BOOK REVIEW:
The Avant-Garde Museum

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Introduction: Navigating a 602-page Palimpsest

_The Avant-Garde Museum_, edited by Jarosław Suchan, Director of Muzeum Sztuki, Łódz, Poland, and Agnieszka Pindera, the museum’s Head of the Research Center, offers a unique account of the artistic, aesthetic, architectural, curatorial and political dimensions of avant-garde artists, artist groups and exhibitions. The volume is composed of twelve essays, written by esteemed scholars in the fields of art history, modern art and architecture, as well as practising curators. In addition, the volume provides a number of primary source texts from avant-garde artists (translated from Polish and Russian originals), and an impressive amount of black-and-white and coloured images showing avant-garde exhibition designs; hand-written personal letters; official collection documents, such as requests and orders; exhibition posters and announcements; and photographs, portraits and paintings from avant-garde artists, artist collectives, museum directors, cultural politicians and decision-makers during the period post-World War I up until the 1960s. The publication is part of a larger research project led by the research team of Muzeum Sztuki, initiated in 2017 with an international conference of experts in the history of the avant-garde. In 2021/22, a final exhibition will be launched at Muzeum Sztuki.

Before I say anything else, it is worth mentioning that I read the book from front to back, all 602 pages, in chronological order, one chapter after another, gliding from the rich secondary accounts written in the past year, to the primary sources of artist groups, artists and museum directors, dating back to the 1910s, referenced time and time again throughout the essays from a contemporary perspective. Hence, I dove into the original sources only after significantly reading about them. Trained as an urban sociologist and political philosopher, I had little prior knowledge about the specificities of ‘the’ avant-garde, either with regards to their bureaucratic underbellies or to the concrete propositions by individual artists or artist collectives about institutional or art historical or even art pedagogical critique. As an interdisciplinary scholar
between the fields of political and spatial theory, I am interested in museums as public spaces for artist-led activism and societal transformation. In that sense, I might be a particular type of reader. Yet, I would argue that the volume constitutes an intriguing resource both for avant-garde ‘beginners’ who are looking for an ambitious introduction to avant-garde movements, actors, images and politics, as well as for well-versed avant-garde scholars such as art historians. We learn about ‘the’ avant-garde as individual and collective mo(ve)ments in which modern art production, presentation and preservation is considered a crucial driver to design societies in which all people have access to artworks and the imaginations they unfold.

As the first bulletin of the artist group, the a.r. group (‘real avant-garde’, 1929–1936), around Władysław Strzemiński, suggests:

Modern art is not just another style. Modern art is the refutation of everything that came before. Modern art is a revolt against the foundations of sensibility. Modern art changes man’s [sic] attitude toward everything his [sic] hand produces. (p 309)

I encountered the protagonists of avant-garde movements in layers of information and interconnection that become denser and more complex the further one reads into the book. Whether the order of essays was consciously designed this way remains unknown. Nevertheless, the linear reading path, obeying the suggested order of texts, enables the reader to gain additional insight and cross-connections in every chapter. Each essay circles around similar historical events and exhibitions – for example, the inauguration of the network of ‘Museums of Artistic Cultures’, announced in 1919 during a museological conference in Petrograd/St Petersburg, the founding of the IZO Narkompros (Department of Fine Arts of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment), also in Russia, or the ‘International Exhibition of Modern Art’ at the Brooklyn Museum in 1926. In each essay, we encounter a different entry point and focus on one avant-garde personality, event or artist group. Taken together, the essays create an overall impression of getting to know individual artists, curators, museum directors, museums or cultural organisations one by one. This way, the reader gradually gathers more knowledge about figures and exhibitions such as Kazimir Malevich and Wassily Kandinsky; El Lissitzky and the Kabinett der Abstrakten he designed in Hanover, Germany, in 1926; the a.r. group, established in 1929 by Władysław Strzemiński and his partner Katarzyna Kobro; or Société Anonyme, Inc. - Museum of Modern Art, spearheaded by the German-American Katherine Dreier, in close yet sometimes conflictual collaboration with Marcel Duchamp (and Man Ray). The latter constitutes a particularly well-discussed example of an ‘experimental’ or avant-garde museum without a fixed location, travelling various places after its inauguration in an exhibition on 19 East 47th Street, New York, in their preliminary headquarters gallery in 1920. Because the different scholars focus on individual biographies or events, every essay stresses another angle from the one before. Knowledge about ‘the’ avant-garde emerges topologically, slightly dishevelled or displaced, reminding of El Lissitzky’s design ideas of exhibition spaces as

spaces of display and demonstrations of new viewing perspectives (see pp 285–294). I would invite future readers of the volume to browse and ‘jump’ boldly between the chapters, to see how they make their own unique connections between essays. It could be really intriguing to read primary sources directly after the secondary accounts, to encounter artists’ own proclamations, which are sometimes very vivid, and their outright critical thoughts (see Strzemiński’s critique in 1936 of the re-opened Bartosiewicz museum, pp 318–323). And I would recommend that future readers deliberately explore the book in their own ways, almost using the heavy, shiny volume like a handbook or a manual, maybe even an encyclopedia.

