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"We need to act against the old, to bury it in the cemetery for forever and a day, to scrub any resemblance to the past off our face." Thus wrote Kazimir Malevich in 1919 in a text which, astonishingly enough, was describing the need to establish new museums. The demand to dispose of the old while simultaneously making efforts to establish new museums—institutions that are associated with preserving the past like no other—does seem rather inconsistent. Malevich was not alone in such efforts; they are something that Russian revolutionaries and radical artists in Germany, the United States and Poland shared, proving that the relationship between the avant-garde and museum institutions was far less clear-cut than their flagship manifestos may have suggested. This, of course, raises some questions. First of all—what motivated the avant-garde's desire to create their own museum institutions? How did it imagine them? How did they fit into its vision of art as a tool for creating a better future? And last but not least—were they supported by ideas that could serve as guidelines for contemporary museums? This book attempts to answer these questions.

The history of the avant-garde's self-institutionalization occupies a marginal position in art history scholarship. Admittedly, particular initiatives have been the subject of academic interest, but there are no existing studies comparing them to each other and thus allowing for the recognition of avant-garde's self-institutionalization as a separate, specific phenomenon. By comparing several avant-garde (quasi-)institutions established during the interwar period, this publication aims to fill this gap. Simultaneously, this book is part of a larger research project launched in 2017 with the international conference *Museum of the Avant-garde or an Avant-garde Museum? Collecting the Radical*, and will conclude with an exhibition planned for the fall of 2021.

This publication consists of materials devoted to four avant-garde museum projects: the network of Museums of Artistic Culture established in post-October Russia, *Kabinett der Abstrakten* designed by El Lissitzky for Hanover's Provinzialmuseum in 1927, Société Anonyme Inc.: Museum of Modern Art established in New York in the early 1920s, and the a.r. group's International Collection of Modern Art, opened to the public at the municipal museum in Łódź in 1931. The critical studies by leading avant-garde scholars are accompanied by a selection of source materials and extensive illustrations, with both archival materials and selected works from collections related to the projects in question. The historical and ideological framework of this anthology is outlined in the opening essay, which contains a comparative overview of the individual avant-garde projects, emphasizing one that remains the least known, the collection of the a.r. group. The final part of the essay provides a comparative analysis of the conceptual frameworks of the projects and formulates a preliminary notion of what might be the *differentia specifica* of avant-garde museology. Each of the projects is presented in more detail in the following essays, highlighting the connections and parallels between them.

Maria Gough and Masha Chlenova discuss the first of the four projects—the network of Museums of Artistic Culture. Gough reports on debates within the Russian avant-garde about the shape and mission of the newly created museums. The main current of the dispute ran between Wassily Kandinsky, who saw museums as spaces for studying the logic of the development of artistic form, and Aleksandr Rodchenko, for whom museums were laboratories of "living forms" still capable of transforming reality. Chlenova adds to this account, emphasizing Malevich's vision of art history and his attempts to translate it into a museum narrative. The second important topic of her essay is the work of Władysław Strzemiński, who had a

close relationship with Malevich, in the structures organizing the art scene in Russia. Chlenova suggests that both artists shared the same vision of the evolution of art and that it served as the basis for Strzemiński's exhibition, education, and museum projects, both in Moscow and Smoleńsk, and later in Poland. Chlenova carefully analyzes a document attributed to Strzemiński, a list of artists ranked according to different trends in modern art, interpreted as a sketch for a future permanent exhibition at the Smoleńsk museum. It is worth noting that this document has also served as a model for presenting the Museums of Artistic Culture's collection, both in this book and in the accompanying exhibition.

Sandra Karina Löschke and Rebecca Uchill focus on another avant-garde museological concept—the *Kabinett der Abstrakten*. Löschke conducts a close analysis of the interactive and immersive nature of the experience it offers to viewers, pointing to the relationship between the technologies and materials it employs, and those used in constructing sceneries of the modern metropolis. Uchill approaches the project not just from the perspective of its creator, El Lissitzky, but rather the man who commissioned it—Alexander Dorner, one of the most progressive museum curators of the time. Her reflections concern the relationship between Lissitzky's artistic ideas, especially those inspired by new theories of space and time, and Dorner's vision of art and its historical development, as well as the concept of the museum derived from it.

The next three texts reflect of the activities of Société Anonyme, an association whose original goal was to establish the first museum of modern art in the United States. Frauke V. Josenhans remembers Katherine S. Dreier—a painter, collector, and the main driving force of the group. Looking for inspirations behind its organizational activities, Josenhans points to Herwarth Walden's *Der Sturm*. She also notes a paradoxical combination of progressive ideas with the bourgeois perception of art as part home décor in Dreier's museum projects, such as the projected Country Museum. Jennifer R. Gross compares the visions of modern art underlying the activities of Société Anonyme and defining the activities of MoMA under the administration of its first director, Alfred H. Barr Jr. In the final essay of this section, the o.k. group (Julian Myers and Joanna Szupińska) reveal the internal contradictions of the Société Anonyme's modernist programme in a detailed discussion of the 1926 *International Exhibition of Modern Art* at the Brooklyn Museum, Société Anonyme's largest exhibition project.

