COLLABORATION AND COMPROMISE:
WOMEN ARTISTS IN POLISH-GERMAN AVANT-GARDE CIRCLES, 1910–1930

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A traditional history of the development of modern art in Central Eastern Europe deals with the activities of associations and groups, but does not examine the artistic couple. This omission suggests that such couples may be considered a topic for gendered conversation, perhaps of interest solely to feminist art historians. But in fact, artistic couples constitute an example of a primary grouping that exists within and often prior to the structure of larger artists groups.¹

Renée Riese Hubert in her pioneering 1994 book Magnifying Mirrors: Women, Surrealism and Partnership considers how partnership worked as a creative mechanism for many Western European artist couples; Toyen and Śtyrsky are the sole Central European example. Hubert’s argument focuses mostly on Surrealist couples, because in her view Surrealism’s eroticism and its desire to overcome the separation between art and life were what made Surrealist partnerships different, since these concerns supported working with a partner. Making a similar case with other avant-garde groups, Hubert observes that independent and talented women joined these groups because such affiliation “afforded them the best chance to make their mark as artists,” and “could provide them with an identity and an authenticity that society continued to deny them.”²

In the recent study Liebe macht Kunst: Künstlerpaare im 20. Jahrhundert [Love Makes Art: Artistic Couples in the Twentieth Century] the editor, Renate Berger, observes that in such partnerships the male artist is often seen as a genius, requiring the energies and assistance of a female, who generally falls into the role of mother, sister, wife, model, or patron. Berger underlines the fact that it is more difficult for women artists, especially the partners of male artists, to be equally recognized in the art world. Berger also includes only one Central Eastern European couple: Lucia and László Moholy-Nagy.³

The avant-garde couples that are the subject of this study are Margarete and Stanisław Kubicki, the founders of the Polish group Bunt; Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński; and Teresa Żarnower and Mieczysław Szczuka, founders of Polish Constructivism. The meaning of their collaboration was different for each of the partners. In one case, what began as a creative partnership became a destructive battle later in life.

In most scholarly studies of the Central European avant-garde, the roles of Kubicka, Kobro, and Żarnower in art production have been overlooked.⁴ Steven Mansbach’s 1999 book Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890–1939 is the first comprehensive summary and chronology of the Central European avant-garde published in English. Although Mansbach names Żarnower as Szczuka’s collaborator and recognizes Kobro as Strzemiński’s wife and partner, he does not address the role that these relationships may have played in their visual productions. Margarete Kubicka is unmentioned, despite her active participation with her husband in the Bunt group and the artistic events of the time.⁵

Margarete was German, and Stanisław a Pole from Großpolen, at the time a German province.⁶ Stanisław was born in Ziegenhain near Kassel in 1889 and Margarete Schuster (Kubicka’s maiden name) in Berlin in 1891. They met most likely in 1912 at the Königliche Kunsthchule in Berlin. Just after the outbreak of the First World War, Kubicki entered the Prussian Army. The couple married in a civil ceremony (Kubicki did not believe in church weddings) on December 22, 1916, in Berlin.

The Kubickis complemented each other in many ways. She was more practical and supported the family; he was a free spirit and a thinker involved with various ideas and movements, including Buddhism, Communism, and anarchism. She kept him informed about Berlin’s art scene during World
War I, when he was stationed in Silesia. Later, in Poznań, she came to visit him quite often and brought with her the German avant-garde periodical *Die Aktion*, which he then introduced to his Polish colleagues.

Their son, Karol Kubicki, states that his mother was more radical in her views, both artistically and politically, than his father, and that often she took the initiative, for instance introducing Kubicki to the painting style of the Munich Blaue Reiter group. Margarete supplied him with funds to live on during his time in Poznań, while supporting herself and their two children in Berlin as an art school teacher. As the main breadwinner for the family, she did not have time for the meetings in Berlin ateliers, and ultimately he became more informed about the latest art theories, which he shared with her at home in Berlin.²

Their contrasting styles can be seen in writings that appeared in a 1918 issue of *Die Aktion*. A statement by Kubicki stressed the political role of art, and two poems by Kubicka were epitaphs to the war. The first poem, "Leben" [Life], laments how fast the dead are forgotten, suggesting that no one is strong enough to live with the reminder of death's presence in the form of corpses. "Die Mutter" [The Mother], the second poem, attempts to capture a mother's feelings in losing a son to the war and ends with the question that Kubicka poses to "staggering women, without a leader: who will show us the way?"

