Autonomy and The Display of Art: Analysis of Early 20th Century Avant-Garde Exhibitions

by

Cameron Drury

Submitted to the Department of Art History

School of Humanities

in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of Bachelor of Arts

Purchase College

State University of New York

December 2024

Sponsor: Sarah Warren

Second Reader: Jonah Westerman

Table of Contents

The Origin of Modern Art and Autonomy

Autonomy is defined as an individual's ability for self-determination or self-governance. The origin of autonomy as self-determination began in ancient Greek philosophy. For Plato and Aristotle, a person who abides by reason and lacks dependency on others for happiness is the most ideal human.[1] The modern idea of autonomy applied to the individual's authority over their actions began in the 18th and 19th centuries with the philosophies of Immanuel Kant. Kantian autonomy covers three themes: autonomy serves as the right for one to make their own decisions excluding outside interferences, autonomy serves as the capacity for one to make such decisions through the independence of mind, reflecting on the first two themes, the final theme serves as a conclusion that the ideal way for someone to live is autonomously.[2]

Modern art as an autonomous practice arose in the 19th century. The art created by modern artists wanted to establish identity away from the norms of art in society. Early 20th-century artists such as Picasso, Kandinsky, Mondrian, and even late 19th-century impressionist artists Matisse and Cezanne wished to draw attention to the procedures and techniques fundamental to art over artwork focused on realism and narratives. American art critic Clement Greenburg, who was a part of the critics that first saw modern art as an autonomous practice, claimed that modern art began with Manet, whose quick, flat style paved the way for the Impressionists, Post-Impressionists, Cubists, and many other modern artists who wished to reject the traditional standards of painting.[3]

---

[1] Jane Dryden, "Autonomy," Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, (November 2010), https://iep.utm.edu/autonomy/#SH1a.
[2] Oliver Senson, *Kant on Moral Autonomy*. (Cambridge: University Press, 2013), 3.
[3] Clement Greenburg, "Modernist Painting." In *Clement Greenburg: The Collected Essays and Criticism* ed. John O'Brian. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986-1993), 85.

Autonomy in art developed in the 20th century when responses to modern society's social and political issues were coming to fruition. Problems from the commercialization of art from capitalism and ongoing wars with the threat of fascism were cited by Greenburg in his essay "Avant-garde and Kitsch" as being the main dangers for art in modern society. Some artists wished to keep the individuality of their art at a distance from conflicts. For example, Kandinsky was criticized as an artist working in the Soviet Union for his focus on spirituality in art rather than utilitarianism. Some artists delved deeply into the impact of the wars their countries faced, using art to show defiance and a platform to critique their nation's condition. The Dadaists, in particular, explored themes related to the aftermath of World War I, especially the German government's handling of the consequences. Still, even the attempts of the most autonomous and abstract presentations of art away from external sources had elements of the current and historical events at the time.

German philosopher and social theorist Theodor Adorno wrote *Aesthetic Theory* in 1970; he argues his views of favoring the autonomy of art that opposed the avant-gardist unacceptance of the separateness from everyday life. To Adorno, autonomous art is not metaphysically removed from and independent from society rather, autonomous art is not reducible to the requirements of society to present reality as harmonious and whole.[4] Adorno doesn't argue for the autonomy of art to reproduce a positive depiction of society rather, art has the right to express the negatives of society, and this is only done because the art is autonomous and can determine itself through its mode of expression.[5] Similar to Greenburg's claim that commercialization is a danger to art, the norms and socially imposed narratives that Adorno refers to is capitalism.

---

[4] Brian O'Connor, *The Adorno Reader*. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 240.
[5] Brian O'Connor, *Adorno*. (London: Routledge, 2012), 174.

Adorno refers to Georg Hegel for his argument that when art is autonomous, its freedom becomes “a deposit for the richest inner intuitions and ideas that a nation possesses.” Free art represents the truth of the origin of the artwork, but the contrast of “unfree” art ex. propaganda, which Adorno is highly critical of, is constrained by its creativity to serve the agenda to represent power or ideology.

Autonomy of Art and Exhibitions

In the early 20th century, many political issues arose worldwide. Revolutions swept across the world, with Russia experiencing some of the most impactful changes. Thus, artists in revolutionary countries created new forms of art in response to the radical changes taking place. The new movements and radical ideas were of great interest to creating exhibitions, which served as a way to educate the public and highlight the significance of new art. Curators and exhibition organizers showcased art to educate audiences, promote propaganda, and draw attention to emerging artists. This proved challenging due to personal tastes, government interference, and public criticism for ignoring the broader context or overly promoting messages.

This paper focuses on two exhibitions from the 1930s. Alfred H. Barr Jr, American curator and founder of the Museum of Modern Art, curated the exhibition “Cubism and Abstract Art,” in 1936 which served to display the timeline of abstract art. Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov, Soviet Marxist curator at the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, curated the exhibition “Works on Soviet and Revolutionary Themes,” in 1930, which gathered historical revolutionary artworks and aimed to bring the ideas to the present to represent how current Soviet society should be progressing. Masha Chlenova’s essay, “Soviet Museology During the Cultural Revolution: An Educational Turn, 1928-1929,” discusses differences in the executions of these exhibitions within the context of Soviet museology. This paper further investigates these differences through

Adorno's principles of autonomy, examining how political climates influenced these exhibitions. Additionally, two other exhibitions in the early 20th century in Germany and Mexico further prove how external and internal interferences were inevitable in art and curation.

Alfred Barr: "Cubism and Abstract Art"

Alfred Barr traveled to Europe to study contemporary European culture and collect bibliographic and visual material for his courses on modern art. Near the end of 1927, Barr made an unplanned detour to Russia to witness its post-revolutionary avant-garde art. During his stay, he watched many plays, praising Russia for having more shows than America or Western Europe. Although he saw value in the plays, most of them were based on themes of Soviet anti-western propaganda. An encounter Barr had while viewing a play was *Roar China*, the play focused on American and British imperialism in China, Barr expressed discomfort with how the Chinese were portrayed as victims while the American and British were the oppressors. Despite the roughly accurate play, Barr remarked that it was too one-sided. In contrast to this reaction, Barr saw another play, *Razlom (The Break-Up)*, claiming it was "better constructed, less caricatured" because the White and Red armies were portrayed equally.[6] Barr's reactions to the political plays signify how Barr had an antipathy towards art clearly as a political instrument.

While meeting with artists in Russia, Barr wanted to meet with painters. Still, he was disappointed that many artists no longer identified as painters and rejected traditional modes of painting as a basis for changing the role of art in a bourgeoisie society.[7] Barr lacked a certain understanding of how the political climate in Russia shifted how artists viewed themselves away

---

[6] Alfred H. Barr, "Russian Diary, 1927-28." In *October*, vol. 7, "Soviet Revolutionary Culture Winter," (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978), 31.
[7] Barr, "Russian Diary, 1927-28." 21.

from traditional art styles. Throughout his travels, Barr was also interested in Russian religious icons and peasant art, even though those art styles were harder to access due to religion being restricted in a communist society.[8] While it is clear Barr appreciated modern and old Russian art, it was only to a certain degree if it remained in his comfort level. This will be evident in his exhibition through his utilization of artwork from Russia. We can deduce that a large part of Barr's preference for painting comes from the fact it is autonomous. Barr's reception of Soviet art will tie into the issues of autonomy present in "Cubism and Abstract Art," as his travels in the Soviet Union gave more insight into how he had issues with ignorance towards their society as an American from a heavily capitalist and nationalist society.

A retrospective of modern art exhibitions in America starts with the Armory Show in 1913, originally called "The International Exhibition of Modern Art," which featured artwork by European impressionist and modern artists such as Van Gogh, Cezanne, Picasso, Matisse, and Duchamp. The exhibition had been calculated to get America out of the comfortable exposure to art by old European masters.[9] At that time, Americans were used to seeing a very realistic style of art, and the modern artwork shocked the viewers. It was a profound moment for American artists who no longer felt the need to comply with the artistic culture of Europe that enforced traditional academic painting; instead, it was able to bring into question the culture of art in America. The conclusion can be drawn that this exhibition was able to pave the way for Barr.

Barr's exhibition "Cubism and Abstract Art" opened in 1936. Barr's intention behind the exhibition was to educate Americans on abstract art from Europe through the format of a timeline to showcase the different movements of abstract art. The exhibition described the

---

[8] Barr, "Russian Diary, 1927-28." 46.
[9] Milton W. Brown, *The Story of The Armory Show*. (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1963), 26.

