

Modernity,
Indifference,
and Oblivion:
Katarzyna Kobro
and Maria
Jarema

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Waldemar Baraniewski is an art historian specializing in Polish and international art of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He is Professor in the Department of the Management of Visual Culture at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw. His publications include the monograph Kazimierz Skórewicz (1866–1950). Architekt, konserwator, historyk architektury (Kazimierz Skórewicz (1866–1950). Architect, conservator, architectural historian) (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Sejmowe, 2000). In the essay that follows, first published under the title 'Nowoczesność, obojętność i zapomnienie. Katarzyna Kobro i Maria Jarema' in the journal Miejsce: studia nad sztuką i architekturą polską XX I XXI wieku, issue 1 (2015), he discusses the historical reception of the work and thought of two outstanding Polish sculptors, Maria Jarema and Katarzyna Kobro, with reference to the superficiality of their treatment by their contemporaries. Baraniewski argues that their work constituted the symbolic nucleus for a new understanding of sculpture, a new attitude towards space, rhythm, movement, architectonics, deformation, and a new professional sculptural language. Despite this, he notes that the innovative quality of this work was overlooked, both during the interwar period, and after the Second World War. Like the sculptures themselves, which, for the most part, did not survive, understanding of their work remained partial. Although they both played a key role in shaping the innovative landscape of Polish sculpture in the interwar period, both remained in the shadow of their male artist partners: Władysław Strzemiński (Kobro) and Henryk Wiciński (Jarema). Both abandoned sculpture after 1945, in the light of new social and personal circumstances. Baraniewski argues that the slow assimilation of these two key figures, and the misattribution of their work, speaks more broadly of poor scholarly standards as regards modernist sculpture in the field of a Polish sculptural history that has remained dominated by academic traditionalism. (KKW)

Modernity, Indifference, and Oblivion: Katarzyna Kobro and Maria Jarema

The tradition of modernity in Polish sculpture is ungrounded, fluid, and lacking in clarity. For the purposes of this essay, I will not seek to define the concept of modernity, but will refer instead to the way it has conventionally been interpreted in research on Polish twentieth-century art. With reference to two great figures of the Polish avant-garde, two great female sculptors, I would like to point out the frailty of this tradition, the problematic nature of a modernity that has been forgotten, despite having been neither adapted nor processed, and tends to be treated as though it were already in the distant past. This text is an attempt to sketch out the mutual relations between these two artists, associated with avant-garde artistic circles, and their ideas in the field of sculptural practice in Poland in the second half of the twentieth century. Emerging from diverse fields within the avant-garde tradition, the work of Katarzyna Kobro and Maria Jarema represents the symbolic nucleus of a new understanding of sculpture, a new approach to space, rhythm, movement, architectonics, and deformation, a new language of sculpture. But this novelty was not universally acknowledged, neither in the interwar period, nor after the war; its understanding was fragmentary, vanishing, like the damaged, un-preserved sculptures themselves.

Janusz Zagrodzki, a respected researcher of Katarzyna Kobro's work, made an attempt to reattribute certain sculptures, previously attributed to Jarema, to Kobro. In so doing, he drew on the Formalist tools of art history: formal descriptions and their relations to their individual relationship to the author.¹ I do not take issue with this; I am simply interested in a specific, unclear aspect of the attribution of work. What is it based on? After all, we are not dealing with a pre-literate era; the period in question is quite recent. Why, as Zagrodzki claims, had Jarema been confused with Kobro? Carelessness, unconcern, ignorance, or indifference? Perhaps this is a significant point of reference for the history of modern Polish sculpture, significant to this day? Or perhaps it was immanent in ungrounded Polish modernity?

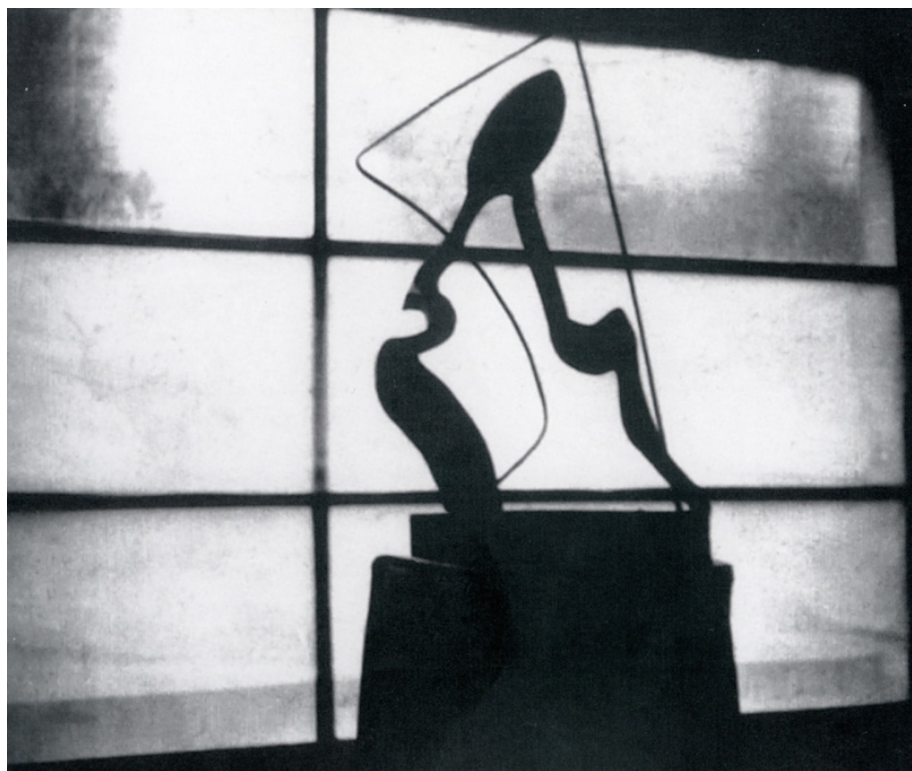


Fig. 12.1.
Katarzyna Kobro,
Construction
(*Konstrukcja*,
c. 1935). Metal,
glass, height
c. 70 cm. Lost
(wrongly attributed
to Maria Jarema).
Reproduction from
Janusz Zagrodzki,
'Wewnątrz
przestrzeni', in
Katarzyna Kobro.
W setną rocznicę
urodzin, exhibition
catalogue, Muzeum
Sztuki (Łódź,
1998–1999),
p. 78. Originally
reproduced in
H. Weber, 'Grupa
Krakowska w
Domu Plastyka',
Nowy Dziennik
(1 March 1935).

