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## “It Was a Mastodon” – Mieczysław Szczuka’s Search for Utilitarian Beauty\*

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„To był mastodont” – Mieczysław Szczuka w poszukiwaniu piękna utylitarnego

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**Abstract.** The article is an attempt at outlining the biography of Mieczysław Szczuka, a Polish graphic artist of the interwar period. His short-lived artistic activity is important because of his fascination with Soviet constructivism, pioneering Polish photomanipulation, theoretical work and combining artistic ideas with the communist pursuit of social and political revolution. Szczuka co-created the art and literary magazines (*Blok* [*The Bloc*], *Dźwignia* [*The Lever*]) and was involved in avant-garde publishing. The programme statements brought up in this paper were part of the artistic and literary discussions of the interwar period.

**Keywords:** Mieczysław Szczuka, constructivism, revolution, *Blok*, *Dźwignia*

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The text is a fragment of a larger whole, hence some issues are only outlined here, and some – such as photomanipulation – were completely omitted. “To był mastodont” [“It was a mastodon”] supposedly said Witold Wandurski about Szczuka’s death (cf. Stawar, 1957, p. 624).

**Abstrakt.** Artykuł jest próbą biografii Mieczysława Szczuka – polskiego artysty-grafika międzywojnia. Jego krótka działalność jest istotna z uwagi na fascynację radzieckim konstruktywizmem, pionierstwo w zakresie polskiego fotomontażu, działalność teoretyczną oraz zespolenie idei artystycznych z komunistycznym dążeniem do przeprowadzenia rewolucji społeczno-politycznej. Szczuka współtworzył czasopisma artystyczno-literackie (*Blok*, *Dźwignia*) oraz angażował się w wydawniczą działalność awangardową. Przywoływane wypowiedzi programowe wpisywały się w artystyczne i literackie dyskusje międzywojenne.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Mieczysław Szczuka, konstruktywizm, rewolucja, *Blok*, *Dźwignia*

Reconstructing the biography of Mieczysław Szczuka is both a tedious and demanding task. The apparent abundance of source material, with the simultaneous scarcity of reliable bibliographic data and the carelessness of some of the authors, translates into a lack of reliability of sources.<sup>1</sup> The previous studies on the theoreticians and practitioners of the New Art of the interwar period treat Szczuka with caution and in a very cursory manner. The only album devoted entirely to his art was created in the 1960s. It is an eclectic piece – a collection of his articles, artwork, letters and manifestos, as well as reviews from exhibitions, posthumous memories and reprinting notes of Tatra Volunteer Search and Rescue.<sup>2</sup> The systematisation of biographical facts is important for a number of reasons – primarily to gather in one place information scattered so far in the press, magazines and collective studies, as well as to give them a coherent shape. Secondly, the family situation, the way of upbringing, education, acquaintances, and inspirations coming from various sources had a great influence on the formation of the young artist's worldview and awareness. Thirdly, Szczuka's activity has shaped the next generations of graphic artists, who – like him – have been enthralled by the revolutionary possibilities (cf. Rypson, 2011; 2017a; 2017b). Finally, I am inclined to believe that composing as complete and reliable a biography as possible will bring his figure to the debate on Polish art history, from which he was absent for many years, and the centenary of his death may be a good reason to bring him back from artistic oblivion.

Mieczysław Szczuka was born on 19 October 1898 in Warsaw, as the only child of Wincent and Florentyna.<sup>3</sup> Young Szczuka attended the General Paweł Chrzanowski

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<sup>1</sup> I have been struggling with various issues all the time due to a negligent change in the name of the school which Szczuka attended, blatant factual errors in seemingly trusted studies (mistaking Henryk Stażewski for Władysław Strzemiński), or to erroneous bibliographic references, which point to missing materials. The present paper provides facts, which were checked and which are true in my personal opinion, while in the case of discrepancies I outline them in a footnote.

<sup>2</sup> This concerns the album by Mieczysław Berman and Anatol Stern (1965).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Muszyński (2015) and Daranowska-Lukaszewska (2020). The need to systematize Szczuka's life and work is best demonstrated by the fact that there is no unanimous opinion concerning the artist's birthday. In their album, Stern and Berman claim that it was on 19 October, while

Gymnasium while learning to draw under his father’s supervision.<sup>4</sup> In 1911, he took part in a school art exhibition, gaining the recognition of art critics. His works in this period were inspired by nature, he often sketched insects collected by his father, which were always sketched in an enlarged, bizarrely exaggerated manner. He graduated in 1915 and began studying at the Warsaw School of Fine Arts, supervised by Miłosz Kotarbiński. His charcoal drawings of insects and copies of Jan Matejko’s monumental paintings were touted a sensation and won him recognition. The majority of his works were filled with religious themes, pathos, and solemnity. He was active in the Brotherhood of Students’ Aid – he sympathised with its right-wing branch – and in a patriotic organisation called the Academic Legion (Monkiewicz, 2018, p. 34). He was given a studio in the attic, however, at that point, he started removing himself from the programme of the School of Fine Arts, while his artistic awareness and hunger for experimentation started awakening. The period of his studies led to the crystallisation of his political views, and the revision of his national-Catholic upbringing, according to Andrzej Turowski: “[this period] brought about quite significant corrections to the model that he saw at home” “[okres ten] wprowadzał w wyniesiony z domu model dość istotne korekty”] (Turowski, 1981, p. 24).

