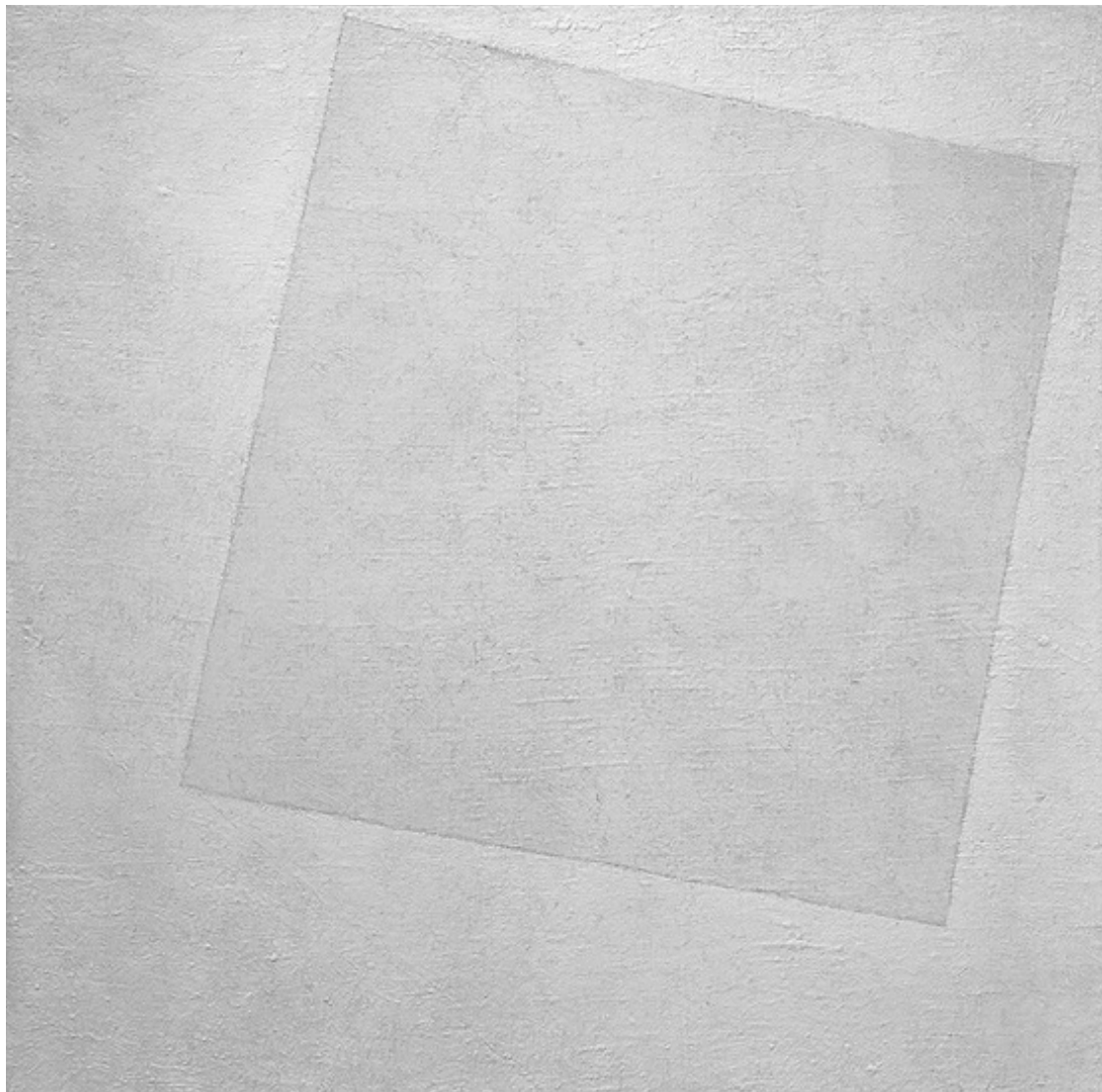


# Polish Modernism's Essentialist Claim

## *The Hansens and Open Form Architecture*

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Kazimir Malevich, *Suprematist*  
*Composition: White on White*, 1918, oil on  
canvas, 79.4 cm x 79.4 cm, digital image  
Source: The Museum of Modern Art /  
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This paper traces the continuities between the post-war Polish husband-and-wife architect duo of Oskar and Zofia Hansen, and their predecessors from the interwar avant-garde, the husband-and-wife artist duo of painter Władysław Strzemiński and sculptor Katarzyna Kobro. It argues that the Hansens' Open Form (1958) approach extended the essentialism of Strzemiński and Kobro's theory of Unism (1924) to advance a modern architecture. This paper analyzes the design for a memorial at Auschwitz-Birkenau that the Hansens worked on as part of a team for an international competition, called the *Road* (1958), as the crystallization of Unism's influence on the theory of the Open Form.

### *Introduction*

Writing in 1987 about Peter Eisenman's "House" projects from the 1960s and 1970s, Rosalind Krauss identified a key contradiction in the modern architectural movement from the early twentieth century. She noted that although the buildings that became associated with the International Style "confronted the viewer/user with material surfaces denuded of their expected [historical] references," modern architecture had idealized industrial technologies such as steel, concrete, and glass for their denuded tectonic expressions.<sup>1</sup> Evoking in her commentary the 1961 essay "Modernist Painting," in which Clement Greenberg defines modernism as "the use of the characteristic methods of a discipline...to entrench it more firmly in its area of competence,"<sup>2</sup> Krauss argued that modern architecture had failed to articulate the specificity of the discipline's medium. Consequently, it was essentially not modern.

Already aware of this contradiction – thirty years prior to Krauss's observation – was the post-war Polish husband-and-wife architect duo Oskar (1922–2005) and Zofia Hansen (née Garlińska) (1924–2013). Two years before Greenberg published his essay, Oskar Hansen presented the theory of the "Open Form" at the eleventh and final meeting of the International Congress of Modern Architecture (CIAM) (f. 1928), in Otterlo, Netherlands. Challenging the shortcomings of the modern architectural movement to which Krauss later referred, Hansen identified CIAM's brand of modernism as having neglected the inhabitant and their concrete dwelling patterns as constitutive elements of architecture. He instead stressed that

the Open, as opposed to the "Closed Form," would allow the inhabitant to "find...[themselves] in the collective... making [them] indispensable in the creation of [their] own surroundings."<sup>3</sup> This implied that buildings should be mutable and that inhabitants should be able to shape spaces to meet their needs.

The Hansens' Open Form approach drew from the interwar Polish avant-garde, specifically from the husband-and-wife artist duo of painter Władysław Strzemiński (1893–1952) and sculptor Katarzyna Kobro (1898–1951), and their theory of "Unism." According to Yve-Alain Bois, Strzemiński and Kobro advocated through their Unist approach the integration of an artwork's "material conditions" and its "expressive function."<sup>4</sup> In Greenbergian terms, this meant that an artwork is self-referential; it excludes ideas existing outside of its own medium. By tracing Unism's influence on the Open Form, specifically manifested during Oskar Hansen's participation at the seventh CIAM meeting in Bergamo, Italy, a decade before the Otterlo meeting, I argue in this paper that the Hansens advanced an essentialist claim for architecture.<sup>5</sup> The couple relegated the object-based qualities of architecture in order to promote what they believed was the discipline's medium specificity, which was not architecture's forms, but the life set into relief to those forms. I end with an analysis of a proposal for a memorial at Auschwitz-Birkenau that the Hansens worked on as part of a team for an international competition, called the *Road* (1958), as the crystallization of Unism's influence on the Open Form.