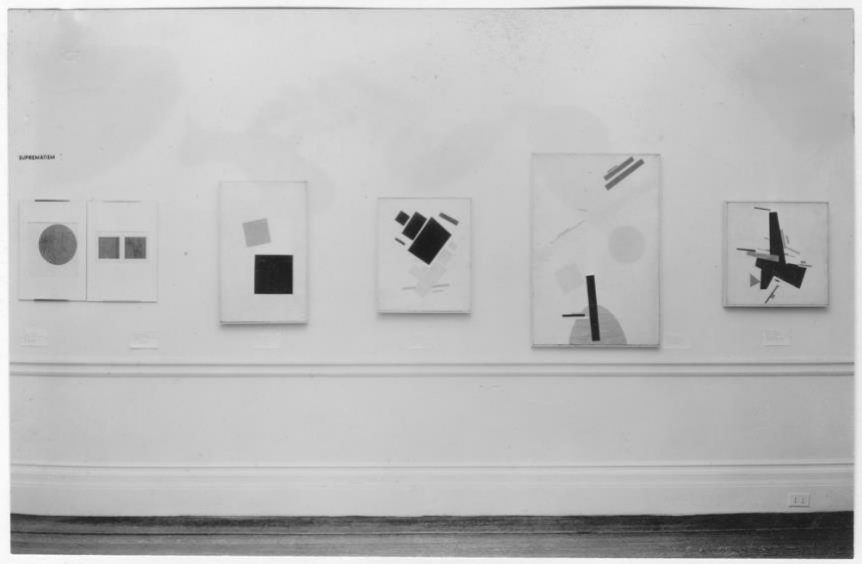
development of abstract art, but the historical context was limited to a stylistic chronology that ignored all other social, political, or psychological contingencies.[10] Barr obtained this artwork through Alexander Dorner, the director of the Hannover Museum in Germany, when it was at risk of being destroyed when the Nazis were closing down museums in the 1930s. Barr introduced something new to the American public: modern art by European artists. An important aspect of the exhibition concerning the artwork's autonomy is how Barr's focus was to educate the public on the styles of abstract art rather than the content; through this, he is claiming the artwork is autonomous. The presentation of linear history through aesthetically pleasing styles is the exact critique that has been made by critics of the MoMA for its seemingly neutral displays (Figure 1.1).[11] There could be an argument made that Barr was upholding the autonomy of art by allowing it to have freedom and not imposing a certain message on the audience. It could represent what Adorno said about escaping the social norms of the time, in Barr's case, it was new artwork from foreign countries. But the complicated aspect comes from Barr's ignorance of the origin of the art, which is an integral part of one of Adorno's principles of autonomy that'll be analyzed. The exhibition was in favor of the art style over the content despite the artwork coming from places under attack, such as the Soviet Union and Germany, and much of the artwork had themes of the conflicts from their origin.[12]

---

[10] Sybil Gordon Kantor, *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art.* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002), 314.

[11] Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach "The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis." In *Marxist Perspectives* v.1. no.4, ed. Eugene D. Genovese (New York: Cliomar Corporation, 1978), 28-51.

[12] Masha Chlenova, "Soviet Museology During the Cultural Revolution: An Educational Turn, 1928-1933." *Journal of Histoire Politique* (Fall 2017): 9.



1.1 “Cubism and Abstract Art,” 1936, New York City.

The exhibition’s problems lie in the country in which it takes place. After World War I, America experienced the first red scare, a panic of communism rising in America that would lead to a revolution much like the German and Russian socialist movements. The exhibition had many Russian and German artists, such as Aleksandr Rodchenko, Kazimir Malevich, and Jean Arp, with themes embedded in their experiences of the revolution and political turmoil. Despite this explicitly political problem in modern art in Europe, Barr ignored many of the social and political roles of the artists to make the work acceptable to the American public.

The presentation of modern art in America was shocking with the Armory Show of 1913, and it’s clear Barr wanted to expand on it. It is to be noted that “Cubism and Abstract Art” was well received. The only main complaint was that there were no American artists exhibited, but it is because the year before, a large exhibition of Abstract Art in America was held at the Whitney Museum.[13] The way Barr displayed the art, focusing only on its style rather than background,

[13] Alfred Barr, “Preface,” *Cubism and Abstract Art*, (reprint. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 9.

most likely contributed to its success. Three years before the exhibition, Mexican communist and muralist Diego Rivera painted a mural titled *Man at the Crossroads* (Figure 1.2) for the New York Rockefeller Center. Before the piece was finished, controversy arose over the image of Lenin, other communist figures, and scenes of labor unrest during the Great Depression (Figure 1.3). As a result, the mural was destroyed before its public debut.[14] Barr had the advantage of the MoMA being a private institution compared to the mural, which is understood as public art and part of public conversation, so it had a different kind of scrutiny. Rockefeller suggested to Rivera to change the portrait; he stated it would be less of a problem if it was in a private home, but it is public, so the situation was different.[15] Rockefeller was more aware of this problem because the Rockefellers were already facing problems with the press with headlines like: "RIVERA PAINTS SCENES OF COMMUNIST ACTIVITY AND JOHN D. JR. FOOTS THE BILL." [16] This demonstrates the potential political and public threat to art that is perceived to be revolutionary. Therefore, it is understood why Barr would be more cautious exhibiting artwork with a revolutionary background and focusing on the style rather than content.

[14] Bertram D. Wolfe, "The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera" (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1963), 327.

[15] Michael E. Telzrow, "Artist of the Revolution: Diego Rivera's Artwork Reflected his Ardent Belief in Communism and His Rejection of God, Tradition and Capitalism," *The New American* (2007), 37.

[16] Telzrow, 37.

1.2 Diego Rivera, *Man at the Crossroads*, fresco, 1933.

1.3 Diego Rivera, Detail of *Man at the Crossroads,* fresco, 1933.

Looking back at this issue in 1952, when the second red scare was at its peak, and the United States government was suppressing modern art for accusations of communism, Barr wrote an article in the New York Times titled “Is Modern Art Communistic?” While the article was written thirty years after “Cubism and Abstract Art,” an interesting aspect is how Barr defends himself by saying modern art isn’t communist because many Soviet bureaucrats from the early 1900s, notably Lenin, did not like modern art. Lenin claimed he could not praise the “-isms” of modern art because “They give men no joy.” Barr also highlights that several modern

artists, including Kandinsky, Chagall, Malevich, and Burliuk, left Russia in the 1920s; he also featured their works in "Cubism and Abstract Art." The arrival of Socialist Realism in 1932 led to hostility towards any art that did not conform to it. Barr used this as his final point for why modern art wasn't communist in the eyes of Soviet Russia.

Barr's relationship with communism is complicated, during his travels in Russia, there seemed to be a disconnect between him and the political climate impacting how he viewed Soviet art. Despite this, Barr still had respect for the art being produced and wanted to preserve it when it was under threat of being destroyed by the Nazis. He appeared to be proud to be the first to exhibit Malevich's artwork in the United States. In 1931, after Barr curated an exhibition on Matisse, the Museum showed the works of Diego Rivera. Barr saw Rivera in Russia in 1927 and later persuaded Abby Rockefeller to collect his works despite the artist's revolutionary politics.[17] However, as seen with the controversy at the Rockefeller Center mural, Rivera's politics became too much of an issue for the American art world. This further proves that Barr was not completely against working with those who were associated with communism. While observing how Barr wrote "Is Modern Art Communistic?", it becomes clear that he does not outright dismiss communism as a bad thing in art; rather, he critiques how people are more willing to reject it due to a common prejudice.[18] Along with that claim, he says, "But this is a point of view which is encouraged by the more reckless and resentful academic artists and their political mouthpieces in Congress and elsewhere."[19] Barr's willingness to take risks with art later led to controversy from the trustees at the museum, which is later explained in this section.

---

[17] Kantor, 22.
[18] Alfred H. Barr Jr., "Is Modern Art Communistic?" *New York Times*, 14 December 1952, 4.
[19] Barr, "Is Modern Art Communistic?" 5.