Unable to free himself from Christian traditions, he painted the figures of the Messiah, as well as biblical and apocalyptic scenes, using chiaroscuro in his creative rage. These works did not herald an immediate change in his art and worldview and, having presented his works at the school exhibition in 1918, he once again gained applause from the audience. Later, the emphasis in his works shifted to the grotesque – the depicted Christ functioned in the reality of the Second Polish Republic, stood before the Polish military court, and explained himself to the Polish police. The artist created his first spatial compositions, which took place in the period when Szczuka was able to create continuously for ten hours behind locked doors, after which he did not appear in the studio for a few days, only to suddenly come and get lost in

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*Polski słownik bibliograficzny* maintains that it was 18 October. Many sources do not give an exact date, providing only the year 1898. I decided to use the data from the album by Stern and Berman, because they knew Szczuka personally and by writing their text, they came into possession of many documents from the life and work of the artist. There are many similar discrepancies, for example concerning the name of Szczuka’s dog: Jan Golus recalls that its name was “Boks” and Wanda Gentil-Tippenhauer wrote that its name was “Bielas.” I have not been able to determine what his real name was and where this discrepancy came from.

<sup>4</sup> The album dedicated to Szczuka informs that he attended General Paweł Chrzanowski Gymnasium (currently, the Jan Zamoyski High School at Smolna 30 in Warsaw), while *Polski słownik bibliograficzny* states that Szczuka attended Wojciech Górski Gymnasium, which was located at a different address at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and was moved to Smolna 30 after the end of World War II. Inaccuracies and lack of care for the reliability of data are characteristic trait of the people who have taken up the subject of Mieczysław Szczuka’s life to date.

art for hours again. At that time, the political sympathies of the Warsaw artist also changed – he started getting closer to left-wing circles. After graduating in 1920, he established contact with communist activists, mainly thanks to the sculptor Teresa Żarnower, Szczuka's friend and lover, who was a member of the Communist Workers' Party of Poland (KPRP). With his fair hair and blue eyes, Szczuka was considered a freak, an outsider, although the circles closest to him were rather inclined towards the term "bard." He was not liked by his fellow students, because he created all the drawings and other works of art faster than they did, yet he gained the recognition of the professors, who treated him exceptionally and turned a blind eye to his numerous absences. He was in a constant rush, constantly pushed and chased by something – he never went down the stairs, he preferred to slide on the railings. One night after a party at school, he stayed alone in the building, and the next day it turned out that he had used freshly whitewashed walls and gave them his own character, by painting drunken saints storming the heavenly gates to get to the virgins who hid there in panic. When asked about the unruly artist, Karol Tichy supposedly responded with: "We, the professors, look at Szczuka like a hen that hatched a duck. [...] Szczuka is the artist of the future!" ["My, profesorowie, patrzymy na pana Szczukę jak kura, co wysiedziała kaczkę. [...] Szczuka to artysta przyszłości!"] (Golus, 1965, p. 124). In fact, he would keep looking forward to the future until the very end, waiting for the Great Transformation, the inevitable arrival of which was sensed subcutaneously by the more insightful individuals at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Szczuka's first individual exhibition took place in May 1920 at the "Polonia" Polish Art Club. His works captured viewers' attention with sharp combinations of intense colours and a dizzying movement of characters in the paintings. The movement element would later be transformed into dynamism, which will become a dominant feature of Szczuka's art. The works at "Polonia" were placed on the floor, at the level of the audience. The reviews left nothing unclear: "great talent goes down the drain" ["wielki talent schodzi na psy"], "Szczuka goes astray due to modernist eccentricities" ["Szczuka na manowcach modernistycznych dziwactw"] (Gentil-Tippenhauer, 1965, p. 130). The exhibition catalogue was created by poet Edmund Miller, who – using phonetic spelling, characteristic of the futurists – preaches the slogans of revolution in art. The first words of the *Katalok* [*Katalogue*] (sic!) were:

Against ossification in found forms, against the liking of the spirit of comfort, against those overly sensitive and unburdened, against the conflation of aesthetic pleasure with pleasure, against insularity. (Stern, 1965, p. 42)<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> "Przeciw kostnieniu w formach znalezionych, przeciw upodobaniom ducha wygody, przeciw wszystko trawiącym i naddelikatnym, przeciw utożsamianiu rozkoszy estetycznej z przyjemnością, przeciw ciasnocie."