*Oskar Hansen's Experiences in the West*

Oskar Hansen's participation at the final CIAM meeting in Otterlo was among a handful of his personal confrontations with some of modern architecture's leading protagonists in the twentieth century. Following the dissolution of CIAM in 1959, Hansen attended Team 10 conferences in Bagnols-sur-Cèze, France (1960) and Urbino, Italy (1966). Team 10, which included a younger generation of CIAM members, such as Jaap Bakema, Alison and Peter Smithson, Aldo van Eyck, Giancarlo de Carlo, Oswald Mathias Ungers, and Hansen's colleague from Warsaw, Jerzy Sołtan, collectively realized, according to Alison Smithson in the *Team 10 Primer* (1962), "the inadequacies of the processes of architectural thought which they have inherited from the modern movement as a whole."<sup>6</sup> Many of Team 10's members wanted to reform CIAM's tenets to better reflect the "patterns, the aspirations, the artefacts, the tools, the modes of transportation and communications of present-day [post-war] society."<sup>7</sup> In the introduction to the *Primer*, Smithson writes that the group rejects the "abstract Master Plan"<sup>8</sup> as a deterministic approach to space-planning that had characterized CIAM's brand of modernism – most notably, as seen in the Athens Charter (1941), which Le Corbusier, who helped found CIAM, promulgated as guide for the functional layout of cities. Team 10 architects, by and large, argued for greater cohesion between architects' designs and inhabitants' concrete dwelling patterns.

At the first official Team 10 meeting in Bagnols-sur-Cèze, Hansen presented an updated version of his Open Form manifesto that he had published in the Polish cultural journal *Przegląd Kulturalny* (1959), and which he would later publish in the Team 10-affiliated Finnish journal *Le Carré Bleu* (1961).<sup>9</sup> Hansen in his presentation prefigured Smithson's critique of the "abstract Master Plan", denouncing the legacy of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* from the early twentieth century, in which "it was the job of the 'architect super-specialist'," as Hansen proclaimed, "to determine the order of all things – from the level of town-planning down to that of a button."<sup>10</sup> In his presentation in Otterlo a year earlier, Hansen proposed an alternative to the "architect super-specialist": The role of the architect "in present times" should be that of a "conceptional-coordinator" who leaves "a margin for [the inhabitant to] evoke [their] own latent essence."<sup>11</sup> The Open Form manifesto published in *Przegląd Kulturalny* reiterated the concerns that Hansen had presented in Otterlo, asserting that the conventions of the [Open Form] will imply the activity defined (as) 'passe-partout' to the changes taking place in space."<sup>12</sup> Denoting a master key that provides universal access, the Open Form would be a "passe-partout" that would provide universal access, as it were, to the dynamic processes of life; it would allow inhabitants to shape its spaces, rather than impose a single aesthetic or programmatic vision, such as the "abstract Master-Plan" that Hansen identified with the Closed Form.<sup>13</sup>

A decade earlier, Hansen was living in Paris on a French government stipend between 1948–1950, apprenticing with neo-Cubist painter Fernand Léger and CIAM architect

Pierre Jeanneret, who was Le Corbusier's cousin. He had, by that point, completed the first three years of his architecture diploma at the Warsaw Polytechnic, where Hansen had met his future wife, Zofia, when both were studying under architect Romuald Gutt.<sup>14</sup> In July 1949, Hansen accompanied Jeanneret to the seventh CIAM meeting in Bergamo, where Le Corbusier presented a series of tapestries that he had designed for "a commercial project called *La Renaissance de la tapisserie française*."<sup>15</sup> According to Joan Ockman, "[t]he virtue of tapestries, in [Le Corbusier's] view, was the ease with which they could be rolled up and transferred from one wall to another."<sup>16</sup> Hansen rejected the notion of standardized decorations and openly criticized Le Corbusier during the plenary session of Commission II, which focused on the topic of the synthesis of the arts. He proclaimed that "[e]ach sculpture and each painting has only one optimum place on earth,"<sup>17</sup> and furthermore contended that modern artists and designers are still working in "the spirit of the [B]aroque"; according to Hansen, "[t]hey do things in the air, like branches that are not nourished for life."<sup>18</sup> These remarks evoke Strzemiński and Kbro's theory of Unism, specifically through the use of the term "Baroque," revealing the influences from the interwar Polish avant-garde on what Hansen would develop a decade later as the Open Form. In Paris, he befriended painter Lech Kunka, who was also apprenticing with Léger on the same French government stipend. Kunka, significantly, had studied with Strzemiński at the Academy of Fine Arts in Łódź, and Hansen later recalled in the memoir of his travels to the West (1999) that the painter "shared...everything he learned from Strzemiński, who was his master – and there was a lot."<sup>19</sup> Through Kunka, Hansen "unknowingly [became] a student of Unism," as the Kraków avant-garde poet Julian Przyboś had designated him.<sup>20</sup>

*Strzemiński and Kbro's Revolutionary Beginnings*

Strzemiński and Kbro first met in 1916 at the Prokhorov Hospital in Moscow, where Kbro (née Katia von Kbro) was working as a nurse tending to Tsarist officers wounded in World War I. Strzemiński, who had studied military architecture in St. Petersburg at the Military Engineering-Technical University, was drafted into the Russian Imperial Army upon the outbreak of the war. He served as an officer on the Russian Western Front, where he was wounded by a grenade explosion on the frontlines near Minsk, losing an arm, a leg, and vision in one eye. Subsequently sent to Moscow to receive medical treatment, he was tended to by Kbro. Following the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, Strzemiński took classes at the newly established First Free State Art Studio (SVOMAS), the replacement for the Stroganov School of Technical Drawing, and studied with Suprematist painter Kazimir Malevich.<sup>21</sup> The burgeoning of the avant-garde around the revolutionary period stirred Strzemiński's artistic facilities. He participated in the Department of Plastic Arts of the People's Commissariat for Education

(IZO-Narkompros), established in early 1918 as the primary agency responsible for spreading the cultural content of the revolution throughout Russia. Strzemiński eventually became the head of IZO's Central Exhibitions Bureau, where he brushed shoulders with Constructivist artist Vladimir Tatlin, the head of IZO's Moscow department, which also included Malevich and abstract expressionist painter Wassily Kandinsky.

Following her stint as a nurse, Kobro began studying at the Moscow School of Painting, Sculpture and Architecture. The school transformed into the Second SVOMAS after the revolution, before transforming yet again into the Higher State Artistic and Technical Workshops (VKhUTEMAS) in 1920 through merging with the First SVOMAS. Kobro was in Tatlin's studio at the SVOMAS, and also studied with Cubist painter Nadezhda Udaltsova, who was Malevich's assistant.<sup>22</sup> Udaltsova, together with fellow Russian émigré Lyubov Popova, had studied in Paris (1912–1913) at the Académie de La Palette under Cubist painters Jean Metzinger and Henri Le Fauconnier. Upon returning to Moscow, Udaltsova and Popova became the two leading exponents of Cubism in Moscow's avant-garde circles. Immersed within the vibrant artistic milieu that had blossomed by the end of the 1910s, Kobro had earnestly absorbed the principles of both Constructivism and Cubism, through Tatlin and Udaltsova, respectively. However, it was Malevich who would prove to be the most significant influence on the development of Unism in the coming years.