Two years later they exhibited in the first Bunt exhibition, in Poznań. Its poster, designed by Stanisław, featured a reproduction of his linocut *The Tower of Babel*. The print, which shows a group of people gesticulating and screaming with the tower in the background, can be read as an allegory of the dominance of old master conservatism and the rebellion (bunt in Polish) of the young generation. *Die Aktion* gallery in Berlin also exhibited works by the two artists that year, and published an issue on Polish art that featured the reproduction of three woodcuts by Kubicki and two by Kubicka.

Kubicki's Cubist canvases and Kubicka's watercolors between 1918 and 1924 show parallel development and feature a similar use of volumes to contrast light and dark tones. According to Karol, Margarete thought of her art as a diaristic record of people she met and places she visited, but this became less the case as she developed stylistically from realism to a Cubo-Surrealist style.⁸ The early period of her oeuvre is rich in portraits of her friends and her husband. In a rare linocut self-portrait the young Kubicka appears as a decisive woman. Her forehead shows two horizontal wrinkles, signifying a
thoughtful person facing life’s troubles. Her wide-open eyes look straight out, almost as if she wants to penetrate the viewer’s personality. Her face is surrounded by a thin white border, set against a black background. She had begun to paint subjects reflecting an abstract realm beyond the bounds of the rational world by 1922, two years before André Breton issued the first Surrealist manifesto.

Kubicki’s 1918 Self-Portrait, also a linocut, shows his heavy head leaning on his hand. His face has a ghostly look as it emerges from the contrasting black. His eyes, covered with angular black shapes, are not visible at all. Kubicki’s 1922 Cubist self-portrait is a culmination of his style. The artist constructs his face from basic cubic angles, which he then fills with further cubic shapes to represent his facial features. A vertical line splits the canvas into two uneven parts; the zigzag shape of his arm and hand supports one side of the face.

In general, Kubicka’s lines are softer and rounder, with planes flowing into one another, while Kubicki’s paintings are more linear and hard-edged. The Kubickis also used similar color schemes during this period, he in oils and she in watercolors. Both painted in warm tones, but she employed a larger range
Stanislaw Kubicki, Self-Portrait, 1922, oil on canvas

Stanislaw Kubicki, The Tower of Babel, 1918, linocut
The Kubickis criticized the 1922 Düsseldorf international exhibition as representing a "selfish, partisan standpoint."

of shades. Kubicki’s Church Tower in Front of the Rising Sun, an architectural abstraction of a cathedral, features planes of ocher that capture the reflection of the sun’s first rays. Another painting, Ecstasy III, shows a Cubist figure with raised arms looking toward the sky. Yellow and brown predominate, while multiple diagonal lines cross in the middle, giving an impression of energy emanating from the composition’s center.

Margarete was a member of Spartacus, a precursor to the German Communist Party, and in 1922 the couple were coauthors, with Otto Freundlich and Felix Gasbara, of the Commune’s second manifesto. In it they proclaimed that their “task is to review the whole of the past. Not as an intellectual critique but through the lived experience of being otherwise.” This meant not selling their art in galleries but making it for political and aesthetic reasons. Again, thanks to Margarete’s hard work as a tutor and art school teacher, the family was able to survive. Margarete signed the Commune’s manifesto as “Stanislawowa,” following the Polish custom in which married women are given a nickname derived from their husband’s first name. The Kubickis also criticized the 1922 Düsseldorf international exhibition and other participating groups as representing a “selfish, partisan standpoint” and not the “interests of the greater international community”; for this reason they did not take part in it.⁷

In November of that year they organized an exhibition in Berlin of revolutionary artists, and invited two colleagues from Bunt, Władysław Skotarek and Stefan Szmał, to participate. This would be their last exhibition with members of the Bunt group. Kubicki then joined the Progressiven group from Cologne.