December 1921 brought Szczuka’s second exhibition at the “Polonia.” Here, he presented his paintings with a clearly revolutionary undertone, including the aforementioned *Chrystus przed sądem wojskowym* [*Christ in Front of a Military Court*], as well as mobile installations, the so-called *formes mobiles* – multifaceted wooden compositions, cubist and suprematist works and monument designs. As Stanisław Czekalski wrote:

The choice of figures, whom Szczuka wants to erect monuments of concrete and iron [Stirner, Liebknecht, Kropotkin – A.W.-G.] betrays, on the one hand, his youthful fascination with anarchism and on the other, these designs clearly show the inspiration with Soviet constructivism. (Czekalski, 1998, p. 77)<sup>6</sup>

It seems that Szczuka somehow replaced the baggage of Christian tradition with a pantheon of revolutionary activists. Once again, the critics were merciless:

These two [Szczuka and Stażewski – A.W.-G.] undoubtedly talented and bold young people, went astray as a result of mixing up conceptual elements with artistic ones, creating *objects to think about* and *artistic rebuses* instead of works of art. (Stern, 1965, pp. 17–18)<sup>7</sup>

However, this was not about “artistic rebuses” but about opposition to the “museum easel form” (Stern, 1965, p. 18). Jan Nałęcz-Lipka wrote in his review published in *Lucifer*: “Szczuka creates abstract compositions in which he solves theoretical, painterly and even metaphysical issues with the help of planes and lines in order to finally move on to the darkest symbolism” [“Szczuka daje kompozycje abstrakcyjne, w których za pomocą płaszczyzny i kresek rozwiązuje zagadnienia teoretyczne, malarskie a nawet metafizyczne, aby wreszcie przejść w najciemniejszy symbolizm”] (Nałęcz-Lipka, 1922, p. 36), which shows a frantic search for an adequate form of expression. In one of his texts, the artist wrote:

The New Art will leave a mark on the exterior of industrial and construction technology production, thus bringing about a breakthrough in the psyche of the masses and the demand for the work whose forms are being built today. (Czekalski, 1998, p. 86)<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> “Dobór postaci, którym Szczuka chce stawiać żelazobetonowe pomniki [Stirner, Liebknecht, Kropotkin – A.W.-G.], z jednej strony zdradza jeszcze jego młodzieńcze zauroczenie anarchizmem. Z drugiej strony projekty te wskazują wyraźnie na inspirację konstruktywizmem radzieckim.”

<sup>7</sup> “Ci dwaj [Szczuka i Stażewski – A.W.-G.] bez wątpienia utalentowani i odważni młodzi ludzie wskutek pomieszania pierwiastków pojęciowych z plastycznymi weszli na bezdroża, tworząc *przedmioty do myślenia* i *plastyczne rebusy* – zamiast dzieł sztuki.”

<sup>8</sup> “Nowa Sztuka wyciśnie piętno na zewnętrznej stronie wytwórczości w dziedzinie techniki industrialnej i budownictwa, dzięki temu nastąpi przełom w psychice szerokich mas i zjawi się zapotrzebowanie na dzieło, którego formy buduje się dzisiaj.”

Critical reviews of two exhibitions organised at the “Polonia” left the artist annoyed, as he was accused of a lack of mimetic skills and clumsy painting technique that pushed him towards experimentation. In 1923, at Warsaw’s Zachęta Gallery, he exhibited monumental compositions on religious themes, created during his time at the Warsaw School of Fine Arts.<sup>9</sup> He presented his works under the artistic name “Józef Rekuć,” and the critics were delighted with the artistry of an unknown painter. The fact that Szczuka presented works on mystical themes was interpreted in various ways. Franciszek Siedlecki understands the religious exhibition by Szczuka as a struggle with the Christian tradition, giving rise to – according to him – this momentum and fury visible in his works. He points to the confrontation with the thoughts tormenting the artist, rooted somewhere in the subconscious and impossible to overcome or marginalise (Stern, 1965, p. 41). Andrzej Stawar, on the other hand, sees this act as an inability to change the worldview paradigm, which is why the exhibition of his early works would be a manifestation of the search for the artist’s own path (Stawar, 1957, p. 614).