"Is Modern Art Communistic?" is relevant to our understanding of the exhibition in relation to communist politics and Barr's political understanding of communism. Barr defends himself as an art historian of modern art by referencing the Soviet Union political figures of the early 20th century and their viewpoints against modernism. In the entry, he claims that communists in the Soviet Union didn't like modern art because it didn't serve the proletariat and wasn't a viable option for the revolutionary transition of society into communism (source). However, some of the artists Barr displays in "Cubism and Abstract Art" do have communist revolutionary ideologies different than the communists he mentioned, and these ideas influenced their art and views. Malevich, in particular, had strong opinions about museums and their purpose. With the exposure of futurist ideology, he dismissed museums stating, "Instead of collecting all sorts of old stuff, we must form laboratories of a worldwide creative building apparatus, and from its axes will come forth artists of living forms rather than dead representations of objectivity."[20] For Malevich, modernism was a way to serve the proletariat and build something "worldwide" to look into the future rather than remain in the past. Barr's argument becomes complicated because there were varying interpretations of communism and its purpose in the Soviet Union. While Barr is not entirely incorrect in claiming that some communists did not like modern art, his argument is not universally true, as seen with Malevich. This further illustrates how Barr, as an American, lacked a more complex understanding of the Soviet Union's political climate.

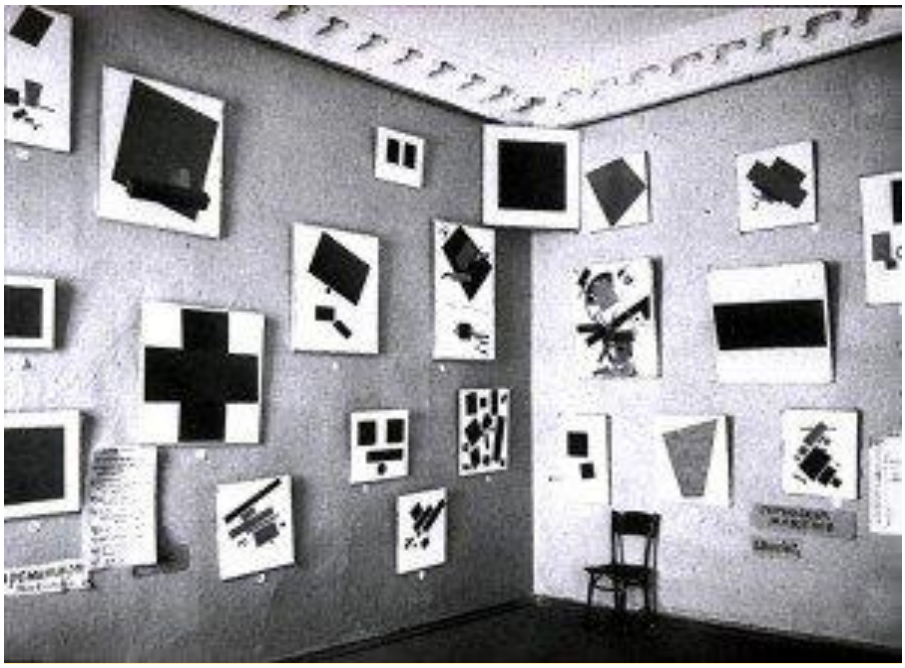
To put in perspective how Malevich preferred his work to be displayed, his exhibition "0.10" shows the radical way he viewed his work. He hung thirty-nine canvases, all but one of

[20] Kazimir Malevich, "On The Museum." In *Avant-Garde Museology*, ed. Arsney Zhilyaev (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 272-73.

them unframed, in a collagelike, multilevel arrangement, crowned by the paint he titled *The Black Square*. This painting was placed high up and across a corner, traditionally reserved for a Christian icon in the houses of Russian peasants.[21] (Figure 1.4) Malevich wanted to portray the sense of freedom his new artwork was showing by saying in a leaflet handed out at the exhibition, "I transformed myself in the zero of form…I destroyed the ring of the horizon and escaped from the circle of things, from the horizon-ring that confines the artist and forms of nature" [22] In contrast to Barr, Malevich intended his art to be displayed in correspondence with his intention of the new style of art he created. However, Barr displayed Malevich's artwork in a spacious, linear format, compared to Malevich's vision of his art to exist beyond conventional preexisting exhibition models, as seen by his claim to "destroy the ring of the horizon."

[21] Masha Chlenova, "0.10." In *Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925: how a radical idea changed modern art*, ed. Leah Dickerman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 207.

[22] Kazimir Malevich, "From Cubism to Suprematism. New Painterly Realism," (1915). In Chlenova, "0.10" 207.



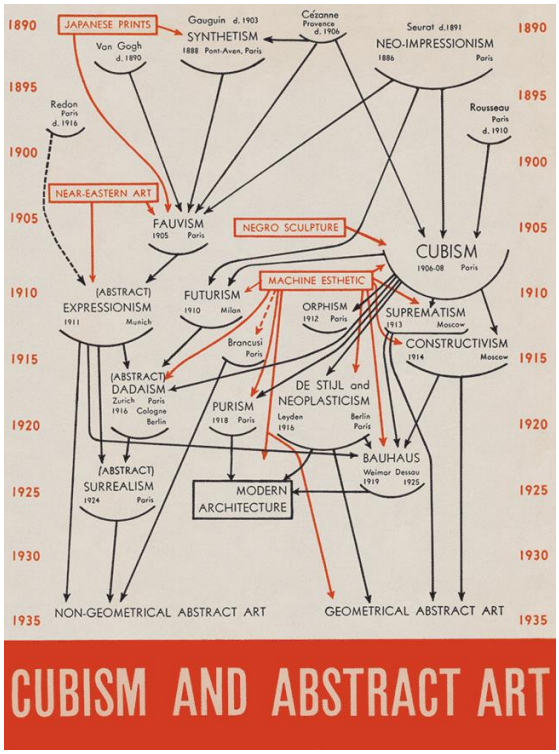
1.4 “0,10” exhibition, 1915, Petrograd.

The format of “Cubism and Abstract Art” was based on Barr’s famous genealogical diagram of abstraction, which began with Post-Impressionism.[23] The main point of the exhibition is Cubism, in which the other styles were categorized into either “geometrical abstract art” or “non-geometrical abstract art” in Barr’s famous diagram for the catalogue of the exhibition (Figure 1.5). Styles that influenced non-geometrical abstract art included Japanese Prints and Near-Eastern art, while geometrical abstract art contributed to movements such as Neo-Impressionism, Cubism, Constructivism, and the Bauhaus. Barr makes a clear point through all the styles that derive from abstraction; it is modern art’s most progressive expression.[24] As the central issue of the exhibition, visitors are first confronted with Picasso’s *Dancer* placed next to

[23] Leah Dickerman, “Abstraction in 1936: Cubism and Abstract Art at the Museum of Modern Art.” In *Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925: how a radical idea changed modern art*, ed. Leah Dickerman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 366

[24] Glenn D. Lowry, “Abstraction in 1936: Barr’s Diagrams.” In *Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925: how a radical idea changed modern art*, ed. Leah Dickerman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012), 361.

an African figure. This effect is done to educate viewers on the development of modern art as well as its historical roots in terms of its aesthetics. In her 1998 book, *The Power of Display. A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art*, Mary Anne Staniszewski noted that in this historical presentation, "[Barr] departed from traditional display methods of treating painting as room décor."[25] The paintings were depicted at eye level and spaced out in chronological order to educate the viewer on the historical development (Figure 1.6). The aesthetically based structure of his displays laid out the groundwork for how museums and galleries displayed artwork in America. These spacious presentations show how Barr valued the autonomy of the artwork in terms of aesthetics.



1.5 Alfred Barr, Diagram for "Cubism and Abstract Art," offset printed in color, 1936, Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York City.

[25] Mary Anne Staniszewski, *The Power of Display. A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art,* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 62.

1.6 “Cubism and Abstract Art” exhibition, 1936, New York City.

Barr claims the works are autonomous through his display, but he ignores the historical implications that the works carry. Adorno’s principle of autonomy claims that art, when autonomous, reflects the freedom of its origin, elaborated by Brian O’Connor in his book *Adorno*, where he breaks down Adorno’s principles, “By virtue of its very autonomy – or freedom – art thereby achieves the capacity to present the truth. In its freedom art actually becomes, what Hegel describes as, a despot for the ‘richest inner intuitions and ideas’ that a nation possesses (Hegel 1975: 7).”[26] Barr presents the artwork without acknowledging the complex political climate that influenced its production, particularly works from Germany and Russia, which were experiencing political turmoil. Rather than the art being autonomous because it is removed from society, Adorno says the autonomy of art should be allowed to depict the negatives of society, which can only be achieved because the art is autonomous, “Art became, as Adorno puts it, ‘social antithesis of society’ (Adorno, 8).”[27] Art is supposed to represent what

[26] O’ Connor, *Adorno*, 176.
[27] O’Connor, *Adorno*, 175.

society is not. The way Barr displays art does not uphold how much of the artwork criticizes the negatives of society or wants to change societal norms. Barr's formalist view of the role of art is described by him as not to "burden the arts with social and political responsibility in the sense they might serve as a substitute for ethical, moral, and religious factors."[28] While art doesn't have to be burdened with the expectations of political or social responsibility, his argument is complicated when the art that is being displayed is meant to serve those responsibilities. For the second part of his statement, art that is serving a responsibility isn't necessarily propaganda; rather, it can show the flaws of society in an enlightening way.