Apart from the chapters’ order and chronology, the book’s density literally spreads right across the page: the layout presses text all over the paper and into its very corners. It creates a sense of urgency, of exuberant, almost excessive information and stories, details that need to be told now. The fact that I discovered page numbers very late (although I was eagerly/desperately looking for them in order to provide concise citations) demonstrates how much focus is given to the main text and therefore also the diverse authorial voices. (For those who start reading the book, page numbers for the open-facing double page are placed in the upper right corner on every left page on the inside margin of the book, two squeezed on top of each other; pages with images might not have page numbers at all). A last sidenote on format and structure: the volume unfortunately only offers a name index of individual artists and organisers rather than artist groups such as Société Anonyme or the a.r. group. This formal decision is...
somewhat counter-intuitive since we learn so much about the interconnected actors, yet the index does not allow for a focused search and informed search for artist collectives.

Museums Beyond Walls: On the Spatial Politics of Avant-Garde Museums

Through detailed descriptions by artists such as El Lissitzky (1890–1942), the book unfolds the importance of spatial and architectural layouts that create new kinds of museums – hinting at the proposition of the avant-garde museum. Architectural compositions of light, materials and density (or airiness) of display not only affect but also crucially activate the viewer in exhibition or museum spaces. Lissitzky boldly announces that ‘we destroy the wall as resting place for their [painters] paintings’ (p 287), and instead proposes spatial approaches such as axes of sight and movement in which canvases remain in motion, act as a ‘spatial stage’ (p 115), ‘visual stage’ (p 115) to enable ‘visual sensations’ (p 239) of paintings or other artworks. Again, great emphasis is placed on the physical activation of exhibition or museum visitors, instead of letting them merely contemplate or passively consume the displayed cultural artefacts. Moreover, Lissitzky underscores the need to provide more space between artworks, or what millennials today might call the ‘decluttering’ of exhibition walls. Especially with Lissitzky’s moveable designs (sliding exhibition display glasses), new interactive ways of encountering cultural artefacts are sought after. More abstractly, and together with Lissitzky’s appeal to create ‘new ways of seeing the world’ (p 239), these experimental exhibition designs might constitute an early foreboding of contemporary museum studies’ accounts that reflect on, analyse and build (multi-sensory) museum encounters,¹ or immersive or virtual reality (VR) museum experiences.²

Another decidedly spatial aspect of avant-garde museums is provided by Frauke Josenhans’s insights into the Société Anonyme Inc. as ‘experimental museum’, which did not act as a ‘museum along the old lines of collecting and conserving Art but are acting as a circulating museum where the movements in contemporary art may be studied’ (p 131). Notably, the Société Anonyme never attained a fixed location, ranging from collaborating with established institutions to hosting exhibits in Katharine Dreier’s home in rural Connecticut. After years of nomadic exhibitions and conservations, treating the museum as a ‘learning institution’ (p 138), the Société’s collection was transferred to Yale University’s art collection, to be continued as a publicly accessible collection rather than a private museum. In sum, avant-garde museums’ spatial politics appeared in a variety of different, more or less permanent and experimental spatial settings, forms and locations. At times, such hints at avant-garde museums moulded existing institutions and museum policies from within towards more openness, and to artists as


museum handlers. Sometimes, they morphed into more conventional collection and museum settings; sometimes, they dissolved again… In short, what unites the kaleidoscopic discussion of the various, partially local, partially internationally interconnected initiatives is that avant-garde museums cannot definitively be defined. While artists such as Strzemiński might have pursued a more universalist or rationalist approach to modernism (from which he later distanced himself), around the same time initiatives such as the a.r. group, or individuals such as Lissitzky, strongly contested such absolutism and instead advocated for fluidity and against rigid viewing or exhibition conventions. Under the shared roof of ‘the’ avant-garde, or avant-garde museums, these movements unravel the persisting heterogeneity of the trope of ‘the’ avant-garde museum. Ultimately, in their self-directed approaches to the museum, they challenge, innovate and contest the very definition of what a museum is or can be.

Let Artists and Collectives Run Museums!

One of the crucial propositions brought forth in the ‘Museums of Artistic Cultures’ conference in Petrograd in 1919 was to establish the notion of ‘artistic culture’, replacing the previously circulated term ‘painterly culture’. Artistic culture should not only point to mo(ve)ments of
institutional transformation within museums (and its traditions of how to acquire, arrange, build, create, discuss and exhibit art) but also indicate new directions for the reception of art history more generally. Within an aesthetic and organisational mindset of ‘artistic culture’, museums were to be run by avant-garde artists themselves, being solely responsible for acquisition and education (pp 258–261). Museum professionals might feel slightly uneasy reading some of these passages, with their professional practice being dismissed as ‘artistic and scholarly museology’ (p 265). Notably, the Declaration of the Department of Fine Arts and Art Industry on the Principles of Museology, launched at the 1919 inaugural meeting of the network of ‘Museums of Artistic Cultures’, reads like a manifesto-style precursor to contemporary discourses and practices of the ‘artist as curator’.³ In short, the declaration emphasises the irreplaceable capacities of artists to engage collectively in counter-hegemonic practices, and to overcome museum workers’ academicism and strive towards the ‘museum of creative artistic culture’ for the entirety of a working-class social body (p 255) – for example, Kazimir Malevich’s emphasis on moments of creation and creativity as a litmus test for ‘artistic culture’ in his 1919 The Axis of Color and Volume. In sum, the ‘artist as curator’ discourse subtly emerges within these pages, appealing to artists as crucial political agents who build, design, stock and manage museums and their collections.