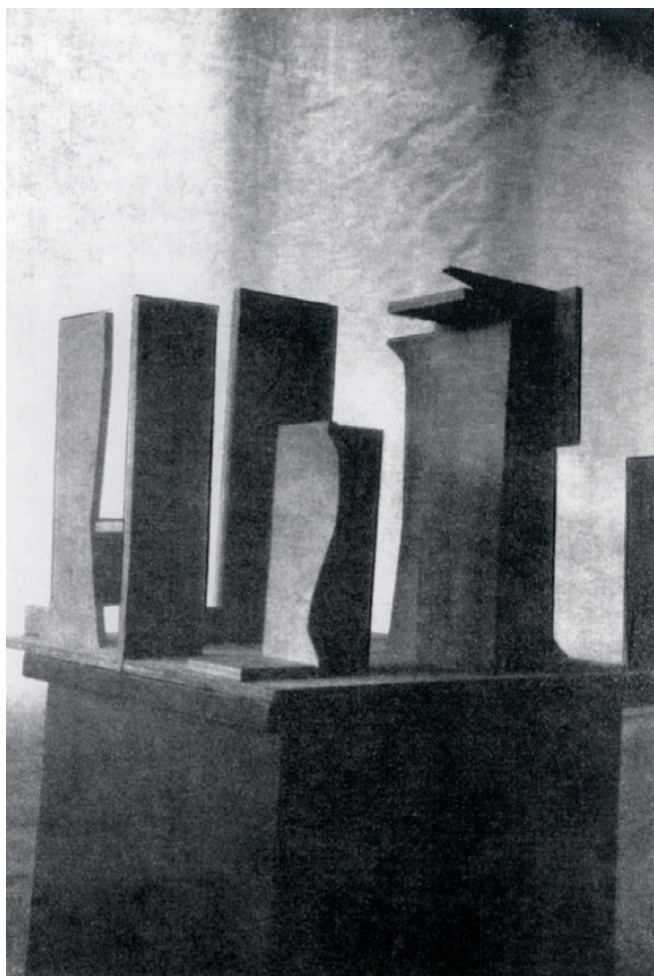
The works and fate of Katarzyna Kobro and Maria Jarema, associated with Łódź and Kraków, two centres of the interwar-period avant-garde, condense within them not simply the main elements of the artistic agendas of these milieux, but, at the same time, indicate their singularly deliberate and lived indifference to one another (despite initiatives in common, such as the creation of the Grupa Plastyków Nowoczesnych (The Group of Modern Artists), or Grupa Krakowska's invitation to Władysław Strzemiński to co-organise an exhibition, which was held in 1935 in Kraków). Grupa Plastyków Nowoczesnych was mainly made up of artists who were younger than their colleagues from Łódź (Jarema was ten years younger than Kobro); this had a bearing on their ideological choices, which, while apparently similar in both cases, were less idealistic and less immersed in utopia in Kraków than in Łódź. Henryk Wiciński expressed himself clearly on this matter:

[There is an emphasis on] utilitarianism, of course, and on social meaning, but from the point of view of results. I believe that, for many, the period of spitting and impotent cynicism has passed. We have entered an era of the pathos of life. The task is to discover sensual forms of vision, the movement of a person in space, the sculpture of vision, and not of recollections of past fame of recollections of life. I cast aside historical pathos, but not the pathos of history. Form giving matter, which is the concentration of artistic energy. Sculpture becomes a starting point in the visual life of the viewer.²

These strong opinions were articulated by a man who was notably familiar with his home artistic milieu in Łódź and with its international contexts, and who was seeking out 'natural relations of actual connectivity' with Kraków.³ He also attempted, tirelessly, to connect and to mediate between Kobro and Jarema. As Barbara Ilkosz wrote: 'Bringing diverse interests to light, Wiciński, from Łódź, brought to Kraków the latest information from the avant-garde circle there, represented by Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro and Henryk Stażewski'.⁴

But the works of the two artists were only ever exhibited together twice during their lifetimes: in February 1935, at the aforementioned exhibition of the Grupa Krakowska, and at the Warsaw Institute for the Propaganda of Art (Instytut Propagandy Sztuki) in 1936. Two of the works shown at the Kraków exhibition, known only from photographs (Figs. 12.1 and 12.2), were for years assumed to be the sculptures of Wiciński and Jarema. It was only in 1998 that Janusz Zagrodzki reattributed them to Kobro, claiming that Wiciński's sculptures 'referred to

Fig. 12.2. Katarzyna Kobro, *Model of a Spatial Composition* (*Model Kompozycji przestrzennej*, c. 1935). Wood, 40 x 64 x 40 cm. Lost (wrongly attributed to Henryk Wyciński). Reproduction from Janusz Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', in *Katarzyna Kobro. W setną rocznicę urodzin*, exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Sztuki (Łódź, 1998–1999), p. 79. Originally reproduced in H. Weber, 'Grupa Krakowska w Domu Plastyka', *Nowy Dziennik* (1 March 1935).



man and to organic material' and that there was nothing to indicate their association with the spatial compositions of Kobro.⁵ 'Whereas', according to Zagrodzki, 'even a cursory analysis of the sculpture [known only from photographs] imposed this identity'.⁶ He also attributed the second composition thought to be by Jarema ('whose work', he wrote, 'was being formed at that time under the direct influence of Wyciński'), to Kobro.⁷ Zagrodzki's arguments are weak, but are typical of the way in which relations between Jarema and Kobro have been perceived. Art historians have systematically excluded Jarema from the field of sculpture.

