

CANONIZATION OF THE AVANT-GARDE: ON THE PUBLICATION AVANT-GARDE MUSEUM

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The release of this exquisite publication immediately gives rise to the question: why did we have to wait for it so long? Meanwhile, when reading the book, we are provoked to enquire whether the main thesis that is the lead of the study can withstand criticism.

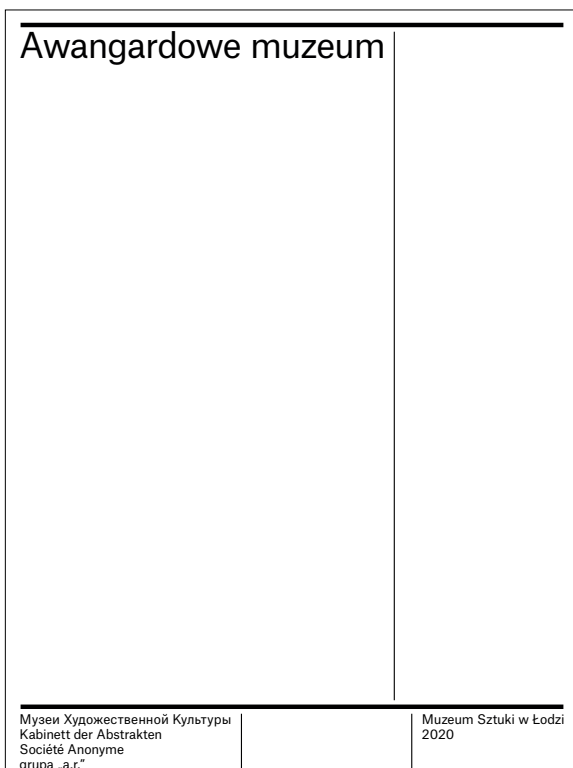
Avant-garde Museum edited by Agnieszka Pindera and Jarosław Suchan was published by the Museum of Art in Lodz in 2020 preceding an exhibition to be launched in autumn 2021. The main purpose is to juxtapose three museum projects: the Museums of Artistic Culture in Soviet Russia, the activity of the Société Anonyme in the USA, and Poland's 'a.r.' Group. Each aspired to create a museum allowing Avant-garde artists to re-legalize their art. In each it was the artists who were to be concept authors, and they were also to head its implementation. The latter element is to distinguish the discussed projects from others in which Avant-garde art was collected and displayed by private collectors or the already operating institutions. The Editors assumed that only museums designed and implemented by the artists themselves were truly of Avant-garde character, however, it was precisely through them that the Avant-garde institutionalised itself. The studying of the mechanisms of this self-institutionalisation is the main purpose of the publication (and the exhibition). The book spans four areas: the concept, collection, organisation, and the display. These issues are not separated in the research; contrariwise, they seem to be purposefully interlaced, which undoubtedly is one of the book's values, though at times leading to some confusion.

The example of the latter is the additional inclusion of the Hannover Kabinett der Abstrakten in the study, despite

it having enjoyed a totally different status than the three other projects. It was not a museum institution, but merely a display space for Avant-garde art; having been commissioned by the Museum director, although designed by an artist, it was located within a regular museum. It seems that the main reason for including the Cabinet of Abstraction in the publication was the need to have a point of reference for the Lodz Neoplastic Room, and to expose its value as a display space for an Avant-garde art collection.

The discussed publication has been divided into three sections: research studies, source texts, as well as the catalogue of documents and works meant to be displayed during the exhibition. Both the second and the third segments constitute a precious overview of materials not readily available, demonstrating the course of the theoretical debate on the *Avant-garde museum* projects, also illustrating the attempts at their implementation. Beyond any doubt, this selection is of historical and educational value, facilitating any further studies of the topic and dissemination of detailed knowledge of it.