Strzemiński and Kobro reconnected around this time and became romantically involved. The couple moved to Smolensk in 1920 to lead the art subsection of the Smolensk District Department of People's Education.<sup>23</sup> Malevich, who was teaching at the nearby Vitebsk Art School, formed the UNOVIS group together with students and other artists in Vitebsk. This group, which included some of the leading figures of the Russian avant-garde, such as Vera Ermolaeva, El Lissitzky, and Lazar Khidekel, aimed at advancing Suprematism into a comprehensive artistic program. In his treatise *The Non-Objective World* (1927), Malevich defines Suprematism as a mode of abstraction in which “the visual phenomena of the objective world are, in themselves, meaningless; the significant thing is feeling, as such, quite apart from the environment in which it is called forth.”<sup>24</sup> Abstraction for Malevich was a means through which to achieve pure pathos in art, to reach what he described as “a ‘desert’ in which nothing can be perceived but feeling.”<sup>25</sup> Through Suprematism, Strzemiński and Kobro aimed at “a [further] purification of art from alien means.”<sup>26</sup> In his “Notes on Russian Art,” published in the Polish avant-garde magazine *Zwrotnica* (1922), Strzemiński attributes Suprematism as “the first and...most powerful eruption of [modern] art”<sup>27</sup>; “the contents of [S]uprematism,” which feature abstract shapes seemingly floating against a neutral background, “are dynamic-cosmic events, occurring in unmeasured space; a harmony of the universe of forms which are organic in

their geometric[ity].”<sup>28</sup> In other words, Suprematist shapes are not representative or imitative of nature, but rather “organic” within a realm of pure abstraction, thereby allowing them to acquire an autonomous existence.

The problem that Strzemiński saw with Suprematism, however, was the movement's excess reliance on cosmic metaphor to ground its mode of abstraction. In his essay, “B = 2,” published in the journal of the Polish avant-garde Blok group (1924–1926), Strzemiński wrote that the “fault of [S]uprematism was that [in] attempting to discover the laws of cosmic organicity, it overlooked the fact that it was creating its own shape in dependence on the environment it wanted to overcome.”<sup>29</sup> Malevich had, in the end, drawn from the natural world as a source of abstraction by qualifying his work through cosmic metaphor in order to achieve pure pathos in art, rather than articulating an autonomous basis of form derived from the material conditions of a given artistic medium. According to Strzemiński, a modern artwork “should not be [an] unfinished unity, or contain anything beyond such unity...only one action is present, rather than 2 or more. Thus all non-constructural or chaotic works are banned out from the frontiers of art.”<sup>30</sup>

For instance, Strzemiński admired Malevich's *White on White* painting (1918) strictly for its material and formal qualities, rather than any metaphoric associations that Malevich might have had in mind. He observed that the rotated white square in Malevich's composition is perceived against a brighter white background due to the “difference in surface” that exists between figure and ground.<sup>31</sup> Despite this, the square inscribes a distance between the frame of the painting and the composition, thereby reintroducing illusionistic three-dimensional depth in a two-dimensional medium. It furthermore evokes such tropes as infinity, weightlessness, and non-objectivity that have nothing necessarily to do with painting. What Strzemiński nevertheless recognized in Suprematism was the possibility of painting as an autonomous medium; painterly effects could be generated from the discipline's medium specificity: surface, texture, color, and the rendering of two-dimensional form. The integration of figure and ground in the case of painting, and object and space in the case of sculpture, would become the primary dimension through which Unist works were executed.

#### *Unism and the Interwar Polish Avant-Garde*

Following the “New Art Exhibition” in Vilnius that Strzemiński organized with Constructivist painter Vytautas Kairiūkštis in 1923, Strzemiński and Kobro moved to present-day Poland. The couple shifted between the towns of Szczekociny, Brzeziny, and Koluszki (the latter two just outside of Łódź), where Strzemiński taught drawing classes at local secondary schools; eventually, they settled in Łódź in 1931. During this time, Strzemiński wrote his book, *Unism in Painting* (1928); he referred to the unresolved “dualism” in Baroque painting between

color and line, in which “a line is a sign of a force,”<sup>32</sup> rather than a graphic divider on a pictorial plane that “cut[s] one color from another.”<sup>33</sup> Strzemiński argued that the tension between painting’s material conditions and its expressive function carried into Impressionist painting, in which “contour lines are broken by color.”<sup>34</sup> This unresolved dualism continued into Cubism; the dynamic forces that are represented in Cubist paintings are, according to Strzemiński, “unconnected with the frame; [they have their] own center of gravity, unconnected with the borders [of the frame] and contrasting with them.”<sup>35</sup> Seeking to counter the unresolved dualism that he perceived to be the legacy of the Baroque, Strzemiński wanted to merge painting’s expressive function and its material conditions into a single, “unanimous action.”<sup>36</sup>

In his *Unist Compositions* from the 1930s, Strzemiński articulated what he believed was painting’s essentialism, related to “the innate qualities of the picture (the square of its sides, the flatness of the surface).”<sup>37</sup> Stripped of any figurative motifs, these paintings exhibit the repetition of a single graphic element, such as dots, hatch marks, or stringcourses of paint. Strzemiński eliminated any three-dimensional depth from the pictorial plane in order to integrate figure and ground. In doing so, he sought to create an “organic plastic entity” that was characterized by the “flat optical unity”<sup>38</sup> of the canvas. Strzemiński considered time to be a non-plastic element; therefore, it is “alien to painting.”<sup>39</sup>

In contrast to painting, sculpture, according to Kobra and Strzemiński in their jointly published book, *Composing Space/Calculating Space-Time Rhythms* (1931), has no “natural limit”<sup>40</sup> and “should unite with infinite space.”<sup>41</sup> Sculpture’s “fundamental law...should be that of its unity with space.”<sup>42</sup> However, unlike Baroque sculpture that “flies into space [without]...creat[ing] a continuum with it,” as the couple write, Unist sculpture “melt[s] into space to make a unified whole.”<sup>43</sup> Sculpture, furthermore, “is not just a plastic phenomenon – its conception includes the coexistence of space and time.”<sup>44</sup> Its essentialism thus extends beyond the non-temporal and purely plastic domain of painting.

In her *Spatial compositions* from the 1920s and 1930s, Kobra constructed geometric sculptures from steel planes folded in perpendicular relation to one another that she often painted in a polychromatic scheme based on primary colors. She would first divide up a single plane in two dimensions according to a mathematical formula, before extending that formula to other planes in three dimensions. Through the shifting orientation of the viewer, and, accentuated by polychromy, new profiles of Kobra’s *Spatial compositions* emerge under a parallax effect, thereby integrating object and space.

