

Conference Paper

Cooperative Avant-garde: Rhetoric and Social Values of the New World of Arts in the System of the All-Russian Union of Artists' Cooperatives 'Vsekokhudozhnik'

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Abstract

The article discusses the early period (1928-1932) in the development of the first national organization of Soviet artists - cooperative 'Vsekokhudozhnik' - within the framework of institutional history and criticism. The main principles of this institution are analyzed and compared with the key ideas of left avant-garde trends in the Soviet art. The analysis of institutional characteristics of 'Vsekokhudozhnik' relies on materials of central and regional archives. Parallels are drawn between the key characteristics of this cooperative and the Russian avant-garde's aspirations to radically transform the art world. The author demonstrates the following overlapping views: ideas about the new identity of an artist; the new status of material objects; depersonalization of art and promotion of collective forms of production; importance of independent art and the need for overcoming (through negation and destruction) the bourgeois market institutional model of art. The conclusion is made that the system of artists' cooperatives served as a platform for testing the principles of political economy of Soviet art and that many of these principles are consistent with manifests of avant-garde movements in the 1920s (production art and literature of fact). In later periods, this platform was used to establish the economic institutional model of socialist realism (planned art production, mass production of copies, system for distribution of commissions, censorship, and so on).

Keywords: Cooperative 'Vsekokhudozhnik', avant-garde, Soviet art, Solomon Nikritin, Soviet art market

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1. Introduction

The phenomenon of avant-garde engendered ample body of research literature. It comprises studies carried out within various academic paradigms and schools, however, one could not say that there are no established conventional conceptions of avant-garde. One of such conventional approaches interprets avant-garde as an aesthetic breakthrough and radical renovation of art practices. For example, S.O. Khan-Magomedov characterized avant-garde non-decorative movements in architecture as a 'formal-stylistic revolution', referring to the almost three decades in the development of the Soviet architectural avant-garde ([10], 216-220). Although E.A. Bobrinskaya pointed out that avant-garde movements in the first quarter of the twentieth century had a somewhat 'collage-like', 'fragmented' and 'disparate' quality and thus eluded generalization, she still identified certain trends in Russian avant-garde (blurred stylistic distinctions, conceptual eclecticism, its revolutionary character, and so on) ([1], 15-65).

Undoubtedly, avant-garde always seeks to construct the future. In this project, visual arts are an integral element, which seeks to institutionalize a novel model of production. In other words, avant-garde redefines such key concepts as an artist and his or her social status; creative work and its forms; art work; and production of art. Avant-garde criticizes the system of art institutions and provides a new understanding of art and its role.

Therefore, talking about avant-garde trends in the Soviet artistic culture, it is essential to contextualize their 'framework' and basic characteristics within the social history of visual art in the period between 1928 and 1932. Although some studies of Russian avant-garde highlight the fact that by 1923 the 'love affair' between the pre-revolutionary avant-garde movements and the Soviet government had been over, there is sufficient evidence supporting the claim that 1923 could rightfully be called the 'year of avant-garde' ([20], 552-556) while the events of the first five-year plan marked the period of its major breakthrough.

It was this turbulent period that played a pivotal role in the institutional and conceptual transformations of visual arts. The 'life-building' ideas underlying Constructivist architecture and production art were integral elements of the Soviet rhetoric (and sometimes practices) of art life.

2. Institutional Situation in the Soviet Art Shortly before the 'Major Breakthrough'

The system of visual arts (formal and informal practices and institutions in the world of artistic culture) in the Russian Empire prior to the 1917 Revolution combined the academic model and the art market. Censorship and patronage relationships with the imperial family and the elite constituted an integral part of the Russian 'art world'. Among other characteristics of this world was a special status of art works and exclusion of certain social groups from art consumption. The institutional rebellion of the Russian avant-garde was directed against these practices and norms that regulated the life of artists.

In the 1920s, in the USSR, the academic model was all but destroyed while art market relationships faced significant restrictions. Let us describe the social background for visual arts in the USSR in 1927 and 1928, shortly before the 'major breakthrough'. This was a period of heated ideological and professional debates between diverse and numerous artistic groups, which competed for material and symbolical resources. Between 1928 and the early 1930s, however, People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (*Narkomat Vnutrennikh Del*) used a re-registration procedure to conduct a purge of public organizations and closed many of them [8].

