

## MIGUEL ABREU GALLERY

### WACŁAW SZPAKOWSKI

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, it always starts on the left side of the page and ends 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.”

For Szpakowski, 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.

*Wacław Szpakowski was born in Warsaw in 1883 and lived in Wrocław from 1945 until his death in 1973. Although he never exhibited work during his lifetime, he has since been recognized as a forerunner of geometric abstraction in art. The first exhibition of his works took place in the Museum Sztuki in Łódź in 1978, followed by individual presentations at the National Museum in Warsaw, the City Museum of Wrocław, Leon Wyczółkowski District Museum in Bydgoszcz, Wilhelm Hack Museum (Ludwigshafen, Germany), Galeria Atelier (Brussels), Galerie Berinson (Berlin), The Baltic Gallery of Art (Ustka), Galeria Awangarda BWA (Wrocław), and Galeria Willa (Łódź), among other locations. Additionally, his work has been presented in group exhibitions including Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925 at the Museum of Modern Art (New York), & at Museum Sztuki (Łódź), Ornament – Seriality, Vasarely Múzeum (Budapest), The Intelligible Non-Violent Art, The Israel Museum (Jerusalem) and Kunststation (Hofbieber-Kleinsassen, Germany), Europe – Concrete – Reductiv, Museum of Architecture in (Wrocław), Vonal, Ernst Múzeum (Budapest), Museum of Art In Łódź 1931–1992, Musée d’art contemporain (Lyon), Présences Polonaises, l’art vivant autour du Musée de Lodz, Centre George Pompidou (Paris), and Polish Photography 1839–1979, International Center of Photography (New York), among others. His work is held in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art (New York) and Museum Sztuki (Łódź, Poland). Wacław Szpakowski 1883 - 1973: Rhythmical Lines, a monograph dedicated to his work, was published in 2016 by Osrodek Kultury i Sztuki we Wrocławiu in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title.*

## Wacław Szpakowski (1883-1973)

### Biography

#### 1883

Wacław Karol Szpakowski was born on the 9th of October in Warsaw, son of Sylwester Szpakowski, a topographer in the Russian army, and grandson of architect Karol Szpakowski. His mother Antonina gave birth to five children whom she educated at home until they entered secondary school.

#### 1897

The family moves to Riga. Szpakowski is interested in atmospheric phenomena, studying hurricanes, cyclones and storms and recoding his observations in a notebook.

#### 1900

Szpakowski takes his first photographs and begins to draw rhythmical lines. He is also interested in music and takes violin lessons.

#### 1902

He enrolls in the Department of Architecture of the Technical University in Riga.

#### 1902-1911

Szpakowski travels widely in Russia, in its northern parts, as well as in Siberia where he goes to visit his father in Irkutsk. He is interested in wooden architecture, collects ornamented belts (kontush sashes) and continues to investigate the form of rhythmical lines.

#### 1912-1914

He moves to Warsaw and works in an architectural office. Collected his first group of drawings, made in 1913-14, into a portfolio comprising 17 loose sheets.

#### 1914

Evacuated with his office to Moscow and from there went to Arkhangelsk where he designed and built wooden docks. Started collecting kontush sashes (traditional woven belts)

#### 1918

Marries Aleksandra Siemiczajewska (1899-1981), granddaughter of a Polish irredentist deported to Siberia for participating in an uprising of 1863. They will have three daughters and a son between 1921 and 1931.

#### 1923-1933

Szpakowski works for the Ministry of Posts and Telecommunications in Warsaw, then in Bydgoszcz. Creates ca. 70 drawings, of various sizes, from ca. 10x20 cm to ca. 70 x 120 cm., made on tracing paper using an ink pen.

**1934**

Forced into retirement, settles in Zoliborz, works on occasional architectural commissions.

**1935**

Becomes the architect of the town of Otwock. Develops the city's master plan, a school and an obelisk.

**1939-43**

Made drawings of spirals, a total of 49 sheets, calling them the S series.

**1941-1944**

Employed in the District Department of Architecture as a building inspector. Together with his son Wojtech joins the underground Home Army, fighting for Polish independence.

In 1943 occupation authorities make him transfer to Lvov. When he returns to Otwock in 1944 he is arrested by communist Security and kept several months in prison.

**1944-1948**

Szpakowski moves with his family to Wrocław (former German city of Breslau) in order to protect his son from persecution. He manages to rescue his sketches and copies of drawings of rhythmical lines.

**1952**

Heads Wrocław's building inspectorate and then the Building Department of the District headquarters of Post Offices and Telecommunications; then works at the Research and Design center of Road and Air Transport and then a designer. Introduces his linear patterns in the design of interiors: ceiling, monumental plafond and mural in a kindergarden.

**1953-4**

Made the album "Rhythmical Lines" where he included all his earlier "linear ideas" in the form of pencil drawings on gridded paper.

**1958**

Retires at the age of seventy-five, on June 30th.

Writes his programmatic text "Rhythmical Lines," published in the monthly magazine Odra in 1969.

**1973**

Wrocław Szpakowski dies at the age of ninety on the 7th February in Wrocław.

## **SOLO EXHIBITIONS**

Szpakowski never sought to exhibit his works and they were not publicly known during his lifetime.

**2018**

Platán Galéria and Hybridart Space, Budapest. *Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973). Ritmikus Vonalak / Rhythmical Lines*

**2017**

Muzeum Okręgowego im. Leona Wyczółkowskiego w Bydgoszczy (Leon Wyczółkowski District Museum in Bydgoszcz). *Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973). Linie rytmiczne (Rhythmical Lines)*

**2016**

Muzeum Miejskie Wrocławia – Pałac Królewski (City Museum of Wrocław). *Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973). Linie rytmiczne (Rhythmical Lines)*

**2015**

Galerie Berinson, Berlin. *Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973)*. The exhibition featured twelve drawings by Szpakowski from the collections of Hendrik A. Berinson and the artist's family.

*Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973). The Infinity of the Line* was a series of monographic exhibitions curated by Janusz Zagrodzki between 1992 and 1998 were accompanied by a catalogue with texts in five languages (Dutch, German, Polish, English, and French). It was shown in Belgium, Germany, and Poland.

**1998**

Galeria Stara BWA, Lublin, Poland. *Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973). The Infinity of the Line*

**1997**

Session devoted to the work of Wacław Szpakowski organized at the Polish Center in Ottawa, Canada by the Association of Polish Engineers.

Galeria Miejska Arsenał, Poznań, Poland. *Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973). The Infinity of the Line*

Galeria Willa, Łódź, Poland. *Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973). The Infinity of the Line*

**1994**

Bałtycka Galeria Sztuki (Baltic Gallery of Art), Ustka, Poland. *Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973). The Infinity of the Line*

Galeria Awangarda BWA, Wrocław, Poland. *Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973). The Infinity of the Line*

**1993**

Wilhelm Hack Museum, Ludwigshafen, Germany. *Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973). The Infinity of the Line*

Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie (National Museum in Warsaw). *Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973). The Infinity of the Line*

**1992**

Galeria Atelier 340 in Brussels *Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973). The Infinity of the Line*

The first two exhibitions of Wacław Szpakowski's drawings were curated by Janusz Zagrodzki who also edited the exhibition catalogue, present Szpakowski as a pioneer of Polish avant-garde and precursor of Geometrical Abstraction, Minimal Art and Op Art.

**1979**

Muzeum Architektury we Wrocławiu (Museum of Architecture in Wrocław). *Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973). Linie rytmiczne (Rhythmical Lines)*

**1978**

Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi (Art Museum in Łódź). *Wacław Szpakowski (1883–1973). Linie rytmiczne (Rhythmical Lines)*

## GROUP EXHIBITIONS

**2018**

*Untitled*, curated by Florian Pumhösl, Galerie Meyer Kainer, Vienna.

**2017**

8, Museum Sztuki, Łódź, Poland

*Grounding Vision: Wacław Szpakowski*, Miguel Abreu Gallery, New York

**2016**

*The Museum of Rhythm*, Museum Sztuki, Łódź, Poland

**2012**

*Inventing Abstraction, 1910–1925*, Museum of Modern Art, New York

*Front Wschodni (Eastern Front)*, Atlas Sztuki, Łódź, Poland

**2011**

*Ornamentika – szerialitás / Ornament – Seriality*, Vasarely Múzeum, Budapest

**2007**

*The Intelligible Non-Violent Art*, Kunststation, Kleinsassen, Hofbieber-Kleinsassen, Germany

*The Intelligible Non-Violent Art*, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem, Israel

*Prawie 100 lat sztuki awangardowej w Polsce – medium: fotografia (Almost a Century of Avant-Garde Art in Poland)* Muzeum Sztuki Współczesnej w Radomiu (Contemporary Art Museum in Radom)

**2006**

*Les Avant-gardes polonaises. Dialogues historiques depuis Malévitich*, Musée Matisse, Le Cateau-Cambrésis, France

*The Intelligible Non-Violent Art*, Atlas Sztuki, Łódź, Poland

*Fotoobrazy. Gest plastyczny w fotografii (Photoimages. Plastic Gesture in Photography)* Museum of Art in Łódź, Poland

**2004**

*Labirynt – Labirynt 2 Gallery Presents Contemporary Polish Art*, Folly Gallery, Lancaster, England

*Labirynt – Galeria Labirynt 2 prezentuje współczesną sztukę polską*, BWA – Galeria Stara, Lublin, Poland

**2003**

*Europe – Concrete – Reductiv*, Museum of Architecture in Wrocław, Poland

*Labirynt – Labirynt 2 Gallery Presents Contemporary Polish Art*, UH Galleries – Art and Design Gallery, University of Hertfordshire, Hatfield, England

**2002**

*Europe – Concrete – Reductiv*, Hünfeld, Germany

**2001**

*Postawy – szczególne powołanie artysty* (Attitudes. The Artist's Special Vocation), BWA – Galeria Grodzka, Lublin, Poland

**2000**

*Autoportrety* (Self-Portraits), BWA – Galeria Grodzka, Lublin, Poland

**1999**

*Niekończąca się linia* (Neverending Line), Muzeum Sztuki Reduktywnej, Świeradów Zdrój, Poland

*Multimedialna kolekcja Galerii Wymiany Józefa Robakowskiego* (Multimedia Art in the Collection of Józef Robakowski's Galeria Wymiany – Exchange Gallery), BWA Zielona Góra, Poland

**1996**

*Vonal*, Ernst Múzeum, Budapest

**1992**

*Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi 1931–1992* (Museum of Art In Łódź 1931–1992), Musée d'art contemporain, Lyon. 1996–2015

**1991**

*Kolekcja sztuki XX wieku w Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi* (20th-Century Art in the Collection of the Museum of Art in Łódź), CBWA Zachęta Gallery, Warsaw

**1989**

*Konstruktivizmus Lengyelországban* (Polish Constructivism), Magyar Nemzeti Galériá (National Gallery), Budapest, Hungary

**1983**

*Présences Polonaises, l'art vivant autour du Musée de Łódź*, Centre George Pompidou, Paris, France

**1979**

*Polish Photography 1839–1979*, International Center of Photography, New York