In 1930, Strzemiński and Kobra, along with other co-founders of the a.r. group (1929–1936), including Przyboś and abstract geometric painter Henryk Stażewski, established the Museum of Art in Łódź. Strzemiński’s main intervention in the museum was the *Neoplastic Room*,

which he designed in 1948 as an exhibition space for the works of the a.r. group, particularly for Kobra’s *Spatial compositions*. Having painted the surfaces of the *Neoplastic Room* in a polychromatic scheme based on primary colors, similarly, to Kobra’s sculptures, Strzemiński sought to integrate Kobra’s work with the surrounding space in order to provide an optimum setting for her exhibited works and that also invoked the idea of abstract, infinite space. Hansen would later reiterate the same intention of integrating an artwork with its environment during his outburst in Bergamo against Le Corbusier’s *Rennaissance de la tapisserie française*.

Shortly after World War II, Strzemiński co-founded the State Higher School of Visual Arts in Łódź, which later became the Academy of Fine Arts, where one of his students was Kunka. In 1949 Socialist Realism was declared the official aesthetic doctrine in Poland. The new policy, which was announced by Minister of Culture Włodzimierz Sokorski at the Fourth General Meeting of the Union of Polish Artists (ZPAP) in Katowice, effectively censured the avant-garde. At the request of Sokorski, Strzemiński was removed from both his teaching post and the ZPAP. Many of Strzemiński and Kobra’s works exhibited at the Museum of Art in Łódź were either destroyed or removed by Stalinist authorities the following year; most notably, the walls of the *Neoplastic Room* were whitewashed. Bois has noted that the censuring of Strzemiński and Kobra’s work during the Stalinist period “condemned [the couple] to a double oblivion.”<sup>45</sup> When World War II broke out, Strzemiński and Kobra fled east (to present-day Belarus); they returned to Łódź the following year, only to find that their apartment had been ransacked by German soldiers and that many of Kobra’s sculptures had been destroyed. Only a handful of her original works survived, along with photographs and “mathematical specification[s]” that have allowed her sculptures to be accurately reconstructed,<sup>46</sup> only to have then been censured under Stalinism. In Paris, Kunka would have thus conveyed to Hansen what he had learned from Strzemiński up to the *Neoplastic Room* before it was destroyed.

#### *Towards Open Form*

After his outburst in Bergamo, Oskar Hansen was invited to participate in a CIAM International Summer School in London, organized by the Modern Architecture Research Group (MARS) and hosted at the Architectural Association (AA). There, Hansen designed a housing scheme that received “special merit” from a jury that consisted of “two members of the [executive] council of CIAM, Professor C[ornelis] van Eesteren from Amsterdam and Dr. Ernesto [Nathan] Rogers from Milan; [as well as] the Principal of the [AA], Robert Jordan; and the Director of the School, Maxwell Fry.”<sup>47</sup> The jury rated Hansen’s design as “the most satisfactory of all the Housing Schemes prepared in the School.”<sup>48</sup> In Hansen’s proposal, buildings are pushed to the perimeter of the site, framing a park in the center. His design evinces what would become

a central concept in the Open Form – namely, life set in relief to architecture’s forms (in this case the communal life of the estate). Rogers subsequently offered Hansen a job, which would have required the young architect to stay in London. He warned Hansen that the kind of modern design that the Pole proposed for the Summer School would not be possible back East with the specter of Socialist Realism. After spending another year in Paris, Hansen nonetheless choose to return to Poland, feeling that it was his duty to help rebuild the country from its ruined state after the war.<sup>49</sup>

At the end of the Summer School, the students were invited to the studio of abstract sculptor Henry Moore, located in the hamlet of Perry Green, in Hertfordshire. Hansen was intrigued with the way that Moore’s curved, streamlined forms – typically executed in bronze or stone – permit space to flow in and around the sculptural mass, or, alternatively, give the impression of the mass melting into space.

Despite his appreciation for Moore’s forms, Hansen perceived them as too solid, their profiles too clearly defined. He later reflected on his encounter with Moore in preparation for his exhibition, *In the Circle of Open Form*, mounted at the Academy of Fine Arts in Warsaw in 1986:

“There are some elements [in Moore’s work] of the Open Form, but, even so, all of his work remains object-based. There is some progress, as in [the work] of Katarzyna Kobro. What I have in mind is that we do not deal just with a sculpture as something solid, but also with the air which penetrates it. If I were to name a sculptor who inspired me, then, undoubtedly, Moore’s search for the continuity of interior and exterior in his sculptures as well as their structural character, that sculptor would have been him.”<sup>50</sup>

With these statements, Hansen expressed his desire to dissolve the boundaries between interior and exterior in order to allow for their interpenetration. He returned to Poland in the spring of 1950; as Rogers had predicted, his homecoming came at the most inopportune time for a young designer steeped in Western modernism. In 1952, just before he was about to receive his master’s diploma, Hansen, together with his friend Lechosław Rosiński, submitted a proposal to redesign the interior of a theater on Nowy Świat Street, intended for conversion into Warsaw’s temporary city hall. In an affair that Hansen referred to in his memoir as the “Trial under the Tin Roof” as it was held in the “Tin-Roof Palace,” an eighteenth-century Baroque palace belonging to Warsaw’s Royal Castle complex,<sup>51</sup> the young designers were reprimanded by a jury that was headed by Warsaw’s chief architect, Józef Sigalin, who had overseen the city’s reconstruction after the war. Hansen and Rosiński’s design had failed to comply with the dictates of Socialist Realism. In a remarkably Unist gesture, they exhibited an ideogram of the building’s stress vectors inscribed on one of the walls above a doorway, replacing the decorative neoclassical pediment with a graphic element that integrated the building’s structural and