The number of people engaged in artistic occupations was insignificant for such enormous country as the USSR. According to the trade union data, in 1929, there were 5,432 artists officially registered as 'persons working in the arts'. Taking into consideration those creative professionals who were affiliated with other trade unions (for instance, sculptors working with wood could be members of the carpenters' trade union), the total number of 'art workers' was about ten thousand people ([2], 14). According to the population census, in various art-related spheres were employed about twenty-five thousand people (but these are just rough estimates). Unemployment among artists remained a serious problem (officially, their unemployment rate was 28.2% in 1924 and 21% in 1925) ([17], 17). Artists had no free access to high quality materials for painting, graphic art, and sculpture; moreover, sometimes they even lacked the most basic materials such as brushes, paints, canvas stretchers, and plaster.

If we focus on the specific historical context of the 1920s in which Soviet avant-garde developed, we shall need to consider its socio-political and economic programme and pragmatics rather than its aesthetic manifestations. As Hans Günther has put it, in

the Soviet period, the aesthetic aspect of texts and the pragmatic aspects of avant-garde work developed asymmetrically and the growing pragmatization deformed and eventually devoured avant-garde aesthetics [7].

The organizational and economic aspects of avant-garde, which were particularly important for its contemporaries, prompt us to consider the events between the 1920s and 1930s. In this period, in A.V. Krusanov's words, 'being "on the front line" of art meant being revolutionary, addressing the most urgent issues of the day and helping the political avant-garde meet their priority tasks'. Socially effective and politicized art was created as official and loyal to the state. In fact, this entailed 'usage of the previously made discoveries for providing social and political services commissioned by the state' ([13], 36-37).

Starting from 1927, the structure of art institutions underwent intensive transformations. In 1927, intermediary bureaus for employing art workers appeared. Publishing entrepreneurship started to decline and the state gradually monopolized publishing of catalogues, albums, postcards and other artistic materials.

In 1929, 'Glaviskusstvo' was established as a body within the Commissariat of Education (*Narkompros*) for centralized management of visual arts. At the same time, a law outlining the basics of copyright was introduced. The turning point in the state strategy of managing artistic culture was marked by the Governmental Decree of 30 March 1930 'On Measures for Creating Favourable Conditions for Artists' Work', which laid the foundation for the system of state funding of arts and art production [21].

In this context, ideas and fates of art theoreticians and practitioners acquire different meanings. Theories and situational criticism of avant-garde leaders were addressed primarily to the art community or their colleagues rather than potential consumers of the new art – inhabitants of cities and villages. Manifests of this period often mention 'the new world of arts' in which everything would be different – an artist would turn into an engineer or worker of art; there would be a new spectator or a new consumer of art; art itself would become a direct social action; and there would be no dominance of a specific art group, style or authority. Solomon Nikritin, an original artist and thinker, emphasized that 'the internal structure of an artist's work is not and cannot serve as an obstacle for the development in our life of the collective ensemble form of artists' creative work'. Nikritin, who created a method of 'projectionism' [15], saw the ideal organizational trajectory as a movement from 'specialized production groups to permanent creative production teams, cooperatives, which should be officially registered as state and public art institutions with their own rules and regulations, budgets, and staff' (*Zapisnye zapiski Solomona Nikritina*, 145-154). Adherents of left avant-garde

movements strove for the 'new socio-cultural status of an artist by offering him or her a specific model of subjectification – becoming a proletarian and vice versa by turning a proletarian into an artist' ([3], 31).

Numerous texts of that epoch sought to destroy the romantic modernist myth about an artist committed exclusively to creation and replace this myth with an idea of an artist turning into an art worker. These ideas are found not only in avant-garde theories of Nikolai Chuzhak but also in the materials of the 1928 discussion at the Communist Academy, which focused on the idea of desacralization of artistic profession and the urgent need to create a group of 'artist-organizers', which would follow the principles of planned development and discipline ([9], 24). The new identity of artists as workers was also emphasized by party and government officials: for instance, at the Moscow meeting of art workers in 1933, party leader Emelyan Yaroslavsky called artists 'one of the units of the working class that held a great potential' [22]. This new interpretation of an artist as a collective worker agreed with the new principles of organization, management and funding of the world of visual arts. It was to be tested in the system of cooperatives.

3. Cooperatives of Artists as Places of Art Production

In European and Russian art systems, formats that allowed artists to realize their dreams of professional solidarity and collective creation started to evolve as early as the second half of the nineteenth century. These formats stood as the antithesis to individualism of the competitive bourgeois art market. Modernist movements of the early twentieth century were driven by this idea, making it central to their manifestos [23]. Participation in the work of groups, cooperatives, and teams became an integral part of artists' everyday life. This consolidation of artists was caused not only by ideological or aesthetic motives but also by the demands of art market and industry [19].