Besides underscoring values of creation and invention as parts of museums of artistic culture, the artist is given significant value as cultural worker. Culture is framed as ‘active work’ (p 55), art-making considered as ‘professional activity’ (p 259). Crucially, this resonates with contemporary cultural political and activist mobilisations to consider artists’ activity as (cultural) labour, and in particular wage labour. Today, these claims to acknowledgement and fair remuneration are partially represented via initiatives such as the US-based W.A.G.E. group, established in 2008 in the fight for more sustainable economic relationships between artists and cultural institutions such as museums, and with the goal to ‘collectively bring about a more equitable distribution of its economy’.⁴ Remarkably, these requests resonate with avant-garde artists’ claims for more self-organisation, and with artists’ political agency in the contested (dis)articulation of the cultural field.⁵ The art historian and philosopher Tomasz Zaluski suggests there is a need for ‘a contemporary reappraisal and update of the idea’ of museums of artistic culture, as outlined above, resting on principles of inventiveness and artist-led museum collections and pedagogies (p 227). Zaluski references a 2012/2013 exhibition at Muzeum Sztuki, during which the ‘effectivity of art’ as a means of artistic activism was discussed, hinting at links not only between avant-garde and contemporary cultural political claims but also at possibilities of learning from the avant-garde.

³ See Elena Filipovic, The Artist as Curator: An Anthology, Mousse Publishing, Milan, 2017
⁴ See W.A.G.E. https://wageforwork.com/about, accessed 30 April 2021
Outlook: (Re)Learning from the Avant-Garde for Museum Futures

In light of recently announced reflections on the ‘death’,6 ‘exhaustion’7 or ‘end(s)’8 of museums, or accounts about post-museums,9 ‘the’ museum seems to be in bad shape to tackle incisive contemporary societal (including spatial, environmental, gender-, equity- and labour-related) challenges. If we consider the official museum definition put forward by the International Council of Museums (ICOM, established in 1946),10 a museum ‘is’:

a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment.

In many ways, museums do not live up to these criteria, or they interpret them in discriminatory, exploitative or otherwise insufficient ways. While this definition, which has been in place since 2007, is currently under construction,11 museums in their many shapes, forms and locations seem under distress. Yet, despite its great scope as target for critique, ‘the’ museum is not and never was redundant. This crucial realisation becomes apparent in the avant-garde critical engagement with, rather than full withdrawal from the museum as (infra)structure. For example, the Director of the Muzeum Sztuki, Jarosław Suchan, puts the finger on the latent yet enduring relation between the avant-garde’s utopian outlook and their investment in rebuilding museums. Stating that ‘the autonomy of art, and the institution of the museum as its safeguard, did not threaten the avant-garde social project; on the contrary, they were indispensable’ (p 39), Suchan underlines how the avant-garde flourished within as well as beyond, besides and against museums. Similarly, Agnieszka Pindera unpacks how parts of the avant-garde were differently motivated to self-institutionalise (or not), both without and within museum walls.

In sum, the volume provides a well-curated, multi-perspectival genealogy and art historical analysis of the multiple artist couples, groups and collectives under the umbrella term of ‘the avant-garde’, nestled in increasingly difficult geo-politics between the Soviet Union,

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10 See the definition on the ICOM website: https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/ accessed 30 April 2021
(Western) Europe and the USA. It also gives clear connections on how avant-garde thinkers and artists influenced the bureaucratic structures of museum and collection planning, exhibition design, and acquisition, funding, lending and commissioning politics, thus providing for the art- and culture-led possibility of exchange and collaboration between East and West. With these transfers, it becomes apparent that some of ‘the’ avant-garde movements laid more or less tangible groundworks for infrastructures that continue to shape museum policies up to today (predominantly in European cultures and countries, notably, where museums are strongly supported with public funding and resources). Overall, the volume might be able to spark questions for both museum scholars and practitioners in both post-Soviet and Western European contexts, questions somewhere along the lines of: what roles do artists play in museums today, in comparison to the avant-garde artists/museums one century ago? How (in)accessible are museum collections to artists, let alone increasingly diverse museum public(s)? How do we encounter contemporary museums as places for radical social and political change? Ultimately, then, what the volume could offer is an inspiration into future-oriented practices of making museums, which subsequently might expose museums to yet-to-be imagined futures.


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12 See schnittpunkt and Joachim Baur, eds, Das Museum der Zukunft: 43 neue Beiträge zur Diskussion über die Zukunft des Museums, transcript, Bielefeld, 2020