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Long Before and Immediately After

1. The Map

To create a map, but also to look at one, is to assume a concrete point of view that determines the relationship between the viewer and the world's actual cardinal points. For a Spaniard, France is in the East, while for a German it is in the West. From the perspective of the "old" Europe, that is to say the realm influenced by the Roman Empire, the West ends at the river Elbe. From Poland's perspective it reaches all the way to the rivers Daugava, Dnieper, and Don—the borderlands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth—and it covers the sphere of influence of the Roman Catholic Church. Although the notion of Central Europe was proposed some time ago, it still appears only sporadically, and thus the dispute has never really been settled. What is important in the context of this essay is that there is no unambiguous term for the vast swathes of land stretching from the north to the south, from the estuary of the Daugava to the foothills of the Carpathians. In these lands, the border between East and West used to run through every town, perhaps every village, as Eastern Orthodox churches stood side by side with Catholic ones and synagogues, and sometimes Protestant churches, mosques, or Karaite kenessas. Those lands, which over the last one thousand years have been passed from hand to hand, are the cradle of a very specific culture whose influence continues to be underestimated—in Europe and beyond.

2. Borderlands

For several hundred years, Polish culture with its Latin influences held sway over greater or smaller parts of the region, until the Russian language and the Eastern Orthodox Church were imposed towards the end of the eighteenth century. In some areas, Polish and Russian competed with German forces (for example, in the peninsula of Sambia and in Courland) or Austrian forces (in eastern Galicia). But the entire area was inhabited by diverse peoples who retained their own cultural and religious identities. This was the case not only with the indigenous populations of Latvians, Lithuanians, Estonians, and Ruthenians, but also the Poles, Germans, Tatars, Dutch, Czechs,

Hungarians, Jews, Greeks, and even Scots who had become rooted in those areas. There were also Roma, Azeris, Moldovans, and Georgians. And others. They belonged to the Roman Catholic Church and to various branches of Protestantism, to the Greek Orthodox and the Greek Catholic traditions; they were Muslims and Turkish-speaking Orthodox Christians as well as members of the Karaite and Armenian Orthodox churches. It was in these lands that the Uniate Church was born, linking the Orthodox rite with the Catholic hierarchy. The spectacular phenomenon of Judaic Talmudism developed here, with its most important center in Vilnius; and finally, this was the birthplace of the anti-Talmudic Hasidism with its focus on mystical religious experience. The Frankist movement also developed here as a Messianic response to the German Haskalah (a Jewish revival in the spirit of assimilation). While in Berlin Moses Mendelssohn was translating the Torah into German, Jacob Frank travelled from Turkey through Bessarabia to Poland—the Promised Land, where he would preach his Messianism. This was the place where the world would be redeemed.

The Frankist movement culminated in the baptism of thousands of Polish Jews and their subsequent rise to the rank of petty nobility. It contributed to the development of Messianism in partitioned Poland; among its followers was the Romantic bard Adam Mickiewicz, born “the son of a foreign mother,” most likely a Frankist, and married to Celina Szymanowska, the daughter of the piano virtuoso Maria Szymanowska, also a Frankist. Mickiewicz identified as a Lithuanian, as we can see in the invocation of his epic poem *Pan Tadeusz*: “O Lithuania, my homeland!” He was born in Navahrudak in what is now Belarus. He wrote in Polish. *Pan Tadeusz* was composed in Paris, the drama *Forefathers’ Eve* in Dresden. And he did not speak Lithuanian.

The poet was not alone travelling through Western Europe; Western culture was an intrinsic element of the education of the entire East-Central European intelligentsia. But the inhabitants of that “borderland” had the opportunity to absorb a broader range of values, spanning not only Rome, Venice, Zurich, Vienna, Berlin, and Paris but also Warsaw, Vilnius, Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Minsk, Kiev, Lvov, and Odessa. Educated at local universities, they set out on long journeys through Europe and the Near East, though the place they called home was usually a country estate or a small town where several languages were used side by side: Polish, Russian, French, and German were spoken in the salons, but on a day-to-day basis people also communicated in

Yiddish as well as various forms of the Ruthenian language. Typical impressions of local everyday life included the *shtetlech* unique to the region, the Hasidic Jews in their distinctive dress, or the dancing Hutsuls. These linguistic and conceptual experiences formed a different spirituality and gave rise to a different axiology—one that tied the inhabitants of those lands together with invisible threads.

