

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 Ośrodek Kultury i Sztuki we Wrocławiu in conjunction with an exhibition of the same title.*