In 1924 Kubicka painted a series of emblematic watercolors devoted to her husband, with titles such as Stanisław Kubicki and the Plants, Stanisław Kubicki and the Sciences, Stanisław Kubicki and the Occultist Powers, Stanisław Kubicki with Rocks and Insects, Stanisław Kubicki and the Animals, and L’Amour. These are in a Cubo-Surrealist style, with an emphasis on color, and incorporate Cubistic shapes that resemble those in her husband’s oil paintings. The strong angular portrait of her husband in Stanisław Kubicki, the Agitator is composed of multiple planes with lively colors emanating from his body. L’Amour is unique among the watercolors in portraying a couple. The orange color predominating is important symbolically in Buddhism, which was of great interest to Kubicki at the time. Though largely abstract, L’Amour can be seen as a tribute to the couple’s relationship.

Kubicka’s series was an homage to her husband, whom she called “a genius,” as Eugenia Markowa recalls in Le Choix, a small book reprinted in the catalogue of the first major joint exhibition of their work, at the Berlinische Galerie in 1992. With its telling title, Die Jahre der Krise [Years of Crisis], the catalogue suggests that their life during these years was far from ideal.⁸ The year 1920 was particularly difficult, as Peter Mantis points out, because Kubicki suffered from a depression that lasted until the end of the following year. Their friend Otto Krischer described Kubicki’s emotional state as his response to the disillusionment of the years following World War I, which he overcame with the help of family and friends.¹¹

The last big exhibition of his life was the Sonderausstellung der Juryfreien [Special Non-Juried Exhibition] in 1931. Due to Hitler’s rise to power, Kubicki left Germany in 1934, choosing exile in Poland. Margarete and the children stayed in Berlin, in a house designed by Bruno Taut (where Karol Kubicki still lives). Kubicki lived first in Poznań and later in Warsaw. After a long surveillance because of his opposition to the Nazi regime, he was imprisoned and executed by the Gestapo in 1942.¹² According to Karol, Margarete, who lived to be 93, always referred to her husband as a genius and “a beautiful soul.”¹³
The artistic exchange between Katarzyna Kobro and Władysław Strzemiński was fruitful at the outset but later proved to be destructive. Strzemiński was an officer in the czar's army at the start of World War I. A grenade explosion resulted in the amputation of his right leg and left forearm. From 1916 to 1918 he was a patient in a Moscow hospital, recovering from his injuries. Like many young women from well-to-do families, Kobro had volunteered to care for the wounded.

Their attraction was stimulated through their mutual interest in modern art. Their daughter, Nika Strzemińska, recalls in her book Miłość, sztuka i nienawiść [Love, Art, and Hatred] that Kobro told Strzemiński "she wanted to study sculpture and that she always found great pleasure in producing works of art... It was then that my father got interested in art." Strzemińska also describes Kobro's willingness to give up her own creative time, and her tremendous physical and emotional strength in helping her handicapped husband on a daily basis.

Beginning in 1917 Kobro studied at the Moscow School of Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting. The following year, the school was opened to the avant-garde, according to reforms carried out after the October Revolution. In October 1918 Strzemiński began studying at the First Free Artistic Studio in Moscow; Kobro continued her studies at the Second Free Artistic Studio. In January 1919 Strzemiński first returned to his hometown in Minsk, due to the death of his father. In the fall of 1919 he moved to Smolensk (without graduating), where he cofounded a branch of the Unovis group with Malevich. In the summer of 1920 Kobro also moved to Smolensk. (Nearby in Witebsk were Kasimir Malevich, Marc Chagall, Wassily Kandinsky, and El Lissitzky.) There she made sculpture, designed theater costumes and political posters, and lectured at the Smolensk School of Ceramic Art, where Strzemiński also taught. Together they supervised the Smolensk branch of Unovis until its closure in 1922.

In late 1921 they were married in a civil ceremony and shared a studio on a main street in Smolensk. Although they planned to settle permanently in Poland and become citizens, in the meantime Kobro lived with her relatives in Riga, returning to Smolensk for short visits. According to her daughter, she did not get along with her mother-in-law; in Riga, moreover, she could apply for Latvian citizenship, and consequently more easily for Polish citizenship.

Like many artists of the period they left Russia, due to lack of money as well as disappointment with the revolution. They were detained for a time by the police as a result of an illegal border crossing, since Kobro did not have a Polish visa. The following period was more difficult for Kobro because of her inability to speak Polish.

