compositions. A piece like *Collage No. 17*, 1963 (116), then, shows in more ways than one the lessons of the path to unism. And yet, despite the meticulous attention to surface in such reliefs, their force does not, I think, spring primarily from the surfaces of the relief forms or the plane a little way above which they have been so carefully mounted. It comes from the space between the two (117).

What interests me is this non-space of the relief — space that the relief traps, brings into its own order but cannot wholly master — a “between” space that cannot be resolved in a binary. It is a powerful space, maybe even a place. But it can be easily overlooked, perhaps precisely because it is more active than passive. We see its effects but we cannot see it in itself, unlike the furrows of facture, here there is nothing concrete to see, but its presence evokes

10 M. Tchorek, “Obraz konieczny i obraz możliwy [Necessary Painting and Possible Painting],” in *Henryk Stażewski*, exhibition catalogue, Warsaw: Galeria Krzywe Kolo, 1961.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 27.



120

Henryk Stażewski, *Bez numeru / Unnumbered*, 1972
akryl, drewno / acrylic on wood, 60×60 cm

a response in the remaining terms, it *does* something. This strip of space is as critically active though, as much an operation as line had been in the unist solution. It even acts in some ways like Edward Krasiński's blue line, as an operation drawing attention to the space it traverses, binding unlikely things together in unexpected but apparently natural ways. Of course, neither of these operations is independent. They operate in a space behind, in front of, over and under other things — producing a space between. The spaces between the picture surface and the raised surfaces of the relief are enabling; they facilitate the action of light, shadow and movement. They allow one thing to make its visible mark on another, in the same way as Krasiński's line claimed to make relations real. The shadows incorporate whatever happens to be in their way as relentlessly as the blue line and yet the mark is ephemeral and provisional in both cases. It is easily undone, still fluid and playful.

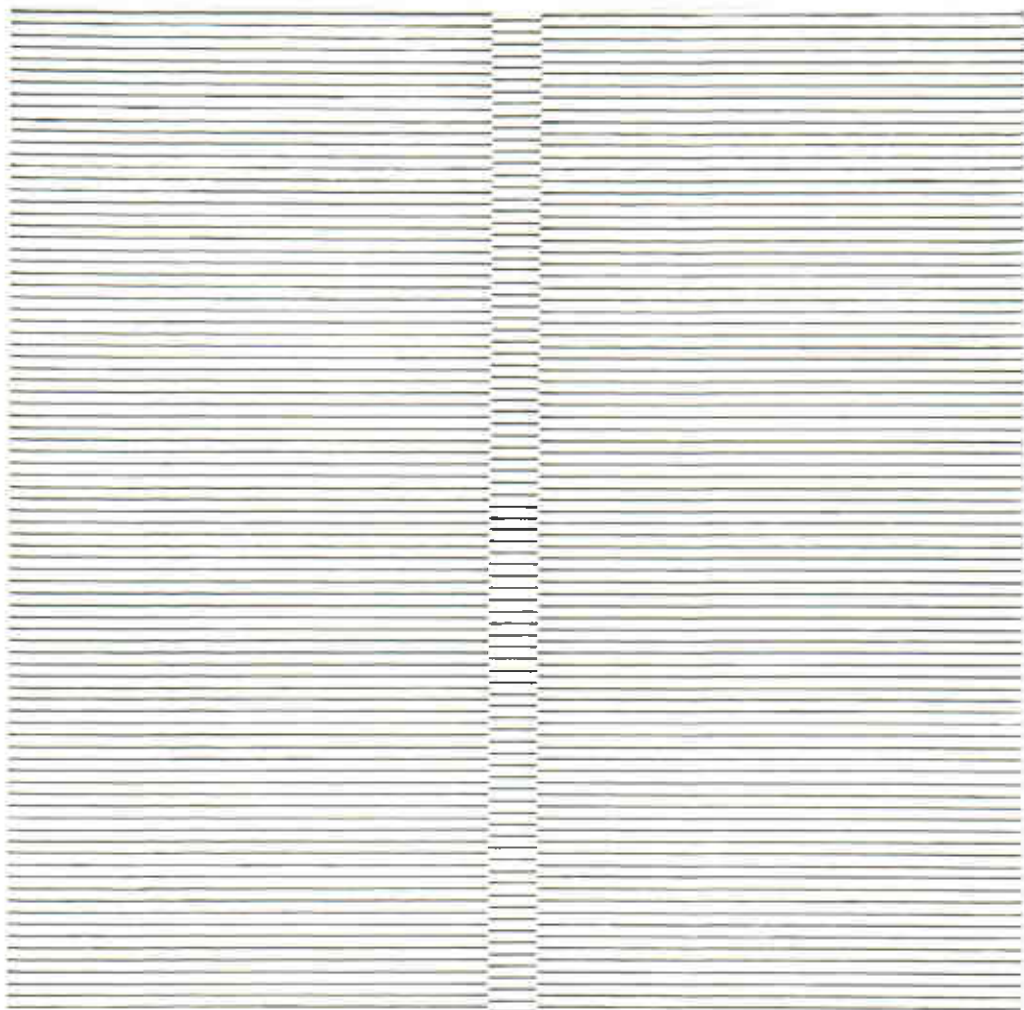
The metal reliefs of the mid-1960s were the logical continuation of Stażewski's interest in courting and incorporating into construction the chance effects of light. The shiny reflective surfaces of aluminium and copper acknowledged and delighted in the spectator's presence and movement around the work. The composition of the elements, meanwhile, became more like a constellation or an accumulation. Stażewski arrived at a serial, modular solution; he called it "the open, completely neutral arrangement which can constitute a point of departure for all possible changes and shifts, leading to the examination of measurement of this space."¹³ Modules and blocks also relate to his lingering constructivist commitment to overcoming "individualism." Repeating the same constructions and deconstructions of the grid form in various groupings was a new schema though, by which he experimented with the possibilities for discontinuity, with interruption of his own systems. Squares and quadrilaterals he called "astroids" became his preferred forms in this period; he claimed they were "anonymous."¹⁴ The square, he maintained, was "the most neutral shape."¹⁵ As Sol LeWitt once said, "The form itself is of very limited importance; it becomes the grammar for the total work."¹⁶ This idea of the grammar of the work is important for a discussion of Stażewski because he was more concerned with exploring existing relations than inventing any new system for pictorial language. He explored its grammar from within. Perhaps to have still been doing this in the 1960s now needs justifying, and perhaps this is what I have undertaken to do here. In some ways then, I want to claim it is not only more interesting but also legitimate to treat Stażewski's reliefs as conceptual propositions on the theme of the relief. Even the most austere conceptualism in any case remained residually tied to the visual if only through text or photography.