Present-day scholarship does not address the interweaving of those threads. Specialists on Emmanuel Levinas rarely refer to the Talmudic schools of Vilnius: researchers on American art do not ask why Barnett Newman and Mark Rothko created ensembles of contemplative abstract canvases marked by ecumenical Judeo-Christian mysticism. Newman's family came from Łomża; Rothko was born in Daugavpils. Even those critics whose own families hail from the region—such as Mayer Schapiro or Clement Greenberg—have overlooked the links between the artists' works and the cultural traditions of their ancestors. Similarly, experts on Andy Warhol do not relate his idea of multiples to the Ruthenian tradition of multiplying printed icons. Painstaking research is needed in order to understand, for instance, why Józef Konrad Korzeniowski—the future Joseph Conrad—who was born in Berdychiv as the son of Polish exiles to Siberia, looked for his “heart of darkness” in Africa; what really connected the thoroughly European composer Karol Szymanowski with the Russian ballets of Sergei Diaghilev, or what inspired Paul Celan, born in the historical region of Bessarabia, to write in German. It is intriguing that the small town of Drohobych produced three well-known painters (Artur Grottger, Maurycy Gottlieb, and Leopold Gottlieb), as well as the outstanding Polish poet Kazimierz Wierzyński and two very different prose writers, namely the Polish Bruno Schulz and the Ukrainian Ivan Franko. It is equally curious that Isaak Bashevis Singer's expressive, literary descriptions of the Polish-Russian-Jewish world and Marc Chagall's comparable paintings met with almost immediate success, while Schulz's refined and hermetic prose and obsessive drawings only became globally recognizable a near half-century after his death in 1942. It is worth noting that neither Singer nor Chagall knew Polish, the language of Schulz's prose, and that both emigrated fairly early on—Chagall to France, Singer to the United States—while Schulz remained in Drohobych under German occupation and painted fairy-tale scenes in the residence of a certain Gestapo officer until he was shot by one of his self-appointed protector's Nazi colleagues.

Many Polish writers and painters had their international success undermined by their close association with Polishness. Joseph Conrad wrote in English and gained recognition during his lifetime. This was not the case with the poet, playwright, and painter Stanisław Wyspiański, the second visionary of Poland's fate after Mickiewicz. Outside of Poland, only a few enthusiasts and Slavic scholars are familiar with the avant-garde writer and artist Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz (known as Witkacy); translations of Witold Gombrowicz's works only reached a broader readership after his death, even though he had spent the last years of his life in Germany and France. Ryszard Stanisławski, long-time director of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, had been promoting interwar Polish art on the European scene since 1957. And yet international audiences only began to show an interest in Katarzyna Kobro, Władysław Strzemiński, and the entire Polish avant-garde in the wake of two major exhibitions—*Présences polonaises* at the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris (1983) and *Europa, Europa* at the Bundeskunsthalle in Bonn (1994). Postwar art from Poland is similarly slow to gain international recognition. Isolated behind the iron curtain, cut off from the market and the global art scene, it acquired the negative connotations of Poland's political system at the time, and was therefore of no interest to art historians. Among the few artists who managed to break through this barrier was Roman Opałka, who was able to settle in his country of birth, France. Magdalena Abakanowicz appeared on the international scene thanks to the Marlborough Gallery. For a long time even Tadeusz Kantor was known only as a man of the theater. Many decades of concentrated efforts and careful reinterpretation were needed to rescue the outstanding Alina Szapocznikow (1926–1973) from oblivion. International recognition for the paintings of Andrzej Wróblewski (1927–1957) was delayed even longer—he is only now beginning to be known in Europe. Among the artists who are still waiting to be plucked from obscurity is Stanisław Fijałkowski, whose singular quest has led him to create a substantial and unique synthesis of European abstract painting. But to understand the essence of this synthesis we must return to the very origins of abstraction.