Andrzej Turowski calls the exhibition at the Zachęta Gallery “one of the most glaring manifestations of mockery” [“jednym z najbardziej jaskrawych przejawów szyderstwa”] (Turowski, 1981, p. 26), which suggests that it was an intended act. The earlier memoirs of Wanda Gentil-Tippenhauer are maintained in a similar tone. Personally, I am inclined an explanation that is closely related to Szczuka’s character – enraged by malicious insinuations that he lacked the technique and mimetic skills, he exhibited his monumental compositions under a pseudonym, thus ensuring an objective evaluation by the critics. Gentil-Tippenhauer’s memories were similar. Pride, self-confidence, and decisiveness were clearly visible in the works of the Warsaw artist, which is why an ideological, ironic behaviour seems to be a convincing explanation, especially since in 1923, Szczuka left Christ and his teachings far behind. Turowski dubbed the exhibition at the Zachęta Gallery “one of the most glaring manifestations of mockery” (Turowski, 1981, p. 26), which confirms that it was intended as a mockery. Regardless of whether the exhibition at the Zachęta Gallery is treated as a Freudian action, struggling with a changing worldview or an ironic mockery of critics, the fact is that Szczuka never again took up religious themes in his work, and instead focused on working towards the New.

The next exhibition took place in Vilnius in 1923. It was a collective presentation under the banner of “New Art.” This event was a kind of a turning point

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<sup>9</sup> In his text entitled *Głód jednoznaczności* [*Hunger for Unambiguity*], Anatol Stern states that it was 1922, while the timeline at the end of the album claims that the Zachęta exhibition took place in 1923.

in Szczuka’s life, as since that moment (and even a bit earlier, in *Zwrotnica*<sup>10</sup>) he had been publishing his artistic views and creative postulates, entering into debates with other artists of the interwar period, fighting with them and fiercely fighting for a place for his vision of art. In Vilnius, he exhibited projects of the *Freedom Monument* and a monument to Max Stirner, as well as exhibits in the field of graphics and book art: *Książka nie nowa* and *Nie wiadomo po co – bajka*. None of these works have survived to this day. What is also intriguing is the almost complete lack of discussion of both exhibitions and Szczuka’s work by contemporary critics. There are rare sketches, written by mostly young researchers, for example, the already mentioned Andrzej K. Olszewski, who wrote: “Szczuka was one of the most prominent figures of the Polish avant-garde, an inspirer and precursor of new artistic ideas and genres” [“Szczuka był jedną najwybitniejszych postaci polskiej awangardy, inspiratorem i prekursorem nowych artystycznych idei i gatunków”] (Olszewski, 1962, p. 44), and Andrzej Wat in *Przegląd Kulturalny* adds that [“I don’t believe that many artists have put as much work and persistence into the development of their artistic language” [“niewielu chyba artystów włożyło tyle pracy i uporu w wypracowanie swego języka plastycznego”] (Stern, 1965, p. 45).

Szczuka’s artistic views were closely related to his political sympathies and growing social awareness. His art changed rapidly and radically as if he felt he had little time. The young artist’s conversion was caused by the *zeitgeist* of an entire generation. It was a time of breakthrough, destruction of values which until now had been considered permanent and the search for new ones. After World War I, dubbed the “last convulsion of the old society” [“ostatnią konwulsją staroego społeczeństwa”] (Stawar, 1957, p. 611), national chauvinisms emerged, and the parochial and bourgeois worldview seemed to be in decline. The turbulent years of the interwar period were also marked with the increased dissatisfaction of the working class, who rued the exploitation of the bourgeoisie. The decaying world of the dominance of wealthy bourgeoisie reveals a new recipient of art – the proletariat. The tragedy of intellectuals who wanted to translate the reality of the social upheaval into artistic activity was that bourgeois ideologues looked at them as “guides to the influence of the hated Bolshevism” [“przewodników wpływu znieawidzonego bolszewizmu”], while the communist party treated them as the “undesirable product of the revolution” [“niepożądany produkt rewolucji”] or “hostile ideological diversion” [“wrogą dywersję ideologiczną”] (Stawar, 1977, p. 617). In the newly formed Polish state, disputes, and discussions about the shape

<sup>10</sup> This concerns issue 4/1923, where pages 104–106 contained Szczuka’s creed in its original and very significant formal layout. Joanna Daranowska-Lukaszewska writes in her *Polski słownik biograficzny* that the text was published in issue 6/1923, but this is an error – it was published in issue 4/1923 without any doubt.