On the contrary, Barr does seem aware of how he is presenting the artwork in a single sentence in the introduction of the catalog of the exhibition about the rise of fascism: "This essay and exhibition might well be dedicated to those painters of squares and circles (and the architects influenced by them) who have suffered at the hands of philistines with political power."[29] Though Barr acknowledges a political motivation, the structure of the exhibition focused on artistic innovation rather than politics. This autonomy implied by the display is not the same as Adorno's understanding of autonomy. Adorno's understanding of autonomy revolves around art being critical of society. However, during the time he was writing *Aesthetic Theory*, art was being increasingly neutralized for the art market.[30] For Adorno, art can serve as an aesthetic object, but first it must be preserved as something capable of critiquing society through escaping social norms. According to Adorno, this critical potential is threatened by capitalism in the art

---

[28] Alfred H. Barr to Dr. Berle, 1958, MoMA Archives, NY: AHB, 12.II.3.a. In *Alfred J. Barr and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art*, 331.

[29] Alfred H. Barr, "Introduction," *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 1936 (reprinted, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1979) 18.

[30] O'Connor, *Adorno*, 176.

market. Barr is not allowing the art to show the critiques of society that it portrays and is neutralizing it, therefore not allowing for it to be the aesthetic autonomous object that he intended for it to be.

After "Cubism and Abstract Art" was opened, controversies arose from leftists on the way Barr ignored the economic, social, and political context of the art's making. Two different kinds of sources targeted the way the exhibition was handled. Meyer Shapiro's contemporary response a year after the exhibition and an historical analysis by Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach of the MoMA's display techniques.

Meyer Shapiro's entry focuses on how Barr used the art movements for the exhibition, and Shapiro offers more historical information to prove how Barr ignored the context of the artworks' making. In the essay, Shapiro explains each art movement's historical context and background, emphasizing that even seemingly autonomous artistic developments were influenced by historical events. He asserts, "All renderings of objects, no matter how exact they seem, even photographs, proceed from values, methods, and viewpoints which somehow shape the image and often determine its contents."[31] Shapiro describes how Barr would claim a certain form of art and then put it in a different context to make it more accessible. Shapiro uses examples of narrative prose that cannot simply be added to a preexisting prose that cannot be disengaged from its original style. Since art inherently serves a purpose for the artist, rewriting it to fit a different narrative diminishes its impact. Shapiro dismisses this because all aspects of a form already have qualities conditioned by the modes of how the artist sees objects in relation to

[31] Meyer Shapiro, "Nature of Abstract Art (1937)," in *Modern Art 19th & 20th Centuries Selected Papers by Meyer Shapiro* (New York: George Braziller, 1978), 195.

how to portray them in art. All these factors that create the content also reflect the emotional state of the painter, which is conditioned by the society under which they live.

> Just as narrative prose is not simply a story added to a preexisting, pure prose form that can be disengaged from the sense of the words, so a representation is not a natural form added to an abstract design. Even the schematic aspects of the form in such a work already possess qualities conditioned by the modes of seeing objects and designing representations, not to mention the content and emotional attitudes of the painter. [32]

All these aspects make it complicated to simply put it in a different context and "cloak" its meaning.

Carol Duncan and Allan Wallach's "The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis," focuses on the overall display of the MoMA in general. Meyer Shapiro's "The Nature of Abstract Art," served to critique the exhibition for ignoring the economic, social, and political context of the art's making. Duncan and Wallach's article calls out the MoMA for presenting itself as a refuge for materialist society, but by offering "refuge," it instead leads to "competitive individualism and alienated human relations that characterize contemporary social experience."[33] In the analysis, the layout of the MoMA is compared to a labyrinth, a series of narrow, silent, windowless white spaces. The sterile environment suppresses the visitor's speech and movement, while technically, the visitor may be able to speak as loud as they can or move however they want, the layout of the museum creates a feeling of suppression.

Both Duncan/Wallach and Shapiro offer insight into the flaws of both the MoMA and Barr. The MoMA creates a sense of alienation through its way of offering refuge from society, and it disconnects the viewer from the outside world. This is relevant to how Barr seeks to create something new for the American public but, as a result, reduces the artwork he is displaying as

---

[32] Shapiro, 197.
[33] Duncan/Wallach, 46.

autonomous from its meaning. As described by Shapiro, Barr is flawed for wanting to create a cloak for the artwork to make it more accessible to the world, through doing this, he dismisses the context in which it was made.

As a curator, the exhibition was very successful for Barr, influencing how modern museums and galleries display artwork, but throughout the years as director, problems were consistently arising. Barr was deemed "too liberal, progressive, and freethinking" by some of the trustees. Barr also faced controversies for supposedly neglecting American abstract art,[34] as seen with "Cubism and Abstract Art," which was one of the largest critiques. He had to accept that with people in power who had preferences in their art. Barr's surrealist show in 1937 irritated the trustees as they found it to be disturbing and ridiculous, even leading to the loss of the support of Abby Rockefeller; she even called for him to step down.[35] Barr admitted that he was not fit as a museum director and said, "I had some abilities as a writer, curator, showman, etc., and perhaps a modicum of professional integrity, but I was inadequate as a fundraiser, general administrator, and diplomat." [36]Barr was dismissed in 1943 as museum director, though he was allowed to stay on the board as advisory director, being relieved of the administrative responsibilities. In 1947, Barr served as director of the museum collections, where he was able to successfully build a permanent collection. Overall, while Barr was not successful as the role of the museum director and his curations were beginning to be controversial, he found his place in collections as an art historian and educator.

[34] Kantor, 372-73.
[35] Kantor, 357.
[36] Kantor, 364.

Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov: "Works on Soviet and Revolutionary Themes"

In the years following the 1917 October Revolution, many Russian Avant-Garde artists called for the destruction of museums as they believed that museums preserved the past that hindered the creation of a new culture.[37] Malevich states, "Instead of collecting all sorts of old stuff we must form laboratories of a worldwide creative building apparatus, and from its axes will come forth artists of living forms rather than dead representations of objectivity."[38] Malevich calls for museums that collect old objects to be transformed into laboratories for artists to create forms that live and serve in the new culture. The book *Avant-Garde Museology* consists of writings by various Soviet creatives on their views of a museum. In the introduction of the book, author Arsney Zhilyaev explains how Soviet avant-gardists saw that for a museum to survive in a post-revolutionary future, it had to keep up with the transformations of reality as it transitioned into socialism.[39] Nikolai Punin in *The Art of the Commune* states, "Let the paintings be hung and rehung without any interruption. Ideally, the museum must be made entirely of moving. Any tendency towards the stasis of the church icon must be eradicated."[40] Punin urges museums to be constantly rotating artwork to benefit the pioneering avant-garde artists rather than being static with the same artwork, such as classic church icons. In 1928, what was later deemed the "Cultural Revolution" in Russia occurred when the proletarians aimed to seize power on the cultural front, extending from education to scientific research and the arts.[41] Soviet museums

---

[37] Arsney Zhilyaev, "Introduction Avant-Garde Museology: Toward a history of a Pilot Experiment," in *Avant-Garde Museology,* 15.
[38] Malevich, 272.
[39] Zhilyaev, 34.
[40] Nikolai Punin, "On the Results of the Museum Conference" *Art of the Commune no. 12* (February 23, 1919). In *Avant-Garde Museology*, 35.
[41] Shelia Fitzpatrick, "Cultural Revolution of Russia 1928-32," *Journal of Contemporary History 9* (1974): 35.

transitioned away from the 19th-century museum pandering to the educated elite to political-educational institutions accessible and attractive to the broad masses. The reform began in 1928, when museum workers from Moscow and Leningrad held a series of meetings at the Scientific Section of the Commissariat for Enlightenment, an agency in charge of the administration of public education and cultural matters. At the 1928 conferences, it was suggested that Soviet museums should be "entirely dedicated to the tasks of mass propaganda of the ideas of the Marxist worldview and the tasks of socialist construction."[42] This more radical point of view for museums made clear that the Soviet museum workers wanted the impact of the revolution to have an influence on museums compared to their Western counterparts.