The first section contains 12 papers: penetrating historical studies giving a broad research perspective on the four above-mentioned projects as well as on their interrelations. The majority of them had been commissioned purposefully for the discussed book or had resulted from an earlier research project implemented by the Museum of Art in Lodz. This part of the publication opens with the paper by Jarosław Suchan who, when analysing the four cases, also illustrates the factual purpose of the discussed book. The goal is to identify the unique quality of Avant-garde museology: both its targets and praxes. This essay is followed by the



papers by Maria Gough and Masha Chlenova dealing with the Soviet Museums of Artistic Culture, whose first concepts date from 1918, followed in subsequent years by the establishment of temporary institutions which, however, soon ceased to operate. The arrangement of the papers in the publication aims both at chronologically approaching the issue, and at establishing a genealogy assuming that the searches of the Constructivists were the source for the remaining projects.

The subsequent papers discuss the following: the Kabinett der Abstrakten designed by El Lissitzky for Hannover's Provinzialmuseum in 1927 (authors: Sandra Karina Löschke, Rebecca Uchill); and the activity of the Société Anonyme spanning 1920–1940, with a particular emphasis on the 'International Exhibition of Modern Art' at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926 (authors: Frauke V. Josenhans, grupa o.k. [J. Myers and J. Szupiańska]).

The activity of the 'a.r.' Group, the creation of the International Collection of Modern Art, and its public display as of 1931, as well as Władysław Strzemiński's design of the Neoplastic Room in 1948, being sufficiently well known in Poland, did not require the discussion of the historical background; what, nevertheless, was studied were the mechanisms of their institutionalisation (in the papers by Daniel Muzyczuk, Tomasz Załuski). Furthermore, the publication presents three comparative papers studying respectively the relations between the Société Anonyme and the 'a.r.' Group (Agnieszka Pindera), the Kabinett der Abstrakten and the Neoplastic Room (Marcin Szelaąg), as well as the Société Anonyme and New York's Museum of Modern Art (Jennifer R. Gross).

And the latter essay is of particular significance here, since it most openly reveals what is at stake in the publication: a truly Avant-garde artists' project is opposed to the activities of a formal museum institution which took

over and appropriated the concept of a museum of modern art. It is essentially the confronting of the artists' failure with a spectacular success of an institution. This, in turn, leads to a more general and overlooked issue: explanation why the *Avant-garde museum* projects failed. The Museums of Artistic Culture were closed down, the Kabinett der Abstrakten was dismantled following the Nazis coming to power, the Société Anonyme gave up the plans of founding their own museum, donating their collection to Yale University; the Neoplastic Room, too, was closed down soon after its opening. The papers presented in the publication do acknowledge this piece of information on the factual level, albeit failing to investigate the structural character of the fiasco. For a reason *Avant-garde museums* were unable to survive, yet the question about this reason has not been asked.

This is strictly related to another issue: the Avant-garde activity is presented in the publication as focused not exclusively on the rigorous autonomy both in theory and in practice. What has been ignored are the situations in which Avant-garde artists used the radical language of their art in designing applied art, advertising, communication, and in propaganda, not even having a second thought when rejecting their artistic autonomy in order to act politically or commercially. This point is possibly best exemplified in El Lissitzky's display activity: the 'demonstration rooms', and first all the Cabinet of Abstraction are described in minute detail, meanwhile the display he designed for the Soviet Pavilion at the PRESSA International Press Exhibition in Cologne in 1928 is totally omitted. Such omissions make the identification of the reasons for the failure of the designers of the *Avant-garde museum* impossible; a hastily formulated hypothesis may be formulated that possibly this too rigorous insisting on the autonomy of art and its experiencing doomed those projects to fail.

