

MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY

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Exhibition: *Grounding Vision: Wacław Szpakowski*

With works by Guy de Cointet, Hanne Darboven, Trisha Donnelly, Sam Lewitt, Hilary Lloyd, Florian Pumhösl, and R. H. Quaytman

Curated by Masha Chlenova and Anya Komar

Dates: January 13 – February 19, 2017

Reception: Wednesday, January 18, 6 – 8PM

Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973) was a Polish architect and engineer who created a distinct idiom of abstract drawing, first conceived in notebook sketches in the 1900s and developed systematically in a series of works made with an ink pen on tracing paper between the early 1920s and 1940s. Szpakowski worked in complete isolation, indifferent to the art of his time; yet his project is fundamentally modernist in its aspiration to find the simplest possible means for expressing the underlying order of the universe, one that approaches a scientific investigation in its formal rigor and systematic nature. Calling his works “drawings of linear ideas,” Szpakowski created symmetrical patterns of a continuous geometric line, invariably 1 mm thick and 4 mm apart, always starting on the left side of the page and ending on the right. For Szpakowski, the line’s relentless trajectory across the surface of each sheet is merely a fragment of its endless rhythmical movement through space and time. He invited viewers to “decipher” what he called “the inner content” of his drawings by following the course of the “broken line” across the surface of the page, “just like one composes the words of a text out of individual letters.”¹ Szpakowski believed that the utter simplicity of his creative means and the viewer’s ability to decipher the meaning of his drawings by retracing the process of their making, constituted two essential characteristics that set his works apart from decorative patterns. Szpakowski called for a mode of sustained looking, through which the viewer’s perceptual apparatus would become tuned into the “cyclical rhythms of phenomena.”

Seen today, Szpakowski’s work anticipates seriality, accelerated temporalities and the increasing density of visual memory. Resembling circuitries or digitally generated diagrams, the motifs of Szpakowski’s drawings evoke the new technologies of image production that affect perception, heightening the crisis of attention. Exploring the dichotomy of a focused and distracted, decentered gaze, Szpakowski’s project can be understood as a critique of the changing modalities of vision.

This exhibition is the first extensive presentation of Szpakowski’s work in the United States. It brings together twenty-six drawings, made between 1923 and 1943, and his early sketchbooks, alongside works by Guy de Cointet, Hanne Darboven, Trisha Donnelly, Sam Lewitt, Hilary Lloyd, Florian Pumhösl, and R. H. Quaytman, all of which resonate in important ways with Szpakowski’s project.

The exhibition was made possible thanks to the generous loans of the Szpakowski family, the Museum Sztuki in Łódź, Hanne Darboven Stiftung, and Mr. Lozowski, and the administrative support of the Art and Culture Center in Wrocław.



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¹ Wacław Szpakowski, “Rhythmical Lines” [1968] in *Wacław Szpakowski: the Infinity of the Line* (Warsaw: Muzeum Narodowe, 1992), 181, 183.