In December 1930, the First All-Russian Museum Congress issued specific guidelines for museum displays: artworks were to be shown not as objects of fetishism but as examples of social processes.[43] The guidelines reflect the Marxist worldview of art because, for the bourgeois art is valued as an object of fetishization and for its quality rather than acknowledging the process and labor behind it. The Marxist ideology changes how art goes from an object of the bourgeois to something that can serve the people through its value as construction and meaning. Between 1929 and 1933, Soviet museum curators developed what was known as "comprehensive Marxist exhibitions," focusing on logical discussion of historical development through the displays of art, including an abundance of textual commentaries.[44] One of the most radical examples of the new Marxist approach to visual arts museums was put forward by the

[42] Presentations at the Leningrad conference of museum workers, 1929. In "Soviet Museology During the Cultural Revolution: An Educational Turn, 1928-1933," 3.
[43] Chlenova, 3.
[44] Chlenova, 3.

curator and director of the Department of New Art, Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov, at the State Tretyakov Gallery.

Fedorov-Davydov was a supporter of sociological aesthetics, pioneered by Vladimir Friche, who was a Marxist literary art scholar and a part of the People's Commissariat of Education after the Russian Civil War. In *Avant-Garde Museology* when introducing Fedorov-Davydov and Friche, Zhilyaev explains, "Sociological aesthetics argued that various aspects of a work of art were conditioned by the artist's position within wider social relations." Fedorov-Davydov's interest in this view of aesthetics correlates with his use of art being valued for its ability to bring attention to social conditions to the public. Zhilyaev points out that sociological aesthetics can be utilized in a questionable matter, "Thus an analysis of this sort often amounted to little more than scouring the artwork for expressions of revolutionary struggle or to the drawing of rather reductive parallels between a formal analysis of the artwork and a social analysis of the artist's class background. Consequently, anyone could be declared a reactionary on account of one's non-proletarian roots, or vice versa."[45] Although the assumption that aspects of a work of art stem from an artist's position in society may be accurate, it became a problematic tool of social control. Labeling anyone as a reactionary based on their artistic expressions risks reducing their art to those themes, potentially leading to suppression.

Fedorov-Davydov made the distinction between art in museums and natural history or science museums, "Art expresses and reflects reality, and its subjectivity of text is at the same time the objectivity of recording facts, which is what needs to be shown in museums of the revolution by means of art. It is, first and foremost, art as a document, as a portrait of reality, for

[45] Zhilyaev, 44.

art, as an emotional irritant, is the strongest method of influence and magnifies that revolutionary charge which the observer receives from non-artistic material in this museum."[46] Fedorov-Davydov believes that art can serve many purposes that other historical objects cannot through its wide array of dynamics. Fedorov-Davydov believed for the proletariat to use art as a class weapon they must understand how art was a weapon and how the other classes used it in the past.[47] The goal of the proletariat seizing cultural fronts that the Cultural Revolution focuses on can be traced back to artists writing directly after the 1917 October Revolution. One example of this can be found in Aleksandr Bogdanov's "The Proletarian and Art" in 1918, proposing how art needed to be changed to reflect the new proletariat and collective and that the art of the past had little value. Bogdanov used four points for how to enact this change, one: art is the most powerful weapon because it portrays living images in regard to cognition, feelings, and aspirations, two: the proletarian needs a new class of art that reflects the collective labor, three: old art needs to be looked at critically it should be viewed as a way to show the proletariat the struggle of the old world, four: organizations and institutions need to be dedicated to promoting new art based on close collaboration that will educate the workers on the direction of the new socialist ideal.[48] Reflecting on Fedorov-Davydov's views of art as a weapon, it's clear he was inspired by these older Marxist revolutionaries. Fedorov-Davydov's Marxist views intertwined with his views of the museum as something that should be revolutionary and serve the proletariat through showcasing class struggles.

---

[46] Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov, "Permanent Collections of Fine Art Museums: Joint Report." In *Avant-Garde Museology*, 353.
[47] Fedorov-Davydov, 354.
[48] Aleksandr Bogdanov, "The Proletarian and Art, 1918" in *Russian Art of The Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-193,* ed. John E. Bowlt (London: Thames & Hudson 2017), 177.

After being appointed as the director of the Tretyakov Gallery, Fedorov-Davydov created his first experimental Marxist exhibition, "Art Works on Soviet and Revolutionary Themes," which opened in 1930. The goal of this exhibition was to "gather the best artworks that addressed Soviet and revolutionary topics to bring it to the present moment" (Chlenova, 5) Unlike "Cubism and Abstract Art," there is little documented information of this exhibition that is translated into English; Masha Chlenova's "Soviet Museology During the Cultural Revolution: An Educational Turn, 1928-1933" provides sufficient information for the description of the exhibition. The exhibition included paintings, sculptures, architecture, drawings, posters, photography, and film to exhibit their importance in the new growing society aiming to advance itself. The purpose of the exhibition was to directly and politically engage with museum visitors. Fedorov-Davydov had displays speaking aggressively in numerous slogans and citations placed on the gallery walls. Fedorov-Davydov's vision was to create an exhibition that speaks for itself without requiring oral explanations. The wall labels and texts weren't the only things that conveyed the message of the exhibition but also the selection of the objects and documents that provided the visitors with class-based content, socio-economic origin, and the meaning of various movements.[49] The display techniques of the exhibition were meant to reflect a linear narrative and utilize every gallery wall as a complete composition.[50] Themes followed in chronological sequence, one for each of the four rooms of the exhibition: from the revolution and its precursors to the victories of the Civil War to the Cultural Revolution. The aesthetic value of these artworks was second to the historical context; the overbearing display technique is one of the main criticisms against the exhibition (Figure 1.7).

---

[49] Aleksei Fedorov-Davydov, "Issues in reconfiguring the Tretyakov Gallery" 1930.9. In Masha Chlenova, "Soviet Museology During the Cultural Revolution: An Educational Turn, 1928-1933," 9.
[50] Chlenova, 10.

1.7 “Art Works on Soviet and Revolutionary Themes” exhibition, 1930, Moscow.

In contrast to Barr’s claim that the works are autonomous, Fedorov-Davydov diminished the work’s autonomy in favor of furthering his political message. Fedorov-Davydov dismissed the idea of an exhibition focused on styles as he viewed it as an expression of a bourgeois artistic culture.[51] He viewed art as an expression of the historical conditions of its production, and for him, aesthetically driven styles do not express those conditions and are merely a sum of characteristics, “not a historical but a typological category – a sum of characteristics, obtained through the materialist-productive analysis of a given art, an analysis of its social mechanism a style of artistic devices and the social functioning of their transformation and the deformation of the material of the surrounding extra-artistic reality.” Fedorov-Davydov claims that styles in the aesthetic sense are merely typological, classifying them by a certain set of characteristics, and the styles do not acknowledge the historical background. As a result, this diminishes the autonomy of the artwork, as the qualities of each artwork were taken out in favor of serving his narrative.

[51] Chlenova, 12.

Since aesthetics were not factored into the exhibition, many of the artworks lacked artistic quality; the art just had to serve Fedorov-Davydov's political task. When faced with criticism about this, he dismissed it by explaining that his vision was to create a critical and agitational task at that moment. [52]

Examining these views of autonomy through Adorno's principles, we will explore how these principles challenge Fedorov-Davydov's logic of the exhibition. Fedorov-Davydov does uphold the historical context and origin that the artwork is produced under, but he uses it as a form of propaganda, something Adorno highly disagrees with. In *The Adorno Reader* by Brian O'Connor, O'Connor summarizes Adorno's view of propaganda, "Art loses its essence when it concedes heteronomy, in this case the heteronomy being political propaganda. Furthermore, ideology cannot be exposed by edification. Political messages will be filtered through false consciousness and dismissed. Rather, social contradictions need to be experienced, and certain art holds open the possibility of that experience." [53]Art that comes from the influence of an external force such as a government will lose what makes it impactful for complex social commentary. Fedorov-Davydov used art that did come from an external force, themes of the revolution, making the exhibition abide by a very linear narrative that does not open for complex conversations. Fedorov-Davydov makes art reducible to what is required in society, such as political messaging that was common in the Soviet Union. Summarizing Adorno's words O'Connor explains, "Art is not autonomous in the sense it is metaphysically removed from and independent of society. It is autonomous in that it is not reducible to the requirements of society, namely the presentation of a harmonious and meaningful whole."[54] The main point of the

[52] Chlenova, 13.
[53]O'Connor, *The Adorno Reader*, 240.
[54] O'Connor, *The Adorno Reader*, 240.

exhibition is to present the direction society should be going in relation to the revolution, so Fedorov-Davydov is abiding by the requirements of a revolutionary society. Fedorov-Davydov did not use art to escape societal norms. Instead, he was displaying something that was already known to the audience. This is a part of the reason it was controversial because the Soviet art world was already exposed to views of class struggle, but by the end of 1932, the theme of class struggle in art moved away in favor of class reconciliation.[55] Fedorov-Davydov was unable to keep up with how art and autonomy mattered as the Soviet Union moved away from radical Marxism. As a result, the exhibition and his reputation suffered.

