

Erna Rosenstein

I Can Repeat Only Unconsciously

In *Displaying the Marvelous*, Lewis Kachur offers an interesting interpretation of the famed *International Surrealist Exhibition* organized in Paris in 1938. According to Kachur, it was a response to the Nazi-organized *Entartete Kunst* [Degenerate Art] show opened in Munich in 1937, and which later toured the Third Reich. Its mocking presentation of avant-garde art as a vast garbage dump provoked the Surrealists to their own, political reaction. Polish avant-garde artist Erna Rosenstein, born in Lwów in 1913, saw both exhibitions, the latter in Berlin in 1938.

She was perfectly aware of the political implications of Surrealism. For Rosenstein, a member of the pre-war Communist underground, the choice of that particular language was an expression of protest against the official cultural policy of the post-war Polish state. In the 1950s, Surrealism was regarded by the Communist Party as one of its most malicious enemies.

For Rosenstein, what mattered was not the 'work' itself, but working, the process. As she put it herself, 'I can repeat only unconsciously'. She referred to the trace of pencil on paper as a 'scratch', and to the names that we give to things as a 'break', aware of the chasm between language and reality. It is echoed in the titles of her paintings: *What Will It Be?*, *I Don't Know Where From and Where To*, *Flying Beyond the Name*.

In Poland, she witnessed the murder of her parents during World War II, a fact that left a permanent mark on her work. She kept returning to the moment by attempting to depict the face, hand, and scream. In Rosenstein's art identity is never integrated. The body is a source of life, of pleasure, but at the same time it is just an object, a piece of waste, within which we can see screws, gears, hammers, and stairways.

Erna Rosenstein and her husband, the literary critic Artur Sandauer, were frequent guests in Henryk Stażewski's studio on Świerczewskiego Street in Warsaw. Like Stażewski himself, they were associated with the Warsaw avant-garde gallery Krzywe Koło, attended exhibition openings at Galeria Foksal, and participated in the artistic *plein-air*s in Osieki. They were also friends of Miron Białoszewski, the poet. Rosenstein shares with Stażewski a striving to affirm the world. There is also an affinity between her work and that of Edward Krasiński, who shared the studio with Stażewski starting in the late 1960s. The way she hung her objects on the walls and arranged them on pieces of furniture may have much in common with the 'perception traps' set by Krasiński throughout the space of the Świerczewskiego St. studio.

In this exhibition we show works from around 1960 to the late '90s, from Rosenstein's former studio in Warsaw. They are now in the collection of Adam Sandauer.

The exhibition comprises two parts. In the space of the Foksal Gallery Foundation on Górskiego St. in Warsaw we present paintings and drawings. On display in the Instytut Awangardy [Avant-garde Institute], the former Stażewski/Krasiński studio, are objects, ready-made paintings and assemblages of plastics, painted chocolate boxes, doorbells, bottle caps, and springs. Until recently treated as margin to the artist's work, they are shown here as being central to it. They surrounded her in her studio, accompanied her as unique pieces of jewellery, blurring the boundaries between art and life. Once they formed a whole; today, irreversibly altered, they demand a reinterpretation. We want them to visit this place a while, to 'fly in through the window', to show their fangs and claws.

Exhibition curators: Dorota Jarecka, Barbara Piwowarska

Opening May 13, 2011

Avant-garde Institute | Edward Krasiński Studio
Al. Solidarności 64, apt. 118, Warsaw
6:00 p. m.

Foksal Gallery Foundation
Górskiego 1a, Warsaw
8:00 p. m.

Exhibition open through July 2, 2011

Foksal Gallery Foundation: Tuesday – Friday 3:00 – 6:00 p. m.

Avant-garde Institute | Edward Krasiński Studio: Wednesday – Friday 4:00 p. m. – 7:00 p. m.

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Erna Rosenstein was born May 17, 1913 in Lwów (now Lviv). She spent her childhood in Cracow. Between 1932–34 she studied at the Wiener Frauenakademie in Vienna, collaborating during that time with the Vienna Workers' Association. She then studied painting at the Cracow Academy of Fine Arts (with Jadwiga Maziarska and Tadeusz Kantor) from 1934–37. From 1936 informally affiliated with the First Grupa Krakowska painting collective, she also worked with Teatr Cricot and co-founded a Communist cell at the Academy. In 1937–38 she traveled to Paris (along with Sasza Blonder, among others), where she was strongly influenced by the *International Surrealist Exhibition* as well as by the *Entartete Kunst* show in Berlin, which she saw on her way back through Germany. She debuted as a painter in Cracow's Dom Plastyków in 1939. In the same year she was put on trial for participating in an illegal May Day parade. When the war broke out, she went to Lwów, where she was active in the Visual Artists' Union. Following the German capture of Lwów, she was forced to the ghetto, from which she escaped in 1942. She survived the war by hiding under various aliases. In 1945 she became a member of ZZPAP (Polish Visual Artists' Trade Union) and joined the Polish Workers' Party (PPR). She participated in the exhibition of Grupa Młodych Plastyków in Cracow in 1946, associating herself with the fraction called the 'moderns'. In 1947–48 she went to Switzerland and Paris, where she saw Surrealist exhibitions (at the Galerie Maeght, for example). In 1948 she took part in the 1st Exhibition of Modern Art at Cracow's Pałac Sztuki. During a stay in Paris in 1949 she became involved with Artur Sandauer, with whom she moved in permanently in Warsaw. She did not show until 1955, dismissing the Socialist-Realist period as 'schematism'. In 1955 she took part in one of the first modern-art exhibitions of the 'Thaw' initiated by Stalin's death, the Exhibition of Nine Painters in Cracow, then in the 2nd (1957) and 3rd (1959) Exhibitions of Modern Art in Warsaw. She co-founded the Second Grupa Krakowska in 1957, thereafter participating in all its group shows. In 1958 she had a solo exhibition at the Galeria Sztuki Nowoczesnej Krzywe Koło in Warsaw. She gained recognition for her 1967 exhibition at Warsaw's National Gallery Zachęta, with exhibition design by Tadeusz Kantor. She participated in numerous shows in Poland and abroad, among them the 'Golden Grape' Symposia in Zielona Góra and Tadeusz Kantor's happenings *Cricotage* (1965) and the *Panoramic Sea Happening* (1967). She was awarded the Cyprian Kamil Norwid Art Critics' Award (1976) and the Jan Cybis Prize (1996).

She was a creator of paintings, assemblages, drawings, objects, and artist's books. She published seven volumes of poetry, among them *Ślad* [Trace] (1972) or *Spoza granic mowy* [From Beyond the Bounds of Speech] (1976). She died on November 10, 2004 in Warsaw. Her work is in the collections of the National Museums of Warsaw, Wrocław, and Cracow, and of the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, among other institutions.