With reference to works from the later exhibition at the Institute for the Propaganda of Art, a reviewer from *Pion* stressed that

Wyciński's *Head* (*Głowa*) demonstrates Cubist assumptions, breaking up shapes into individual geometric form in order to intensify its representation. His and Jarema's compositions realise the postulates of the new sculpture, which forsakes the object and operates with elements of form intersecting one another and the surrounding space, as a constituent factor. Thanks to this the views achieve a multiplicity of perspectives and connections with the surroundings. The ambition to establish spatial relations in sculpture is best expressed in the abstract sculptures of Katarzyna Kobro, demonstrating great inventiveness and a constant desire to produce bold experiences.⁸

The critic, Jadwiga Puciata-Pawłowska, did not see any essential differences between the manners of treating sculpture of Kobro, Jarema, or Wyciński. She clearly stressed the abstract character of the works and that external space was the main point of reference for the compositions of the trio of artists (or rather, one could say, of two pairs of artists—Wyciński–Jarema and Strzemiński–Kobro—as this was how the situation presented itself). In relation to both pairs, contemporary criticism stressed the leading role of the men in introducing original ideas, dynamism, and creative ferment into the partnership. 'In truth ... we did not have many sculptors to whom the epithet of "modernity" could be applied without a stretch', Ignacy Witz said, in hindsight.⁹

He wrote: 'One could mention the early works of Maria Jarema, who was, after all dependent on Wiciński, and also Katarzyna Kobro', adding, 'but among the works of our avant-garde sculptors, the works of Kobro were inescapably ornaments, clearly aestheticized, dependent on Archipenko'.¹⁰

Mieczysław Porębski presented the issue differently in his conclusion to a conference devoted to Strzemiński in 1994. With reference to a paper by Ewa Franus—an excellent study of the artistic emancipation of Katarzyna Kobro and at the same time an attempt to address the question of the identity of the real author of the book *The Composition of Space: Calculations of Space-Time Rhythm* (*Kompozycja przestrzeni: Obliczenia rytmu czasoprzestrzennego*)—Porębski confessed that Maria Jarema 'was no longer the weaker side, set in motion by her partner. It was the partners that were weaker. It was Wiciński who was weaker ... She was the one who was the leading authority; she was the moral authority over the course of all those years in which she, and not Moses, led the Grupa Krakowska across the red sea. Everyone was afraid of her. Even Kantor'.¹¹

Porębski's comparison once more highlighted the asymmetrical nature of the fate of both artists. On the one hand, Maria Jarema 'did not owe her place in history to the noble calamity that an individual can be subjected to by historical insanity. She owed it to courage and fidelity to her talent, which enabled her to overcome her circumstances, helping her to retain her human as well as her artistic dignity'.¹² On the other hand, there was Katarzyna Kobro, over the course of whose life there unfolded a dismal scenario of progressive elimination from human memory. Her peak (and breakthrough) moment was a text by the French critic G  rald Gassiot-Talabot, who shared his discovery on the pages of *Art International*:

Leafing through the publications of *Abstraction-Cr  ation* of the years 1932–1933, one finds traces of the work of an extraordinary sculptor named Kobro [male], whose works are the precursors of contemporary English sculpture, and have the same manner of defining the volumes of surfaces, the same propinquity for curved, baroque and interrupted rhythm. Only the colour remains unknown from the black and white photographs. This encounter with an unknown artist makes one want to know more about the works of this [man] Kobro.¹³

This was in 1966, eight years after the death of Maria Jarema and also the year of her great exhibition at the Krzysztofory in Krak  w, an exhibition whose catalogue opened poignantly with the following words of Helena Blum: 'The Krak  w milieu remembers with gratitude those artists who lived and worked within it'.¹⁴

Why were the sculptures of Katarzyna Kobro so little present in Polish visual culture, then and, perhaps, also now? Why were the original and pioneering ideas formulated in the treatise on *The Composition of Space* not taken up by the next generation of artists? In seeking to answer these questions, Janusz Zagrodzki stated:

One of the reasons why the individual achievements of Kobro did not garner universal recognition, was the specific atmosphere which was created around the inquiries of the avant-garde and as a consequence produced a schematic principle of evaluating the achievements of individual artists through the prism of the artistic legend of W  dys  aw Strzemi  ski ... In the general perception, Strzemi  ski's person towered above the other representatives of the avant-garde, and Kobro's art remained in the shadow of his personality.¹⁵

We might ask, here, while retaining a sense of perspective, whether Jarema met with a similar fate, in later years. For although, according to Porębski's testimony, even Kantor was afraid of her, her art has somehow fallen into the shadow of Kantor's. Theatre seems to triumph over sculpture. After all, Jarema herself, like Kobro before her, 'retreated' from sculpture. This was an astonishing act, given her engagement in sculptural work and the results she achieved. In the words of a direct witness, Helena Blum, who met with the sculptor in 1944: 'I remember that first visit to Maria Jarema's perfectly today. I asked Maria about her sculpture, as at that time I imagined her to be a sculptor. And her response is lodged in my memory, that she had abandoned sculpture, as it exceeded her physical strength. Then I asked her what she was painting. But she did not show me anything, and did not say anything on this subject'.¹⁶