The reception of the exhibition was highly critical. Discussions about the exhibition were held and brought together two dozen museum specialists, art administrators, and critics. According to transcripts of the debates, the participants were critical of the low artistic quality of many of the artworks and the excessive propaganda of the installation, which many found was overpowering the work's autonomy.[56] While his goal to create an agitational response was successful, it negatively affected him, leading to the suppression of his views as a curator at the gallery. During the era of the Cultural Revolution, the passion for these themes was justified, but by the time of 1930s, the political climate in the Soviet Union began to shift away from radical Marxism, having it condemned as "vulgar sociology" or "vulgar Marxism."[57] By the end of 1932, Fedorov-Davydov's colleagues found his displays too agitational. In January and February 1933, there were extensive debates held at the Tretyakov for the future of the collection and its presentation, concluding that Fedorov-Davydov's approach was too political for the gallery. Eventually, Fedorov-Davydov had to reinstall the gallery's collection and revert the displays to

[55] Chlenova, 14.
[56] Chlenova, 13.
[57] Chlenova, 3.

show only masterpieces by great painters without any textual explanations, abandoning his Marxist views of curation. Fedorov-Davydov still held onto his idealism and outspokenness, which was increasingly falling out of sync with the rest of the country. By 1934, the same year Socialist Realism was enacted as the official state style, he made a remark on realism and naturalism and was fired and never returned to museum work.[58] Contrasting Barr, who was still able to be successful in the museum field despite being unable to uphold his position as curator or director. Fedorov-Davydov was unable to surrender his Marxist views of art, and with the growing censorship of the Soviet Union, he had to give up his position in the museum.

Barr and Fedorov-Davydov represent the complicated nature of the autonomy of art in an exhibition. In the eyes of their audiences, Barr's display was much more acceptable than Fedorov-Davydov's because the works were able to stand their ground without extreme over-interpretation and being overpowered by the curatorial voice, something that is a core issue in museology and curatorial work. The outcome of an exhibition revolves around the view of the curator and the political climate, which can create conflict with the truth of the artwork and the audience. Barr could have made the political background of the artwork more explicit, but the American audience would have disapproved and become skeptical, there even being a chance that he could not have done it without the approval of the supporters of the museum. How Fedorov-Davydov could have made the exhibition respectful of the autonomy of the art is complex, as his exhibition entirely revolved around propaganda – a concept that Adorno disapproved of in art. The representation of autonomy in art in an exhibition revolves around the political climate in which the art is created and the current views of politics in the country in

[58] Chlenova, 15.

which it takes place. If it cannot include both aspects, as seen with Barr and Fedorov-Davydov, it is arguably not autonomous.

Fedorov-Davydov and Barr: The Complications of Autonomy

Autonomy and art from the point of view of a curator can be complicated when personal bias and political environment are factors. Barr and Fedorov-Davydov experienced criticism coming from different aspects of their exhibition. Comparing the two curators and how they handled their respective exhibitions gives a sense of how autonomy is received in the larger public sphere. Barr's exhibition had a favorable and lasting impact because it was innovative in the way the artwork was displayed and presented to the public with modern European art. While Barr was criticized by Meyer Shapiro for his ignorance in displaying art that had political roots as apolitical, Barr did not face serious repercussions for this. The reception of "Cubism and Abstract Art" proves how the autonomy of art in an exhibition can be put aside even if the curator doesn't necessarily agree with the aspect and still has a lasting impact but only depending on the audience and political circumstances at the time. Fedorov-Davydov had a much harsher reception, resulting in losing his job for not abiding by the shifting political climate in the Soviet Union. Fedorov-Davydov provides a different perspective to Barr with how he diminished the autonomy of the artwork and had that point leveled against him. Unlike Barr's depoliticized displays, Fedorov-Davydov presented propaganda art that, in Adorno's perspective, wasn't autonomous. Fedorov-Davydov and Barr show how it's acceptable or unacceptable to diminish autonomy depending on the political situation of the country where they are displaying it. In the early 20th century, as many countries faced challenges from war and urbanization, the contexts in which art was produced varied. This variation, combined with the emerging radical ideologies about the creation of art, further complicated difficulties to main autonomy.

Autonomy and the Avant-Gardes: Other Early 20th Century Revolutionary Movements

During the early 20th century, many countries were undergoing revolutions or inciting ideas for one. When Germany and Mexico experienced revolutions and like Russia, they were creating art and exhibitions reflecting the ideology of their transformed societies and how the transformations impacted their ability to convey art to the public. In this section, I will examine two exhibitions that occurred prior to "Cubism and Abstract Art" and "Art Works on Soviet and Revolutionary Themes." In Berlin, the exhibition "First Russian Art Exhibition" and Mexico's Exhibition at Café de Nadie. These exhibitions offer different perspectives on how the political tensions affected them and how autonomy was challenged compared to Barr and Fedorov-Davydov.

In 1918-1919, Germany had a revolution known as the November Revolution that aimed to establish a communist government inspired by the Soviet Union. Examining Soviet cultural diplomacy in the West, the "First Russian Art Exhibition" shows how the Soviet Union gained more influence in the West through art. "First Russian Art Exhibition" is a valuable example for examining exhibitions in politically tense countries like Fedorov-Davydov, curating in the Soviet Union during the 1930s. It is also an example of an exhibition aiming to be innovative and present something new, like Barr's at MoMA. The exhibition was first proposed by Vassili Kandinsky in 1921 to Comintern executive member Karl Radek as a source of income for hungry painters from the Russian famine.[59] The Reich rejected the exhibition because of the dislike of the Comintern for the communist uprisings in Germany. After Kandinsky abandoned

[59] Aleksandr Benua, *Dnevnik 1918-1924* (Moscow: Zaharov, 2010), 233-7. In Ewa Berard, "The 'First Exhibition of Russian Art' in Berlin: The Transnational Origins of Bolshevik Cultural Diplomacy, 1921-1922." 171.

the project, it was picked back up by Lunacharsky. The German government then approved in 1922, on two conditions: the exhibition must not carry any political propaganda, and the Russian material must undergo an evaluation by a German jury.[60] The Reich changed their minds because Germany and Russia had important economic negotiations that would support one another, but in order to not provoke suspicion of an alliance from other Western European countries, the Soviet Republic could not officially organize it.[61] The exhibition was very successful and ended up showing the German audiences the vitality and aesthetic creation of the Soviet Union, creating more solidarity between the two countries. The success of the exhibition shocked the Bolsheviks and showed the ability of the Soviets to establish more of a presence in the West. The success that came from presenting new art allowed for the art to be shown continuously until 1935, when the art was seized by the Nazi party.

