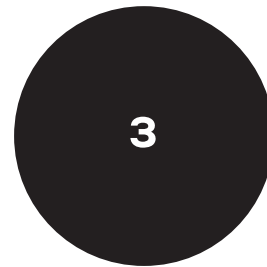




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Re-Staging the Avant-garde: Henryk Berlewi's Return to

Abstract Art

Henryk Berlewi is a seminal figure of the Polish avant-garde whose circuitous artistic trajectory, marked by a rupture with and then a return to abstraction, invites us to pose questions regarding the way the legacy of the avant-garde was constructed and at the same time retroactively shaped by the modernism of the 1960s. Berlewi's practice began with propagating the Renaissance of Jewish culture.¹ However, under the influence of El Lisztzky, with whom Berlewi travelled to Berlin in the early 1920s, his work changed radically, from lyrical Chagall-inspired symbolism to a specific interpretation of constructivism, which was theorized in his 1924 manifesto entitled *Mechano-fracture*.² Nevertheless, after having relocated to Paris in 1928, where he would be permanently based until his death in 1967, Berlewi returned to figurative painting and the classical style. This period of his practice fell into oblivion, as it failed to fit the framework of precursorship. The artist spent the Second World War in France and fought in the Resistance.³ During that time, and throughout the 1950s Berlewi painted portraits and still lifes and elaborated on what he called the "theory of reintegration of object."⁴ It was not until 1957 that Berlewi discovered himself again as an abstract artist, arguably a forerunner of op art, and once more embraced abstraction as a mode of artistic expression. Throughout the 60s he participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions in Berlin, Paris, and Warsaw, concentrated on re-making his historical works, and in 1962 republished *Mechano-fracture*. The aim of this article is to analyze how Berlewi re-staged his previous practice in a world now divided by the Iron Curtain, and how this renewed performance can be related to the methodology of art history.

1957 was marked by two events crucial to Berlewi's return to abstraction. The first was the publication of Michel Seuphor's *Dictionary of Abstract Art* and its complimentary exhibition, *50 ans de peinture abstraite (50 Years of Abstract Painting)*, which took place in Gallery Creuse in Paris and presented works by the artists characterized in Seuphor's book. According to a review by Julian Przyboś, the exhibition created a linear narrative by showing one painting by each painter from Seuphor's dictionary, and served as means to illustrate a progression of

abstract art towards optical abstraction.⁵

The second event was the exhibition *Précurseurs de l'art abstrait en Pologne: Kazimierz Malewicz, Katarzyna Kobro, Władysław Strzemiński, Henryk Berlewi, Henryk Stażewski* (*Precursors of Abstract Art in Poland: Malevich, Kobro, Strzemiński, Stażewski, Berlewi*), organized in the famous Parisian Galerie Denise René in collaboration with the Polish government, and curated by the aforementioned Julian Przyboś, an active member of the pre-war avant-garde movement and friend of Władysław Strzemiński, along with an honorary committee consisting of Jean Cassou, Marian Minich (the director of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź), Willem Sandberg (Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam), Jean Paul Sartre, and Tristan Tzara.⁶



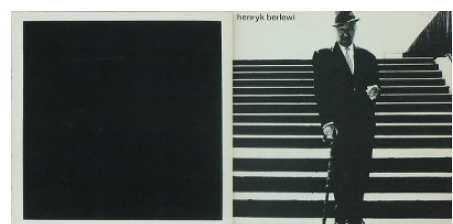
Henryk Berlewi, *Eve*, oil on canvas, glued on cardboard, 46 x 37,5 cm, 1950, Archive of the Rempex Auction House

Berlewi's participation in the two events took a very different shape. In Michael Seuphor's book, Berlewi occupies no special place, and his short biography is located in the dictionary section. The main body of Suephor's book focuses for the most part on Western Europe and Russia; there is no mention of abstract art in Poland per se.⁷ The presence of Berlewi in the exhibition *Precursors of abstract art* is much stronger; not only is he one of the central figures of the exhibition, named even as a precursor, but his text explicating his theory of *Mechano-facture* is also published in the catalogue. A close reading of the two essays published in the *Precursors...* catalogue reveals how difficult it was for the authors of the exhibition to step outside of a centre/periphery paradigm. Jean Cassou, the author of the opening text, distanced himself from the notion of the precursor in art, "it is in vain that one looks for the first inventor of a visual idea like one does with a scientific theory," he concluded.⁸ He wrote of a *cosmogony* of abstract art, not of a history; that it was simply *in the air* emerged simultaneously and with equal force in France, Russia, the Netherlands, and Germany. Poland was located at the intersection of these influences with Malevich, seen as the main paternal figure of Polish abstraction. Julian Przyboś shared this view on Malevich's role, and like Cassou emphasized the Polish nationality of the artist.⁹ However, Przyboś's text differs quite a bit stylistically. Its impersonal, rather matter-of-fact style was quite

uncharacteristic of his otherwise very persuasive way of writing. The main goal of the text was to inform the reader about the avant-garde movement in Poland; however, it did so without creating or alluding to a larger network of reference that could potentially be applied to constructing a context for the artistic practices being discussed. Despite their differences both texts failed to address the specificity of the emergence of abstraction in Poland, and despite their efforts at a reappraisal of its precursorship they, depicted the area as a "territory of artistic exports."¹⁰ At the same time, the catalogue heavily relied on a nationalistic framework, which as Piotr Piotrowski has noted is symptomatic of art historical discourse dealing with margins: "we are faced with either what is presented as simply *the history of modern art* with no local specification or with all kinds of adjectives specifying the regional... or—more often the ethnic locality (for instance, the history of Polish, Slovak, Bulgarian art)."¹¹ Within such paradigms the art of the centre becomes a transparent model, a canonized style, which can be emulated, to greater or lesser success, by artists from cultural peripheries.

