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Multiplying the spirit of culture of Łódź – five times Kobro

Introduction

Łódź, which was between World War I and World War II automatically associated with textile industry, at the beginning of the 1930s successfully debuted as a center of the avant-garde art [11, p. 303]. Łódź promoted plastic arts during the famous exhibition titled the *International Collection of Modern Art* which opened on February 15, 1931 in the *Julian and Kazimierz Bartoszewicz City Museum of History and Art* (the museum was established in 1930 in the city hall building at Wolności Square 1) (Fig. 1). The exposition was organized on the initiative of the co-founders of the avant-garde group of artists – *a.r.* (revolutionary artists) which started its activi-

ties in 1929 such as Katarzyna Kobro (1898–1951, sculptor, wife of W. Strzemiński) and Władysław Strzemiński (1893–1952, painter and art theorist). Apart from the works which were mainly donated by foreign artists who were active in such avant-garde groups as *Cercle et Carre* and *Abstraction – Creation*, the founders of *a.r.* presented their own works too [10].

As a result of the exhibition Łódź became the second in Europe (Hanover was first with its El Lissitzky Abstract Cabinet), and third in the world (after the Museum of Modern Art in New York) city with its own collection of modern art [7].

Katarzyna Kobro's Works

Katarzyna Kobro (b. in 1898 in Moscow, d. in 1951 in Łódź) was one of the most prominent Polish sculptors of the interbellum (in 1922, she was granted Polish citizenship). She did not produce too many works but the ones she did were artistically significant (a lot of them were destroyed during occupation). Her sculptures were fully appreciated only after her death.

Kobro, who was fascinated by mathematics, created sculptures connected with architecture. She combined simple vertical and horizontal forms in space compositions with mathematical precision with free forms which appeared in architecture as late as in the 1960s [13, p. 75]. Color (yellow, red, blue, black and white) played important role in Kobro's light and fully kinetic space structures.

In 1931, *a.r.* published a book by Kobro and Strzemiński titled the *Spatial Composition. Calculating the Spacetime*



Fig. 1. The City Museum of History and Art in the city hall building, Wolności Square 1 (photo by B. Wycichowska, 2011)

Il. 1. Miejskie Muzeum Historii i Sztuki w budynku ratusza, plac Wolności 1 (fot. B. Wycichowska, 2011)

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Rhythm where Kobra explains the *organic* right of the sculpture: *its connection with space* [4, pp. 53–54].

Kobra's sculptural technique, controversial for those times, was always overshadowed by her husband's works (they were married from 1920 until 1947). After they parted in 1947, the artist who was taking care of her little daughter went through a lot. In 1949, she was accused of "abandoning Polish nationality" and imprisoned. Although she was acquitted by the court of appeals in 1950, it was not the end of her misery. In June 1950, she was diagnosed as having inoperable cancer. Kobra died on

February 21, 1951 (the artist's grave is at the Orthodox cemetery in Doły).

Kobra's idea of coexistence of sculpture and space was brought back to life for the first time at the *Constructivism in Poland 1923–1936. Blok, Praesens, a.r.* exhibition in the Folkwang Museum in Essen (Germany) and Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller in Otterlo (Holland) in 1973 – 22 years after the artist's death. Kobra's works were greatly acclaimed by the critics of conceptualism as well as minimalism and placed the sculptor high among the world's most prominent constructivists [14].

Katarzyna Kobra and her works in the space of Łódź

Kobra's works in art space during the artist's lifetime

As mentioned above, Kobra's works were exhibited in 1931 at the *International Collection of Modern Art* in the *Julian and Kazimierz Bartoszewicz City Museum of History and Art* in Łódź.

In 1948, the *International Collection of Modern Art* of *a.r.* group, impoverished as a result of occupation, was placed in the Museum of Art established in 1948 (Maurycy Poznański Palace at Więckowskiego Street 36) (Fig. 2).

Strzemiński designed the Neoplastic Hall there to exhibit the constructivist works [5, pp. 71–80] which was the central point of the permanent exposition. However, already in 1950, the works alluding to the constructivist-neoplastic aesthetics which did not 'fit' the socialist realism style, were locked in the storage rooms and the exhibition hall was completely redecorated.

Kobra's works in art space after the sculptor's death

Only after Kobra's death, in 1960, was the Neoplastic Hall reconstructed and the exhibits returned to their original place. In 2007, the overstocked Museum of Art (numerous donations) moved to its new venue in the revitalized I. Poznański – Manufaktura post-factory facility in a post-industrial building of so called high weaving plant. The new venue (3000 m²) has been operating since the fall 2008 as a branch of the Museum of Art called *ms²* and it presents the Collection of the 20th and 21st Century Art (Fig. 3). The

exposition follows no formula for time, author or workshop. The collected exhibits are connected only by their subject anchored on the following lofty formula: to present everything that is important to the contemporary man. Its numerous works also include Kobra's works.

The exposition formula poses the question: Does such a configured presentation get to the society whose knowledge of art is rather poor? Is the presentation of Kobra's works at *ms²* perceived as the artist's prime or slump?



Fig. 2. The Museum of Art in Maurycy Poznański Palace, Wólczajska Street 36 (photo by B. Wycichowska, 2011)

Il. 2. Muzeum Sztuki w pałacu Maurycego Poznańskiego, ul. Wólczajska 36 (fot. B. Wycichowska, 2011)



Fig. 3. The Museum of Art *ms²* in Manufaktura (photo by B. Wycichowska, 2011)

Il. 3. Muzeum Sztuki pod nazwą *ms²* na terenie Manufaktury (fot. B. Wycichowska, 2011)

Kobra's presence in the city space

Kobra's heritage is available in the city space for those who know where to find it. On Montwiła-Mirecki Estate (high-standard residential estate built in 1928–1931 by Łódź municipality), there is a commemorative plaque on the wall of the house at Srebrzyńska Street 75 where Kobra lived with her husband (Fig. 4).