Examining the "First Russian Art Exhibition" compared to Barr and Fedorov-Davydov, the exhibition shows a different perspective between political circumstances and displaying art. While the German government was hostile to any idea of Soviet propaganda, they allowed the exhibition anyway if it was depoliticized to support the negotiations with the other country. Like "Cubism and Abstract Art," this exhibition proves the point that presenting something new to the audience and keeping it depoliticized creates something successful. This might be because they are being presented something new but not too aggressive, as propaganda could be. Despite how the exhibition followed the rules presented to it by the government, the rise of fascism still saw it as a communist threat and shut it down. "Cubism and Abstract Art" and Barr were both allowed

[60] German Foreign Office Archive, in Ewa Berard, "The 'First Exhibition of Russian Art' in Berlin: The Transnational Origins of Bolshevik Cultural Diplomacy, 1921-1922." 171.
[61] Ewa Berard, "The 'First Exhibition of Russian Art' in Berlin: The Transnational Origins of Bolshevik Cultural Diplomacy, 1921-1922," *Contemporary European History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 172.

to keep their reputation because the politics in the United States wasn't nearly as aggressive, further showing the disconnect that Barr's exhibition had with the European avant-garde art it was exhibiting. Referring to the issues Fedorov-Davydov faced, we observe the Nazi party rejecting modern art in response to cultural Bolshevism, comparable to how Fedorov-Davydov's visions as a Marxist curator were dismissed due to the shifting political climate in the Soviet Union. Connecting "Art Works of Soviet Revolutionary Themes" being shut down and the art from the "First Russian Art Exhibition" being confiscated shows how dire the political situation was, no matter the curator's views of autonomy it would not have made a difference. The political tensions within the countries caused the art and exhibition to be shut down, further showing the comparison with how endangered art was during the early 20th century in Europe compared to the United States.

Moving away from exhibitions in Europe and the United States, the exhibition in Café de Nadie in Mexico in April 1924 provides a different perspective on a failing exhibition but in the hands of the artists themselves. The Mexican Revolution took place from 1910 to 1920 in protest of President Porfirio Diaz favoring the bourgeois population, creating extreme wealth inequality. After the revolution, the country was in a similar state to Russia after the October Revolution; it had a largely rural and preindustrial population. The effort to bring Mexico in line with the urbanization of the Western world faced criticism from artists for the obvious class divide and marginalizing indigenous peoples, who remained largely rural and struggled with integrating into the new society. An important movement that took place after the revolution was Estridentismo, or Stridentism in English. Estridentismo was a movement created by poet Maples Arce in 1921; the estridentistas were interested in urban modernization, rapid

technological innovations, factories, and workers' demonstrations, the estridentistas wanted a socio-politically engaged art practice inspired by the Mexican Revolution.

The exhibition in Café de Nadie offers a different perspective from the first three exhibitions outlined in the paper because it was organized and put together by the artists who were exhibiting their work. The Estridentismo artists featured were Fermin Revueltas, Leopoldo Mandez, Jean Charlot, and Xavier Gonzalez. Fermin Revueltas's paintings, which combine rural and urban subjects, exposed one of the fundamental challenges Maples Arce faced in establishing the Estridentismo movement: how to have a radical avant-garde based on urban models with the realities of a rural country.[62] When Revueltas transitioned away from easel paintings to murals, he developed a heightened social consciousness that further questioned the vision of an urban utopia.[63] In his mural, *Allegory of the Virgin of Guadalupe* (Figure 1.8), Revueltas opted to depict a nationalist subject of the Virgin of Guadalupe, the choice of subject and the manner of depicting it exhibit a social concern. He aimed to depict the complexity of Mexican nationhood by depicting various shades of brown to show the different racial types that are in Mexico and trying to unite Mexicans with faith as nationhood. Leopoldo Mandez uses a similar technique with visuals of the disconnect between modernity and tradition in the streets of Xalapa. In his painting *The Station*, he depicts a group of peasants boarding the back of a train. The space is cramped and overcrowded, and the windows resemble a prison, Mandez offered a critique of the vision of technology helping the people. Jean Charlot's work showed an interest in depicting the indigenous population; his work depicts a concern with the past and a sense of historical

[62] Flores, 101.
[63] Tatiana Flores, *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Gardes: From Estridentismo to ¡30-30!* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013), 97.

importance in a modernist technique. His painting *Massacre in the Main Temple* (Figure 1.9) depicts the Aztecs murdered by the colonists during a religious celebration.[64]

1.8 Fermin Revueltas, *Allegory of the Virgin of Guadalupe,* encaustic, 1922-1923, San Ildefonso Museum, Mexico City.

[64] Flores, 82.

1.9 Jean Charlot, *Massacre in the Main Temple,* encaustic, 1923, San Ildefonso Museum, Mexico City.

In *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Garde*, Tatiana Flores critiques the Estridentismo exhibition at Café de Nadie for its exclusivity by the artists curating the exhibition; she brings in evidence of writer Jublio and Frida Kahlo critiquing the estridentistas for their problematic behavior. By examining this exhibition, we get a broader example of issues with early 20th-century art movements and their exhibitions, which were shaped by the political climate of the time. The exhibition took place in Café de Nadie, a meeting place for the estridentistas, because no one bothered them, not even the waiters.[65] The site became the subject of a story by Estridentismo writer Arqueles Vela about a prostitute in the café. At the end of the story, she lists all the men she got with at the café who were all artists of the Estridentismo. The story provides awareness of the sexist undertones of Estridentismo and explains why women were not more active in the Estridentismo. By 1924, Estridentismo founder Maples Arce wanted to expand the scope of the movement to make it as inclusive as possible and even altered his style to reflect a heightened social consciousness,[66] but from what we see in the exhibition, the artists did not

[65] Luis Mario Schneider, *El Estridentismo, o Una literature de la estrategia,* (Mexico City: Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, 1997), 80. In *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Gardes: From Estridentismo to ¡30-30,* 197.
[66] Flores, 200.

uphold that. The exhibition gives an insight into the overarching problems in the Mexican avant-garde adversely by the artists themselves with themes of sexism, self-absorption, and alliance with the commercial industry that marked the end of the Estridentismo activity in Mexico City (Figure 1.10).[67] The pictures that depict the exhibition are almost entirely male, serving as further evidence of the sexism problem in the Mexican avant-garde. Frida Kahlo calls out this issue in her artwork, in the preparatory drawing for *Self-Portrait with Pancho Villa and La Adelita* (Figure 1.11), the male central figures argue while the female figure appears to be ignored despite the solemn expression she has. Similar to the estridentistas, Kahlo used modernism and social content; through this, she exposes the contradiction faced by the Mexican avant-garde of creating social content but actively giving outsider status to minorities. This problem also shows the artists in the exhibition moving away from Arce's expansion of Estridentismo by creating an aura of exclusion for anyone outside their pre-determined group, especially women. Jubilo, an early supporter of the Estridentismo movement, critiqued the exhibition and considered it a failure because it was becoming too self-absorbed.[68] He pointed out that self-absorption was a part of the meeting place of a café setting that was reminiscent of academic bourgeoisie settings, "the academic rosette of seriousness is already visible. The estridentistas' meet, they get together in a cenacle; like the bourgeoisie of Art, they have a place to take themselves seriously." The estridentistas contradictions with the movement that was meant to raise social consciousness and be inclusive failed by excluding the minority they meant to represent in their art and becoming absorbed in the lifestyle they meant to criticize.

---

[67] Flores, 205.
[68] Jubilo (Guerillermo Castillo), "El fracaso del stridentismo," *El Universal Grafico* (April 14, 1924), 3. In *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Gard*e, 201.

1.10 Café de Nadie exhibition, 1924, Mexico City.

1.11 Frida Kahlo, preparatory sketch for *Self-Portrait with Pancho Villa and La Adelita,* pencil on paper*,* 1927, Private Collection.

Connecting back to the other three exhibitions covered, the exhibition in Café de Nadie offers a different perspective on how the artists failed their exhibition, rather than as curators. As artists who dealt with social themes, they presented the art in a depoliticized matter devoid of the social themes their works convey with no aesthetic or thematic correlation; the exhibition was

simply meant to exhibit Estridentismo art. The act of depoliticizing their art, along with being called out for adhering to bourgeois standards of art, is a connection with Barr being exposed by Shapiro for taking the artwork based on social conditions and contorting it to fit his narrative. But because the artists were the ones exhibiting their art, they were called out for becoming self-absorbed. The estridentistas received government funding after their leader left Mexico City, which changed the dynamic of the group's criticism of urbanization, as they became complicit with the government that was promoting it. This connects back to how the other three exhibitions experiencing political issues were impacted by government interference in art. The exhibition at Café de Nadie serves as a supporting example of how exhibitions can be impacted by several elements from political tensions, including government interference in the arts. As demonstrated by the estridentistas in the Café De Nadie exhibition, the loss of initial values in art movements undermines their effectiveness, with this particular exhibition falling flat due to the emerging similarities of bourgeois art values.