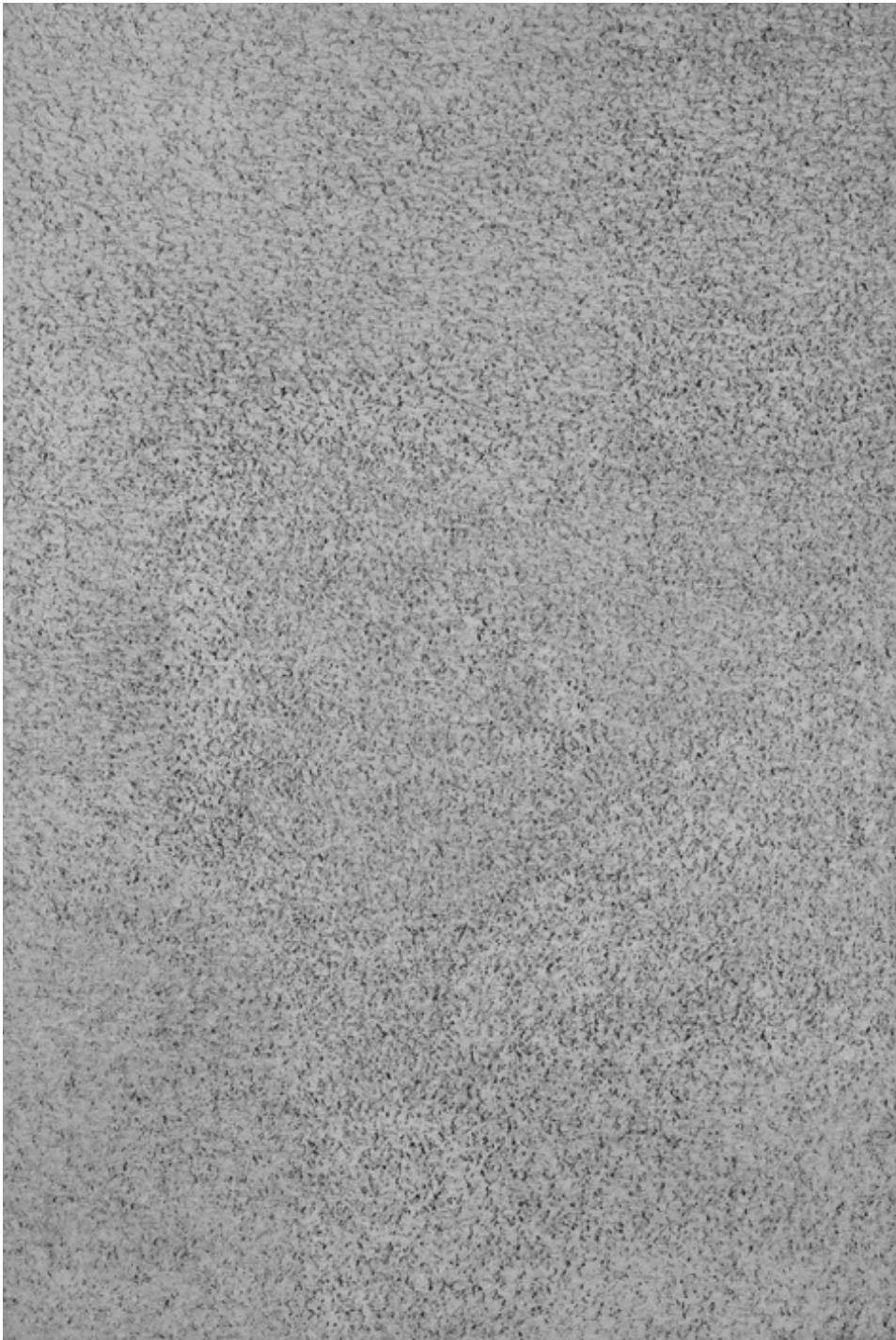
visual features, its material conditions and expressive function. Hansen and Rosiński would have been stripped of their right to practice architecture had it not been for the intervention of Szymon Syrkus, who vouched for Hansen. The two were acquainted through their affiliation with CIAM, as well as through their connection to Sołtan.

Following the “Trial,” Hansen retreated from design practice; he mostly painted and sculpted in his home studio for the next several years while Zofia worked in a state planning office. During this time, he also began teaching at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, beginning in 1950 as an assistant to Sołtan in the Faculty of Interior Design, and later as a full-time lecturer in the Faculty of Sculpture. For the next three decades until his retirement in 1983, Hansen led the “Solids and Planes Composition Studio” (renamed the “Visual Structures Studio” in 1970) and would work on architectural projects throughout the rest of his life, oftentimes in collaboration with Zofia.

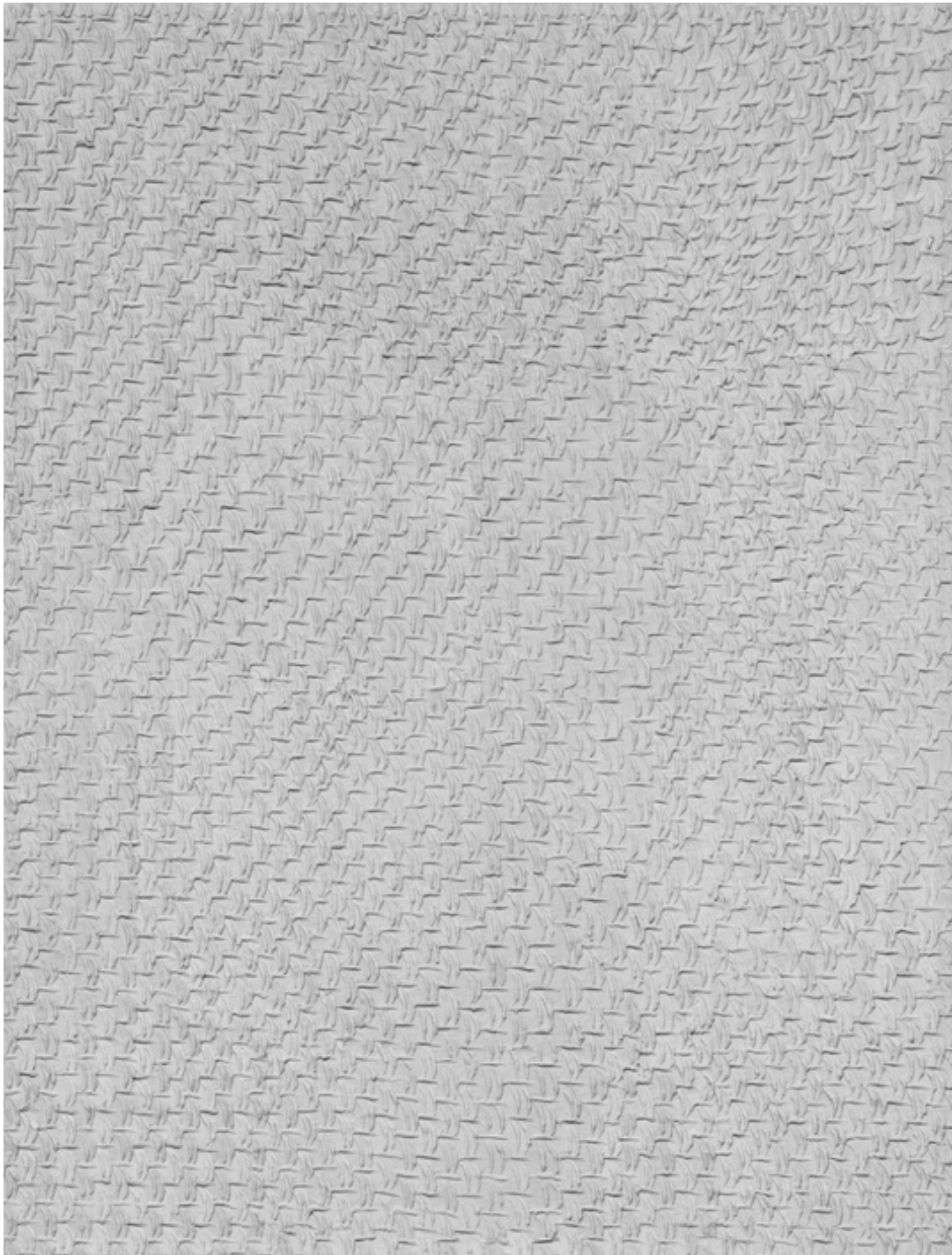
### *The Road*

One of those projects, the first in which the Hansens applied their Open Form approach and that reveals the strongest Unist influence, was for a memorial at Auschwitz-Birkenau. The proposal that they worked on for the *Road* (1958) was part of a competition organized in 1956 by the International Auschwitz Committee (IAC), which consisted of former prisoners. To attract attention from abroad and the participation from Western artists, the IAC invited Henry Moore to chair the selection committee; other judges included Bakema and Gutt.