It is not my intention to verify the above hypothesis in the present review; contrariwise, I put it forth, since I consider it relevant for the assumption, which is the publication's leitmotif, that the Avant-garde, first designing the museums, and later attempting to organise them, conducted the process of self-institutionalisation. This assumption, initially signalled in the introduction authored by both Editors, is later developed in Agnieszka Pindera's paper. However, it is hardly possible to be maintained in view of the fiasco of the *Avant-garde museum* projects. The self-institutionalisation did not actually happen, yet an effective assimilation of the Avant-garde ideas and accomplishments occurred through what Tony Bennett referred to as the *exhibitionary complex*. Director of the Provinzialmuseum in Hannover Alexander Dörner included Lissitzky's project in his discourse on art history and his display concepts; what even confirmed the situation more decisively was the reconstruction of the Cabinet of Abstraction at the point when the output of the Constructivism was acknowledged to form a canonical part of modernity. Similarly, the Neoplastic Room and the International Collection of Art of the 'a.r.' Group were, against Strzemiński's objections, incorporated by Marian Minich, Director of the Museum of Art in Łódź, into his narration on art development. In this case, too, first the destruction, and the subsequent reconstruction of the display space confirm the assimilation of the Avant-garde output as an element in the historical resources given to a public

museum to make them available. The Société Anonyme, in its turn, allowed the Museum of Modern Art, being an effectively organized institution, to take over their museum idea and implement it in harmony with Alfred Barr's concept.

Therefore, the assumption implying the self-institutionalisation plays a different role. It certainly allows to mythologize museology projects of the Avant-garde as unique and rigorously autonomous, while marginalizing their assimilation in the museum discourse of the 20th century. The myth of heroic autonomy is of particular importance for the Museum of Art in Lodz which regards the International Collection of Modern Art donated to it by the 'a.r.' Group as the foundation of its institutional identity. It permits the Lodz Museum to perceive itself as not merely a heir to the Avant-garde and guardian of its legacy, but as an avant-garde institution *par excellence*. Therefore, the discussed publication is more a tool for the self-institutionalisation of the Museum of Art in Lodz as an avant-garde museum than for studying the self-institutionalisation of the Avant-garde.

In essence, however, more is at stake: the final canonization

of the Avant-garde understood both as incorporation into the canon, and sanctification, assigning it an absolute and unquestionable worth. As a result, this implies Avant-garde's entire historicization: the inevitable development has been sealed with the discussed publication. *The Avant-garde museum* projects have entered the respectable spectrum of historic monuments: of the past which can provide some teaching to us, but which is no longer able to challenge the present. With this the revolutionary Avant-garde ideology has lost any support in its valid ontology.

Surprisingly, the *Avant-garde Museum* does not only sound as the death knell for the Avant-garde. Maybe owing to the fact that the orphaned revolutionary ideology may be incorporated into contemporary actions and practices. It is Tomasz Załuski who sounds in his paper the most determined to revive the Avant-garde vigour to reshape what is found in reality, calling for the use of the idea of Museums of Artistic Culture as tools for the change of contemporary alienated cultural institutions. In order to do it effectively, however, the aspiration to institutional autonomy should be rejected.

Abstract: The monumental publication *Avant-garde Museum* (ed. Agnieszka Pindera, Jarosław Suchan, Muzeum Sztuki w Łodzi, Łódź 2020) juxtaposes and analyses four museum projects: Museums of Artistic Culture in Soviet Russia, the activity of the Société Anonyme in the USA, Poland's 'a.r.' Group, and the Kabinett der Abstrakten, the selection criterion being that each was conceived by Avant-garde artists; additionally, in the projects' assumptions the artists were to run the implementation of the projects.

The publication has been divided into three sections:

research papers, source texts, and the catalogue of documents and works. The study of the Avant-garde museum projects spans over four areas: the concept, collection, organization, and display. However, these issues are not isolated in the research, but more purposefully integrated. The main goal of the study is to show how the Avant-garde institutionalized itself. This very thesis is reflected upon in the present paper. Just like the consequences of this publication: e.g., entering the Avant-garde into the canon of art history and sanctifying its output as an unquestionable value.

Keywords: Avant-garde, museum, modern art, museology, art of exhibition.

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Table of contents 2021: <https://muzealnictworocznik.com/issue/13664>