3. Never-Ending Romanticism

The difference between Mickiewicz's Romanticism and that of Goethe, Mickiewicz's senior by almost forty years, does not boil down to the simple fact that Mickiewicz argued with God while Goethe argued with Mephistopheles.

A key difference is that the Polish Lithuanian strove for salvation for his homeland, while Goethe sought redemption for the world. This is why Mickiewicz describes the colors of Lithuania's fields, while Goethe produces his *Farbenlehre*—an analysis of colors represented by an abstract disc of colors, which was later recognized as an illustration of color psychology. And yet both poets were looking for primeval values guiding the magical behaviors common to all humanity. Goethe's endeavors in the natural sciences took him to the verge of anthroposophy, which Rudolf Steiner would later take up and develop. The Polish anthropologist Leszek Kolankiewicz relates the scene where the spirits are awakened in Mickiewicz's *Forefathers' Eve* to ancient Greek as well as African rituals, pointing out their similarities to ongoing practices of *voodoo* and *candomblé*.¹ Mickiewicz was acquainted with the writings of Jakob Böhme, who connected Protestant mystical theology with the Kabbalistic tradition rooted in the book of the Zohar—a foundational text for the earliest Frankists. No doubt Mickiewicz read Böhme differently than Novalis. And yet it is certain that Böhme influenced early Romanticism and helped shape Christian theosophy. After Goethe, the theory of colors was taken up by the young Arthur Schopenhauer, who would later also study Böhme alongside Hindu and Buddhist philosophies. The fascination with the East (*ex oriente lux*) common to many Romantics was still rather superficial at the time. It was the next generation that began to draw conclusions from Schopenhauer's theory of will, which synthesizes Eastern and Western philosophies. His influence is evident in the works of Nietzsche, Wagner, and an entire pleiad of writers, beginning with Tolstoy.

It is noteworthy that the intense east-west exchange that marked Russian philosophy, literature, art, and even politics at the turn of the twentieth century took place above and beyond Poland and the entire swathe of borderlands linking those two cultures. In Russian salons people discussed Nietzsche but not Mickiewicz or Chopin. At the same time, the latter was being promoted by the Berlin-based Stanisław Przybyszewski, another Nietzschean, a friend of Strindberg, creator of the "theory of the naked soul," and the earliest champion of Edvard Munch. And yet there must have been something attractive about that mysterious East, since Przybyszewski's wife, Dagny Juel, the muse of Norwegian bohemians, travelled all the way to Tbilisi only to be shot by her

¹ Leszek Kolankiewicz, *Samba z bogami: Opowieść antropologiczna* [The Samba with the Gods: An Anthropological Story] (Warsaw: Wydawnictwo KR, 1995).

jealous lover, another Pole. But we should add one important consideration. While Far Eastern influences are comparable across both parts of Europe, other factors determining the development of modern art vary between Western Europe and Russia. Western symbolism and abstract art are rooted in Nietzsche and in philosophical trends such as anthroposophy and theosophy, which are in turn related to Catholic and Protestant mysticism and perhaps also to elements of Judaism. In Russia, these modernist movements developed with reference to the same trends but on a different ground, namely in the context of the Orthodox tradition, which was originally saturated with mysticism and pre-Christian rituals. Russian philosophers and writers worked from a comparable perspective, as we can see in Vladimir Solovyov, a supporter of Christian ecumenism; Andrei Bely, a disciple of Rudolf Steiner; or the influential Nikolai Berdyaev, the foremost Russian scholar of Jakob Böhme.