of the so-called New Art and its functions in the emerging country arose. Social unrest heralded the imminent arrival of changes that would permeate all areas of life. Szczuka had the feeling that the era of bourgeois, parochial art was coming to an end and that these issues had to be rethought in order to correspond to the specificity of post-war reality and the social transformations that came with it. The programme statement in three parts, published in the fourth issue of *Zwrotnica* in 1923 contains Szczuka's views on art (Szczuka, 1923, pp. 104–106). One of the fragments of the programme statement refers to the "INSEPARABILITY OF ART / AND SOCIAL MATTERS" ["NIEROZDZIELNOŚCI ZAGADNIEŃ SZTUKI / I ZAGADNIEŃ SPOŁECZNYCH"] (Szczuka, 1923, p. 105), and it is Szczuka's firmest declaration, in which he expresses his dissatisfaction with the current situation of the workers, while drawing attention to the need of making the necessary changes. The artist was characterised by "constant pain over human fate" ["nieustanna boleść nad losem ludzkim"] (Krzywicka, 1965, p. 140), and this theme is very well illustrated by Szczuka's programme statement published in *Zwrotnica*. I will quote the initial part of the final part of the declaration:

THE FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL  
 TAKES ALMOST ALL OF PEOPLE'S TIME  
 NOT ALLOWING THEM  
 TO DEAL IN ART.  
 MODERN LIFE, WHICH AIMS AT  
 MAXIMISING PROFIT WITH MINIMUM  
 EXPENDITURE  
 LEAVES  
 A SPECIFIC MARK ON CONTEMPORARY ART. (Szczuka, 1923, p. 105)<sup>11</sup>

Szczuka's interest in Russian constructivism went hand in hand with his increasingly communist views. He despised the exclusiveness of art, the bourgeois love of collecting trinkets. He felt that there could be no New Art without fundamental social and political upheaval because the main audience had to change – hence his deep desire to liberate art from museums, to give it a practical meaning, to make it a usable value. New demands, such as elevating craftsmen to the rank of artists, or rather pulling artists off the pedestal and making them "foremen" – as John Heartfield liked to refer to himself – emerged simultaneously in various areas of Central and Eastern Europe. It is difficult to determine who initiated these changes

<sup>11</sup> "WALKA O BYT / POCHŁANIA LUDZIOM PRAWIE CAŁY ICH CZAS / NIE POZWALAJĄC / NA ZAJMOWANIE SIĘ SZTUKĄ / ŻYCIE WSPÓŁCZESNE ZDĄŻAJĄCE TYLKO / DO MAKSYMUM ZYSKU PRZY MINIMUM / WYŁOŻONYCH ŚRODKÓW / NAKŁADA / SPECYFICZNE PIĘTNO NA WSPÓŁCZESNĄ SZTUKĘ."



and where, but this does not seem to be of great importance for my deliberations. This community or rather common nature of artistic issues was the cornerstone of constructivism. This is where the demands for utilitarianism, the inseparability of art and social issues, simplicity, and functionality of everything that pretends to be art, came from. The manifesto published in *Zwrotnica* was Szczuka’s artistic creed. His fascination with constructivism and abstractionism resulted in an exhibition at Berlin’s “Der Sturm” gallery in 1923, created with Teresa Żarnower. Apart from abstract compositions, it also featured designs of monuments to Zamenhof, Liebknet and Dostoyevsky, architectural projects (*Dom Pracy* [House of Labour], the interior of a cinema), set designs, works related to abstract film, similar to the top works of Szczuka’s masters – Hans Richter and Viking Eggeling – as well as typographic compositions and book designs where the text was combined with artistic elements.

In 1924, the artistic group “Blok” was founded and from the very beginning it brought together diverse artistic personalities. Included in its ranks were: Mieczysław Szczuka, Teresa Żarnower, Henryk Stażewski, Katarzyna Kobro, Karol Kryński, Władysław Strzemiński, Witold Kajruksztis, Henryk Berlewi, Aleksander Rafałowski, Mieczysław Szulc as well as poet Edmund Miller, who was responsible for the text in the magazine they published. Although the publication – the *Blok* magazine – had the subtitle “Magazine of the artistic avant-garde” it soon turned out that it would be eclectic in nature, and the artists who founded it created a highly explosive mixture. What united them was their shared desire to express themselves and their uncompromising commitment to the ideas of modernity. The ambition of “Blok” was to bring together Europe’s leading avant-garde artists, ensure the flow of aesthetic currents, and bring about theoretical discussions and publishing manifestos, and works.