A recognized painter in Constructivist circles, Strzemiński published an enthusiastic review of Kobro's works in a 1922 issue of the magazine Zwrótnica: "The most talented from the young generation is a sculptress, Kobro. Her Suprematist sculptures have a European impact. Her work is a true step forward, attaining new and unachieved values; these works do not simply copy Malevich, but are a parallel development." In 1924 Kobro acquired Polish citizenship and began teaching at two industrial schools near Łódź. Strzemiński quickly made contacts with prominent artists in the Polish avant-garde, which included Henryk Stażewski, Teresa Żarnower, and Mieczysław Szczuka. In 1924 he cofounded the Blok group, which issued a journal of the same name; Kobro also joined the group. In 1926 they left Blok and cofounded Praesens, a group of artists and architects. Strzemiński and Szczuka had disagreements with the Blok group over a proposed modern art museum in Poland. In a February 1931 letter Strzemiński wrote: "I suggested to the members of the Blok that such a museum should be organized, but to no avail, because Szczuka was afraid of the technical and the painterly matters, of the painterly culture..." In 1928 Strzemiński published Unism in Painting, in which he asserted the formalistic view that a painting is a flat canvas covered with paint and bordered by a frame; the content, he maintained, should be optically unified. He achieved this by using varied color tones and through a roughness of texture that forced the eye to accept the illusion of the unified structure. This illusion can be understood, perhaps, to have a particular psychological importance to Strzemiński, who through his work was trying to reestablish the missing link between his injured physical self and the space which surrounded him: "Everything possesses the rules of the construction of its own organism. The organic principle of painting demands as high a unity as possible between the forms and the surface of the painting... The entire painting ought to function as one integrated surface." Kobro sought spatial wholeness in her art through different means. Janusz Zagrodzki, who has pioneered in the reconstruction of Kobro's lost work, explains that a fundamental element of her sculpture is the modular unit. One of Kobo's extant abstract sculptures of 1924 incorporates her application of a unit of constant proportion. In 1925 Kobro revised her system and introduced a principle
"The organic principle of painting demands as high a unity as possible between the forms and the surface of the painting."
of equal proportions that was applied to different lengths and surfaces. Between 1925 and 1928, Kobro developed a specific mathematical formula that she used in constructing her sculptures. As she discarded the concept of isolated forms, her compositions began to merge with the surrounding space. Each piece was now made up of a few flat or curved rectangular planes joined at right angles along their edges. The planes appear to glide rhythmically, folding, doubling back, or stretching into elastic archways, as in her 1925 Space Composition 1.

Strzemieński began painting his own architectural compositions two years later, in 1927. The soft curve in Architectural Composition 13c resonates with Kobro’s three soft curves in her 1925 composition.

In Kobro’s spatial sculptures the relation between separate parts was most often close to an 8:5 ratio. Her formula employed an unequal division of a line or rectangle, so that the ratio of the smaller section to the larger is equivalent to that of the larger part to the whole. This ratio is derived from the classical proportions of the golden section.19

Kobro wrote in 1929 on the harmony of this “new form”: “New sculpture should be the most condensed…part of the space. [Sculpture] achieves this because its form creates a rhythm of dimensions and divisions. The unity of that rhythm is based on its numerical calculations.”20

Kobro’s sculptures from this period are for the most part white, which lent them a totalizing spatial uniformity. In Space Composition 3 of 1928, horizontal and vertical planes are united by a soft curve, which is subordinate to the harmony of the proportions. In her article “Functionalism” she postulates that comprehension of the nature of space and time results from an understanding of the everyday: “An understanding of the rules of relationship between the parts of
a sculpture shows that each form in the sculpture is also an organizational norm of the human psyche...” 21 According to Kobro, this concept would determine the composition of urban developments in the future, which would share in the simplicity and harmony of her sculptures.

The Functional Kindergarten (1932–34), the only architectural design by Kobro that has survived, was never implemented. Nevertheless, her innovative solution for sculptural forms had its resonance in modern architecture. She believed that “a sculpture should become an architectural problem, an experiment in organizing methods in arranging the space.” 22 Unfortunately, her goal of transforming sculpture into architecture was confined to experimentation in her studio.

