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https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-21_22

Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory, ed. by Cristina Baldacci, Clio Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini, Cultural Inquiry, 21 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 219–29

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Living Simulacrum

The Neoplastic Room in Łódź: 1948 / 1960 / 1966 / 1983 / 2006 / 2008 / 2010 / 2011 / 2013 / 2017 / ∞

CITE AS:

Joanna Kiliszek, 'Living Simulacrum: The Neoplastic Room in Łódź: 1948 / 1960 / 1966 / 1983 / 2006 / 2008 / 2010 / 2011 / 2013 / 2017 / ∞', in *Over and Over and Over Again: Reenactment Strategies in Contemporary Arts and Theory*, ed. by Cristina Baldacci, Clio Nicastro, and Arianna Sforzini, Cultural Inquiry, 21 (Berlin: ICI Berlin Press, 2022), pp. 219–29 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-21_22>

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ABSTRACT: The Neoplastic Room at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź was originally designed in 1948 by the avant-garde artist Władysław Strzemiński. Destroyed in 1950 and reconstructed in 1960, it became the focal point of the museum, with the 'International Collection of Modern Art' by the a.r. group being exhibited there. At the same time, it became a point of reference for contemporary artists and a strategy for building a permanent collection for the museum, as well as a reflection on how the past can give a vision of the future. This essay focuses on the gesture of 're-curating' the Neoplastic Room in relation to the performative practice of the artists involved (e.g., Daniel Buren, Elżbieta Jabłońska).

KEYWORDS: Neoplastic Room; reconstruction; simulacrum; reenactment; collection

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The Neoplastic Room in Łódź: 1948 / 1960 / 1966 / 1983 / 2006 / 2008 / 2010 / 2011 / 2013 / 2017 / ∞

JOANNA KILISZEK

The Neoplastic Room at the Muzeum Sztuki (Museum of Art) in Łódź was originally created by the avant-garde artist Władysław Strzemiński in 1948 and destroyed in 1950. Its various reconstructions since 1960 represent both a strategy to build a collection and a reflection on the meanings and values that define the past as a producer of a vision relevant to our time and to an (as yet) undefined future. Up to the present day, the restaging of the Neoplastic Room has included elements of performative bodily practice. The gesture of 're-curating' it should thus be understood as a performative movement that has been developed into a physically performative process by contemporary artists, such as Daniel Buren and Monika Sosnowska.

The work's reenactments at the Centre Pompidou in Paris (1983) and at the Reina Sofía in Madrid (2017) reveal a clear tendency to create quasi-bodily performative aspects. The aim of this paper is to emphasize their historical lineage from within the museum by focusing on the archive, the art object, and the curatorial strategy.

EXHIBITION SPACE AS A PERMANENT REENACTMENT

The Neoplastic Room was created especially for the International Collection of Modern Art in 1931 by the a.r. group (also known as

Figure 1: Władysław Strzemiński, *Neoplastic Room*, 1948/60. Reconstruction by Bolesław Utkin; view of 2010. Archive of the Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, photo Piotr Tomczyk.

'revolutionary artists' or 'real avant-garde') initiated two years earlier by the Polish artists Władysław Strzemiński, Katarzyna Kobro, Henryk Stażewski, Jan Brzękowski, and Julian Przybos. The project of the Room raised many questions: how should a homogeneous art complex in a museum be ideally displayed? Should the museum create a special space for a specific collection to reflect the assumptions and ideas of the artists? To what degree can the artistic trend be legible for future generations?