The programmes declaration in the first issue of *Blok* is very vague, and thus ambiguous – this was probably done in order to maintain the coherence of the group. Szczuka’s intransigence caused his voice to be clearly heard in the manifesto:

We are finally eliminating the expression of personal moods, the manner of putting oneself out there that existed in modernist art. Art should not be a manifestation of the artist’s individualistic intentions but a work of effort of the community, whose worker and inventor is an individual artist. What every artist creates is supposed to be a superstructure over the sum of efforts of his predecessors and colleagues. Diverse individualistic experiments must be replaced by absolute discipline and continuity of work based on canons. Instead of inspiration and aesthetic contemplation, there needs to be a conscious, shaping will, demanding clarity and accuracy of forms. [...] The handmade forms contain graphological deviations, characteristic for individual artists, while mechanical performance ensures absolute objectivity of the form. (Szczuka, 1924, seq.)<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> “Likwidujemy ostatecznie istniejące dotychczas w sztuce modernistycznej wyrażanie osobistych nastrojów, manierę wywnętrzania się. Sztuka winna być nie przejawem indywidualistycznych zamierzeń artysty – lecz dziełem wysiłku zbiorowości, której robotnikiem i wynalazcą jest

The general and ambiguous nature of this statement can be seen at first glance. The point of view of the author of *Droga do Damaszku* [*The Road to Damascus*]<sup>13</sup> is closely intertwined with the theories of Fordism and Taylorism – “optimal division, specialisation, strict discipline and precise coordination of work, systematisation, mechanisation, standardisation and mass production [“optymalnego podziału, wyspecjalizowania, ścisłej dyscypliny i precyzyjnej koordynacji pracy, systematyzacji, mechanizacji, standaryzacji i umasowienia produkcji”] (Czekalski, 1998, p. 85). The proposed objectivity of forms and unambiguity of the message was to be guaranteed by the use of geometric figures, since “these forms, according to the modernists, are universal idioms, understood in the same way by representatives of all nationalities and classes” [“formy te, według modernistów, są uniwersalnymi idiomami, jednakowo rozumianymi przez przedstawicieli wszystkich narodowości czy klas społecznych”] (Misiak and Szydłowska, 2015, p. 69). The wondrous ambiguity of the programme’s declaration allowed for some sort of an agreement between the artists forming the “Blok” collective. Szczuka’s obsession with objectivity went hand in hand with his delight in machines and their logic, which should be followed in creative work. The animosity towards “graphological deviations” was supposed to subdue the temptations of the exuberant artistic imagination, to make art unambiguous, understandable, carrying a clear, unquestionable message. This gave rise to the category of “beauty of utilitarianism,” which became the main principle of constructivism. Szczuka was irritated by the needless ornamentation

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poszczególony artysta. To, co tworzy każdy artysta, ma być nadbudową nad sumą wysiłków jego poprzedników i współtowarzyszy. Rozbieżne indywidualistyczne eksperymenty muszą być zastąpione przez bezwzględną dyscyplinę i ciągłość pracy opartej na kanonach. Zamiast natchnienia, estetycznej kontemplacji – świadoma, kształtująca wola, domagająca się jasności i ścisłości form. [...] Formy wykonane ręcznie zawierają w sobie grafologiczne odchylenia, charakterystyczne dla poszczególnych artystów – wykonanie zaś mechanicznie daje bezwzględny obiektywizm formy.”

<sup>13</sup> *The Road to Damascus* was exhibited in 1923 at the Zachęta Gallery as Józef Rekuć’s work. The painting has not survived to this day, its existence is, however, proved by reviews which clearly indicate its artistic value. Franciszek Siedlecki wrote in his review: “The greatest of them all was the painting, *The Road to Damascus*. A human body falls from a horse standing on its hind legs, hit by the beam of light from above. The centre of the painting was brightly lit, while the fleeing shadows could be seen on its borders. It was a visual representation of Grace with incredible strength and power as if the artist deeply listened to the words: »Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?«” (after: Stern, 1965, p. 41). [“Najwspanialszym z nich wszystkich był obraz *Droga do Damaszku*. Ze stającego dęba konia spada ciało ludzkie, rażone światłością z góry. Centrum obrazu było jasno oświetlone, na ramie zaś czerniały uciekające cienie. Było to przedstawienie plastyczne Łaski z siłą i potęgą niebywałą, jakiegoś zaśluchania w słowa: »Szawle, Szawle, czemu mnie prześladujesz?«”]. I recall this painting because it is a sign of Szczuka’s conversion – he gives up his religious motives, goes beyond his traditional and Christian upbringing, throws himself into a whirlwind of experimentation, absorbs the ideas of Soviet constructivism, and gets fascinated by the concepts of construction, editing and production of works of art.

of everyday objects, thus becoming the herald of simplicity and ascetic forms. The vision of taking art to the streets and abolishing its elitism guided all the avant-garde artists. Szczuka’s programme declaration quoted above proves that the transformation of the economic system was supposed to give workers the ability and time to have contact with art. The text ends with a prophetic conclusion (I preserved the original layout and font):

IN THE FUTURE  
WHEN THE BANE OF EXPLOITATION DIES  
WHEN EVERYONE WILL LIVE IN A WAY DICTATED  
BY THEIR OWN HAPPINESS  
THE FORMS OF ART  
WILL ALSO CHANGE  
IN A WAY THAT CANNOT BE FORESEEN. (Szczuka, 1923, p. 106)<sup>14</sup>