Group 'Verbovka' ('Recruitment') can serve as a good example of a union between avant-garde aesthetics and team organization. Within this group, even before the 1917 Revolution, Alexandra Exter's sketches were used for embroidery by craftswomen. After the revolution, for a short period, there existed such an original form of organization as state-funded art communes. All the works created by artists in these communes were considered to be communal property on the grounds that 'the commune met the artist's subsistence needs and he therefore should not expect to gain any other material benefit from his work' ([14], 63). More conventional forms included group

'Segodnya' ('Today') (1918-1919); cooperative writers' publishing houses; selling associations; society of professors of the Higher Art and Technical Studios (*Vkhutemas*) 'Art Production'; art group 'Apollon' ('Apollo') and other cooperatives with shared profits. Their main objective was to introduce new corporative practices in production and sale of art works ([14], 103-103). In that period, cooperatives established partnerships with public organizations, Soviet institutions, and individual clients. They tried to adhere to the requirement of trade unions not to use external workforce and not to pursue excess profits. Cooperatives organized their own auction exhibitions, used their own production facilities and could take private commissions, which agreed with the stylistic and organizational diversity of artistic life of the 1920s.

In September of 1928, the decision was taken to organize another credit cooperative 'Khudozhnik'. Officially, this cooperative was established only in June 1929 and afterwards its organizational form and subordination changed on several occasions. The founding members of this cooperative were 57 individual and legal persons and 39 cooperatives of Moscow and Leningrad. Originally, this organization was called the All-Russian Cooperate of Artists 'Khudozhnik' ('Artist'), but since September 1931 it was renamed into the All-Russian Union of Artists' Cooperatives 'Vsekokhudozhnik'.

There were no avant-garde artists among the founders of this organization. The cooperative was established by the leader of the official trade-union of art workers Y.Slavinsky; member of the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia F.Lekht ([6], 72); the head of the casting workshop of the group 'Prikladnoe Iskusstvo' ('Applied Art') and the chairman of the famous housing cooperative 'Sokol' in Moscow V.F. Sakharov, artists V.A. Savichev, N.N. Maslennikov and others, none of whom was related to leftist art. Many avant-garde artists, however, joined the cooperative because it represented the desired new order of the art world and also because 'Vsekokhudozhnik' gradually became a platform for distribution, commissioning and sales of art works.

The primary objective of creating 'Vsekokhudozhnik' was to assist 'art workers armed with all kinds of weapons to join the wave of Socialist construction' ([2], 3). 'Vsekokhudozhnik' was supposed to guarantee the production of art materials, help artists in their work and sales of their production, organize exhibition sales and publishing, decorate workmen's clubs and other unconventional places for exhibiting art works.

The cooperative also developed the idea of overcoming professional barriers and expanding the boundaries of art by involving independent artists and those who showed the inclination and talent for art but had to put up with a marginal status in the old institutional system. These ideas were particularly favoured by avant-garde

artists. Thus, the cooperative provided a platform for self-expression for independent authors, copyists and former peasants and workers who wanted to try their hand at art.

Apart from that, 'Vsekokhudozhnik' introduced new methods of brigade work in order to meet the 'growing need for collective work and collective workshops' and other types of teamwork in art ([11], 334).

The cooperative system used such mechanisms of employment as mass business trips of art workers to industrial construction sites. Art workers were also involved in the mass industrial production of household goods, mass-market and original art production ([24], 769-791).

Fast expansion of the cooperative shows that artists had accepted the new rules of the game: according to different estimates, in 1930, this system included from 1,000 to 1,500 artists ([2], 4, 9) while in 1932, there were already approximately 3,600 members (Russian State Archive of Literature and Art).

The most important invention of 'Vsekokhudozhnik' was probably the system of advanced contracts (*kontraktatsiya*), which meant that an artist signed a contract to deliver painted, graphic or sculptural work on an assigned theme and received an advance payment for it. Although at first *kontraktatsiya* did not attract many artists, it played the key role in the transition to the system of state distribution of commissions and mass art production in Soviet visual arts.