The exhibition was shaped not only by the methodology of art historical writing of the time, but also by politics. The 1957 opening at the Galerie Denise René was possible due to a favorable turn of events on both sides of the iron curtain. There was an intensification of interest in avant-garde practices: in the same year as Denise René organized the first retrospective of Piet Mondrian in Paris, the De Stedelijk Museum purchased works by Malevich that he had exhibited in Warsaw and Berlin in 1927,¹² and only a year before this Michael Seuphor, who was also a friend of Mondrian, wrote his monograph.¹³ The enthusiasm for the avant-garde in Western Europe coincided with a relaxation of cultural policy in Poland brought about by the so-called *Thaw*, allowing for the revival of discussions about the legacy of the avant-garde, and the organization of the first exhibit of Kobro and Strzemiński in nearly ten years, held in Warsaw and Lodz.¹⁴

However, to complicate this picture it is necessary to add that around 1957 the optimism and initial approval, brought about by the open critique of Stalinism and a renunciation of socialist realism, weakened. Ludwik Flaszen, a theatre critic, director and later a collaborator with Jerzy Grotowski, described the contemporary embrace of modernity in a rather ironic tone, whereby



Henryk Berlewi, *Threefold*, two-sided print, 22 x 65,8 cm, 1963, Archive of the Rempex Auction House

suddenly the protagonists of socialist realism became the zealous propagators of avant-garde theatre. Flaszen insisted that it was not possible to continue as if Stalinism had never happened, as if it was some surreal, distant past. "Did the unreality of our life not make irreversible shifts? Is it thus possible to continue?" he asked in his 1957 article.¹⁵

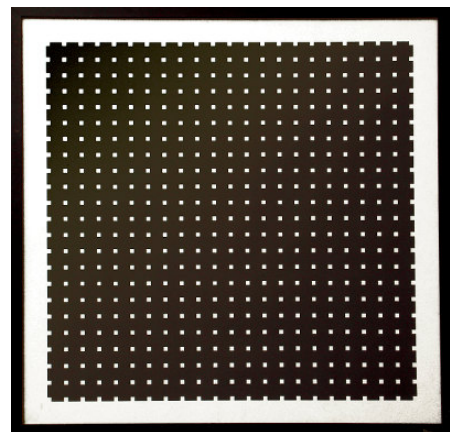
Apart from critiquing the hypocrisy and ease of changing minds when it suited, Flaszen pointed to a discrepancy between the ambitions of modern art and the un-modern reality of the country. Similar issues were picked up on by the art critic Andrzej Osęka, who in his review of Kbro and Strzemiński's 1956 exhibition pointed to the social isolation of the Polish avant-garde and its non-linear development. "There is no connection between the avant-garde movements, no process of resulting from something, as the stimuli for each new impulse were artistic events shaped outside the country:... The artist, in order to go further, needs new space, new materials. His thought requires verification..."¹⁶

Osęka lamented the fate of Strzemiński and Kbro's oeuvre, to which the exhibition at the Zachęta National Gallery of Art did no justice, and the fact that it was pompously opened by some state officials who had provided no compensation for the artists, who lived and died in extreme poverty. Finally, he concluded by juxtaposing the miserable fate of the Polish avant-garde legacy to the glamorous presence of the avant-garde in the truly modern West. Rendering the avant-garde in Poland meaningful is seen as a hopeless undertaking, and he finishes with the question: "But can even the most beautiful articles in the newspaper teach modernity to people living in such homes and such cities as ours?"¹⁷

What both Flaszen and Osęka addressed was the discrepancy between the projects of modernization (economic development) and modernity (aesthetic and social development), later theorized by Frederic Jameson, and recently applied to a Polish context by Jan Sowa.¹⁸ For Jameson this mismatch lies at core of the modernist project, and as he has written, "Modernism must thus be seen as uniquely corresponding to an uneven moment of social development, or to what Ernst Bloch called the 'simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous,' the 'synchronicity of the nonsynchronous' (Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen: the coexistence of realities from radically different moments of history—handicrafts alongside the great cartels, peasant fields with the Krupp factories or the Ford plant in the

distance.”¹⁹ However, for Oseka and Flaszen it produces an unsettling sense of unease, they experience the “embarrassment of non-simultaneities and non-synchronicities,” which leads them to question the legacy of the avant-garde.²⁰ Revisiting the avant-garde in Poland was thus marked by a certain anxiety; there was a sense of un-rootedness and inadequacy in these practices and an emphasis on the disconnection of modern visions from the peripheral condition of the country, a “struggling with the modern form,” to borrow an expression used by Jan Sowa.²¹

In this sense such opinions, although not hostile to the avant-garde, echo conservative critiques from the 1920s. In an article entitled *Mechano-rubbish*, Antoni Słonimski accused Henryk Berlewi and the group Blok of simply imitating foreign trends in western art; according to Słonimski this contributed to making the local art world provincial and parochial.²² The article created a stir and Mieczysław Szczuka, in a rather bold and romantically old-fashioned gesture, challenged Słonimski to a duel. Ironically enough, the same article was re-printed alongside Berlewi’s memoir in *Życie Literackie* (*Literary Life*) in 1957.²³ We can close the circle