4. The Mysticism of Abstraction

While in Berlin Przybyszewski was praising Munch's work, permeated as it was with emotional color, the Czech painter, theosophist, and occultist František Kupka investigated the relationship between painting and music—first in Vienna, then in Paris, where he collaborated with the Orphists. A similar quest took the young Lithuanian painter and composer Mikalojus Čiurlionis (1875–1911) from Poland, where he had trained, to Saint Petersburg. There he met with members of the group *Mir iskusstva* (World of Art). The movement included Diaghilev as well as the composer Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915), one of the few supporters of Chopin's music. For Scriabin, the creative act was a confession of faith linking music and dance, an interplay of colorful lights and smells. His exploration of the visuality of sound culminated in *Prometheus: The Poem of Fire* (1909–10). It was to be performed by an orchestra, choir, and *clavier à lumières*, whose keys would be used to produce colors.² For this purpose he developed the “color harmony of sounds,” where the musical circle of fifths finds its equivalent in Goethe's palette of colors.

Čiurlionis, who must have been familiar with the writings of Oscar Miłosz and the theories of Emanuel Swedenborg, referred to Lithuanian fairy tales and

² The world premiere of this work took place in New York in 1915, after the composer's death. In Russia it was first staged in 1962.

legends.³ Diaghilev and his circle drew on the source of pre-Christian Russian folklore, which was musically interpreted by Igor Stravinsky. His roots were in the Polish nobility, and his flagship ballet *The Rite of Spring* was choreographed by the Polish dancer Vaslav Nijinsky. The road to success took Diaghilev, Stravinsky, and Nijinsky through Paris, where audiences admired the performances' radicalism and "Russian spirit." From 1909 Diaghilev celebrated many triumphs in Paris, but he showed no interest in Scriabin or in the works of Čiurlionis, who had died prematurely. A musicological monograph on Čiurlionis was only published in Leningrad in 1975. Its author, the musicologist and pianist Vytautas Landsbergis, a friend of George Maciunas, had been a member of Fluxus before he became the head of the independent state of Lithuania in 1990.

It so happens that Munch's emotional palette corresponded to a large degree to Goethe's emotional color wheel, which was also the basis for Witkacy's psychological theory of color; Scriabin's circle of fifths, meanwhile, is closer to the German poet's analytical circle of colors. John Gage points out that the first person to attempt a harmonization of colors inspired by Goethe was the now forgotten Adolf Hölzel.⁴ In 1917 this German painter began to create abstract paintings consisting of blots of color that he referred to as colorful sounds. Soft musicality and dance-like rotational movement also characterize the earliest abstract compositions of Wassily Kandinsky, who had studied music in Odessa and had an interest in Russian folk culture. This "Herderian" turn to folklore is also present in the early, pre-abstract compositions of Kazimir Malevich, a Pole working in Russia. In Kandinsky's work, this turn is visible in his manner of composing colors; in Malevich it is also expressed through rhythm and themes. In Munich, Kandinsky, who must have been familiar with Scriabin's theories, brought to the movement *Blaue Reiter* his Russian spirituality, marked by the philosophies outlined above. But he had also absorbed Goethe's *Farbenlehre*, which was then being rediscovered. The Calvinist Piet Mondrian approached the theory of colors differently: coming from the same intellectual foundation (especially theosophy), he developed his restrictive Neo-Plasticism. According to Gage, Mondrian believed that the essence of being manifests itself in

³ Oscar Miłosz is the uncle of Czesław Miłosz. He is described in the latter's book *The Land of Ulro*, where a large part is also devoted to Swedenborg. This Swedish philosopher influenced many turn-of-the-century writers and thinkers, including Carl Jung.

⁴ John Gage, *Colour and Culture: Practice and Meaning from Antiquity to Abstraction* (London: Thames&Hudson, 1993).

paintings through the colors white, black, red, yellow, and blue, as well as the directions horizontal and vertical; Kandinsky, meanwhile, thought about the relationship between colors, geometric figures, and stereometric blocks, linking the color yellow with the triangle and the regular tetrahedron, the color red with the square and the cube, and the color blue with the circle and the sphere—he did not examine the relationship between color and being. And yet it seems that Gage bases his argument on Kandinsky’s treatise *Point and Line to Plane* and not on his earlier theoretical texts or an analysis of his works.