The vision of the inevitable upheaval and the dream of a different social and political system have accompanied Szczuka and the art he was creating since the 1920s. He decided to devote his work as an artist to speed up the emergence of this Great Transformation of his dreams. The sixth issue of *Blok* contains the answer (or rather answers) to the eponymous question – *Co to jest konstrukttywizm?* [*What is constructivism?*]. This text shows that constructivism is not thought of as an individual branch of art, but rather as a phenomenon, a cohesive whole. The author postulates that the material should be used in a reasonable manner to limit waste and at the same time make the resulting work of art dependent on the material from which it was made. He stresses that constructivists are not to imitate machines but to work according to their simplicity and logic. As expected, the declarations in *Blok* sparked debates both among the members of the collective, as well as among the entire avant-garde community. Thus, a statement was published in one of the issues:

*Blok* represents people who joined a group, united by the slogan of ruthless construction. Within the group, however, there are differences in directions, represented by individual contributors to the magazine. (Stern, 1965, p. 28)<sup>15</sup>

The uncompromising attitude of Szczuka discouraged those unconvinced, thus the intended eclectic nature of the magazine was rather short-lived, despite his

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<sup>14</sup> “W PRZYSZŁOŚCI / GDY ZGINIE ZMORA WYZYSKU / GDY KAŻDY BĘDZIE ŻYŁ W SPOSÓB PODYKTOWANY PRZEZ POCZUCIE WŁASNEGO SZCZĘŚCIA / ZMIENIĄ SIĘ / I / FORMY SZTUKI / W SPOSÓB KTÓREGO PRZEWIDZIEĆ NIE MOŻNA.”

<sup>15</sup> “*Blok* reprezentuje ludzi, związanych w bojową grupę hasłem bezwzględnej konstrukcji. W łonie grupy jednak zachodzą różnice kierunków, których przedstawicielami są poszczególni współpracownicy pisma.”

sincere intentions. It should be stressed, however, that Szczuka felt an attachment to the community of “Blok” – he even defended Henryk Berlewi when Antoni Słonimski mocked his *mechano-faktura* composition exhibition in *Wiadomości Literackie*, dubbing it “Mechano-nonsense” (Słonimski, 1924, seq.). In defence of his older colleague’s honour, he challenged Słonimski to a revolver duel, during which he was shot in the leg, which was an accident as both opponents did not know how to use their guns. In 1924, Szczuka started working with *Nowa Kultura*, published by the Communist Party of Poland, and edited by Jan Hempel, where he was responsible for graphic design. The magazine was not read exclusively by leftists – it was an apparent breath of fresh air as the magazine was read by young people, who were hungry for experimentation and followed avant-garde values (Sierocka, 1992, pp. 528–535). The modern and innovative nature of Szczuka’s new layout was met with astonishment and lack of understanding by the audience, who complained to the editor and asked him to go back to the previous version. Szczuka’s idealism was inspired by the optimism typical of the times in which he grew, but the goal was more difficult to achieve than it first appeared. Hempel responded to the critics of Szczuka’s typography in a concise manner, claiming that “a magazine for the proletariat needs not be ugly” [“czasopismo proletariackie niekoniecznie powinno być brzydkie”].

In 1925, a retrospective exhibition was held in Riga, while Szczuka joined forces with Żarnower to organise the Iconographic Museum in the Baryczków Townhouse in Warsaw. The following year, at the initiative of the author of *Droga do Damaszku*, the First International Exhibition of New Architecture was opened in Zachęta. It was a key event, and Szczuka was both one of the exhibited artists, as well as its organiser. The exhibition brought together representatives of modern architecture from all over Europe. Jan Minorski wrote that:

The *Blok* magazine needs to be commended for its fresh publications on new international architecture. [...]. *Architektura i Budownictwo*, an expert magazine, published similar publications only a couple of years later. (Minorski, 1965, p. 63)<sup>16</sup>

which proves the innovation of architectural presentations in *Blok* and the ambitions of its authors. In 1926, there was a split in *Blok*’s ranks and from that point on, the editorial office was run by Szczuka and Żarnower. The artist meanwhile developed his interest in photomanipulation and collage and created prints for Anatol Stern’s *Europa* – thanks to which the book became a staple work in the world of book art.

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<sup>16</sup> “*Blokowi* jako czasopismu należy się uznanie pierwszeństwa w publikowaniu nowej architektury zagranicznej. [...] Fachowe czasopismo *Architektura i Budownictwo* podobne publikacje zamieściło o parę lat później.”