The fact remains that, from that moment on, Maria Jarema concentrated all her creative activities on painting, graphic art, and scenography. The history of art of the first half of the twentieth

century has known many examples of artists who were as able with a chisel as with a paintbrush. The list is headed by Henri Matisse; Pablo Picasso occupies an important role in it, with his extraordinary imagination; also Amedeo Modigliani, Umberto Boccioni, the German Expressionists, Max Ernst, Hans Arp, Alberto Giacometti, Theo van Doesburg, to name just a few. The boundaries between types of activity became blurred in their work, and the drive towards synthesis and interdisciplinarity seems to be one of the markers of avant-garde movements. This sort of blurring of typological differences was not a widespread phenomenon in Polish artistic life of the 1930s and 1940s. The norm was a rather rigidly-observed division between types of activity: the Capists did not sculpt; the students of Tadeusz Breyer did not reach for paintbrushes. This had an obvious bearing on social reception and critical strategies, where types of activity were also quite clearly divided, and artists were judged according to their degree of accomplishment in a certain, coherent typological agenda, with its own particular descriptive language. Polish sculpture of the 1930s did not push the boundaries of traditionally distinct spheres such as the monument, the portrait, the artistic representation of animals, and miniature sculptural ornaments. Katarzyna Kobro indicated these limitations and the provincialism of Polish sculpture with great incisiveness, consciousness, and courage. 'Contemporary Polish sculpture?' she asked: 'There was once Gothic sculpture, there was Baroque sculpture, there was impressionist sculpture ... The whole understanding and culture of those times has passed. Currently, here is bureaucratic sculpture and the savage howl of "national" art'.¹⁷

Besides Katarzyna Kobro, the only exception within Polish sculpture of the times was the work produced in the circle of the Grupa Krakowska. As Helena Blum recalls:

Henryk Wiciński was a strong creative personality, with the power to influence those around him ... Jarema's standing was close to Henryk's. Born the same year as he was, in the year below as a student, she inevitably took up the same slogans, and worked in a related spirit. In this work, however, she revealed her own features. Jarema had her own position, decisiveness and the courage of her convictions. She was able to agree certain shared positions with Wiciński, but she never forgot her own convictions.¹⁸

They formed something akin to a separate group within the Grupa Krakowska circle, absorbed by the problems of new art, the new language of sculpture, exceeding objecthood. "Abstractionism", incorrectly considered by some to be a movement, was a defence mechanism of art', Jarema wrote in 1947 in her memoir of Wiciński.¹⁹ The memoir is a moving account of shared passions and struggles. She wrote:

Wiciński ... rejected subject matter, wishing to reveal the problems of art clearly. He imposed these on the viewer, depriving him of subject matter, which so often entirely absorbs his attention, but also makes art more intimate, more human. In presenting the pure construction of artistic forms, he showed how they operated in their own right. The power of their operation is one that is felt by every artist, in making art, even if he does not entirely understand this process. In the drama of the converging forms he senses the cosmic drama of the planets colliding with each other.²⁰

In this description, the creative act becomes a force setting the mechanisms of a new universal order in motion, a new cosmogony of non-objective forms. It had to have been written by someone experiencing similar emotions and conscious of the direction of her own investigations and works, tending towards defining a new status of sculpture as a non-objective art, and created on the basis of free imaginary invention.

Jarema's sculptures from this period were constructed out of compact segments, referring to transformed figurative forms. They often departed considerably from the figurative, to produce vibrant organisms, with shifting dispositions and profiles. In the history of Polish modernist sculpture, these investigations (and here Jarema has to be seen in close relation to Wiciński) were extraordinary. They transcended all the traditions that had been naturalised in Polish art. It would be difficult to ascribe an external context to them. In their earliest works, while they were still in Xavery Dunikowski's studio, we see conclusions drawn from the lessons of Cubism and the sculptures of Matisse, in the disposition of the figure, the specific deformation, expression, and likeness.

A contemporary critic described this accurately: 'The Formism contained in her works reduces all real shapes to a harmonious, rhythmic synthesis, to a game of convexities and concavities, soft surfaces and sharp edges interrupted by a series of abstract voids enlivened here and there by the Cubist formative force of encroaching material'.²¹ In later works, we can perhaps see a certain likeness to Otto Freundlich or Alexander Archipenko in the way abstract forms operate in the compositions.

Let us return once more to the aforementioned first visit of Helena Blum to Jarema's studio. This record of the first meeting after a 6-year interlude with the young art historian, whom she had met in Paris before the war, is a register of the fundamental change that took place in the art of the Kraków artist. Helena Blum had kept in mind the figure of the young sculptor, the student of Dunikowski, a friend of Wiciński. After the war, she found the artist declaring that she has parted ways with the field of activity and with her promising career, as though at a crossroads, as yet unsure of her future choices. Jarema was perhaps also unsure of the value of her artistic achievements to date and of the meaning of further activity, in relation to the experiences brought by wartime: not only lived, personal experiences but also those of an intellectual nature, dramatically confirming her faith in a refreshing and enriching universal culture, an international community of modern art. Her words in the *Głos Plastyków (Artists' Voice)* questionnaire of 1937—'art, like all knowledge, is international. Based on global achievements, the art of further problems and solutions, which in their intellectual sense have nothing in common with nationality or race'—sounded, in 1945, like a voice from another world.²²

A faithful answer to the question of whether the reasons for abandoning sculpture given to Helena Blum were true and complete is essentially impossible. Asking why Jarema, having already achieved so much by the late 1930s, abandoned the sculpture to which she would return sporadically, Mieczysław Porębski stated: 'The artist is simply more-and-more-obviously tempted by painting. She instinctively avoids a premature exploitation of her earliest formulas, achievements and experiences. She refuses, consistently refuses, to habituate herself she refuses to build on her earlier achievements'.²³ These are strange words and hard to accept. While I understand the temptation to paint, this does not explain the radicalism of this step. Perhaps the decision to abandon sculpture was less influenced by the technical burden of the profession and the temptation for change, than by the death of Wiciński, to whom she was linked by a sincere friendship and a shared artistic vision. The deciding factors in her abandonment of sculpture were probably a lack of support and confirmation in her search for a 'sculpture of vision', a sense of loneliness and of being misunderstood. She felt less alone and apart in painting.