¹³ Stażewski, untitled text (*Odra 2*, 1968), in Jurkiewicz et. al., *op. cit.*, p. 277.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 276–7.

¹⁵ Stażewski, "Rozmowa z Henrykiem Stażewskim [Conversation with Henryk Stażewski]," in *Henryk Stażewski*, Warsaw: Galena Foksal, 1969, in Jurkiewicz et. al., *op. cit.*, p. 279.

¹⁶ S. LeWitt cited in M. Bochner, "The Serial Attitude," in A. Alberro and B. Stimson, *Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology*, Cambridge, Mass. and London, England, 1999, p. 25.



121

Henryk Stażewski, *Nr 20 / No 20*, 1974
akryl, płyta pilśniowa / acryl, hardboard, 60 × 60 cm

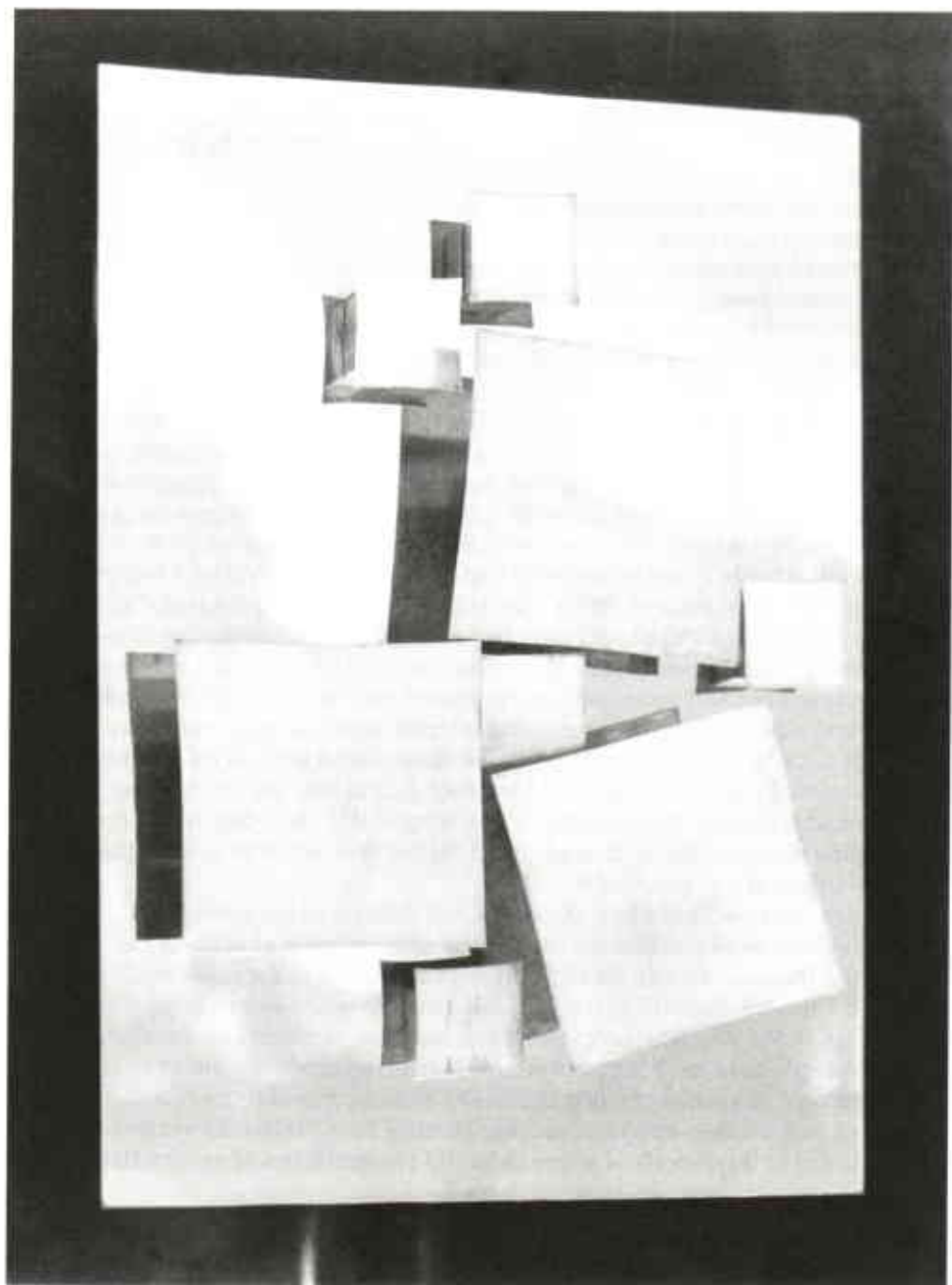
Although much of his work was small-scale and wall-hung, Stażewski was also interested in larger-scale projects. But he insisted that “the work of art should not melt into the surroundings, nor decorate anything, nor facilitate anything. It should dominate it artistically.”¹⁷ A photograph of Stażewski at the opening of his Zachęta Gallery exhibition in 1965 against his huge black-and-white and white reliefs measuring 3 by 5 meters shows him both beside and inside his work (118). The photograph transforms the painting into environment — the diagonal shadows are more imposing and elongated than ever before. The protrusions appear to be hollow with a black interior: once more appropriating a portion of air to play the role of “between,” excising it from its usual functions. The shadows produced by the space between the relief, meanwhile, are a steady but variable presence articulating a mobile space and establishing a concrete relation between what was once the simple binary figure/ground.