A 1931 book, Kompozycja Przestrzeni. Obliczenia Rytmu Czasoprzestrzennego [Space Composition: Space-Time Rhythm and Its Calculations], coauthored by Kobro and Strzemiński, described the mathematics of such open spatial compositions in terms of an 8:5 ratio. (The chronology of their art demonstrates that Kobro employed this ratio a year earlier than Strzemiński.) In the book they developed a theory of the organic character of sculpture, a fusion of Strzemiński’s Unistic theory of painting and Kobro’s ideas about sculpture’s basis in human rhythms of movement: “A work of sculpture should make up a unity with the infinity of space. Any closure of a sculpture, any opposition between it and the space, strips it of the organic character of the uniformity of a spatial phenomenon by breaking off their natural connection and isolating the sculpture.” 23 In a survey by the magazine Europa on modern sculpture Kobro stressed the importance of form and space: “Sculpture enters the space and the space enters the sculpture. The solid block is a lie against the real meaning of sculpture.” 24 Art historian Ewa Franus justifiably calls the book “a shining example of cooperation, the culminating point of its authors’ symmetrical union.” 25

Unfortunately, their collaborative endeavors did not last, and their relationship changed into a destructive competition. Strzemiński wrote in a letter to the type designer Jan Tschichold that it was impossible for him to do creative work after their daughter Nika was born, as she was ill and he did not have the space. 26 Consequently, their relationship worsened, putting additional strain on Kobro. Nika quotes from her mother’s notes that Strzemiński did not want a child, and that his mother had warned Kobro never to have a child, but only to care for her husband. 27

Nika Strzemińska describes a tragic argument between her parents in January 1945, during which Strzemiński accused Kobro of not caring enough for the family to secure wood for the fire. After this, Kobro destroyed her wooden sculptures of 1925–28; how many she destroyed is unknown. After World War II, the couple separated. Strzemiński took Kobro to court, attempting to deprive her of parental rights. He also wrote a denunciation when she was a candidate for a position as professor of sculpture at the Higher School of Art. Strzemiński “influenced the Ministry to deny her the offer.” 28 Franus suggests that although Strzemiński was attempting to destroy Kobro as a person, he nonetheless respected her as an artist, since he included her sculptures in a 1948 exhibition at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, in the “Neoplastic Room” that he created. However, because Kobro had given these spatial compositions to the museum in 1945, 29 it would have been difficult for Strzemiński not to include her.

Another example of constructive artistic exchange and emotional support is the collaboration of Mieczysław Szczuka and Teresa Żarnower. The artist Anatol Stern, a friend, commented: “These two people, besides their aesthetic ideas, shared a strong feeling that helped them to overcome obstacles in their fight for the truth in which they believed.” 30 Szczuka credited Żarnower with the initiative to establish
the Blok group and its magazine; she also provided it with financial support.31
Żarnower and Szczuka were both from Warsaw; Żarnower was born in 1895 and Szczuka in 1898. Both graduated in 1920 from the Warsaw School of Fine Arts, and Szczuka had his first exhibition that same year. They often exhibited together: their names are listed in exhibitions in Vilnius in May of 1923, at the Sturm Gallery in Berlin the same year, in Bucharest in November of 1924, and at Warsaw's Polonia Artistic Club in 1924–25. In Berlin they exhibited twenty-two objects, including sculpture, drawings, and paintings.32
Most of their original works are lost, so the main information on the art of Szczuka and Żarnower is from Blok and from Dźwignia (Lever) magazine, which Szczuka edited until his death and which Żarnower continued. The layouts in these magazines are silent testimony to their close collaboration, as they are generally reproduced side by side or on consecutive pages. The first issue of Blok (1924) reproduces on the title page two untitled sculptures by Żarnower and two adjacent works by Szczuka: Architektura and an abstract composition. Other 1924–25 layouts in Blok demonstrate their collaboration on typography.

The cover of Blok 5 has an untitled composition by Żarnower on the front and a photomontage by Szczuka, entitled Kemal Pasha: Kemal’s Constructive Program, overleaf. In the photomontage a schematic drawing of a construction crane on the left is amplified by a photograph of a chain parallel to the crane’s mast. The image of the new Turkish leader Kemal Pasha is circled by a Firestone tire; beneath his portrait is a modern building from Ankara. Next to the building is a photograph of a dog, as if to add a more domestic aspect to the collage. Beneath the building, an upside-down locomotive is situated. Żarnower’s abstract composition corresponds formally with Szczuka’s reality-based photomontage:
the crane drawing is echoed by the vertical construction of lines, and the Firestone tire and gear assembly synchronize with Żarnower’s circles.