Henryk Berlewi, *Element of the Exhibition of Mechano-facture in Berlin*, ink, paper, plexiglas, 51,7 x 51,7 cm, Archive of the Rempex Auction House

connecting the pre- and the post-war moment by adding that when writing his memoir, Berlewi was motivated by a disagreement with Andrzej Wat, the son of Aleksander Wat, with whom Berlewi had cooperated in the 1920s. According to Berlewi, the former depicted the avant-garde as if it “fell down from the sky without any transition and evolution” and he felt obliged to present its genesis and, in passing, mention his own precursory role.²⁴ It was important for Berlewi to explain the decisive role of *formism*, an artistic movement from the beginning of the century, that paved the way for him to free art from a “patriotic-academic traditionalism” and consequently enabled some artists to move towards abstraction.²⁵

Perhaps the crux of the issue of the local perception of the the avant-garde in Poland lies in the inability of critiques to move beyond thinking about *influence*. Berlewi was indeed shaped first by expressionism and then by constructivism, but

I believe that to understand the value of his engagement in the avant-garde one should move beyond thinking of Eastern European artists as simply being influenced by something outside of their local discourse, as in the case of the previously discussed exhibition of Polish artists in Paris. As Partha Mitter wrote, "influence has been the key epistemic tool, implicitly or explicitly, in the asymmetrical valuation of cultural exchanges between Eastern and Western art," which "ignores the significant aspects of cultural encounters."²⁶ In his critique of this notion of influence, Mitter follows in the footsteps of Michael Baxandall, whose groundbreaking 1985 book, *The Patterns of Intention*, emphasized the artist's agency, and the engagement articulated in her choice of inspirations and styles, refusing to depict her only as a passive receptor.²⁷ Mitter, in order to re-think the relationship between Western influences and non-Western art, prefers to write about "paradigm shifts," a notion he has adapted from Thomas Kuhn.²⁸

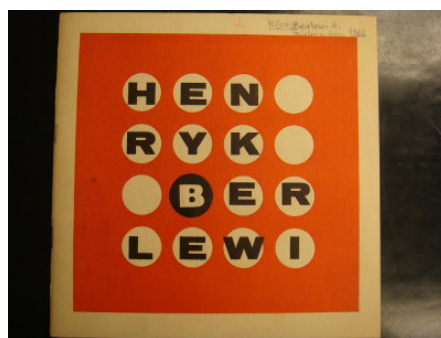
To analyze such a relationship between Henryk Berlewi and the avant-garde, I would like to propose using the term *elective affinities*, which found its way into the writing of Max Weber via the famous novel by Goethe, having been first used as a term in alchemy. Michael Löwy has defined elective affinities as being, "not the ideological affinity inherent in different variants of the same social and cultural current... The election, the mutual choice, implies a prior distance, a spiritual gap that must be filled, a certain ideological heterogeneity."²⁹ Elective affinity is thus an ambiguous bond, which must be actively performed in order to be sustained. This notion allows art history to break free of the paradigm of emulation, in which artworks are assessed based on their proximity to an "original idea." Thinking about artistic relations in terms of elective affinities in this particular case invites us to pose the question: what was the common ground for Berlewi and avant-garde artists such as either El Lissitzky or László Moholy-Nagy or Vikkig Eggegling; that which allowed them all to engage in abstraction? Once it is acknowledged that the bond created between these artists is not simply one of hierarchy, a further question arises as to which activities performed and sustained such a bond, and what ultimately broke this connection? "Influence alone is not a sufficient explanatory factor. Influence itself must be explained," as Löwy wrote.³⁰

One such approach to analyzing the connections between avant-garde artists is visible in a recent attempt at historicizing abstract art, namely the MoMA exhibition: "Inventing Abstraction 1910–1925. How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art."³¹ In

the opening essay the curator of the exhibition, Leah Dickerman, underlines the fact that “the development of abstract art is a prime example of the power of network thinking.”³² The focus of the exhibition was thus to trace the exchange between the artists rather than to seek seminal figures, or to present abstraction as the inevitable goal of artistic development. An alternative to the famous Alfred H. Barr diagram is presented as a visual means of depicting this approach.³³ Perhaps the most striking difference between the new diagram and Barr’s 1936 chart is its horizontality. This is in tune with the earlier postulate of Piotr Piotrowski, itself an exercise in horizontal and transnational art history.³⁴ The diagram, in which Berlewi also finds his place, depicts how interconnected the particular articulations of abstraction were, and the collective effort that brought about this “paradigm shift” in art. In the period following the second world war Berlewi and other Polish avant-garde artists felt excluded from this collective history.