Although Stażewski never wrote anything specific about the idea of the “between” in relation to his own work, he did, in 1977, write a piece called an “Inquiry into the Word ‘Between’” following Stanisław Dróżdź’s exhibition *Between* at the Foksal Gallery. The exhibition surrounded the spectator with the letters out of which the word *między* is made up whilst never allowing these letters to form the word in any line (119). In a sense then this was a literalisation of the condition of being caught inside the text, inside a whirl of its absurdly abstract components — excluded from the stability of legibility and the habits of comprehension. An ideal viewing position was outlawed, each being as bewildering and frustrating as the next. Although the claustrophobic crowding of Dróżdź’s exhibition seems in absolute contrast to the cool order of Stażewski’s abstraction, both are responses to the same conceptual problems associated with meaning production and embodied spectatorship. Stażewski’s text on the between was essentially a list of paired opposites, introduced as follows: “Inquiry into the Word ‘Between’ — in all combinations its meaning as: a place in the spatial and physical sense, an attitude to man and nature, antipodes in the emotional, mental, ethical and philosophical sense. BETWEEN: among, next to, in, together, jointly, inimically.”¹⁸ The Polish word has a conceptual range that its English equivalent lacks, explaining the wealth of the list of opposites that follows. These range from simpler pairs like left and right or top and bottom, to more difficult ones like “the dialectical power of differentiating reason and the sensualist power of the instinct surrounding unity” or “the courage of free thinking and determinism, which is a compulsion.”¹⁹ He could have extended the list indefinitely, for structuralism has shown our entire way of thinking is ordered according to such paradigms. However, Stażewski wrote that “‘between’ was not only a ‘place’ and a set of binaries, but also an ‘attitude’.”