Marian Minich, who was appointed director of the Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, in 1935, continued this work in the postwar period through his efforts to recover the remains of the Collection.[1] In 1945, Strzemiński handed over his most important works to the museum. Kobro donated to the museum some of her pre-war metal spatial compositions. In 1946, Minich acquired a nineteenth-century neo-Renaissance townhouse to serve as the new premises. In Poland, the Second World War created a deep desire to rebuild lost cultural her-

1 About 75% of the works from the 'International Collection of Modern Art', donated by the artists of the a.r. group, have survived (of the 112 works still present in the collection in 1939, nineteen were stolen or lost). See Jacek Ojrzyński, 'Historia Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi', in *Historia Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi: Historia i wystawy*, ed. by Urszula Czartoryska (Łódź: Oficyna Bibliofilów, Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 1998), pp. 6–39 (p. 17) <https://msl.org.pl/media/user/Czytelnia/muzeum-sztuki-w-nnodzi-historia-i-wystawy-1998-1000dpi-pdf.pdf> [accessed 10 December 2019].

itage and to recover what remained after the material and cultural destruction of the war. The artistic and historical value of the donations by Kobro and Strzemiński — who in 1931 had also collected and given the works of various European avant-garde artists to the museum — convinced the museum authorities to create a special exhibition facility for them.

In one of the rooms of the palace, a neoplastic architectural interior was created, complete with paintings, sculptures, and furniture, forming a perfect space for the interpretation and understanding of these aesthetics. The work was entrusted to Strzemiński.[2]

The artist based his project on the manifesto he wrote, together with Kobro, in 1931, titled 'Composition of Space: Calculations of Space-Time Rhythm'. The rectangular room, with three entrances and a milky glass ceiling, was divided into planes based on strict mathematical calculations and painted with basic colours (red, blue, and yellow). These compositions were supplemented with a vertical and horizontal arrangement in neutral colours (white, grey, and black), thus achieving a balance and harmony of space. Kobro's curvilinear sculptures were displayed on pedestals and painted primarily in neutral colours, discretely located within the space of the room. There were also paintings of artists connected to the De Stijl group and painters focused on the neoplastic trend: Sophie Taeuber-Arp, Vilmos Huszár, Theo van Doesburg, Jean Hélion, Henryk Stażewski, and Georges Vantongerloo. The space created by Strzemiński exactly implemented the postulates contained in the *Composition of Space*:

1. Sculpture is part of space, its organic character is conditioned by its relationship with space.
2. Sculpture is not a composition of the form in itself but a composition of space.
3. The energy of successive shapes in space produces a space-time rhythm.
4. The source of the harmony of the rhythm is measurement, based on numbers.

2 Cf. Janina Ładnowska, 'Sala Neoplastyczna: z dziejów kolekcji sztuki nowoczesnej w Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi', in *Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi: Monografia*, ed. by Aleksandra Jach, Katarzyna Słoboda, Joanna Sokołowska, and Magdalena Ziółkowska, 2 vols (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, 2015), I, pp. 326–43.

5. Architecture organizes the rhythm of human movements in space, hence its nature as spatial composition.[3]

Opened on 13 June 1948, the Neoplastic Room soon became the museum's greatest attraction. It was the only place in Europe created as the result of a concurrent avant-garde vision referring to the model of exposition and museum experiment represented by the creation of El Lissitzky's *Kabinett der Abstrakten* at the Hannover Provincial Museum in 1927, which had been destroyed by the Nazis in 1937 and was recently reconstructed at the Sprengel Museum (2017). This exceptional display space had been commissioned by Alexander Dorner, the director of the museum.

The introduction of the doctrine of socialist realism to Polish art and museums in 1949, which was rejecting *a priori* the avant-garde artistic tradition, caused the closing of the Neoplastic Room in January 1950. The walls were painted over, and the paintings, sculptures, and furniture went into the storerooms.

Following the political thaw in the Soviet bloc after 1956, there was a return to universally recognized European artistic and aesthetic values. In 1960, Minich decided to recreate the Room.[4] Kobro had died in 1951 and Strzemiński a year later. There were no plans or designs of the Neoplastic Room in existence and only a few photographs of the interior. It was still possible to turn to Boleslaw Utkin, the pupil of Strzemiński who had assisted the artist in 1948. Documentation for the project based on research and his memories was created and the interior restored.