Jarema's decision to abandon sculpture had far-reaching and long-lasting consequences. In view of the destruction of the greater part of Wiciński's life's work, her withdrawal from sculptural work essentially put an end to 1930s efforts to formulate a tradition of Polish modern sculpture. The battleground was left to the *manualiści*: the conservative, 'realist' sculptors for whom the year 1949 marked the beginning of a new, Socialist-Realist, situation.

Jarema's move influenced the reception of her work, including that of her earlier sculptural works. Critics, educated and specialised in the analysis of paintings, essentially restricted their activity to the description of the painterly and graphic aspects of Jarema's work. One extreme instance of such an attitude was the aforementioned exhibition organised at Galeria Krzysztofora in 1966, eight years after the artist's death. There was not a single sculpture among the sixty works included in the exhibition, and even the catalogue essay made no mention at all of sculpture. This text is also a good example of the misunderstanding associated with the attempt to analyse Jarema's painterly and graphic works in the context of Kinetic art or Italian 'Spatialism'. The author wrote:

In today's art, movement is associated with spatial problems ... The continuation of the artistic thought of Mondrian has been undertaken in the West ... Not only have the problems undertaken by Vasarely and Mortens, and, here in Poland, by Maria Jarema, come to the forefront, but these ideas are also appearing in Italy. This is testimony to the currency and importance of these matters for modern art ... Other artists, meanwhile, are making new efforts, which are ultimately liberated in so-called op art.²⁴ Thus, the loss of a proper context for this art, namely, the sculptural experience of the fullness of space, led to entirely erroneous observations and conclusions.



Fig. 12.3. Maria Jarema, *Dance* (*Taniec*, 1955). Brass, height 26 cm. National Museum in Kraków. Photo: Waldemar Baraniewski.



Fig. 12.4. Maria Jarema, *Figure* (*Figura*, 1955). National Museum in Kraków. Photo: Waldemar Baraniewski.

Critics ignored the artist's many years of work on discovering the presence of material shape in three dimensions, which left a permanent trace in her thinking about form and space, determining the manner of organising the flat surface of the canvas. The failure to take into consideration this 'sculptural component' in analysis led to false interpretations. 'The subject of Jarema's paintings', wrote Julian Przyboś, 'is the movement of colours and forms. After years of studies and research associated with this subject, she arrived at results worthy of comparison with the most interesting achievements of contemporary painting'.²⁵ It seems that, contrary to Przyboś's intentions, there would be little to gain from such a comparison. Here one can refer to the testimony of Ryszard Stanisławski, who sought to present Jarema's work in a serious manner when organising exhibitions of Polish artists abroad. Foreign partners politely declined, for they saw and interpreted her works precisely in the context of what Przyboś would called the 'greatest achievements of contemporary painting; well known and realised somewhat earlier in their own countries'.²⁶ The imposed reading of Jarema's work as belonging to the painterly tendencies of abstraction, Kineticism, or Spatialism led to assumptions about the derivative nature of her works. Meanwhile, the correct context for the evaluation of the series *Rhythms* (*Rytmy*), *Filters* (*Filtry*) and *Penetrations* (*Penetracje*) should be sculpture, for the vision recorded in them is as though genetically shaped by sculptural, not painterly, thinking about space. We might say that Jarema was realising the instructions of Wiciński, who wrote, in a letter to her in 1937:

Organic sculptures are on an open path. I am working in the opposite direction to Cubism, neo-Plasticism as the crystallisation of Cubism and the composition of space, which entails the visual linking of Cubist form by way of a slight agreement between the sequencing of form in space. The most important issue is the means of linking form and its spatiality—leading the gaze; what I mean is the penetration of one form by another according to the laws of the physiology of vision.²⁷

We might say that what we have here is a generalised description of the compositional principle of Jarema's paintings and graphics. The artist herself intuitively indicated the correct tropes to critics, creating two extraordinary sculptures in 1955: *Dance* (*Taniec*, Fig. 12.3) and *Figure* (*Figura*, Fig. 12.4), full spatial materialisations of her graphic works.

Now let us return to Kobro and to the question of why her artistic life's work would have to wait so long for an accurate evaluation. Without trivialising the aforementioned dominant role of Strzemiński as an artistic partner, it is worth noting two additional aspects of the question. The first is the result of the artistic strategy adopted by Strzemiński after 1945, whereas the second is a consequence of the phenomenon of retrospective revolution, which dominated the landscape of artistic changes after 1956.²⁸ The first case relates to Strzemiński's resignation from participating in the *First Exhibition of Modern Art* (*I Wystawa Sztuki Nowoczesnej*) in Kraków. As Kantor recalled: 'Some artists assumed a negative attitude to appearing at all ... Strzemiński and Kobro's position in relation to the actions of the artists from Kraków remained one of indecision. They did not participate in the December exhibition at all. Strzemiński was mistrustful of this avant-garde event' and went so far as to say to Kantor outright: 'Dear Sir, you are all mistaken'.²⁹ Kantor also named Kobro alongside Strzemiński in his account, but it is unlikely that the artist would have considered participating in the Kraków exhibition at all at this time (the end of 1948), in view of her personal circumstances.