It is intriguing that on the last page of the poem, the artist puts a drawing of one of the peaks of the Tatra Mountains – Zamarła Turnia. The piece is black, enclosed in an acute triangle and placed on the perimeter of a black circle. The painting itself would be surprising, since it differs in a variety of ways from the overarching theme of *Europa*, while being soothingly calm after the bright reds that illustrated the poem. However, what is even more surprising and astonishing is its mourning tone, especially since this very peak became the place of Szczuka’s death a short time before the poem was published.

At the turn of 1925 and 1926, Szczuka became involved in the amnesty campaign organized by the Communist Party of Poland. In connection with the campaign, he manipulated photographs, calling for the release of political prisoners held by the Sanation authorities, which exposed him to the actions of the censorship authorities, who confiscated most of his works. Together with Teresa Żarnower, they became the pioneers of political photography manipulation in Poland. He also created a photo manipulated cover for Władysław Broniewski’s volume *Dymy nad miastem* [*Smoke over the City*]. A year later, he was appointed by the party to run the newly created *Dźwignia* magazine, which – despite its literary character – became Szczuka’s place of free expression. The monthly magazine brought together Polish cultural left, and Szczuka was also responsible for its graphic design. The July issue featured *Sztuka a rzeczywistość* [*Art and Reality*] – and, in my opinion, it was the most mature and consolidated theoretical statement by the author of *Droga do Damaszku*. Szczuka repeats some of his previously expressed views, but at the same time, he makes a thorough analysis of the situation of an artist in the age of capitalism while criticising the art favoured by the bourgeoisie. He notes that there has been a significant gap between the artist and everyday life, as capitalism brings rapid technological progress, immense growth, and the mass production of artworks. Szczuka seems irritated by the exuberant ornateness of the objects that are produced – things, which are made weird and [“bent in an Art Nouveau fashion” (Szczuka, 1927, p. 12)] which are cheaper than simple, harmonious and modest objects. The artist believed that this was the result of the bourgeoisie being the target audience for art – the group that comes from the people, which has been given political and economic privileges and thus became the ruling class, which results – as Szczuka argues – in their “parvenu attitude to art and life” [“parwienuszcowski stosunek do sztuki i życia”] (Szczuka, 1927, p. 12) – their love of useless, ornamental objects or those that no longer have a utilitarian function, a firm separation of what is beautiful from what is useful. Dwellings of “industrial barons” (Szczuka, 1927, p. 12) are filled with trinkets, depending on the degree of their wealth. In this power structure, the art “for the people” (Szczuka, 1927, p. 12) is characterised by cheapness, kitsch, based mainly on idyllic, patriotic, religious,

and military motives. The artists did not manage to survive the confrontation with botches, while technological achievements, such as photography, robbed the artists of orders for landscapes, portraits, or genre scenes. They were left with the only option – escaping towards pure art, which very often resulted in a lack of buyers, and thus losing their livelihood. And thus, artists often choose the easiest way – working for people who do not deal with art, who do not devote their time to studying art or know it in the slightest, but instead, they have the capital, thanks to which the artist may survive. The taste of the ruling class is imposed on all areas of art, and the dominant desire to maximise profits pushes aesthetic issues to the brink. It is not surprising, therefore, that Szczuka's interest in architectural matters and his conviction that only a change in the situation of the proletariat, overthrowing the dominance of the bourgeoisie, while at the same time taking care to increase the cultural and class awareness of the workers could provide the heralds of New Art with a suitable audience. The agreement between the artists and the revolutionaries was driven by the common conviction that

Only a new social system will make it possible to take advantage of all the opportunities offered by technical progress, strangled or misused by today's rulers of the world, and to create new conditions for this human activity, which we refer to as art. (Szczuka, 1927, p. 18)<sup>17</sup>

This text shows the ambivalence towards technological development – it is undoubtedly an achievement of capitalism, generated by hard, unappreciated and underpaid work, but objectively speaking it is valuable as it enables art, among other things, to reach the broadest possible audiences, and this is what Szczuka cared about.

In 1923, the Warsaw artist began to practise mountaineering, and he stayed in Zakopane due to his tuberculosis diagnosed in 1919. He quickly learned climbing and he marked out many trails that were believed to be very demanding among climbers, some even on the verge of human capabilities. He wanted to end the elitism of mountaineering, to prove that one does not have to be associated with clubs to climb the summits. Szczuka died on 13 August 1927 during his 13<sup>th</sup> attempt to climb the southern face of Zamarła Turnia. He was twenty-nine years old.

*Translated into English: Lingua Lab.*

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<sup>17</sup> "Tylko nowy ustrój społeczny umożliwi wykorzystanie wszystkich możliwości postępu technicznego, zduszonych lub opacznie wyzyskiwanych przez dzisiejszych panów świata i umożliwi powstanie nowych warunków dla tej działalności człowieka, którą nazywamy sztuką."

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