The review of the show in the Galerie Denise René written by Julian Przyboś exemplifies how important and long-awaited the Paris exhibition was. Przyboś stated that the show introduced Polish abstraction to the visual consciousness of the West and further, he remarked that the creator of “*Mechano-facture*, forgotten in Poland... was listening, touched by the equally touched confessions of Jesus Rafael Soto, who suddenly saw in Berlewi his own precursor... Vasarely can claim Berlewi as his predecessor. The idea which the ignorants in Poland were trying to ridicule is fruitful and original. These are not experiments without their practical consequences.”³⁵ Przyboś then continued, recalling the excitement produced by Kobro’s sculptures. Richard Mortensen, a Danish painter living in Paris, having noticed a layer of dust covering Kobro’s sculpture (Przyboś blamed it on the bad storage conditions in the Łódź Museum), began to carefully clean them and exclaimed excitedly “How much I love this woman!”³⁶ Both images, so vividly and emotionally recalled by Przyboś, reveal his hopes for the oeuvre of the Polish avant-garde to be not only noticed and admired, but also to be actively engaged with – introduced into art history not as a mere footnote to grander narratives but used, incorporated into a larger context, and actualized.

The two 1957 exhibitions awakened hopes and long-abandoned dreams. For



The cover of the exhibition catalogue of Henryk Berlewi in Zielona Góra, 1967

Berlewi they became a turning point of his practice, as he was interpellated, in Louis Althusser's sense of the term, for the second time as the subject of the avant-garde. Berlewi was recalled in connection with other artists, and responded to that call by recognizing himself as a part of the narration as it was presented.³⁷

Althusser also wrote about the *mise en scène* of interpellation, a structure reflecting the very structure of ideology, in which subjects perform their respective roles. In this sense the two Paris exhibitions could be perceived as such a *mise en scène*, placing Berlewi in a particular art historical context.³⁸ Not only had he gained a place within a larger narrative, but it was the special place of a precursor. The specific conditions of this act structured Berlewi's later re-stagings of his avant-garde practice. Enacting the historical figure of a forerunner became, from that moment, his mode of engaging in the present. Thus his later obsession with chronology ("I used to hate chronology at school, now I'm its fanatic," Berlewi wrote in a letter to his friend³⁹) and his compulsion to prove the primacy of his ideas, as well as those of the Polish avant-garde.

The fact that he was incorporated into the global narrative specifically as a Polish artist was also of significant importance to Berlewi's later framing of his practice. The artist continuously emphasized his Polish-ness while he marginalized his Jewish roots. In his 1962 article he wrote: "I am fetishist of the Polish language. *Mechano-facture* was created in Berlin, in the year 1922 as a reaction against untamed hyper-individualistic painting... But only here, in Poland, in Warsaw, in the year 1923 and 1924 I perfected my visual system, nowhere else but here could I create the term *mechano-facture*. Isn't the structure of the word specifically Polish, crystal-sounding, intellectual-logical, and still emotionally-romantic, did this very linguistic structure not influence the shape of my serial structures... rational and yet romantic?"⁴⁰ Such a statement is surprising given that *mechano-faktura* is a rare example of a Polish phrase that translates flawlessly into English (*mechano-facture*) and German (*Mechanofakturen*) without even sounding particularly different. Surely, as stated above it was the structure of art historical concepts and their intimate bond with nationalism, which in the Polish context is oriented to ethnicity, that structured Berlewi's framing of his own practice. Berlewi was willing to go to great lengths to inscribe his name in history.⁴¹ However, what might appear at first glance to be a cynical exploitation of one's own past can also be approached as a radical readiness to offer that history to anyone willing to make

their own legacy of it. In *Elective Affinities* Goethe wrote that “affinities only begin to interest when they bring about separation” and indeed this might be true in Berlewi’s case, as the most curious aspects of his practice focus on trying to re-establish his connection to the avant-garde and bridge the gap that had separated him from the movement for the prior 30 years.⁴²

Berlewi began vigorously re-staging his avant-garde practice, and the beginning of the 1960s became the most fruitful period of his career. He undertook building friendships and alliances with people involved in propagating the avant-garde legacy. One of these friends, with whom he engaged in a lasting correspondence, sharing plans, hopes and frustrations, was Anatol Stern—the Jewish-Polish futurist poet, himself involved in the pre-war avant-garde.⁴³ Stern was



The cover of the exhibition catalogue of Henryk Berlewi in Łódź, 1966

traveling to Paris, where some of his plays were being staged, and Berlewi helped him publish his books in France. In the aftermath of the success of the *Precursors...* exhibition, Berlewi and Stern began planning another broader show contextualizing the Polish visual and literary avant-garde. Although their efforts mostly remained unrealized, the possibility of an exhibition was a subject often returned to throughout their correspondence, as a potentiality awaiting the right moment to be realized. Another, rather implausible, idea they shared enthusiasm for was to create a Museum of the Avant-garde in Poland.

Throughout his time in Paris, Berlewi kept with him a rare collection of Polish avant-garde books and prints, which he’d brought from Warsaw and managed to secure throughout the wartime. When Yves Poupard-Lieussou was working on his book on the Dada movement, Berlewi acquainted him with this archive and undertook, as he confessed in a letter to Stern, “a tremendous effort to translate Polish Dadaist poetry to French.”⁴⁴ Berlewi was moreover disseminating copies of the books among other artists and academics interested in the legacy of the avant-garde. For example, he recalls sending a reproduction of “Europe,” a book of poetry by Anatol Stern and collages by Mieczysław Szczuka, to Stephan Themerson in London (the original was too dear to his heart so he offered to send a photographic reproduction).⁴⁵