Let us recall here the previously-cited words of Helena Blum concerning the Kraków milieu remembering those artists who had worked in the city. The mobilisation of the Kraków milieu and Strzemiński's refusal to participate in the *First Exhibition of Modern Art* meant that Kobro's work came to be temporally associated with the pre-1939 context, even before the introduction of Socialist Realism, when her work was considered degenerate. We might interpret the artist's donation of her surviving works to the museum in Łódź in this way (alongside the existential concern for her own life's work). Her works were intended to play the part of didactic exhibits within the exhibition programme of Marian Minich, when he was director of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź. Deprived of the status of works and of their own intellectual base they were to 'explain the successive stages of the development of art from Cubism to Constructivism'.³⁰

A period of silence followed. Deprived of the possibility of artistic work and embroiled in day-to-day concerns, Kobro sank into obscurity. Her art was erased from the memory. Maria Jarema was also silent, and her silence, as she would admit years later, was one filled with self-doubt. Faith in artistic work relies on the conviction, which Kobro would surely have assented to, that 'the fundamental discovery of contemporary art is freedom, ... the right to arrive, without reservations, at the final frontiers of oneself'.³¹ The political transformations of the mid-1950s lent her position (though not her art) a new dimension. Anna Markowska wrote: 'Clearly, the artist was able to serve as a model of morality in the fifties, but not as an artistic authority'.³²

In order to shed further light on the situation of Kobro's art after 1956, by now without the participation of the artist herself, I will refer to the testimony of Jerzy Sołtan. 'Polish Modernism', the architect wrote, 'was rather influenced by the simplified, German but also Kandinsky-Malevich faction. It was in favour of complete non-representationalism in painting and sculpture. I personally, on the other hand, was attracted to modernism for its attempt to link modernity and tradition'.³³ Sołtan went on to recall a meeting at the Warsaw Klub Krzywego Koła to which he had been invited:

a meeting at which he understood that he was actually standing before a tribunal composed of the orthodox, invincible, hard Polish modernists of the twenties, formerly of *Blok* and *Praesens* ... Then I realised that they were starting to see me as someone who, defeated in cultural matters, was now plying a new incarnation of Socialist Realism. It was clear that that fellow Przyboś was unable to accept that modernism or architectural contemporaneity could encompass other, broader or deeper problems than those to which he and his colleagues were accustomed and which they had considered binding for so long. Przyboś clearly remained in the era of projects such as Kobro's *Functionalist Elementary School* (*Funkcjonalne przedszkole*) and Strzemiński's *Gdynia Train Station* (*Dworzec kolejowy w Gdyni*).³⁴

It goes without saying that Sołtan referred to both these metaphorical projects as decidedly bad, with clear contempt. There are many similar testimonies that could be cited. More often than not, they also identify Kobro's sculptural works with architectural projects, thereby depreciating their role and positioning them in an entirely false context. It seems that it was precisely these 'architecturally' inclined readings of Katarzyna Kobro's sculpture that were to be one of the reasons for the meagre interest in her work among Polish sculptors. The problem of architecture was one of the most energetically-debated topics in the Polish socio-cultural press of the 1960s, against a real background of an acute shortage of apartments and exceptionally poor-quality building. The entanglement of Kobro's work in this argument, though accidental, played a decisive role in its being received incorrectly for many long years. Yves-Alain Bois's well known assessment of Kobro's work precisely conveys this situation: 'Some works appear too early and make a comeback too late, their very precocity interfering—and continuing to interfere—with their reception'.³⁵ This assessment refers to the 'work', thus, both to the material objects and to their theoretical and intellectual subsidiaries. But *The Composition of Space: Calculation of Space-Time Rhythm*, after all, led a life of its own as a work published in print, and did not necessarily require the potential reader to refer to the author's sculptures.³⁶ Is it possible to recover the traces of its reading in contemporary Polish reflection on sculpture and the ways it is taught?

In searching for the intellectual basis of art pedagogy, I looked through the (only partially-preserved) course materials for diploma-level studios in the Sculpture Departments of the Warsaw and the Kraków Academies of Fine Arts for the period 1960 to 1970. I was not in search of direct references to the tradition of the artistic avant-garde, but of some trace of a continuity of experience or a conscious contradiction of these experiences. The results of my survey were as I had expected. On the one hand, there was the traditionalism of the 'study from nature': 'Learning is based on the extensive and profound study of nature. Man is the fundamental object of this study. It entails systematic exercises in the field of the human figure, with attention to the gradation of the degree of difficulty'.³⁷ On the other hand, the superficial freedom of experiences, resonating with artistic slogans fashionable in the 1960s and 1970s, referring, for example, to the artist as a creator and user of modern technologies of visual information. The one exception in the country were the courses formulated on the cusp of the 1960s and 1970s in the circle of Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts in the studio of Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz and complementing Oskar Hansen's Solids and Surfaces studio. Without going into a deeper analysis of these here, it is worth saying, nonetheless, that the problems and exercises formulated by Hansen contained within them themes familiar from a reading of *The Composition of Space*, mainly in matters relating to spatial relationships.

Oskar Hansen published his 'experiences in creative practice' for the first time in 1959, in a laconic and not-particularly-specific text entitled 'Open Form'.³⁸ The concept itself, never entirely defined by the author, was an enormous success as of that moment. Hansen intended Open Form to be

a new, more organic art of our times ... It will create a sense of the necessity of existence in every one of us, it will help us to define ourselves in the space and time within which we live. It will be a space that is in accordance with our complex, and, as yet, unknown psyche. This will happen because we will begin to exist as the organic elements of this art. We will walk within it rather than walking around it.³⁹

Hansen's definition of Open Form means the literal opening of sculptural form to space, to the surroundings, to create a spatial continuum between what is inside and what is outside. This theoretical perspective is reminiscent of the formulation expressed by Kobro and Strzemiński in *The Composition of Space*, when they wrote: 'Sculpture has no known natural boundaries and the result of this is the demand for its unity with the sum of infinite space ... Sculpture, created in a space that is not limited by any boundaries, should form a unity with the infinity of space'.⁴⁰ The poet Julian Przyboś, referred to by Sołtan, saw a clear similarity between Kobro's ideas and Hansen's. He wrote:

Kobro's artistic activity brings sculpture closer to architecture, but not at all in the way in which it has for so long been assumed. Her sculptures were not an addition or a component

part of architecture, but it was as though they were a sort of architecture: architects could take inspiration for their building designs from these compositions of pure space. I see the continuation of this idea in Oskar Hansen's idea of open architecture. And I see its final results in the sort of architecture, which, in the same way as Kobro's sculpture came to be a negation of solid form, came to oppose the idea of the home as a closed space; an architecture in which the walls would disappear.⁴¹