The symbolism of color is also visible in Malevich’s work. His decision to break with his contemporaries’ understanding of art is not rooted in a sublimation of the image of the visible world (as it is with Kandinsky and Mondrian). Rather, it is based on a radical decision, inspired by his participation in the “zaum” performance *Victory over the Sun*,⁵ where the performance’s content and message were perhaps more important to him than its “futuristic” form. *Black Square*, which inaugurated Suprematism, refers not only to lines and forms that cannot be found in nature; it also references the basic Pythagorean oppositions of black and white, good and evil, the world of light and darkness—oppositions to which the painter added another dichotomy: consciousness and subconsciousness, which he discusses in the introduction to his main theoretical and philosophical work in 1922.⁶ The black square, but also the black circle and the black cross, were supposed to synthesize the world of impressions and sensations that have nothing to do with the image of perceived reality; they were supposed to project “the spirit of non-objective sensation.”⁷

Setting up his exhibitions, Malevich would place his “square” high up in the corner, slightly inclined just like an icon in an Orthodox home. This could be read as an iconoclastic proposition to replace the divine image with an experience of the sacred beyond religion. Embroiled in Bolshevik ideology after the October Revolution, the artist never gave a straightforward explanation. Nor did he ever mention his theosophical episode, which seems to have ended when the Soviets came to power.

5 *Victory over the Sun* (1913): prologue by Velimir Khlebnikov, libretto by Aleksei Kruchenykh, music by Mikhail Matyushin.

6 The original title of Malevich’s book is *Супрематизм: Мир как беспредметность или вечный покой*; A. von Riesen’s German translation, *Die gegenstandslose Welt*, was published in 1927.

7 Kasimir Malevich, *The Non-Objective World: The Manifesto of Suprematism*, translated from the German by Howard Dearstyne (Mineola, New York: Dover Publications, 2003), p. 68.

5. Added Value

Today the small Volhynian city of Zdolbuniv lies in western Ukraine. This region, inhabited mostly by an Orthodox population with Ruthenian roots, had seen over four hundred years of Polish influence; following Poland's third partition (1795) it underwent a process of Russification that could not be prevented by the fact that the land and private property remained in Polish hands; for some time, for instance, Zdolbuniv continued to belong to the aristocratic Lubomirski family. Stanisław Fijałkowski was born there in 1922, just over a year after the signing of the Peace of Riga that ceded Volhynia to the reborn Poland.

According to the literary scholar Maria Janion, Poland used to share the Slavs' pre-Christian culture, but it was cut off from its roots by its Christianization in the Latin church, which led to a different development of the previously common language, causing Poland to become orphaned and marginalized in its uncertain identity.⁸ Thus the notion of the "borderland" can also refer to the syncretic culture that arose from the interplay of many different factors converging on new ground and forming new and distinct contexts that eventually produced something like a cultural "added value." However we look at it, Polish culture, whose development for over 120 years had been overshadowed by three partitions, mostly focused on regaining independence. It was with this goal in mind that Poles drew on the achievements of European civilization. A more universal harnessing of this potential did not come about until later.

Even before the end of World War I, artistic positions in Poland saw a forceful radicalization. The Modernist discourse was oriented towards Germany (Expressionism), Italy (Futurism), and France (Cubism), as well as towards revolutionary Russia, which promised artists broad social relevance as well as the possibility to engage in experiments with art's revolutionary mission. This mission did not convince Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, Lieutenant of the Imperial Leib Guard, who soon escaped the hotbed of the revolution and returned to Poland. Army engineer Władysław Strzemiński, meanwhile, seemed to have more faith. Born in Minsk, he fought on the eastern front, where, in 1916, he lost an arm and a leg and sustained damage to one eye. Along with

⁸ Maria Janion, *Niesamowita słowiańszczyzna: fantazmaty literatury* [Uncanny Slavdom: Phantasms of Literature] (Cracow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 2006).

his future wife, sculptor Katarzyna Kobro (1898–1951)—a Latvian with German and Russian roots—Strzemiński got in touch with the leading members of the Russian avant-garde and became an active member in the artistic scene that included Alexander Rodchenko, Vladimir Tatlin, Antoine Pevsner, Marc Chagall, El Lissitzky, and above all Malevich. And yet in 1922 he decided to move to his reborn fatherland. At first, the Strzemińskis lived in Vilnius, where, in 1923, they worked with Vytautas Kairiūkštis—a student of Čiurlionis—to organize the *First Modern Art Exhibition*.