Berlewi referred to Stern as his “comrade,” writing that they were the “last Mohicans of the avant-garde” and must “fight arm in arm for the common goal of recognition for the Polish avant-garde.” In letters to Stern, who interestingly was not a close friend in the 1920s, Berlewi relived past arguments and relayed present tensions. For example, he had harsh judgments of friends such as Aleksander Wat, whom he called a *pseudo-avantgardist* because he had proven reluctant in his support for the propagation of their shared history.⁴⁶ The tone of these letters is often very emotional and once, when his friend Stern

procrastinated in replying, Berlewi wrote: “your stubborn, months-long silence, brought to me various... even pessimistic thoughts, putting me in a state of melancholia. I thought thus that the last entrenchment of our avant-garde is wrecked and that the end of our dreams will follow (it sounds romantic but aren’t we the romantics of anti-romanticism?)”⁴⁷ The ardent tone of Berlewi’s letters, the mortal offense he had taken when *Blok* failed to credit his ideas in 1924, and the intensity with which he later returned to the past, testified to his romantic, deeply emotional engagement with the avant-garde. This is also expressed in his descriptions of his encounter with El Lissitzky, a meeting that turned out to be crucial to his later artistic development, and which he recalled thus 40 years later: “gradually, as Lissitzky developed his eloquence in order to praise this art not yet known to me, like a true apostle he gave an apology of suprematism, I felt more and more drops of this poison infiltrating my soul. His fiery and simple words affected me like hashish. He beguiled me with an unknown, magic painting of crystal purity, with the shimmering brightness of the new art. Truly illuminated, possessed with this new ‘religion,’ I vigorously devoted myself to the propaganda of this doctrine conceived in neighboring Russia.”⁴⁸ By the time of this recollection Lissitzky was no longer there to propagate the avant-garde, art institutions had taken on this role instead, and Berlewi now strove to establish a dialogue with them.

During the period of the early 1960s Berlewi exhibited his paintings in numerous exhibitions all over the world: *50 Years of Concrete Art* in Helmhaus Zurich (1960),

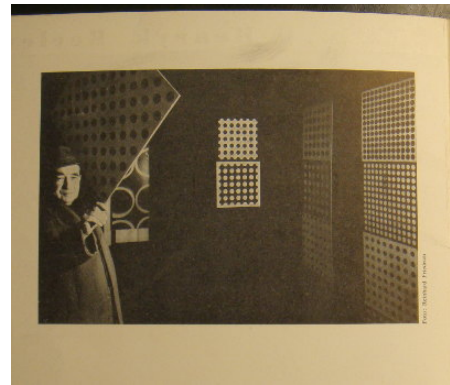


Photo of Henryk Berlewi from the book *Współczesne malarstwo polskie Henryk Berlewi*, by Andrzej K. Olszewski. Published in Warsaw in 1966

an exhibition on Der Sturm in the Nationalgalerie Schloss Charlottenburg in Berlin (1962), *Das Ursprungliche und die Moderne* in Akademie der Künste, Berlin (1964), and a solo exhibition in Centre d'Art Cybernétique in Paris (1965), to name just a few. He also published a text on Polish functional design and, during six months he spent in Berlin, attempted to translate the theory of *mechano-facture* into the medium of film.⁴⁹ Summarizing this moment in Berlewi's practice the contemporaneous Polish art historian Aleksander Wojciechowski wrote that "the works from the last period prove the great vitality of the artist, who already entered history once, but who luckily was able to return from history to the art of the present day".⁵⁰

Finally, the biggest highlight of this period was Berlewi's participation in the famous 1965 MoMA exhibition "The Responsive Eye."⁵¹ "The whole of New York thinks of me as the father of op art," he announced proudly to Stern in a postcard, and later when asked about his impressions of New York he told Stern: "You know it's strange, it seemed to me I could see one of my op art compositions."⁵² Yet despite the enthusiasm for the new movement, Berlewi was quite hesitant in his assessment of op art. In a radio interview given to Polskie Radio in 1966 he regarded it as too commercialized, even if based on similar assumptions as his own theory.⁵³ Indeed, *Mechano-faktura* lends itself easily to a modernist reading: it emphasizes the specificity of the medium of painting, its flatness, autonomy and a universality of geometric forms. It was also originally intended to be exercised in a commercial context, such as the joint enterprise of Berlewi, Wat and Burcz—*Reklama-Mechano* (Mechano-Advertising), an agency which actually realized advertisements for Pluto chocolate. However, as expressed in the radio interview, Berlewi saw the meaning of his theory as deeper than aesthetic, and believed his art to be a form of therapy bringing about a cartesian rationality and clarity. These philosophical underpinnings were, in his opinion, lacking in op art.⁵⁴ The cover Berlewi designed for Stern's 1959 selection of prose, titled *Zabawa w piekło* (*Playing hell*), also testifies to his distance concerning abstraction in the 1960s. Instead of exercising what he championed at the time, namely, avant-garde typography, he chose one of his figurative pictures, *Phantom of Lady Macbeth*, as the cover image.⁵⁵

However, even given his skepticism Berlewi seems to have enjoyed and valued the *pop* aspects of op, and in 1966 he collaborated with Polish fashion label *Moda Polska* to create a line of dresses inspired by patterns from his paintings.⁵⁶ A photo

shoot of Berlewi surrounded by young women holding his paintings was published in *Ty i Ja* fashion journal, and was even picked up and republished by the German tabloid *B.Z* under the provocative title: "Papa of Op and Girls from Poland."⁵⁷

Berlewi's photographic self-portraits were also often used in catalogues for his exhibitions, one design going as far as to insert the artist's head and signature into one of his abstract compositions.⁵⁸ Such examples embody his paradoxical union of history and the present moment, and demonstrate that in his return as the forerunner of op art, Berlewi could also productively be seen as a precursor of pop art. Not only in his flamboyantly projected image, but also due to his way of operating as a kind of artistic entrepreneur, seizing every opportunity, networking and propagating his history with an inextinguishable enthusiasm. "The avant-garde doesn't give up," as the title of 1962 painting by Asger Jorn tells us.