The convergence of these ideas has been noted by researchers many times, leaving unanswered the question of the originality of Hansen's theories and their dependence on the work of Katarzyna Kobro.⁴² Oskar Hansen himself rather trivialised such associations. In his most substantial statement on this subject, he admits that the only thing linking him to Strzemiński is his working method, which is to say the 'holistic grasp of phenomena', though he saw a fundamental difference in their conceptualisation of the role of the artist, to whom, Hansen claims, Strzemiński accords the role of 'übermensch in the sphere of art'. According to Hansen: 'Strzemiński believes in the artist who teaches to see. Open form, however, is learning itself'.⁴³

And so, the situation is rather paradoxical. Hansen's idea seems to be a somewhat simplified adaptation of Kobro and Strzemiński's treatise, but, given the scope of similar research into new definitions of space and spatial relations, being conducted in various circles in the 1930s, its originality cannot be definitively denied. Let us take into consideration that its author, somewhat naively explaining that he had been an 'unwitting student of the founder of Unism', had, at the end of the 1940s, come across the workshop of Le Corbusier, who, at that time, was concerned with the spatial relations of sculptural forms.⁴⁴

One might have the impression that experiences, work, and discoveries somehow fail to add up, fail to be realised, in Polish art. Breaking with tradition is a more common topos than referencing related trends or creative continuity. Janusz Sławiński wrote: 'Tradition is a found system that is external to individual activity, while being the immanent norm of such activity ... In other words: it is as though the newly created work enters into tradition; but this happens to the extent that that the work internalises tradition'.⁴⁵

The trouble with Polish sculpture is, among others, that its adherents rarely take the trouble to arrive at the 'genotype' of the work, which 'situates it in the system of traditional norms'.⁴⁶ Only exceptionally rarely do they take the trouble of undertaking and working through, or creatively rejecting, predecessors' works. Katarzyna Kobro and Maria Jarema left us precisely this sort of work, whose significance for Polish art is indisputable, although by now, for the most part historicised: they serve as a domain for art-historical and museological exploration, for collection strategies, but not an artistic reference point.⁴⁷

Translated by Klara Kemp-Welch

1 Janusz Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', in *Katarzyna Kobro 1898–1951. W setną rocznicę urodzin*, exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (Łódź, 1998–1999), pp. 73–81. Earlier, a photograph of the sculpture by Wiciński was published as lost in *Henryk Wiciński 1908–1943. Wystawa rzeźby i rysunku*, exhibition catalogue, Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych (Warsaw, 1962).

2 Henryk Wiciński, 'Odpowiedź na ankietę rzeźby', *Głos Plastyków* 1/7 (1937): p. 46. Partially reprinted in Józef Chrobak (ed.), *Henryk Wiciński* (Kraków: Galeria Krzysztofory, 1990), pp. 45–46; and reprinted in full in Aleksandra Melbechowska-Luty and Irena Bal, *Teoria i krytyka. Antologia tekstów o rzeźbie polskiej 1915–1939* (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo Neriton, 2007), pp. 299–316.

3 Wiciński, 'Odpowiedź na ankietę rzeźby', p. 46.

4 Barbara Ilkosz, *Maria Jarema 1908–1958. Między realnością i abstrakcją* (Wrocław: Muzeum Narodowe we Wrocławiu, 1998), p. 22.

5 Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', p. 78.

6 Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', p. 78.

7 Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', p. 78.

8 Jadwiga Puciata-Pawłowska, 'Salon Plastyków', *Pion* 5 (1936), p. 5. Reprinted in Józef Chrobak (ed.), *Maria Jarema (wspomnienia i komentarze)* (Kraków: Stowarzyszenie Artystyczne Grupa Krakowska, 1992), pp. 25–29.

9 Ignacy Witz, *Obszary malarskiej wyobraźni* (Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1967), p. 65.

10 Witz, *Obszary malarskiej wyobraźni*, p. 65.

11 Ewa Franus, 'Punkt równowagi w starym śnie o symetrii', in *Władysław Strzemiński 1893–1952. Materiały z sesji*, exhibition catalogue, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (Łódź, 1994), pp. 130–138; Mieczysław Porębski, 'Podsumowanie sesji', in *Władysław Strzemiński 1893–1952*, pp. 160–171.

12 Porębski, 'Podsumowanie sesji', pp. 160–171.

13 Gérald Gassiot-Talbot, 'Lettre de Paris', *Art International* 7/10 (1966): p. 66. Cited in Janusz Zagrodzki, *Katarzyna Kobro i kompozycja przestrzeni* (Warsaw: PWN, 1984), pp. 118–119.

