

## POLISH AVANT-GARDE, 1920-1945 AT THE UBU GALLERY

From April 9 to May 16, 1998, the Ubu Gallery (in Association with Galerie Berinson, Berlin, and Gilles Gheerbrant) presented an exhibit of books, graphic design, paintings, photography, collages, periodicals, and posters, representing the many avant-garde movements that flourished in quick succession in Poland from the 1920s to 1940s, such as Formism, Constructivism, Unism, and Functionalism.

Except for a brief association with the Formists after he returned from Russia in 1918, the slightly older Witkacy (1885-1939) refused to join any of these movements and remained a skeptical outsider mistrusting the various avant-gardes, perhaps because he could not share their utopian dreams about the future or their belief in technology and machinery.

Among the many talented artists on display at the Ubu outstanding were Władysław Strzemiński (1893-1952) and his wife Katarzyna Kobro (1898-1951), who founded the Constructivist journals *Blok* and *Praesens*, and Mieczysław Szczuka (1898-1927) and Teresa Żarnower (1895-1950), who edited the communist publication *Dźwignia* (The Lever).

Many of the artists represented in the exhibit were inspired by the cinema and worked in film. Under the influence of Walter Ruttmann's *Symphony of a City* (1927), Kazimierz Podsadecki (1904-1970) created cinematographic collages. In 1932 Podsadecki organized with Janusz Maria Brzeski (1907-1957) the Film Studio of the Polish Avant-Garde. Brzeski's work shown in the exhibit includes two witty satirical photomontage cycles, *Sex* (1930) and *The Birth of the Robot* (1933), each of five pictures. Starting as a technocrat, Brzeski—under the influence of Čapek, Zamyatin, Jasiński, and Huxley—ended as a catastrophist. The writer and experimental filmmaker Stefan Themerson (1910-1988) (See SEEP Vol. 16, no. 3, pp. 91-3) created collages of frames from his films *Pharmacy* (1930) and *Europa* (1932), based on a poem by the Futurist Anatol Stern.

Also featured in the exhibit are graphics by Henryk Berlewi (1894-1967), creator of "Mechano-faktura," painting based on abstract geometry; and book illustrations, woodcuts, and typographical design by the Expressionist Jerzy Hulewicz (1888-1941) and the painter and poet Tytus Czyżewski (1880-1945).

The exhibit at the Ubu Gallery conveys the vitality and variety of the Polish Avant-Garde during the inter-war and war years, a darkening period that made it increasingly difficult for these artists to work in their homeland and scattered many of them to Berlin, Paris, London, and New York. Their accomplishments are all the more remarkable.