When we compare the 60s fashion shoot of Berlewi with models to the photos of him in the Austro-Daimler car saloon that hosted his first exhibition of abstract painting in Poland in 1924, obvious differences of style and the times aside, we can perceive a remarkable similarity. One fetish of modernity, the shiny new car, has been replaced with another, the attractive young woman. Indeed, it is interesting to consider that women wearing fancy op art fashion were just as rare in 1960s Poland as new Austro-Daimler cars were in the Poland of the 1930s, returning us to Jameson's asymmetry between modernization and modernism. It is, after all, the nature of the avant-garde to be ahead of its time.

One can also find a lot of similitude in the *Życie Literackie* article discussed earlier, which Berlewi published in 1957. In it Berlewi returned to a dramatic quarrel that took place nearly 40 years earlier between himself and members of Blok (Mieczysław Szczuka and Teresa Żarower), who did not credit Berlewi as a member of the editorial board of the magazine despite having used his ideas and published a reproduction of his *Mechano-facture* painting. A painting which, as Berlewi wrote, "today occupies an honorable place in the international exhibition of abstract art of last 50 years in Galerie Creuse in Paris, in the section for precursors, along with Mondrian, Klee, Lissitzky, Larionow, Severini, etc."⁵⁹ Thus, his return as a precursor also retroactively legitimizes him in the past.

In fact, to further enact this retroactive justice, Berlewi resorted to a legal language rather more contemporary to our own times, claiming Szczuka and Żarowerówna

had not only plagiarized him, but had also “infringed [his] copyright.”⁶⁰ Perhaps this is why, when he republished his theory of *Mechano-Faktura* in Paris in 1962 he placed a copyright symbol next to his name. Moreover, this strategy of using the language of *intellectual property* when speaking about his practice was coupled with self-institutionalization. In 1961 Berlewi established a one person-institution called *The Archives of Abstract Art and the International Avant-garde*, of which he was the director. Berlewi designed an official letterhead – white paper with a red and black geometric frame, consulting on its form with Stern – and later used it for all his correspondence.⁶¹ *The Archive* stored his collection of avant-garde publications. It was also the official publisher of the reprint of *Mechano-faktura* and undertook plans to republish other key publications. In romancing with the authority of legal, institutional and bureaucratic forms and structures, the “aesthetics of administration,” Berlewi embraced the future once more, perhaps unwillingly this time, as a proto-conceptual artist.⁶²

In his fight for the legacy of the avant-garde, Berlewi constantly anticipated the future. In a bitter letter to Stern from 1962 in which he expressed his frustrations, he fantasized about a young student “rediscovering from the dust of oblivion these old scraps and writing a thesis on them,” these scraps of course being his practice.⁶³ It is my guess that this is why Berlewi donated the first signed copy of the reprint of *Mechano-faktura* to the University Library in Warsaw. Being the first book on Berlewi I read in undertaking this research, rather than the rare original print of the book from the 1920s, illustrates once again how Berlewi’s practice in the 1960s conditions both his art and theory from its earlier iteration in the 1920s, to the extent that the two become difficult to discern. Berlewi’s strategy was effective: today he functions primarily as a pioneer of avant-garde painting and typography. However, the question that remains for contemporary art historians is whether it is possible to fit the entirety of Henryk Berlewi’s activities into a single narrative? Is it possible to write a narrative that would embrace, all at once, his Jewish identity and engagement in the renaissance of Jewish culture, and his avant-garde practice, as well as his



Henryk Berlewi, *Figures*, oil on canvas, 41 x 33 cm, undated, Archive of the Desa Unicum Auction House

flamboyant presence in op art, and perhaps, even, the biography of Berlewi the devoted son who shared his whole life with his mother Helena Berlewi, who herself, at the age of 79, began her own artistic practice?⁶⁴

Footnotes

1 On Jewish Renaissance movements in Poland see: Jerzy Malinowski, *Grupa "Jung Idysz" i Żydowskie Środowisko "Nowej Sztuki" w Polsce, 1918-1923* (Warsaw: Polska Akademia Nauk, 1987). On Berlewi's ambiguous Jewish identity: Seth L. Wolitz, "Henryk Berlewi i Nieostra Tożsamość: Estetyczne Poszukiwania Autentyczności", in *Polak, Żyd, Artysta. Tożsamość a Awangarda*, ed. Jarosław Suchan and Karolina Szymaniak (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 2010), 66-80.

2 For the English translation see: Henryk Berlewi, "Mechano-Facture," in *Between Worlds*, eds. Timothy O. Benson and Éva Forgács (Cambridge, London: MIT Press, 2002), 489-491. On Berlewi's involvement in the avant-garde: Piotr Rudziński, "Awangardowa Twórczość Henryka Berlewiego", in *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* 2 (1977), 205-219; and "Awangardowa Twórczość Henryka Berlewiego Cz. II", in *Biuletyn Historii Sztuki* 4 (1977), 376-387.