On the Polish scene Kobro and Strzemiński soon turned out to be the most radical members of the Constructivist movement as well as staunch believers in modernity in the absolute sense, encompassing all domains of art and design, including typography. Thus these artists created something like a Polish variant of Bauhaus—only outside of academic institutions. Like with Bauhaus, moreover, the successive artistic groupings that they helped establish maintained contact with the entire European world of art—from Hans Arp, Georges Braque, and Picasso to Georges Vantongerloo and De Stijl. Thanks to this, and thanks to the support of poet Jan Brzękowski, they managed to assemble the “a.r. collection” in Łódź. Inaugurated in 1930, this was the first collection of modern art to be open to the public. Before the next war broke out, Strzemiński managed to publish a series of manifestos as well as his own theory, *Unism in Painting*,⁹ in which he attenuates the Suprematists’ dynamic approach to the psychological aspect of art. In March 1927, Malevich followed Strzemiński’s invitation to Warsaw, where he exhibited his works. Next he travelled to Berlin, with the intention of ending his journey in Paris, but the authorities in the Soviet Union urgently recalled him to Saint Petersburg. Malevich left all of his works behind, along with his notes and artistic testament “in case of death or imprisonment.” He would never travel abroad again. His works survived World War II. They can now be viewed at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam as well as the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

6. Synthesis

Timothy Snyder describes the area of land between prewar Poland’s western borders and the line connecting Leningrad, Smolensk, and Kursk in the east,

9 Published in 1928 by Biblioteka “Praesens” in Warsaw.

between Tallinn to the north and Crimea to the south, as “bloodlands.” Under Stalin and Hitler, fourteen million unarmed people—mostly women, children, elderly people, as well as prisoners of war—were killed in this region in the years 1933–45.¹⁰ During the negotiations of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939, Stalin demanded Volhynia (as well as Belarus, western Ukraine all the way to the Bug and Narew rivers, and the area around Białystok in northern Poland). Over the course of the following year he would seize Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia, which he would control up to the outbreak of the Soviet-German war in June 1941.

Until 1948, mass displacements of ethnic groups (Jews, Roma, Poles, Germans, Ruthenians) took place across the “bloodlands” in addition to voluntary migration in the hope of saving one’s life or of improving one’s lot. In 1944, after his family moved to Hajnówka on the edge of the Białowieża Forest, the young Stanisław Fijałkowski is conscripted into forced labor in Königsberg. He finishes school in the now liberated Białystok in the spring of 1945, after which he and his family immediately find themselves in the bombed-out city of Gdańsk, where he begins to study art. After a few months, however, he moves to Łódź. Here, his academic teacher is Władysław Strzemiński. At this time the art scene, deeply damaged by the war and occupation, works hard to survey the losses and to consider what chance the language of art stands in the face of the revaluations brought about by their recent experiences. The old avant-garde is disheartened and dispersed. Within its new post-Yalta borders, the previously multi-ethnic nation of Poland has become ethnically homogenized, and after January 1948 Stalinist. Strzemiński, unable to fit into this tight corset, loses his position in 1950 and dies in 1952, a year after Katarzyna Kobro, who passed away lonely and impoverished.