17 Stażewski, “Rozmowa z Henrykiem Stażewskim [Conversation with Henryk Stażewski],” *op. cit.*, p. 280

18 Stażewski, “Ankieta słowa ‘między’ (tytuł wystawy Stanisława Dróżdźa) [Questionnaire on the Word ‘Between’ (title of Stanisław Dróżdź’s Exhibition)],” in Jurkiewicz et al., *op. cit.*, p. 293.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 294.



122

Henryk Stazewski, *Relief aluminiowy nr 16 / Aluminium Relief No. 16*, 1965
aluminium, drewno / aluminium on wood, 28×40 cm
sfotografowany na tle nieba / outdoor photographed

What might it mean to claim that the “between” is an “attitude”? A series of lectures delivered in 1977 at the Collège de France by Roland Barthes on the *Neutre*, recently translated into English under the title *Neutral*, may provide an answer. “A rule... of the Neutral,” Barthes argued, “would consist in finding a way to disseminate intelligent stuff, as though between the lines (cf. [compare] the monochrome) of a flat, dumb (verbal) fabric.”²⁰ It is the desire, firstly, for the “suspension of orders..., — then, by way of deepening, refusal of pure discourse of opposition.”²¹ The neutral is a site of resistance. It is a position from which to attack the sterility of conventional binary thought structures. The neutral is outside of the realm of *ninisme* — neither-nor criticism. It is the projection of Barthes’s dream of “exemption from meaning,” his dream of a “third language,” a dream Stażewski shared, as, of course, have many others in one form or another. Derrida sought out the *entre* that exists between speech and writing. Deleuze was fascinated by the rhizome because it “has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*.”²² For Stażewski, the ultimate between may have been the space between cause and effect. “Man moves in a labyrinth,” he said, “where he is not capable of visually taking in the enormous chasm between cause and effect.”²³ We live out our lives in a spatio-temporal gap, he suggests. The relief, I believe, was a way to articulate this condition spatially: the cause being the relief and the shadow the effect, with the spectator in between, unable to stop the infinite run of the two parallel lines. Stażewski’s reliefs re-opened a gap that art’s move into the environment had squeezed out. He resurrected the relic of the relief because it was a partially open system, one which remained conceptually robust enough to open out onto the questioning of the world beyond its confines without dissolving itself into that world entirely. Julian Przyboś once wrote that Kobro had sculpted “space itself... [S]he shaped this void, this depth, not filled with any material that surrounds us.”²⁴ Stażewski wanted to project the viewer into this space conceptually.

There were periods when Stażewski lost interest in his pursuit of this critical space and explored instead the secrets of colour, but as some of his line drawings from the mid-1970s show, he kept returning to the problem of the between. In *Unnumbered*, 1972 (120), it is the dynamic space where two fields of lines overlap. In *No. 20*, 1974 (121), it is a central stripe produced by the slight shifting of a segment of each horizontal line. It is a line produced out of nearly nothing, a minute sequence of shifts that make an unbounded line of lines. No contours, just another non-line, another Neutral line. Stażewski worked as hard to uncover the secrets of space as he did the subtleties of colour. His

20 R. Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, trans. R. E. Krauss and D. Hollier, text established by T. Clerc under the direction of E. Marty, New York, 2005 (Paris, 2002), p. 85.

21 *Ibid.*, p. 12.

22 G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. B. Massumi, London and New York, 1988 (Paris, 1980), p. 27.

23 Stażewski, untitled text from 1976, reprinted in Jurkiewicz et. al., *op. cit.*, p. 287.

24 J. Przyboś, “Rzeźba napowietrzna [Open-air Sculpture],” (*Poezja* 1, January 1966, pp. 75–80), reproduced in *Edward Krasinski*, exhibition catalogue, Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 1991, p. 10.

exploration of the spaces behind the scenes he constructs is perhaps the most secret of these, and the most magical.

Stażewski was also in some ways a mystic, despite his rational approach to the canvas. He wrote, “I will create fiction seen with the eyes, but expressing something deeper that cannot be seen — internal and hidden — whose mechanical indicator is the work of art. In this will be the intervention of thought, which disintegrates in consciousness and the subconscious.”²⁵ The unarticulated space beneath and behind the raised reliefs is always somehow unknown. Looking sideways (and the works invite this, in a backhanded sort of a way, having been conceived to court the movement of the spectator), we peer into the slices of space between the relief and the picture plane and see tunnels between the wood blocks on which the reliefs are mounted. We see a network of lines of escape, metaphors for a critical space beyond — perhaps even for what Barthes called Neutral. Looking at a photograph of Stażewski’s *Aluminium Relief No. 16, 1965* (122), photographed against the sky, I wonder if this is what he meant when he spoke of “the creative power of comparison” being a moment in which “metaphor becomes reality.”²⁶

²⁵ Stażewski, untitled text from 1974, reproduced in Jurkiewicz et. al., *op. cit.*, p. 282.
²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 288.