3 This information is enclosed in a biography written by Berlewi, now deposited in: Henryk Berlewi Papers, Special Collections, Polish Academy of Science, Institute of Art, Warsaw. It is not further specified which resistance organization Berlewi fought in.

4 Ibid., 2.

5 Julian Przyboś, "Maj Malarski W Paryżu Czyli Owies i Ryż", in *Przegląd Kulturalny* 27 (1957), 1-3.

6 *Précurseurs De L'art Abstrait en Pologne: Kazimierz Malewicz, Katarzyna Kobro, Władysław Strzemiński, Henryk Berlewi, Henryk Stażewski* (Paris: Galerie Denise Rene, 1957). For more information on the organization of the exhibition see: Andrzej Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie: Rekonstrukcje i Symulacje* (Warsaw: Universitas, 2002).

7 Michel Seuphor, *Dictionnaire De La Peinture Abstraite* (Paris: Fernand Hazan,

1957).

8 Jean Cassou, "Introduction", in *Précurseurs De L'art Abstrait en Pologne...*, 7–10.

9 On the issue of polonizing Malevich see: Turowski, *Malewicz*, 222–223. Nationalism paired with a propagation of the avant-garde can also be seen in texts written by Berlewi; "Undoubtedly Mechano-facture, which begun today's op art, despite its universalism, is a Polish thing". Henryk Berlewi, "Post scriptum," *Poezja* 11 (November 1966), 105.

10 Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 164.

11 Piotr Piorowski, "Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde", in *Europa! Europa? The Avant-Garde, Modernism and the Fate of a Continent*, eds. Sascha Bru et al. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), 56.

12 These were the works exhibited in Galerie Denise René. Later they were displayed in Amsterdam, in December 1957. The year before Denise René and Willem Sandber also organized the first exhibition of Mondrian. See: Ibid., 223; also "Anka Ptaszkowska rozmawia z Denise Reneé," in *Galeria Denise René sztuka konkretna/ Galerie Denise René l'Art Concret* (Łódź: Muzeum Sztuki, 1997), 30.

13 Michael Seuphor, *Piet Mondrian, sa vie, son œuvre* (Paris: Flammarion, 1956).

14 Katarzyna Kobro Władysław Strzemiński: *grudzień 1956, styczeń 1957* (Łódź: Ośrodek Propagandy Sztuki, 1956).

15 Ludwik Flaszen, "Rekolekcje 'Nowoczesności'", *Przegląd Kulturalny* 17 (April 1957), 1–3. (All translation's from Polish texts author's own)

16 Andrzej Osęka, "Los Polskiej Awangardy," *Przegląd Kulturalny* 6 (February 1957), 2–3.

17 Ibid., 3.

18 Jan Sowa, *Fantomowe Ciało Króla Peryferyjne Zmagania z Nowoczesną Formą* (Kraków: Universitas, 2011), 529.

19 Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 306–307.

20 Ibid., 309.

21 Sowa, 30–34.

22 Antoni Słonimski, "Mechano-Bzdura", *Wiadomości Literackie* 13 (March 30, 1924).

23 Antoni Słonimski, "Mechano-Bzdura", *Życie Literackie* 27 (July 7, 1957), 5.

24 Henryk Berlewi, "Nieco O Dawnej Awangardzie", *Życie Literackie* 27 (July 7, 1957), 5–7.

25 Ibid., 5.

26 Partha Mitter, "Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-garde Art from the Periphery", *The Art Bulletin* 4, (Dec., 2008), 538.

27 Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

28 Ibid., 539. See also: Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-garde 1922–1947* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 9–10.

29 Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 12.

30 Ibid., 22.

31 *Inventing Abstraction 1910–1925. How a Radical Ideal Changed Modern Art*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, December 23, 2012–April 15, 2013. Organized by Leah Dickerman, Curator, with Masha Chlenova, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Painting and Sculpture.

32 *Inventing Abstraction 1910–1925 How a Radical Idea Changed Modern Art*, ed. Leah Dickerman (London: Thames & Hudson, 2012), 9.

33 Diagram available online:

<http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/inventingabstraction/>

[page=connections](#) [date of access 11.02.2013]

34 Piotrowski, *Towards a Horizontal History...*, 56–58.

35 Julian Przyboś, "U Denise Rene", *Przegląd Kulturalny* 4 (1958), 7. It is interesting that Przyboś mentioned Vasarely. Berlewi soon after felt Vasarely was becoming a precursor of op art at his expense, expressing his disappointment to journalist Francois Pluchart, who reported it in: "Berlewi ou l'Op Art", *Combat* (November 23 1965), 9. In the famous 1955 exhibition *Le mouvement*, which took place in Galerie Denise René, other historical precedents that could cast some doubt on Vasarely's claim to originality, such as Berlewi's Mechano-facture of 1922, or Josef Albers compositions on glass realized in the Bauhaus in the late twenties, and many of his subsequent drawings—were conspicuously absent. See: Yves-Alain Bois, "1955 The 'Le mouvement' Show at the Galerie Denise René in Paris Launches Kineticism", in *Art Since 1900*, eds. Hal Foster et al. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011), 380.

36 Ibid.

37 Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (London, Paris: Monthly Review Press, 1977), 178.

38 Ibid.

39 Letter dated October 6, 1962, folder akc. 14355, Anatol Stern Papers, Manuscript Department, National Library of Poland in Warsaw; Malina Gmadzyk-Kluźniak, "'Trzymam Rękę Na Pulsie Naszej Awangardy'. Z Archiwum Anatola Sterna," *Biuletyn Informacyjny Biblioteki Narodowej* 2 (1996), 32–34.