For the first time, plans were designed, which later became useful in updating subsequent installations. Kobro's sculptures were set on glass platforms, and on the walls behind pictures by Vilmos Huszár and Henryk Stażewski were hung. Strzemiński's furniture was placed opposite to them, and on these walls pictures by Theo van Doesburg and Jean Hélion were shown. In addition, director Minich proposed that

3 Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński, 'Kompozycja przestrzeni: Obliczenia rytmu czasoprzestrzennego', *Sztuka i filozofia*, 13 (1997), pp. 88–99 (p. 99) <https://monoskop.org/images/9/9c/Kobro_Katarzyna_Strzeminski_Wladyslaw_Kompozycja_przestrzeni_1931_1997_fragmenty.pdf> [accessed 20 October 2017].

4 On 21 October, the new exhibition of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź was opened to commemorate both the 30th anniversary of the Museum's founding and the 25th anniversary of the director's employment. Cf. Ładnowska, 'Sala Neoplastyczna', p. 341.

Figure 2. Władysław Strzemiński, *Neoplastic Room*, view of 1948–1950. Archive of the Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź.

there should be an extension of the first Neoplastic Room to a second room, called the Small or Second Neoplastic Room, to increase the size of the display space and provide an opportunity to demonstrate the theory of Neoplasticism relating to the penetration of coloured planes and the functioning of their rhythm in infinite space.

The Neoplastic Room gained a symbolic dimension. Through its existence within the same space as the central and main part of the collection, from 1960 until today, it has become a link between the pre-war, avant-garde history of the collection and the present. It was shown

in its original version but also in dialogue with new artistic works. The Room denotes the axis, a centre around which reflexive practice concerning the museum and collection is constantly focused. The material dimension is also important. In general, it can be said that the modern approach of reconstructing earlier works such as the Neoplastic Room became more elaborate in the twenty-first century. It seems safe to use the popular term 'reconstruction' or even 'simulacrum' here, which suggests that the reality of simulation can evoke reality itself.[5]

Over the years, the Room and furniture have been redesigned according to the pattern and plans developed by Utkin. The value of the a.r. group collection in Łódź has become widely known throughout the world since the early 1960s. The Neoplastic Room itself began to travel as an independent exhibition module. In 1983, it was reconstructed at the Centre Pompidou for the exhibition 'Présences polonaises'.[6] In this reconstruction, the collection of the a.r. group and the so-called *architekton* of Kazimir Malevich (with whom Kobro and Strzemiński worked in Vitebsk and Smolensk between 1919 and 1921) were exhibited. The Fyns Kunstmuseum in Odense, Denmark carried out another reconstruction of the Room in 1985. The last reconstruction was opened at the Reina Sofía Museum in Madrid in 2017.[7]

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Since the 1960s, there has been a slow change in the manner in which artworks are displayed. A new practice has emerged not only with respect to the presentation of art objects but also, and above all, in the process of creating them: that is, in the artistic process or the presentation of artistic gestures (i.e., actions, performances, and happenings)

5 Cf. 'Simulacrum', in *Lexico.com* (Oakland, CA: Dictionary.com, 2021): '1. An image or representation of someone or something. 2. An unsatisfactory imitation or substitute,' <https://www.lexico.com/definition/simulacrum> [accessed 11 July 2021].

6 The documentation of the exhibition, with photographs by Eustachy Kossakowski, is available at: <https://artmuseum.pl/pl/archiwum/archiwum-eustachego-kossakowskiego/2808> [accessed 21 October 2017].