By the time the communist regime dismantles the Polish art scene, Strzemiński has already written his book *Teoria widzenia* (Theory of Vision),¹¹ where he introduces his notion of the *afterimage*.¹² In 1948 he set up a project called *Neoplastic Room* for the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, which continues to house the “a.r.” group’s prewar collection, though decimated by the Nazis. Strzemiński, damaged by the war and embittered by the experience of Russian and German

10 Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

11 Not published until 1958 with the Cracow-based Wydawnictwo Literackie.

12 The afterimage is an internal image that arises on the retina a moment after we look at a source of light or an object that reflects light.

occupation, renounces his support for Russian Constructivism and revolutionary art; he distances himself, consciously and even demonstratively, from the values associated with it and instead references Mondrian's solution—to embody ontology in painting.¹³ In other words, he puts the restrained, almost mathematical and static way of describing the world above the Suprematists' cosmic, universalist vision. It is unclear how much of this significant gesture was readable to his colleagues and students at the time; many of them were simply trying to survive Poland's imposed cultural policy in the years 1948–56.

The war delays Fijałkowski's education by six years. But because of this he is able to follow Strzemiński's views more consciously, which in turn safeguards him from the mandatory Socialist Realist style. He sets out to search through the postwar ruins of modernist models of art, and begins to work out a fresh synthesis—one that takes into account a new *spectrum* of values. After graduation he turns to teaching and perfecting his graphic and painting skills. He also takes to reading, becoming one of the world's most erudite contemporary artists. He delves into philosophy, medieval treatises on art, the theory and symbolism of colors, theological writings, Far Eastern religions, and psychoanalysis. Many of these find their way into his work: he references old methods of painting, experiments with the symbolism and harmony of colors; he tests out theories of color one by one; he introduces into his paintings Masonic symbols and the golden ratio as well as Cabbalistic numbers and signs. In 1959 he translates Kandinsky's *Punkt und Linie zu Fläche* (Point and Line to Plane) (1926), then he tackles the earlier text *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (Concerning the Spiritual in Art) (1912), and finally he renders the German version of Malevich's *Die gegenstandslose Welt* (The Non-Objective World) into Polish. In 1960 he studies Jung, but does not follow the example of Jackson Pollock, whose dripping technique was rooted in his encounters with Jungian psychology. In the years 1950–62, Fijałkowski's closest neighbor and friend is Jerzy Nowosielski, a painter and Greek Catholic theologian of Ruthenian extraction. He introduces Fijałkowski to the icon as an incorporation of the sacred in an image—a concept that the Catholic Fijałkowski was not fully aware of and that still remains largely unreadable in the Western world today.

Fijałkowski sees his ideas confirmed by his stay in Paris in 1957, where he meets with Strzemiński's friend Jan Brzękowski, and around 1960 he begins

13 Strzemiński's experiences are documented in his series of drawings from the years 1939–45.

to come into his own as a painter. His works are now devoid of traditional semantics, although he is reluctant to call them abstract. His lines, spheres, forms, and geometric solids are not particularly regular; painted freely, they bring to mind Bergson's notion of *élan vital*, or perhaps Jungian cosmic energy; in any case they do not represent the previous generation's characteristic ideas on art's complete autonomy in relation to the external world. Fijałkowski—an admirer of Husserl and of his student Roman Ingarden—seems to depart from visible or imagined reality towards a depiction of the process of phenomenological eidetic reduction. But he does not stop at this. He introduces numbers and suggests landscapes through the horizontal partitioning of the plane of his paintings (top–bottom; sky–earth) as well as through the use of colors. He mixes orders and introduces chaos into the existing classification system that would have made it possible to apply a familiar category to his art. Years later he sums up his experiences: “I believe that things that touch us deeply cannot be said in any other way than through an open form that is underdetermined and must be constructed through the process of reception.”¹⁴