Conclusion

Examining the other two exhibitions provides evidence supporting how the political climate of the early 20th century – shaped by revolutions in Russia, Germany, and Mexico – transformed the creation and reception of art. The "First Russian Art Exhibition" showed the shifting relations between the Soviet Union and Germany, leading to the Soviet Union having more impact in Western Europe. This exhibition also showed how the German government handled art in relation to politics. The art in the exhibition was stripped of its autonomy to ensure it adhered to rules prohibiting propaganda, as tensions with communism in Germany were high. The downfall of the Estridentismo movement began at Café de Nadie, as the artists slipped into

old bourgeois practices of handling art as a primarily male space set aside for a select few. This created tension with the original message of inclusivity in art, which emphasized connecting Mexican peasants with the new urban population. Instead, it showed the artists becoming ignorant of the evolving messages of greater inclusivity that Maples Arce was promoting for the movement. The exhibition at Café de Nadie demonstrates how the political tensions of the new society Mexico sought to create impacted the art. The artists aimed to highlight the marginalization of lower-class and upper-class people, as well as the oppression of Indigenous people in relation to their oppressive history, given that they made up most of the lower-class population. The estridentistas diminished the impact of their art by limiting access to their exhibition to a small group of men and organizing it in a café associated with a story rooted in sexism. By succumbing to the same problems they sought to address by encouraging inclusion in art, they ultimately excluded anyone outside their circle.

All four of the exhibitions collectively demonstrate the impact of political issues in the respective countries and how these issues influence the art, artists, and display of art to the rest of the world. Applying Adorno's principles of autonomy, the independence of art is diminished in each exhibition by various factors, including the curators, government, and artists themselves. When reviewing the main aspects of Adorno's principles that posed problems in the exhibitions, it becomes evident that many share similar issues. One major critique leveled against Barr by Shapiro concerns the authenticity of the art's origins, upon analyzing the exhibition, it proved to be a problematic aspect of Barr's curatorial approach.

In Berlin, the "First Russian Art Exhibition" faced a similar problem, in a different context, where the true message of the art was suppressed as promoting Soviet propaganda. This was not the curators' decision but rather a reinforcement of the Weimar government. In this case,

the situation was straightforward: political tensions in Germany regarding communism hindered the exhibition. In Barr's defense, while there were political issues concerning communism in the United States, they were not as explicit as in Germany. Furthermore, since the MoMA was a private institution, he might have had more leeway to be transparent about the origins of the art and its thematic significance. Fedorov-Davydov explicitly used propaganda as the primary goal of his exhibition. However, he encountered a similar issue the "First Exhibition of Russian Art" with the government authorities shutting down the exhibitions due to growing censorship and shifting political aspirations of the transitioning regimes.

The Mexican avant-garde artists align with Adorno's principles, which suggest that art should reproduce the norms of society negatively, thereby creating a heightened perception of the issues in Mexican society and the process of urbanization. The artists wanted to demonstrate how the urbanization of Mexico is creating a larger class division. However, they deviated from this goal as they became increasingly self-absorbed. When Maples Arce wanted to broaden the message of the Estridentismo movement to be more inclusive, the artists involved in the exhibition resisted the efforts. The treatment of female artists undermines the message of reproducing the negatives of society's, given that the treatment of women in Mexico was harsh, as depicted by Frida Kahlo in her art.

The exhibitions provide insight into the shifting political issues in the early 20th century, illustrating how these issues evolved over time. While there was a suggestion of communist themes in the United States, attitudes shifted dramatically during the second Red Scare in the 1950s the United States reacted harshly to modern art, claiming it was communist. This reaction is evident in seen in Barr's 1954 article, "Is Modern Art Communistic?" where he defended himself as someone who advocated for modern art. Fedorov-Davydov's reception of his

exhibition reflected the Soviet Union's movement away from modern art as a tool for propaganda and instead adopting socialist realism as the official style, using it to promote the country's greatness to the proletariat through realism. The reception of the "First Russian Art Exhibition" marked the beginning of greater Soviet influence in the West. However, after the exhibition had ended, the Nazis confiscated its art when they came to power, showing how modern art was beginning to be censored and dismissed. The Estridentismo movement allowed for rethinking the role of the artist in society, but they alienated many and marginalized themselves by conforming to unavoidable Westernization trends occurring in Mexico. Applying these issues back to autonomy, Adorno wrote *Aesthetic Theory* in response to the shifting role of art in society, particularly its assimilation into capitalism, which he observed in the 1970s. As evidenced by the exhibitions, these issues were fostered decades before *Aesthetic Theory* was written, with the shifting political tensions still becoming relevant in contemporary times.

Bibliography

Barr, Alfred H, Jr. “Russian Diary, 1927-28.” in *October*, vol. 7, “Soviet Revolutionary Culture Winter,” (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1978).

Barr, Alfred H, Jr. “Preface,” *Cubism and Abstract Art*, (reprint. New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966).

Barr, Alfred H, Jr. “Is Modern Art Communistic?” *New York Times*, 14 December 1952.

Barr, Alfred H, Jr. “Introduction,” *Cubism and Abstract Art*, 1936 (reprinted, New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1979).

Berard, Ewa. “The ‘First Exhibition of Russian Art’ in Berlin: The Transnational Origins of Bolshevik Cultural Diplomacy, 1921-1922,” *Contemporary European History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021).

Bogdanov, Aleksandr. “The Proletarian and Art, 1918” in *Russian Art of The Avant-Garde: Theory and Criticism 1902-193,* ed. John E. Bowlt (London: Thames & Hudson 2017).

Brown, Milton W. *The Story of The Armory Show*. (Greenwich: New York Graphic Society, 1963).

Chlenova, Masha. “Soviet Museology During the Cultural Revolution: An Educational Turn, 1928-1933.” *Journal of Histoire Politique* (Fall 2017).

Chlenova, Masha. “0.10,” in *Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925: how a radical idea changed modern art*, ed. Leah Dickerman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012).

Dickerman, Leah. “Abstraction in 1936: Cubism and Abstract Art at the Museum of Modern Art,” in *Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925: how a radical idea changed modern art*, ed. Leah Dickerman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012).

Duncan, Carol, and Allan Wallach. “The Museum of Modern Art as Late Capitalist Ritual: An Iconographic Analysis” in *Marxist Perspectives* v.1. no.4, ed. Eugene D. Genovese (New York: Cliomar Corporation, 1978).

Dryden, Jane. “Autonomy,” Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy, (November 2010), https://iep.utm.edu/autonomy/#SH1a.

Fedorov-Davydov, Aleksei. “Permanent Collections of Fine Art Museums: Joint Report” in *Avant-Garde Museology*.

Fitzpatrick, Shelia. “Cultural Revolution of Russia 1928-32,” *Journal of Contemporary History 9* (1974).

Flores, Tatiana. *Mexico's Revolutionary Avant-Gardes: From Estridentismo to ¡30-30!* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2013).

Greenburg, Clement. “Modernist Painting.” In *Clement Greenburg: The Collected Essays and Criticism* ed. John O’Brian. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986-1993).

Kantor, Sybil Gordan. *Alfred H. Barr, Jr. and the Intellectual Origins of the Museum of Modern Art.* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2002).

Lowry, Glenn D. "Abstraction in 1936: Barr's Diagrams," in *Inventing Abstraction, 1910-1925: how a radical idea changed modern art*, ed. Leah Dickerman (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2012).

Malevich, Kazimir. "On The Museum," in *Avant-Garde Museology*, ed. Arsney Zhilyaev (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

O'Connor, Brian. *Adorno*. (London: Routledge, 2012).

O'Connor, Brian. *The Adorno Reader*. (Wiley-Blackwell, 2000).

Punin, Nikolai. "On the Results of the Museum Conference" *Art of the Commune no. 12* (February 23, 1919) in *Avant-Garde Museology*.

Senson, Oliver. *Kant on Moral Autonomy*. (Cambridge: University Press, 2013).

Shapiro, Meyer. "Nature of Abstract Art (1937)," in *Modern Art 19th & 20th Centuries Selected Papers by Meyer Shapiro* (New York: George Braziller, 1978).

Staniszewski, Mary Anne. *The Power of Display. A History of Exhibition Installations at the Museum of Modern Art,* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998).

Telzrow, Michael E. "Artist of the Revolution: Diego Rivera's Artwork Reflected his Ardent Belief in Communism and His Rejection of God, Tradition and Capitalism," *The New American* (2007).

Wolfe, Bertram D. "The Fabulous Life of Diego Rivera" (New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1963).

Zhilyaev, Arsney. *Avant-Garde Museology* (New York: E-flux classics, 2015).