7 Cf. the exhibition catalogue *Kobro & Strzemiński: Avant-Garde Prototypes*, ed. by Marta Alonso-Buenaposada (Madrid–Łódź: Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía–Muzeum Sztuki, 2017), available for download at <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/sites/default/files/publicaciones/textos-en-descarga/kobro_ing.pdf> [accessed 18 March 2019].

in a particular place and local context. For the Muzeum Sztuki, the post-communist transformations of 1989 provided the opportunity for a groundbreaking change in the organization of the museum by allowing the 2006 acquisition of a new building, a former weaving facility, the now reorganized Manufaktura. This site became the second headquarter of the museum. The new building was meant to house the main collection, which was to comprise a critical discourse with regard to its presentation of art history. Jarosław Suchan, the museum's director, finally decided to leave the Room in the old museum building, in the space originally designed by Strzemiński:

> We thought we could not ignore the fact that the Room was designed for a specific place and that this place was associated with over sixty years of history. Although its location has not changed, the context has changed: The Room is no longer part of the permanent exhibition. This involves a certain symbolic loss, but at the same time it provides the opportunity to [...] draw attention to its meaning that has so far remained in the shadows. For example, the 'economy of gift' became important for us: the fact that the artist created a space which was 'donated' to the works of other artists.[8]

The new museum building, however, would 'serve to present contemporary artistic phenomena, above all in relation, however, [to] those that would have some relationship with the context produced by the history and collections [...] of the Museum'.[9]

The new approach to the value of the Neoplastic Room became visible in 2006, with Julita Wójcik's action *The Museum as a Luminous Object of Desire* as part of the exhibition.[10] She asked Suchan to wear a sweater that she had knitted and to perform the opening ceremony wearing this costume. The patterning of the sweater made direct reference to Neoplasticism and to the colours and panels of the Room. The sweater 'responded' to the movement of the body it covered, and this

8 See Jarosław Suchan in Marta Skłodowska's interview, 'Czuła arytmetyka Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi: Rozmowa z Jarosławem Suchanem', *Obieg* (2009) <http://archiwum-obieg.u-jazdowski.pl/rozmowy/9864> [accessed 10 November 2017].

9 Ibid.

10 Cf. the exhibition catalogue *Muzeum jako świetlany przedmiot pożądania/Museum as a Luminous Object of Desire*, ed. by Jarosław Lubiak and Maciej Świerkocki (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2007).

movement made the work itself a performance that was interpreting the opening of a new museum exhibition in an avant-garde institution.

Since the early spring of 2007, three preliminary versions of the future permanent exhibitions have been prepared. They were titled: 'Collection of Art of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century — "Draft 1: Art and Politics"; "Draft 2: The Power of Formalism"; and "Draft 3: Beyond the Reality Principle"'.[11] During the first installation, the objects from the International Collection of the a.r. group were displayed. During the second one, objects from the so-called 'Unist Series', comprising several paintings from the following decade — such as a painting of Günter Uecker's *Untitled* (1988) — were exhibited in the Small Neoplastic Room.[12] The Neoplastic Room was treated as an architectural space and confronted with contemporary experiments in the sphere of space and architecture by artists such as Grzegorz Sztwiertnia, Igor Krenz, and (again) Julita Wójcik.

The transformation of the third project incorporated the 1980s' trend of emotional expressiveness; it became part of an exhibition titled 'Dreams'. Two expressive sculptures from an entirely different artistic tradition than the Room itself were placed on the passage that led through the empty Room: Piotr Kurka's *Sitting Man* (1988) and Mariusz Kruk's *Wolf* (1988) were displayed standing in a red triangle.

The exhibition explored the relationship between art and psychoanalysis; its title referred to Sigmund Freud's famous essay *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920).

The reopening of the renovated old premises in 2009 highlighted three projects referring to the faithful reproduction of reality. One of them, Elżbieta Jabłońska's 'I Repeat Them to Reach Them', directly

11 The 'Collection of Art of the Twentieth and Twenty-First Century' was organized as follows: Project 1: 'Art and Politics', curated by Zenobia Karnicka, Maria Morzuch, and Jarosław Suchan, Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź (27 February–19 May 2007); Project 2: 'The Power of Formalism', curated by Jarosław Lubiak (6 September–24 March 2008); Project 3: 'Beyond the Reality of Principle', curated by Jarosław Lubiak (24 April–17 August 2008).