In 1924, Blok 6/7 published the first Polish Constructivist manifesto, “What is Constructivism?” Some attribute this to Szczuka, but in fact it was signed as an editorial, and Żarnower was on the editorial board. The manifesto’s fourteenth and last statement proposed that problems of art are indivisible from social problems. Both Szczuka and Żarnower continued their engagement in the leftist political life of the young Polish state even after Blok ceased to exist in 1926.

Also in Blok 6/7 was Szczuka’s programmatic statement about modern architecture, faced by a page of illustrations including Willi Baumeister’s Raumgestaltung Mauerbild, Strzeminski’s Flat Construction, an aerial photo, and an abstract decorative composition by Żarnower, next to which was a photograph of the Tatra Mountains. Szczuka’s statement stressed the importance of the fusion of modern buildings with the surrounding space: a building should not be perceived as a heavy structure, rather it should be seen as a composition of different colors and surfaces. Szczuka illustrated his architectural theory with drawings published in later issues of Blok.

But Szczuka’s later works in Blok are primarily photomontages. He defined his pioneering work in this genre as a “poetic visual plastic” [poezoplastyka] and thought of a photomontage as a condensed poem, with stanzas corresponding to simultaneous images.³Blokk 8/9 (1924) published one of his more advanced photomontages in terms of its poetic compositional structure. At the center a classical profile of a man is combined with a statue of a woman and a modern high-rise building. Above this structure a modern car rests on the back of a hand. At the bottom of the photomontage a spool of film unrolls, as if releasing these overlapping images. In a statement beside the photomontage Szczuka links the two forms: “Cinema is the multiplicity of happenings in one time / Photomontage is multiplicity of occurrences.” Below, Blok’s editor placed one of Szczuka’s interior designs. Żarnower’s abstract Konstrukcja Filmowa [Film Construction], with a motif of uniform waves halted by rectangular geometric forms, is situated on the right-hand page, opposite Szczuka’s design of a modern living space.

Above Żarnower’s abstraction is another photograph of the Tatra Mountains, juxtaposed to a photograph of a construction scene, with high-rise buildings in the background. Szczuka’s fascination with both mountains and high-rise buildings allowed him to link them visually. The same issue
of Blok reproduces Żarnower’s and Szczuka’s architectural constructions and reproductions of two architectural models, one by each of them. Their statement on the same page proposes the development of a flexible architectural system, which would allow additions at a later time.

Szczuka and Żarnower were the only artists in Poland who at that point in the 1920s used photomontage for political purposes.24 Szczuka designed covers for political leaflets demanding the release of political prisoners. One of the leaflets is a photocollage documenting a political demonstration with the slogan: “We demand amnesty for all political prisoners.” The simplicity expressed in the contrast of white paper with red typography and black background intensifies the demand. This cover is the first Polish photomontage poster and an example of the new politically engaged genre in Polish modern art.

Żarnower designed a poster for the Polish Communist Party in the 1928 election with the statement: “Vote for the unity of workers and peasants! 13” [Na jedność robotniczo-chłopską głośuj! 13], which uses the same technique as Szczuka’s amnesty poster. (Thirteen was the number of the “unity” statement in the party platform.) Żarnower was most likely the instigator of the couple’s leftist political involvement, as she was a longtime member of the Polish Communist Party, while Szczuka grew up in a conservative family.25 The bold red typography of her photocollage contrasts with the black-and-white images of dense crowds with raised arms. One man is singled out by enlargement; his hand, stretching toward the exclamation point, creates a structural division. On one side is the slogan, at which he is also looking; on the other is a factory, the visual sign of industrial modernity.

Their collaboration was truncated by Szczuka’s tragic 1927 death in a snowstorm in the Tatra Mountains. Afterward, Żarnower abandoned her style of abstract composition and turned toward Szczuka’s technique of photomontage. She continued the editing and graphic design of Dźwignia magazine. In 1929 she published Anatol Stern’s poem Europa, illustrated with typocollage pages by Szczuka, and she designed the book’s cover. He had finished the book design just before his last trip to the Tatra Mountains. Stern recalls in the introduction: “The man who had collaborated on the creation of ‘Europe’ did not live long enough to see the appearance of our work in its final form. An obscure presentiment had already guided his hand when, as he was finishing the cycle of collages which were to illustrate my poem, he put a black border round the last of his drawings, that of the Dead Peak,
Teresa Zarnower, cover design for "Europa," by Anatol Stern, 1929

"Vote for the unity of workers and peasants." "Na jedność robotniczo-chłopską! Głosuj!"
the witness of his first climbing triumphs in the Tatra mountains, and of his last descent from the rocks.”