W. Strzemiński Academy of Fine Arts (some inhabitants of Łódź wish it was Kobra Academy of Fine Arts) houses K. Kobra gallery.



Fig. 4. The commemorative plaque of W. Strzemiński and K. Kobra on the wall of the house where they lived at Srebrzyńska Street 75 (photo by B. Wycichowska, 2011)

Il. 4. Tablica poświęcona W. Strzemińskiemu i K. Kobra na ścianie domu, w którym mieszkali, ul. Srebrzyńska 75 (fot. B. Wycichowska, 2011)

The main alley in J. Kiliński Park is called Katarzyna Kobra Alley [9] (there is no plaque.)

Kobra's grave in the Orthodox part of the Doly Cemetery, where her daughter – Nika was buried in 2001, shall always be a place to reflect on the sculptor's life. A granite plaque with an image of K. Kobra and information about the artist in Polish and Russian was unveiled on October 10, 2010 on the wall by the grave [1] (Fig. 5).



Fig. 5. Katarzyna Kobra's grave and the commemorative plaque in Doly cemetery in its Orthodox part (photo by B. Wycichowska, 2011)

Il. 5. Grób Katarzyny Kobra i tablica pamiątkowa na cmentarzu Doly, w części prawosławnej cmentarza (fot. B. Wycichowska, 2011)

Kobra in the mental space of Łódź. Katarzyna Kobra Awards

Katarzyna Kobra Awards which are presented every year contribute to cherish the memory of the great sculptor who demonstrated a progressive and searching attitude, an open artist, and altruistic initiator of cultural events. The idea of the award came from Józef Robakowski as well as

Kobra and Strzemiński's late daughter – Nika Strzemińska [2]. For 10 years, until 2011, the award was presented by East Gallery; in 2011, Dariusz Bieńkowski (award founder) and J. Robakowski moved the presentation ceremony to the Museum of Art.

The market tactic to preserve the memory of Kobra in the space of Łódź

The Academy of Fine Arts is building the Center of Science and Art and the Park of Art right next to it with two venues: the Center of Science and Art and the Fashion Promotion Center. The Fashion Promotion Center will have black elevations with Kobra color rectangles (the *initiated* will know they allude to her works).

The name Kobra came up twice on the blueprint of the New Center of Łódź. First time – in Rob Krier's urban design concept for the name of the Market located in the

very middle of the layout [12, p. 289]. Second time – in the protested idea of naming the whole area of the center *Kobra City* [3; 6; 8, pp. 6–7].

The Environmental Protection Department has its own plans too – Kobra Park is to be designed in the area located by the Academy of Fine Arts along the open Łódka river bed. Before the park is designed, a reservoir will be built in front of the Academy of Fine Arts building (its construction is scheduled for 2012) to enrich the park layout.

Conclusions

Undoubtedly, Katarzyna Kobra – a world famous sculptor who contributed to the cultural growth of Łódź – deserves to be commemorated. However, the question

remains if the assumed formula – of multiplying the city spirit of culture by using the artist's name for planned investments: from *Market Kobra* to *City Kobra* – is not an

attempt to appropriate her name for commercial and marketing purposes?

I think that removing Kobra's works from the Neoplastic Hall of the Museum of Art to *ms²* which promotes Manufaktura was an act of *violence* committed on the sculptor's works.

Kobra's works in Łódź don't need any *new packaging* and the sculptor's name doesn't need *commercializa-*

tion. It is the society that needs more cultural education that should help the society to understand the works of that great artist in both real and spiritual dimensions as well as participate in discovering the actual art resources and consequently – in developing the city of culture.

*Translated by
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Mnożenie ducha kultury miasta Łodzi – 5 x Kobra

Łódź na etapie powstawania koncepcji nowoczesnego i kulturalnego miasta XXI wieku w ramach rewitalizacji skoncentrowała się na trwałym zaznaczeniu w przestrzeniach publicznych obecności znanych postaci ze świata kultury i sztuki. Szczególnego wyróżnienia w koncepcjach projektowych doczekała się po kilkadziesiąt lat milczenia Katarzyna Kobra – wybitna rzeźbiarka, która wspólnie z mężem Władysławem Strzeмиńskim stworzyła w Łodzi jedyną w Polsce kolekcję międzynarodowej awangardy. Dzięki ich zaangażowaniu w 1931 roku w Łodzi otwarto pierwszą wystawę sztuki awangardowej, a sama Łódź zaczęła być postrzegana jako europejskie miasto sztuki.

Key words: city of art, commercialization, cultural education

Zachłyśnięcie się Kobra w XXI wieku doprowadziło do sytuacji, że znane i podziwiane dzieła Kobra – zgromadzone „od zawsze” w Muzeum Sztuki przy ul. Więckowskiego – zostały przeniesione do Muzeum Sztuki *ms²* w Manufakturze, natomiast rynek w nowym centrum miasta i park przy Akademii Sztuk Pięknych mają nosić nazwisko artystki; nazwiskiem rzeźbiarki już nazwano główną aleję w parku im. J. Kilińskiego. Należy zatem zadać pytanie: czy jest to sposób na budowę miasta kultury?

Słowa kluczowe: miasto sztuki, komercjalizacja, edukacja kulturowa