12 Unism (in Polish *unizm*) is a painting theory developed by Strzemiński in the years from 1923 to 1928. The artist postulated a homogeneous composition of a picture composed of abstract elements. The effect was the impression of a completely flat surface, deprived of depth and any dynamics. The main purpose of unism was to create a timeless image, working only with the concept of space. The idea comes from the spirit of constructivism.

Figure 3. Exhibition view: Draft 3: 'Beyond the Reality Principle', 2008. With works by Piotr Kurka and Mariusz Kruk Archive of the Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, photo Marian Stępień.

related to the history of the Neoplastic Room. The artist emptied the Room of works of art, but in the middle she placed a long podium with jigsaw puzzles consisting of large blocks, from which one could arrange one's own Neoplastic Room.[13] Around it, she arranged a simulation of painting and sculpture storerooms and presented inventory cards and documentation. In the Room itself, films about Strzemiński and Kobro were shown, as well as archival materials and commentaries on the works of other artists. From the very beginning, Jabłońska prepared a special spatial interactive game for visitors using abstract wooden plywood shapes to allow each viewer to make a model of a neoplastic composition. The Room provoked and implied new values, derived from the assumption that art is a constant process.

Challenges are always present when particular situations arise, such as when there are new works displayed in the Neoplastic Room that start a dialogue with its architecture and the history of the mu-

13 Cf. Elżbieta Jabłońska's exhibition 'Powtarzam je by doścignąć', curated by Maria Morzuch at Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, as part of the opening of the old venue after its renovation on 26 February 2009, <http://culture.pl/pl/wydarzenie/otwarcie-ms> [accessed 3 November 2017].

Figure 4. Exhibition with participatory elements: Elżbieta Jabłońska, 'I Repeat Them to Reach Them', 2009. Archive of the Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, photo Marian Stępień.

seum. The first time this happened was in 2009, when a project was executed according to Daniel Buren's drawings, and that was the third version of the project (the first one had been mounted in 1985 at the Moderna Museet in Stockholm). He built the architectural and painterly installation *Hommage à Henryk Stażewski. Cabane éclatée avec tissu blanc et noir, travail situé, 1985–2009* for the exhibition, borrowing works by Henryk Stażewski from the Łódź collection. In a later project, 'Neoplastic Room, Open Composition', accomplished in 2010 by Suchan, the museum presented works and installations by a number of contemporary artists, including Jarosław Fliciński, the Grupa Twożywo, Krenz, Sztwiertnia, Jabłońska, and Wójcik. New works also appeared, such as Liam Gillick's prototype structures, as well as pieces by Monika Sosnowska, Céline Condorelli, and Nairy Baghramian.

CONCLUSIONS

In creating the Neoplastic Room, Władysław Strzemiński left the museum and its audience a unique and valuable legacy in the context of

contemporary art. It explodes every museum norm by being a utopian project. It preserves, as a result of successive reconstructions and the decisive approach of successive directors, and also serves as a witness to a monumental artistic, intellectual, progressive, and reflective effort. This progressive heritage has become the immanent and constitutive past, present, and future of the museum and its discursive programme. The prophetic nature of the mission of the new museum, with the power generated by artists and visionaries, has led to the creation of the Neoplastic Room, which has become a lasting feature and constitutes a reference point for subsequent discussions about values in art.

The current information chaos, the pressure of mindless consumerism, liquid reality, and the lack of any sense of constancy show that there is an urgent need for self-reflection. In times of uncertainty, times that question or break the past manners of analysis and extend beyond the possibilities of any planning, the museum turns again to the artists. This dialogue is currently taking place at the oldest museum of modern art in Europe. The museum (in fact, the people who preserve the traditions of the museum) trusts the talents of the artists and their ability to create a vision. However, questions remain: how smoothly will the museum adapt to the future? Will there be worthy successors to carry on this vision? The anticipation of the value of art and its development is the province of the most outstanding galleries and museums. This value characterizes outstanding institutions, and its practice shows that the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź belongs to this leading group, currently heightening the expectations regarding the future work of the curatorial and conservation team.

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