The link between the essays forming the last section of the book is the a.r. group and its International Collection of Modern Art. The group's activity and vision of the museum are juxtaposed with the activities of other avant-garde formations and other museological concepts. The purpose of this comparative study is to recognize the conditions of possibility, ideological context, and social dimensions of avant-garde institutional projects. In her discussion of the history of a.r. and Société Anonyme, Agnieszka Pindera focuses on an often-overlooked aspect of avant-garde organizational activities, i.e., their economic circumstances. Daniel Muzyczuk, covering the dispute over how the a.r. collection was displayed in the museum in Łódź, points to the differences and similarities between art history's models of the museologist and the avant-garde artist. Marcin Szelaż writes about the different overlapping models of the museum, juxtaposing two projects resulting from the collaboration of the avant-garde artist and a progressive museologist: the aforementioned *Kabinett der Abstrakten* in Provinzialmuseum, Hanover, and the *Neoplastic Room* designed by Władysław Strzemiński, the co-founder of a.r., at the invitation of the director of the Łódź museum, Marian Minich. The last question discussed

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in this section considers the museum as a means of achieving the avant-garde's political goals. To this end, Tomasz Załuski analyzes the activities of a.r. in the light of the ideas behind the establishment of Museums of Artistic Culture. Załuski does not stop at historical interpretations, pointing to the relevance of these ideas and outlining the ways in which contemporary museums might apply them today.

Voices of the avant-garde are also included in this book. The texts by Malevich, Kandinsky, Rodchenko, Lissitzky, Dreier, and others not only provide direct accounts of the motivations and visions behind the undertakings discussed in the publication, but also capture something more fleeting—the accompanying emotions and intellectual atmosphere, manifested in the language and the rhetoric.

Neither this publication nor the corresponding exhibition could have been created without the effort and support of many people and institutions. We would like to thank the authors of the published texts; Masha Chlenova for conducting research in Russian archives and help to organize the materials on the Museums of Artistic Culture, Frauke V. Josenhans for helping us prepare the Société Anonyme section, Isabel Schulz from the Sprengel Museum, as well as Frank Tommek and Claus Holtmann (Holtmann GmbH+Co.KG) for providing valuable information on *Kabinett der Abstrakten*, and Anna Karpenko for help in researching Russian and Belarusian sources. Special thanks go to Zenobia Karnicka, former curator of Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź, for sharing her invaluable knowledge about the work of a.r. and Władysław Strzemiński. We would also like to thank Terra Foundation for American Art for the grant covering research at the Yale University Art Gallery, where the Société Anonyme collection is housed, and the Beinecke Rare Books and Manuscript Library, where archives attached to this association are located, and Stephanie Wiles, director of Yale University Art Gallery, for supporting this project.

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In the dominant narrative, the avant-garde and the museum are usually cast in the roles of mortal enemies, their encounter inevitably resulting in the failure of one or the other: the destruction of museums or the disarming of the avant-garde. This narrative could center on figures such as Edmond Duranty, a writer, columnist, and critic with much sympathy for the Barbizon painters and the Impressionists, who called for the Louvre to be burned down over 150 years ago, or the Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, who half a century later argued that museums and libraries should be destroyed as repositories of anachronistic and unworldly cultural ideals. In the same narrative, the avant-garde is identified with living art, an art that wants to be consonant with the rhythm of the present, whereas museums are seen, to quote Theodor W. Adorno's well-known phrase, as mausoleums, the family sepulchers where art withers away.¹ Or as mental asylums that "have wards and cells—in other words, neutral rooms called 'galleries'." "A work of art when placed in a gallery," continues the author of the comparison, Robert Smithson,

loses its charge [...]. A vacant white room with lights is still a submission to the neutral. Works of art seen in such spaces seem to be going through a kind of aesthetic convalescence. They are looked upon as so many inanimate invalids, waiting for critics to pronounce them curable or incurable. The function of the warden–curator is to separate art from the rest of society. Next comes integration. Once the work of art is totally neutralized, ineffective, abstracted, safe, and politically lobotomized it is ready to be consumed by society.²

On a theoretical plane, this opposition between the avant-garde and the museum was cemented by Peter Bürger and his influential 1974 book, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which since its publication has influenced scholars and artists alike.³ According to Bürger, at the heart of the avant-garde project is a promise to radically transform social life through art. This promise was meant to be realized not so much by introducing new, socially engaged content to art as by changing the role of art itself: instead of describing reality, art should seek to transform it. This mission entailed quitting the space in which art had hitherto functioned and instead entering, and ultimately becoming fully integrated with, the practice of everyday life. The fact that the space of art had not been abandoned was, according to Bürger, proof that the avant-garde project had failed. That avant-garde creations ended up in museums had reduced them to the role of "art works," of the same status as their historical predecessors, while they were intended to be means of a global revolution, one that was existential rather than artistic. Museums, therefore, along with the entire art world-constituting system, are responsible for disarming the avant-garde.