Zarnower’s heavy, posterlike cover design is unusual for a time when a simple design with small fonts and a light-colored background was more characteristic. Instead, she chose the colors that Szczuka had used in the layout of the book: white, red, and black. For the title she used black letters with white shading placed on an angled red banner, supported at the bottom by the creators’ names in broad red letters with black shading. The page is divided into three spaces that feature different images. At the top the head of a growling gorilla overlooks the main title. An obscure dancing couple appears in the middle triangle between the diagonal title and the author’s names. Below this, contrasting images of 1920s Europe are aligned. These show marching soldiers, a dead young man’s face, and women dancers.

Stern describes Szczuka’s visionary illustrations: “In his collage for ‘Europe’ he showed, as if in the luminous beam of a searchlight, the two faces of modern art: Chaplin, bursting into sardonic laughter before the European spectacle he contemplates, and Petrarch, crowned with laurel, among a thousand others, turning his back on the continent drowned in a sea of blood. Szczuka only saw the two poles; he abhorred the debauchery of nuances.” Two years after its publication, the book won a prize at an international exhibition of modern books in Paris, the final fruit of Szczuka and Zarnower’s collaboration.

Because of her Jewish heritage, Zarnower emigrated from Poland in 1939, and died in New York in 1950. Andrzej Turowski claims she was so depressed that she committed suicide in New York, while the late director of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź stated that she died in a fire in her New York apartment. Irena Lorentowicz, a colleague from the School of Fine Arts in Warsaw who knew the couple, wrote a memoir about Teresa Zarnower that gives yet another reason for her death: the shock of receiving a letter from her brother David, who had survived in Russia while she thought him already long dead. According to Lorentowicz, Zarnower was found dead in her apartment, seated at a table, with pen in hand and an unfinished letter in which she wrote: “My joy in knowing that you are alive will kill me.” David Zarnower died in 1965. In 1957 he had mentioned in correspondence with Stern that neither artist cared what happened to their art after it had been exhibited. Szczuka, more radical than Zarnower in this regard, was known to give away or even destroy his works. The works Zarnower left in Warsaw are most likely lost.

The women in these collaborative couples played vital roles in the formation of larger avant-garde groups as well as in their periodicals: Kubicka introduced Kubicki to Die Aktion and was a cofounder of the Bunt group. Kobro was an active member of Blok and a.r. and, as the only representative from Warsaw, signed the “Manifeste Dimensioniste,” printed in 1936 in Paris. Zarnower was a cofounder of and coeditor in the Blok group.

The dynamics of couples allowed what neither member could have produced alone. Although each of the collaborations was different, I would like to point out that the women in these partnerships were expected to reach a compromise, as women, between their own careers and the support of their partners’ careers. Although collaboration with their male partners was crucial in the art world’s recognition of their talents, their devotion to family life and to their partner often meant a concession in their own career. But it is nonetheless fruitful, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, to examine and rethink the gender roles of artists in the early twentieth century, and to ponder the developments in female-male partnerships throughout the past century.

I would like to thank Ellen Fernandez Sacco for her many contributions, which reshaped this project in its numerous stages. My thanks go to Karol Kubicki, who generously shared stories and archival materials about his parents’ life and work. I also wish to express my gratitude to Miroslaw Barusiewicz, Janina Ladniewska, Zenobia Karnicka, Miroslawa Matucka, and Jacek Ojrzyński from Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, Maria Golob of the Muzeum Narodowe in Poznań, Ursula Prinz, Berlinische Galerie, Freya Mühltrop, Dorota Faliga-Januszewska of the Muzeum Narodowe in Warsaw, Joanna Sosnowska from the Institute of Art History at the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences in Warsaw, and Beth Guynn at the Special Collections of the Getty Research Institute. Special thanks go to Bernard Kester. I am grateful to Radoslaw Sutnar for a consultation on the golden section. Finally, I would like to thank Thomas Frick, my editor at LACMA.
1. Sandor Kuthy, curator of exhibitions devoted to the couples Sonia and Robert Delaunay and Sophie Tauber and Hans Arp, has examined the theme of partnership in Western European art production. But until now the dynamics of Central Eastern European artistic couples have been little investigated.