14 Helena Blum, *Maria Jarema 1908–1958* (Kraków: Galeria Krzysztofory, 1966), unpaginated.

- 15 Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', p. 7.
- 16 Helena Blum, *Maria Jarema* (Warsaw: Muzeum im. Xawerego Dunikowskiego, 1978–79). Reprinted in Chrobak (ed.), *Maria Jarema (wspomnienia i komentarze)*, pp. 34–42.
- 17 Katarzyna Kobro, 'Odpowiedź na ankietę rzeźby', *Głos Plastyków* 1/7 (1937): page. Reprinted in full in Melbechowska-Luty and Bal, *Teoria i krytyka*, pp. 299–316.
- 18 Text reproduced from the partial remnants of a typescript, in Chrobak (ed.), *Maria Jarema (wspomnienia i komentarze)*, p. 15.
- 19 Maria Jarema, 'Henryk Wiciński', *Głos Plastyków* 5 (1947): pp. 41–47.
- 20 Jarema, 'Henryk Wiciński', pp. 41–47.
- 21 Puciata-Pawłowska, 'Salon Plastyków'. Cited in Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', p. 78.
- 22 Maria Jarema, 'Odpowiedź na ankietę rzeźby', *Głos Plastyków* 1/7 (1937): pp. 43–44. Reprinted in Józef Chrobak (ed.), *Maria Jarema* (Kraków: Galeria Krzysztofora, 1988–1989), pp. 8–9. Reprinted in full in Melbechowska-Luty and Bal, *Teoria i krytyka*, pp. 299–316.
- 23 Mieczysław Porębski, *Maria Jarema* (Warsaw: PIS, 1958), pp. 10–11.
- 24 Blum, *Maria Jarema 1908–1958*, unpaginated.
- 25 Julian Przyboś, 'Widzenie ruchu', *Przegląd Kulturalny* 2 (1957): p. 7.
- 26 Ryszard Stanisławski in personal communication with the author, 22 October 1998.
- 27 Jarema cited Wiciński's letter in her memoirs of him. Jarema, *Henryk Wiciński*, p. 15.
- 28 Janusz Sławiński, 'Rzut oka na ewolucję poezji polskiej w latach 1956–1980', in *Teksty i teksty, Polska Encyklopedia Niezależna* (Warsaw: publisher: PEN, Polska Encyklopedia Niezależna, 1990), p. 99. The author's account of the dynamic of literary life describes the specific situation of Polish art in the second half of the 1950s: 'this whole enlivening energy, both of the poetry of those times, and to no smaller degree that of its readers, remained, if one is allowed to say such a thing, to a serious extent at the mercy of the retrospectivist revolution. For the move to abandon the socialist realist past was at the same time a move towards literary pasts that had been accused in the Stalinist years, towards literary experiences that had been erased, silenced, deemed null and void or enemy; it was a move to create to the poetics, styles and eras with which the ties had been brutally torn up. For both poets and poetry critics, the most important task seemed to be to return to the present day its lost past' (p. 99).
- 29 Wiesław Borowski, *Tadeusz Kantor* (Warsaw: WAI, 1982), pp. 36–38.
- 30 Zagrodzki, 'Wewnątrz przestrzeni', p. 110.
- 31 Typescript 'Zapiski Marii Jaremy', created from manuscripts and made available to the author by Józef Chrobak, from his personal archive.
- 32 Anna Markowska, *Dwa przełomy. Sztuka polska po 1955 i 1989 roku* (Toruń: Wydawnictwo Naukowe UMK, 2012), p. 69. The author offers an innovative reading of the position of female artists in the Grupa Krakowska circle, including Maria Jarema. See chapter 6, 'Artystki Grupy Krakowskiej', pp. 209–232.
- 33 Jerzy Sołtan, *Rozmowy o architekturze. Rozmawiał Andrzej Bulanda* (Warsaw: Muzeum ASP, 1996), p. 65.
- 34 Sołtan, *Rozmowy o architekturze*, p. 65.
- 35 Yve-Alain Bois, 'Sztrzeński and Kobro: In Search of Motivation' in *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: MIT Press, 1993), p. 123.
- 36 Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński, *Kompozycja przestrzeni. Obliczenia rytmu czasoprzestrzennego* (Łódź: Biblioteka "a.r." no.2, 1931), p. 113.
- 37 'Programy pracowni Wydziału Rzeźby Stanisława Słoniny i Stanisława Kulona z 1974', archives of the Akademia Sztuk Pięknych, Warsaw.
- 38 Oskar Hansen, 'Forma Otwarta', *Przegląd Kulturalny* 5 (1959): p. 5.
- 39 Hansen, 'Forma Otwarta', p. 5.
- 40 Kobro and Strzemiński, *Kompozycja przestrzeni*, p. 6.
- 41 Julian Przyboś, 'Rzeźba napowietrzna', *Poezja* 1 (1966), p. 75.
- 42 Marcin Lachowski, Magdalena Linkowska, and Zbigniew Sobczuk (eds.), *Wobec Formy Otwartej Oskara Hansena. Idea – utopia – reinterpretacja* (Lublin: Towarzystwo Naukowe KUL, 2009), p. 63.
- 43 Oscar Hansen, *W kręgu Formy Otwartej* (Warsaw: Muzeum ASP, 1986). In a conversation with Wojciech Włodarczyk, Hansen defined his relations with Strzemiński in the following way: 'The more immersed I become in what Strzemiński wrote, and I have not much time for this, the more strongly I feel myself to be his student. I never met Strzemiński or Katarzyna Kobro. I came to know Strzemiński's ideas, and probably mostly his, not Kobro's, at the end of the forties by way of his student Lech Kunka ... Nowadays I recognise that I was an unwitting student of the founder of Unism, as Julian Przyboś later labelled me'. *W kręgu Formy Otwartej*, p. 22.
- 44 The first full, monographic treatise on Open Form bears no traces of a reading of *The Composition of Space*. Kobro's surname does not appear and Strzemiński is only mentioned in the context of memories of Lech Kunka, from 1948: 'He [Kunka], meanwhile, shared with us all that which he had learned from Strzemiński, who was his master. And there was a great deal of it'. Oskar Hansen, *Ku Formie Otwartej*, ed. Jola Gola, (Warsaw and Frankfurt: Fundacja Galerii Foksal and Revolver, 2005), p. 172.
- 45 Janusz Sławiński, 'Synchronia i diachronia w procesie historycznoliterackim', in Sławiński, *Prace wybrane*, vol. 2 (Kraków: Universitas, 1998), pp. 11–32.
- 46 Sławiński, 'Synchronia i diachronia', p. 20.
- 47 See: Barbara Ilkosz, *Maria Jarema 1908–1958. Między realnością i abstrakcją*, exhibition catalogue (Wrocław: Muzeum Narodowe we Wrocławiu, 1998); Janina Ładnowska and Zenobia Karnicka (eds.), *Katarzyna Kobro 1898–1951. W setną rocznicę urodzin*, exhibition catalogue, (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 1998).