But there is another story besides the one presented above, one where there are neither calls for museums to be burned down, nor suggestive images of art being lobotomized by museum curators. Instead, there are artists making an effort to develop their own museum institutions as what they believe can be effective means of achieving avant-garde goals. Most intriguingly, these are artists associated with Dadaism and Constructivism, i.e. the most radical factions of the avant-garde

1 Theodor W. Adorno, "Valéry Proust Museum," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), 175.
2 Robert Smithson, "Cultural Confinement," in *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 132.
3 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), trans. Michael Shaw (Manchester and Minneapolis: Manchester University Press, University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

Strzemiński's artistic beliefs, with which it was undoubtedly connected, not only in historical terms, with reference to the achievements of the interwar avant-garde, but also as a result of Strzemiński's ideas at the time. The *Neoplastic Room* synthesized Minich's rules for organizing a permanent gallery of an international collection of modern art. Within the rules set by Minich, it acquired a museological sense, ceasing to be merely a historical *arte factum*. As such, it would be hard to imagine the permanent exhibition of international modern art opened in 1960 at the Muzeum Sztuki in Łódź without the *Neoplastic Room*.

USERSHIP IN RELATION TO ART AND MUSEUM INSTITUTIONS

To conclude, bearing in mind the relationship between the main actors of the above intra-institutional arrangements, as well as the diachronic relations of these temporally and geographically distant projects, I would like to point out the progressive aspect of these experiments, which might be seen as a reference point for contemporary exhibition and museum practice.

Looking at the exhibition practices of artists of the interwar and postwar avant-garde in our day, it is probably impossible, especially in institutional theory, to avoid juxtaposing them with Stephen Wright's proposals for refreshing the art-related conceptual apparatus and the forms of its institutional support.³⁶ In particular, I am referring to concepts that are key to the projects under discussion: "authorship," "viewer," and "museum 3.0."

The collective activity in the *Kabinett der Abstrakten* and the unifying totality of the *Neoplastic Room* weakened the autonomy and singular authorship of the works they presented. Interactivity and movement, in turn, marked an attempt to break free from the passive, contemplative reception of art, by providing some forms of usership, although certainly not in the strict sense that Wright has in mind today. Finally, this usership, which, according to Wright, generates value through user involvement and thus opens the field for changing the museum into a space of socialized creativity, laid the foundations for the concept of the "museum 3.0." All these terms reanimate ideas such as emphasizing the museum's exhibition space as intentionally significant for the art presented within, or seeing the viewer's physical activity as part of the process of constructing the meaning of the exhibition, which seemed to have been put aside in museum studies. These have generated new opportunities for contemporary exhibition practices. Their potential comes from the appeal of the past, which plays a special role in the context of a museum. It allows us to boldly reach for solutions to change museums' conventional methods of exhibiting art, especially when it comes to permanent exhibitions.

Translated from
the Polish by Joanna Figiel

article in the late 1950s. See: Minich, *O nową organizację*. The typescript was published as a book in 2018: Marian Minich, *O nowy typ muzeów sztuki*, ed. Paweł Brożyński, in collaboration with Magdalena Kunińska (Kraków: Universitas, 2018).
Stephen Wright, *Towards a Lexicon of Usership* (Eindhoven: Van Abbemuseum, 2013).



Neoplastic Room, Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź, design
by Władysław Strzemiński, 1948, reconstruction of the painted
decorations by Bolesław Utkin; photographed in 1960–66
Archive of the Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

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Jean (Hans) Arp (1886–1966)

Configuration, 1929
relief, painted wood, 39 × 31 × 2.8 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź



Louis Marcoussis (Ludwik Markus) (1878–1941)

Concert, 1928
oil on canvas, 98 × 79 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź

Hans Rudolf Schiess (1904–1978)

Composition, ca. 1930
oil on canvas, 61 × 50 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź





Katarzyna Kobro (1898–1951)

Abstract Composition, ca. 1924–1926
oil on glass, 24 × 32 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź
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Sophie Taeuber-Arp (1889–1943)

Composition, 1930
oil on canvas, 52 × 42 cm
Muzeum Sztuki, Łódź