2. Renée Riese Hubert, Magnifying Mirrors [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994], 4, 10.


4. In his book Budowniczowie Świata [Builders of the World] [Cracow: Universitas, 2000], Andrzej Turowski presents factual information about Kubro and Zarnower and comments on their art production, but Kubicka is not mentioned. Mariusz Tchorz, in "About Władysław Strzemieński," published in Twórczość 5 (1994), speculates about Kubro's influences on him while she was his nurse and about the meaning of the artist's body for his body of work. Ewa Franus has written a recent essay about Strzemieński and Kubro, not published in English to my knowledge, although Turowski quotes the Polish version ("Punkt nierównowagi w starym śnie o symetrii") in Budowniczowie Świata. Peter Mantis published the first article on Kubicka and Kubicki in the catalogue Die Jahre der Krise [Years of Crisis] [Berlin: Ruksaldruck, 1992], from the first major exhibition devoted to the artists, at the Berlinische Galerie in 1992. The Bunt group, active in Poznań between 1917 and 1922, is critically evaluated by Jerzy Malinowski in Sztuka i Nowa Wspólnota. Zrzeszenie Artystów Bunt. 1917–1922 [Art and New Group Artists Association Bunt, 1917–1922] [Wrocław: Wiedza o Kulturze, 1991]. The book's factual and chronological character hinders the articulation of the Kubickis' collaboration, but Margarete Kubicka is consistently acknowledged.


6. Kubicki's roots were clearly from Poznań. Since the Third Partition of Poland in 1795, Poznań was in a German province, Großpolen, until 1918 when the new Polish republic was proclaimed. The citizens of Großpolen were called Reichsdeutsche, since they belonged to the German Reich.

7. Karol Kubicki, interview by the author, Berlin, April 2001; and Kubicki's correspondence, Kubicki archive, Berlin. In a letter from December 10, 1925, Kubicki thanks Margarete Schuster (Schuster was Kubicka's maiden name) for money and issues of Die Aktion. Karol Kubicki commented that his mother had bought the earlier issues of Die Aktion and delivered them to Kubicki. He then deposited them with Jerzy Hulewicz, his later Bunt collaborator.


12. Letter to the author from Karol Kubicki, May 28, 2001. The Polish sources state that Kubicki was killed in Berlin, but his son denies this. Kubicki was brought back to Berlin for a surveillance confrontation with his wife; after both kept silent, thus protecting their friends in the Polish underground, he was taken back to Warsaw, where he was killed in the winter of 1942.


17. Quoted in "Władysław Strzemieński," www.groveart.com


19. The golden section is discussed in the article "Architectural Proportion," The Grove Dictionary of Art, vol. 2, 345ff. The mathematician Luca Pacioli, a friend of Leonardo and Piero della Francesca, wrote a book called Le divina proportione (1509) in which he discussed the special properties of the golden section. It has been considered a mystical proportion with inherent aesthetic value and has been found in natural forms as well.


25. Franus, unpublished article.


27. Nika Strzemieńska, Miłość, Sztuka i Nienawisć, 50.

28. Ibid., 67.


31 Szczuka wrote in Dźwignia, no. 2/3 (1927): “In 1924 Teresa Żarnower gives an initiative to unite in a group Blok and in March 1924—the first exhibition of the group and the first issue of the magazine with the same name take place.”

32 Inventory letter from the Archive at the Art History Institute of the Polish Academy of Arts and Sciences in Warsaw. Żarnower and Szczuka signed a handwritten letter [February 12, 1923] requesting permission to export seventy works of art. The permission was granted on March 24, 1923.

33 From Szczuka’s 1924 statement in Blok 8/9 (my translation):
Photomontage=the most condensed poetry in form
Photomontage=poetic visual plastic
Photomontage gives the multiplicity of multiple happenings in the universe
Photomontage=objectivism of form
Cinema is the multiplicity of happenings in one time
Photomontage is multiplicity of occurrences
Photomontage is multiple penetration of two and three dimensions
Photomontage=modern epos

34 Mieczysław Szczuka, 108.
35 Ibid., 80.
37 Ibid.
38 Turowski, Builders of the World, 218.
39 Ryszard Stanisławski, interview by the author, September 1999.
40 Lorentowicz in Mieczysław Szczuka, 148.

42 Kobro, “Manifeste Dimensioniste,” in Katarzyna Kobro.