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Exposè of Doctoral Thesis “Exhibitions of Russian Avant-Gardists during the 1920ies in Germany within the context of Soviet art politics”

Subject of the Research Project

The October Revolution of 1917 had its impact on every aspect of life in Russia. The Emperor was displaced and Councils and People’s Commissars came to power, the economy was nationalized, and society became socialistic. The arts were changed. Since the free arts market was dissolved, patronage capable of supporting artists lacked. The part of sponsors was assumed by the government. Artists had to carry out state assignments. For the first time in Russian history, some artists were appointed to political posts and endowed with power of decision on cultural policy. Malevič and Kandinskij, for instance, held a job in the People’s Commissariat for Public Enlightenment. Alongside with other Russian artists, they decided on the founding of new museums of contemporary art, on the acquisition of works of art payed for by the state, on closing down the Academy of Fine Arts, and the founding of new artistic educational institutions. But many artists migrated via Germany to France, other European countries, or the USA. In Germany, their work was exhibited. My dissertation project addresses these exhibitions in Germany.

Special emphasis of my research project will be on Kazimir Malevič, Ivan Puni, El’ Lissitckij, and Vasilij Kandinskij, since their exhibitions in Germany provide optimal insight into the Soviet Republic’s cultural policies. Furthermore, these artists played an important part in the early Soviet Republic: They were highly renowned and they cooperated with relevant politicians, influencing their ideas and decisions.

While the focus of my research is on the 1920ies, comprehensibility of events requires the period of dissertation to be extended to comprise the years from 1917 to 1931. This will allow to trace the changing significance of the avant-garde in the Soviet Republic and to identify the political intentions of the Soviet politicians with respect to arts exhibitions of the ‘20ies.

The title of my thesis outlines a complex research project. It may be subdivided into three issues: art policy, exhibitions, representation of art politics in art exhibitions. The focus, however, will be on “art politics’ manifestation in art exhibitions”.

This aspect is of particular importance, since art exhibitions never should be seen as exclusive aesthetic events. Art-historical and art-political reasons will always motivate decisions on the manner of presentation art works. In case of international exhibitions, such art-political motives are much of a factor, as will be pointed out in case of the art exhibitions of Russian avant-gardists in Germany.

The Scientific Issue

The central question of my research project concerns the relationship between the sociopolitical situation created by the October Revolution of 1917 and the exhibition of Russian avant-gardists’ work in Germany. This gives rise to the following research problems: Has there been a uniform culture politic during the early years of the Soviet Union? If so, what are its characteristics? Otherwise, what were the prevailing tendencies? Further research issues will come up: What were the political objectives pursued by Soviet politicians via art exhibitions in Germany? What did the artists expect regarding the exhibitions in Germany? Did they correspond with politicians and did they adopt their intentions?

Methods and sources

I intend to answer these questions by performing a chronologic analysis of a number of exhibitions, followed by pointing out the changing situation of art politics with respect to exhibitions during the referred period. In order to determine the shaping of those exhibitions, I’ll base my reasoning on sources pertaining directly to them. I’ll cite exhibition catalogues - if available -, newspaper articles from the 1920ies, reviews, statements of those involved in implementation, as well as remarks of artists involved and of politicians (manifestos, appeals, artistic programs, autobiographies, and official regulations). Analysis of source texts is given priority over secondary literature, since the latter, as far as reviewed to date, does not provide relevant insight into the research issue proper.

State of Research

Ever since the end of the Soviet Union, research conditions have undergone radical changes, opening up new scientific perspectives. Russian scientists now may carry out research unrestrictedly. Their work is published in Russian or translated into English. German-speaking researchers as well benefit from access to Russian sources, as may be

gathered from an increasing quantity of relevant studies. Soviet culture politics have been studied extensively, however, covering no more than an aspect or even a partial aspect of my doctoral project.

The same holds true for secondary literature, which is merely presenting biographical data of artists who participated in the relevant exhibitions or pointing out the particular significance of individual works of art. The aspect of art politics manifesting in the respective exhibitions is disregarded. The lack of scientific studies or other publications addressing the central point of my thesis bestows scientific relevance to the project.