Simultaneously and independently of 'Vsekokhudozhnik', in the spring and summer of 1928, there appeared another organization of avant-garde artists that sought to establish itself on the national arena – the All-Russian Union of Workers of New Kinds of Art Work 'Oktyabr' ('October'). This organization strove for synthesis of art and production and construction of a new living environment. 'Oktyabr' distanced itself from the organizational and artistic practices of the Association of Artists of Revolutionary Russia (AKhRR) and included architects A.A. and V.A.Vesnins, M.Y.Ginzburg, artists D.S.Moor, A.A.Deineka, G.G.Klutsis, film-makers S.M.Eisenstein, E.I.Shub, and theoreticians A.M.Gan, A.Kurella, P.A.Novitsky, and I.L.Matsa. This union of left artists intended to create a network of regional branches, conduct an inaugural conference, and establish the basic avant-garde principles in Soviet art.

However, there was no institutional development of 'Oktyabr' to follow. One of the reasons was the lack of resources for engaging creative intelligentsia in the cultural revolution and for creating art for the masses. The idea of transforming people and society through art seemed appealing to the artists but funding for these ambitious projects remained unsecured. In the late 1920s, Solomon Nikritin, mentioned above,

lamented the hard life of artists: 'the majority either suffer from poverty,...literally starve or pick up odd jobs here and there from making magazine covers to signs "let me carry your luggage for you" ([16], 121-126).

In the conditions of the 'great leap into socialism', 'Vsekokhudozhnik' was used to develop the economy dependent on state commissions. It was also used to test various methods of providing artists with income. Cooperatives provided what was at that time referred to as a 'solid material base for art' through the extensive network of artists' groups integrated into the system of consumers' and producers' cooperation and local industry. Members of the cooperative created art works for popular consumption as well as 'elite art', designed interiors for various institutions and engaged in urban planning.

The avant-garde idea of depersonalization of an artist who creates styleless, authorless art, devoid of any unique features, was embodied in the work of 'Vsekokhudozhnik'. Artists and critics argued that it was possible to get rid of the individualistic aspect of art and that instead 'workerization' (*orabochivanie*) of art was required. In the 1920s, many masters of traditional crafts and groups of professional artists organized cooperatives, accepting the Soviet rules of the game. The criterion of quality and hierarchy of professional excellence all but disappeared from professional communication. The first overviews of the progress made by 'Vsekokhudozhnik' contained enthusiastic accounts of 'artists who were only recently divided into highly qualified masters, mediocre and weak ones, that is, according to the formal quality criterion, but now they are evaluated according to the ideological, social and political principle. It is a real breakthrough!' ([25], 177).

Branches of 'Vsekokhudozhnik' operated in Moscow and other cities and towns, connecting metropolitan and provincial, famous and unknown artists. Members of art cooperatives created objects that came to be regarded as symbols of the Soviet epoch such as Palekh miniatures, Gzhel pottery, banners for demonstrations, 'red corners' for factories, pictures for halls of Soviet institutions and copies of commonly recognized, popular art works. In this work artists pursued the aims of 'life-building', which included permeating people's everyday life and relieving it from 'remnants of petty bourgeois taste and vulgar shoddy stuff' ([2], 7).

4. Pyrrhic Victory

The criticism ruthlessly mounted by the avant-gardists between 1928 and 1932 against former institutions ([2], 31) created a particular situation.

In the USSR, a number of factors, including avant-garde craving for the new world of art, led to the formation of a new model of political economy. It was not, however, as Evgeny Dobrenko argued, the Soviet system of socialist realism as a representational mechanism for producing Socialist images ([4], 135). It was real art production based on state commissions, planned production, distribution and promotion of visual art works.

The All-Russian cooperative 'Vsekokhudozhnik' became a testing ground for implementation of many avant-garde ideas about re-structuring of the art world. Initially, this cooperative limited itself only to situation-specific goals but later it transformed into a systemic mechanism, which determined the functioning of Soviet art from the 1930s to the 1980s. Through 'Vsekokhudozhnik' art spread to the extra-aesthetic spheres of life (which was exactly what avant-garde strove for) [5]. 'Collectivization' and 'rationalization' of art and the struggle with the 'individualistic and priestly' psychology of an author led to dramatic transformations in the institutional system of Soviet art [12].

Left art prevailed temporarily during the reconstruction period but it was a 'Pyrrhic victory'. Ideas of Constructivist and production art were included into the official rhetoric of the first five-year plan but when put into practice, these ideas failed to deliver on the promises implied in the avant-garde design of art institutions.

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