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To Show and To Speak: Strategies of Labelling in Soviet Art Museums in the 1920s and 1930s

Approximately between 1928 and 1933, in the years of the cultural revolution in the USSR (Fitzpatrick, 1974), major Soviet art museums undertook a so-called Socialist reconstruction, introducing to their permanent displays massive amounts of explanatory texts, slogans, maps and statistical charts aimed to explain the history of art as a product of class struggle and socio-historical conditions. This ambitious reform, addressed to uneducated audiences, was short-lived, mainly due to the shift in cultural politics starting from 1932, with the inauguration of Socialist Realism and return to aesthetical understanding of art.

This research project will overview multiple strategies of labelling in Soviet art museums in order to show that the use of text in the expositions wasn't limited to propaganda, with some researchers comparing the exhibitions like *Experimental Complex Marxist Exhibition* (1930) at Tretyakov Gallery with infamous Nazi exhibition *Degenerate Art* (1937) in Munich (Barron, 1991; Jolles, 2005). While the defining feature of both exhibitions was indeed denouncement of avant-garde movements as formalist and decadent, didactical labels in Soviet exhibitions also marked educational turn in construction of museum displays and were rather polemical than dogmatic (Chlenova, 2017, 2019). Moreover, this research aims to prove that labels condemning Orthodox icons or avant-garde artworks may have been adopted by some museum curators as a smokescreen for Soviet authorities in order to have a possibility to exhibit this art at all, which will become impossible only in a few years.

Labelling is still a challenging task for art museums all over the world, and such issues as the balance between aesthetics of display and informativity, the importance of curatorial framework and the engagement of the audience brought up by theorists like Alexey Fedorov-Davydov were ahead of their time. Experimental «self-talking» exhibitions notoriously influenced Alfred Barr, who was inspired by wall labels in Tretyakov Gallery during his visit in 1928 (Kantor, 2003), and widely used them later in his seminal exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art* (1936). On the other side, mutual influence of museum practices in the West and in the USSR before and during the cultural revolution is still understudied and will be also explored in my research.

The primary research method for this study is archival research based on the documents and photographs from Tretyakov Gallery, Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Museum of New Western Art, Hermitage, Russian Museum and art museums in Russian province, transcripts and diaries of museum practitioners and theorists from Russian State Archive, Russian State Archive of Art and Literature and Russian Academy of Sciences. The literature review will examine more than 200 titles related to Soviet museology, including theoretical works, catalogues and specialized press published in the years of the cultural revolution.

References

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