40 Berlewi, *Post Scriptum...*, 105.

41 On the link between nationalism and art history see: Matthew Rampley, "The Construction of the 'New' National Art Histories in the New Europe", *Art History and the Visual Studies in Europe Transnational Discourses and National Framework*, ed. Matthew Rampley et al. (Leiden: BRILL, 2012), 231–247. On Polish 'ethnic' nationalism see: Krzysztof Jaskułowski, "[Western \(Civic\) versus Eastern \(Ethnic\) Nationalism. The Origins and Critique of the Dichotomy](#)", *Polish Sociological Review* 3 (2010), 289–303.

42 Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Elective Affinities* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1872), 40.

43 In 1918 Berlewi participated in the futurist soiree "Wieczur podtropikalny użądzony przez białych mužynuw" [A Subtropical Evening Organized by White Negros], organized by Anatol Stern and Aleksander Wat. Berlewi designed a poster for the event. See: *W kręgu futuryzmu i awangardy. Studia i szkice*, ed. Andrzej Waśkiewicz (Wrocław: Oficyna Wydawnicza ATUT, 2003), 231-232.

44 Letter, Henryk Berlewi to Anatol Stern, March, 1958, Anatol Stern Papers. Gmadzyk-Kłuźniak, *Biuletyn Informacyjny Biblioteki Narodowej* 2, 32-34. Probably Poupard-Lieussou was researching for the book he co-edited with Michel Sanouillet: Sanouillet and Poupard-Lieussou, eds., *Documents Dada* (Paris: Weber-Skira, 1974). Letter, Henryk Berlewi to Anatol Stern, April 27, 1959, Anatol Stern Papers. Letter, Henryk Berlewi to Anatol Stern, January 6, 1962, *ibid*.

45 Letter, Henryk Berlewi to Anatol Stern, April 22, 1963, *ibid*.

46 Quoted in: Turowski, *Malewicz w Warszawie...*, 10-11.

47 Berlewi spoke of these attempts in an interview for *Film* magazine: "Berlewi Henryk", *Film* 33 (1958), 10. Berlewi's *Mechano-facture* has recently been re-created in film by Marcin Giżycki, who was inspired by the 1958 interview. See: Marcin Giżycki, *Awangarda Wobec Kina* (Warsaw: Wydawn. "Małe", 1996), 34; Marcin Giżycki and Henryk Berlewi, *Kinefaktura*, ed. Marcin Giżycki (Warsaw: The Museum of Modern Art, 2012), <http://filmoteka.artmuseum.pl/index.php?l=1&id=1341>.

48 *Henryk Berlewi Malarstwo*, (Zielona Góra: Związek Polskich Artystów Plastyków Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych Muzeum Okręgowe Lubuskie Towarzystwo Przyjaciół Muzeum, 1967).

49 Berlewi made a brief appearance in a short film by Brian de Palma documenting the opening of the exhibition. See: *The Responsive Eye*, directed by Brian de Palma (1966), <http://www.dailymotion.com/embed/video/k78x1tHXZ7F3QU2GoEg>.

50 Postcard, Henryk Berlewi to Anatol Stern, March 30, 1965, Anatol Stern Papers; Typescript, *Difficult life of an innovator/ Henryk Berlewi*, Anatol Stern,

undated, Anatol Stern Papers.

51 "Interview with Henryk Berlewi, the Creator of Op Art," recorded July 7 1977, D. 12953, Archive of Polish Radio, Warsaw.

52 This raises the problem of the avant-garde legacy in relation to modernism. The topic was debated by Julian Przyboś, according to whom abstract art had descended into decoration and thus needed to be overcome in order to render art meaningful again. See: Piotr Piotrowski, ed., *Sztuka ok. 1956: Odwilż* (Poznań: Muzeum Narodowe w Poznaniu, 1996); and *Znaczenia Modernizmu W stronę historii sztuki polskiej po 1945 roku* (Poznań: Rebis, 1996), 40-90.

53 Anatol Stern, *Zabawa w piekło* (Warsaw: ISKRY, 1959).

54 Edward Hartwig, "Henryk Berlewi for Moda Polska" *Piktogram* 16 (2011): 14-20; *Ty i Ja* 9 (September 1966).

55 Anatol Stern Papers, undated.

56 *H. Berlewi* (Łódź: Łódzki Związek polski Artystów Plastyków, 1966).

57 Berlewi, "Nieco O Dawnej...", 8.

58 Ibid.

59 Examples of such correspondence can be found in the Henryk Berlewi Papers, Special Collections, Polish Academy of Science, Institute of Art, Warsaw.

60 Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, "Conceptual Art 1962-1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions", *October* 55 (Winter, 1990), 105-143.

61 Letter, Henryk Berlewi to Anatol Stern, April 22, 1963, Anatol Stern Papers.

62 On Helena Berlewi see: Aleksander Jackowski, "Twórczość późnego wieku", *Polska Sztuka Ludowa - Konteksty* 45/2 (1991), 38-40; and *Kwiaty Hel-Henri*, dir. Konstanty Gordon (1967).

63 Letter, Henryk Berlewi to Anatol Stern, April 22, 1963, Anatol Stern Papers.

64 *Helena Berlewi* (Warszawa: Centralne Biuro Wystaw Artystycznych, 1958).