One of the unchanging principles of his paintings seems to be the introduction of a frame. Malevich's *Black Square* brings to mind an Orthodox icon not only in the way the artist had it mounted, but also through the white border surrounding a black center. The classic icon “written” onto a wooden board usually consists of two planes: the outer, raised one, which is reserved for an ornamental border or a series of smaller images depicting a New Testament story, and the inner, depressed plane (called the *covcheg* or ark), which contains the holy image. These two planes illustrate the division of the world into the mundane sphere (*profanum*) and the heavenly sphere (*sacrum*). In Fijałkowski's works the border is shrunk to a thin stripe around the edges of the painting; sometimes it is marked only by a thin, uncertain line. Thus the image is cut out from the painting as object and becomes a window that offers us a glimpse into another world. As the artist explains in an interview: “Art is also a kind of metaphysical practice, a particular form of philosophizing. In today's world, which has lost its religious sensibility, its sensitivity to the spiritual world or its ‘feeling for metaphysics’ as Witkacy called it, art offers some

14 Zbigniew Taranienko, *Alchemia obrazu: Rozmowy ze Stanisławem Fijałkowskim* [Alchemy of an Image: Conversations with Stanisław Fijałkowski] (Warsaw: Instytut Wydawniczy ‘Książka i Wiedza’, 2012), p. 97.

of the experiences that religion used to provide. I cultivate, in a different form, the same thing as Jerzy Nowosielski, the only artist close to me, namely a secular equivalent of theology.”¹⁵

At the time of this interview, given in 1977, Fijałkowski had already made significant progress with his series *Talmudic Studies*, which suggests parallels with the late works of Levinas. This series appears after the expulsion of Poland’s last remaining Jews during the anti-Semitic campaign of March 1968 and brings to mind an earlier series, namely *Highways*, where a broad diagonal stripe cuts through the composition from the bottom of the left edge up to the right, ending either at the right edge or at the horizon, beyond which lies an imagined sky. The stripe follows a casual, almost natural gesture of the right hand, arrested at the border with infinity. His “reading” of the Talmud, meanwhile, involves covering the entire surface of the image with thin lines. Sometimes that image itself is divided into two fields positioned at an angle towards one another, forming a diagonal border (as in *Highways*), which creates a sort of fold, a cosmic warp that conceals a kernel of truth.

In his visual treatise, written out in hundreds of variants, the artist still finds space for expressions of feeling. The series *Paintings for Waleria*, his wife, consists of very painterly, almost abstract and monochromatic works. Against the backdrop of infinite space interpolations sometimes appear as if “on the surface,” in a different, more “tangible” reality of the painting. They disturb its purity, like fine dust that veils the clarity of vision. According to Georges Bataille, “there is a blind spot in understanding: which recalls the structure of the eye. In understanding, as in the eye, one can only reveal it with difficulty. But whereas the blind spot in the eye is without consequence, the nature of understanding demands that the blind spot within it have more meaning than understanding itself.”¹⁶ Perhaps the French philosopher’s argument was not unknown to the painter—it was published as early as 1943. But it is more likely that Fijałkowski arrived at these conclusions through a con-

15 “Wojciech Skrodzki rozmawia ze Stanisławem Fijałkowskim” [Wojciech Skrodzki in Conversation with Stanisław Fijałkowski], *Projekt*, no. 5 (1977), p. 34

16 Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, translated and with an introduction by Stuart Kendall (New York: SUNY Press, 2014), p. 112.

tinuous pursuit of his own intuition about “being through painterly activity.”¹⁷ For as the art historian Andrzej Turowski remarks, the content of Fijałkowski’s works is above all the process of their creation.¹⁸

Stanisław Fijałkowski has been developing his ideas for sixty years. His work belongs to the canon of Polish postwar art, continues to be the subject of in-depth studies, and Polish scholars have also engaged the painter in various discussions on philosophy and art theory. But they have failed to address both the zeitgeist and the *genius loci* whose interlacement, in this particular case, has led to the creation of a painterly synthesis that reflects many centuries of Europe’s aesthetic experience.

Translated from the Polish by Tul’si Bhambry (authorized translation)

17 Taranienko 2012 (see note 14), p. 78.

18 Andrzej Turowski, “Magiczny kwadrat Stanisława Fijałkowskiego” [Stanisław Fijałkowski’s Magical Square], in *Stanisław Fijałkowski: Works on Paper 2* (Poznań, 2010), pp. 84–85.