The Hansens submitted the design for the *Road* as part of a team that consisted of sculptor Jerzy Jarnuszkiewicz, graphic artist Julian Pałka, photographer Edmund Kupiecki, and Rosiński. The team proposed a seventy-meter-wide, one-kilometer-long tarmac road that would intersect the Birkenau grounds at an angle oblique to the camp’s grid. It would slice through what Oskar Hansen later described in the French journal *L’Architecture d’aujourd’hui* (1965) as the “horrible urbanism” of the site.<sup>52</sup> The *Road* would begin at the camp’s eastern end, offset from the main gate where trains carrying prisoners had passed through, and terminate at the former two crematoria to the west. The indentations of the former barracks, latrines, train tracks, and other elements intersected by the *Road* would forever remain ossified in the tarmac. Everything else would be reclaimed by nature. The *Road* would be a purely horizontal intervention on the Birkenau grounds, with the only vertical elements being the leftover remnants of the camp. The urban-architectural “machine of death”<sup>53</sup> would dissipate and eventually be overtaken by trees and other vegetation, thereby reconstituting life into the site. Denuded of any representational content, the *Road* would be a space where visitors could perform commemorative acts, such as lighting votive candles or laying wreaths as in the Christian tradition, or placing visitation stones as in the Jewish tradition, or for visitors simply to use it as a gathering site.



Władysław Strzemiński,  
*Unist Composition 10*, 1931,  
oil on canvas, 74 cm x 50 cm  
Source: Ewa Sapka-Pawliczak  
& Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi



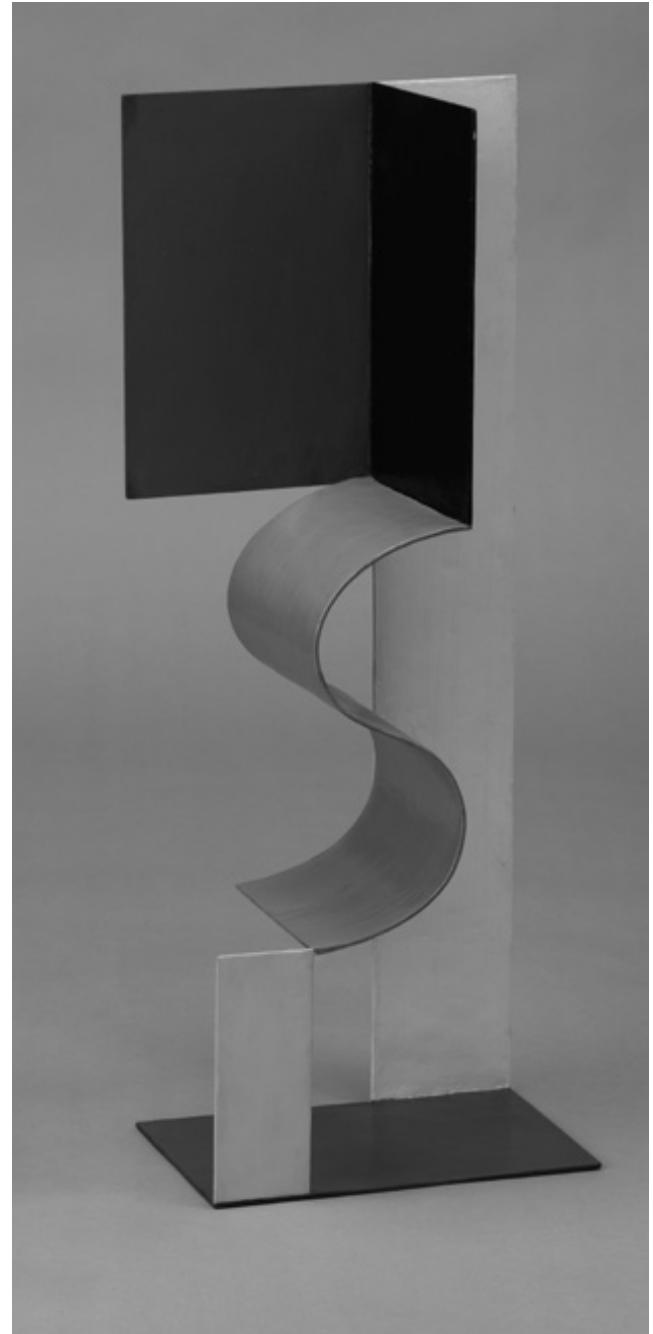
Władysław Strzemiński,  
*Unist Composition 11*, 1931,  
oil on canvas, 50 cm x 38 cm  
Source: Ewa Sapka-Pawliczak  
& Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi



Katarzyna Kobro,  
*Spatial Composition (4)*, 1929,  
 oil on steel, 40 cm x 64 cm x 40 cm  
 Source: Ewa Sapka-Pawliczak  
 & Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi



Katarzyna Kobro,  
*Spatial Composition (6)*, 1931,  
 oil on steel, 64 cm x 25 cm x 15 cm  
 Source: Ewa Sapka-Pawliczak  
 & Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi

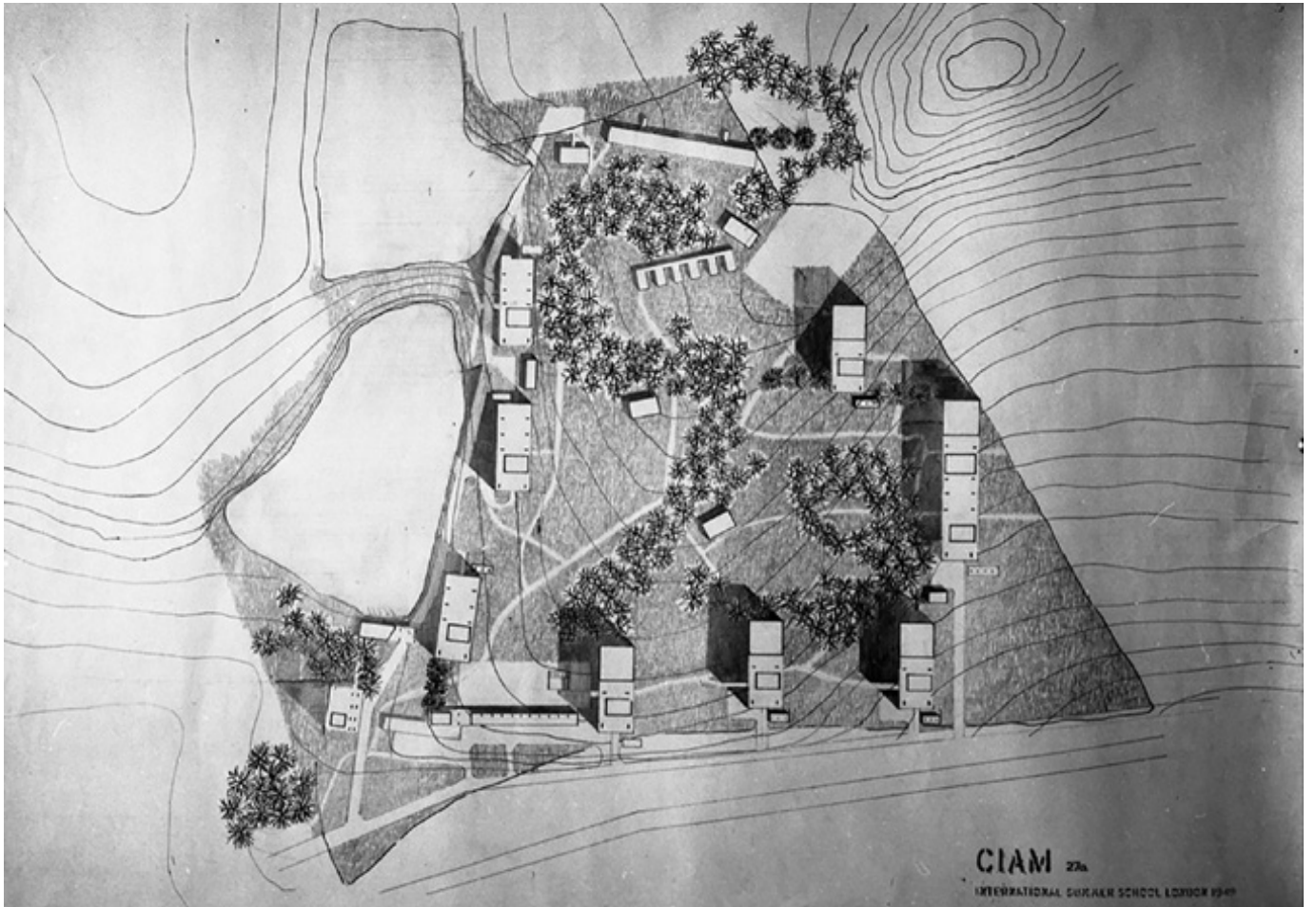


Władysław Strzemiński,  
*Neoplastic Room*, 1948,  
 reconstructed in 1960 by Bolesław Utkin  
 Source: Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi

Oskar Hansen, model of  
CIAM summer school  
housing project, 1949  
Source: Hansen Family Archives



Oskar Hansen at Henry Moore's  
Studio in Perry Green, 1949  
Source: Hansen Family Archives

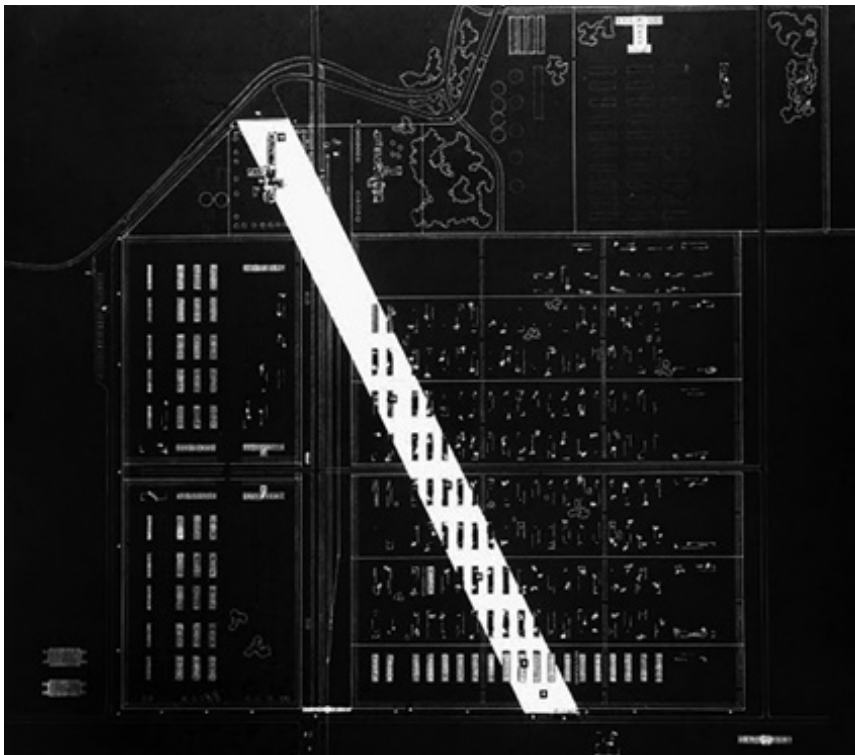


Oskar Hansen, plan of  
CIAM summer school  
housing project, 1949  
Source: Hansen Family Archives



Oskar Hansen, mockup of the *Road*,  
model of entrance into Birkenau, 1958  
Source: Archiwum Oskara Hansena,  
Muzeum Akademii Sztuk  
Pięknych w Warszawie

Oskar Hansen & Lechosław Rosiński,  
*Warsaw Temporary City Hall*  
 (Interior Color Scheme), 1952, ink and  
 gouache on cardboard, 38.5 cm x 49.7 cm  
 Source: Hansen Family Archives



Oskar Hansen, plan of the *Road*, 1958  
 Source: Hansen Family Archives

The team's proposal countered the logic of the Closed Form – what Krauss would later term in her essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field” (1979) as “the logic of the monument.”<sup>54</sup> The *Road* would be a place for commemorative acts, rather than a “commemorative representation”<sup>55</sup> whose meanings were already imbued into the memorial. Due to the oblique angle of the *Road*, visitors would walk down a path that was not marked in the camp's layout and that no prisoner had ever walked toward their death. The angle inscribes a distance between the Birkenau grounds and the life reconstituted onto the site, similarly, to the distance that the rotated white square in Malevich's *White on White* inscribes between the frame of the painting and the composition. In both cases, a new background is introduced that negates the logic of the conditions existing prior to any intervention, whether the Birkenau grounds or a canvas. This new background becomes infinitely extensible; in the case of the *Road*, it allows for the site to become a “passe-partout” that provides universal access to the dynamic processes of life that are set in relief to the *Road* itself.

The selection committee unanimously choose the *Road*, with Moore having stated that the scheme was “exceptionally brilliant.”<sup>56</sup> Nevertheless, it was rejected by the IAC on the grounds that it was too abstract. The Hansens opposed any figurative representation on the site. Instead, they wanted to not only foreground visitors' commemorative acts, but visitors themselves, who would, as Hansen would later write in his Open Form manifesto, “walk through [the Open Form], and not around it. Diverse individuality, in all its randomness and bustling, will become the wealth of this space, its participant.”<sup>57</sup>

Before submitting their final design, the team worked on a first iteration, called the *Slab*, in which they proposed to petrify the soil surrounding the former two crematoria on the camp's western end. *Cut out within the Slab* would be a sanctuary with ashes in which light from the ceiling would be filtered by a red crystal above a cinerary urn. The first proposal made it past the first round of judging; however, the team became increasingly dissatisfied with its object-like status, in which one bounded figure framed another bounded figure, thereby reinforcing the logic of the Closed Form. Furthermore, according to Hansen in an interview published in the Polish journal *Architektura* (1977), it was

“too traditionally Christian”<sup>58</sup>; instead of “forgiving at the altar, we should try to experience what four million did before us.”<sup>59</sup> Hansen also later stated in his book, *Towards Open Form / Ku Formie Otwartej* (2005), that the first iteration's “immobility, or even its passivity, its anachronistic nature, made it impossible for it to become a contemporary, universal symbol.”<sup>60</sup> The team recognized that the only appropriate intervention on the site would be to depart from a formalist mode of expression and to open the camp to new life. In this way, architecture's expressive function would be integrated with the life set in relief to its forms, rather than with those forms themselves or their structural features, as in the case of Hansen and Rosiński's proposed theater redesign on Nowy Świat Street.

### Conclusion

Reflecting on Strzemiński and Unism, Hansen stated in his book *Zobaczyć świat* (2005) that the artist's *Unist compositions* were “absorptive backgrounds” in which figure and ground are integrated based on...contrast.<sup>61</sup> They “gain value under the criteria of [the] Open Form,” as he writes, “when they become backgrounds displaying life events.”<sup>62</sup> Architecture's content, its essentialism, according to Hansen, is “life...the fundamental value of which are individual, but integrated events.”<sup>63</sup> As an absorptive background that integrates and “displays...life events,” the Open Form allows people to “throw off the glasses of the Closed Form”<sup>64</sup> and to “See the World,” as the title of Hansen's book suggests, to see life.

If sculpture opens the Closed Form, which for Strzemiński was the essence of painting, then architecture is the space that it opens into. That space, however, is not conceived as abstract, infinite space, but space that has its own “natural limit” – namely, the life set into relief to architecture's forms, which gained a universal dimension with the *Road* as a “passe-partout.” When Hansen proclaimed at the seventh CIAM meeting in Bergamo that modern artists and designers were still working in “the spirit of the [B]aroque,” who “do things in the air, like branches that are not nourished for life,” he was pointing to an unresolved dualism in modern architecture between the Closed and the Open Form, between branches that are not nourished for life, and the life that provides nourishment.

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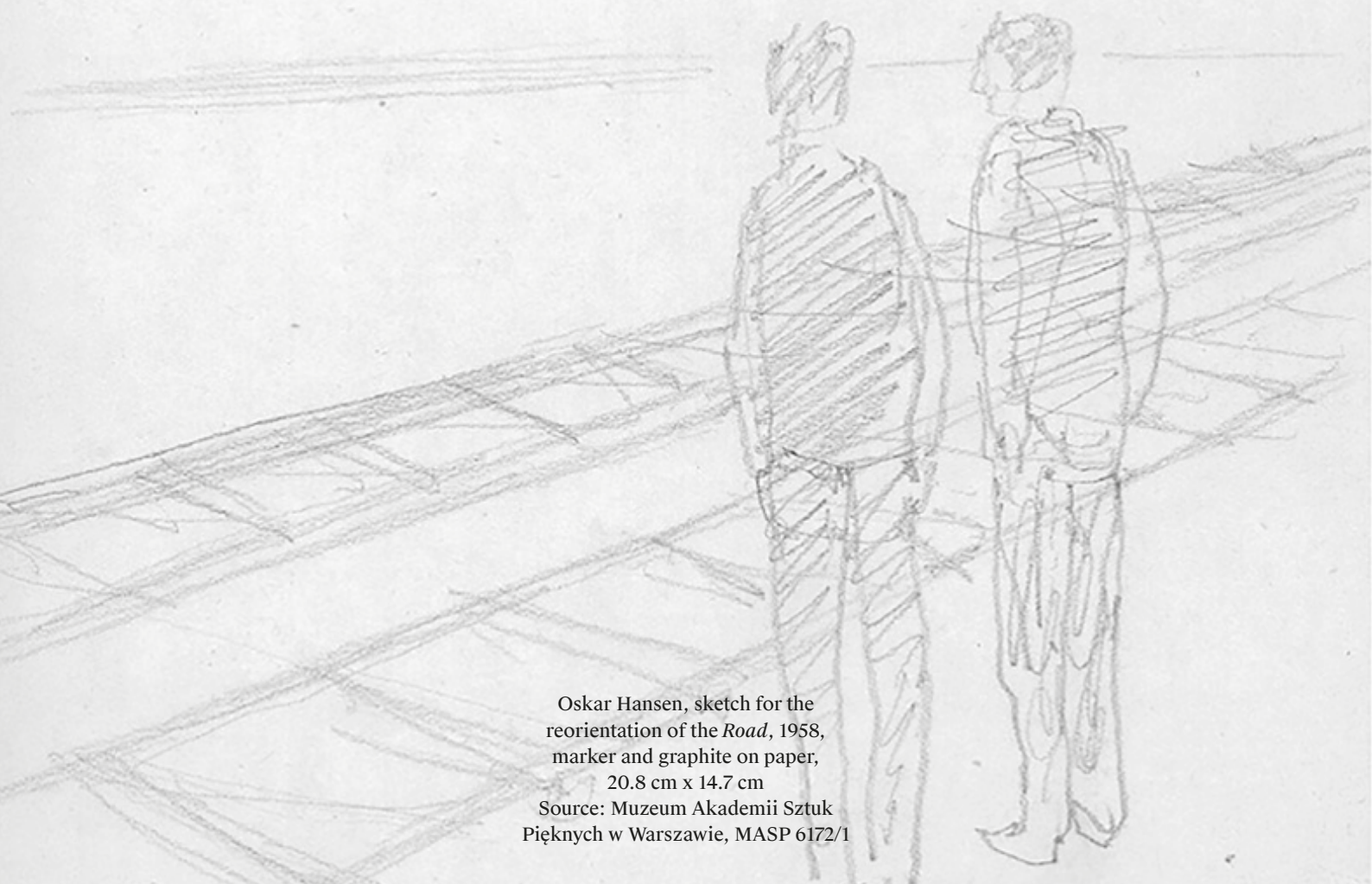
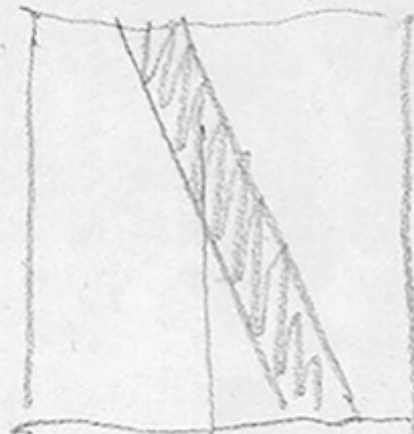
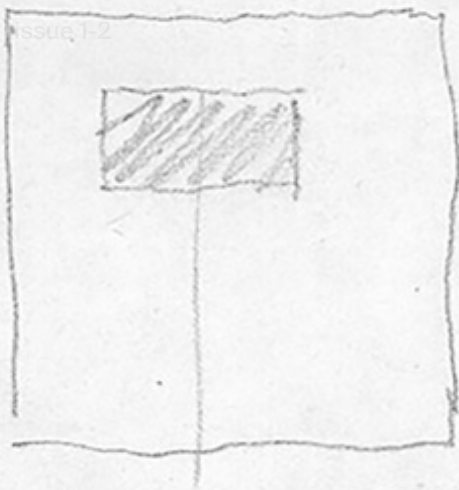
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Oskar Hansen, sketch for the reorientation of the *Road*, 1958, marker and graphite on paper, 20.8 cm x 14.7 cm  
Source: Muzeum Akademii Sztuk Pięknych w Warszawie, MASP 6172/1

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