CHAPTER EIGHT

EXHIBITING MALEVICH UNDER STALIN

Maria Kokkori

For both social and ideological reasons, museological policy was a highly sensitive matter for the Bolshevik government. At the Third Congress of the Soviets in January 1918, it was decreed that museums had to educate the wider public, not just specialists, and should facilitate the working class’s access to art and culture. Anatolii Lunacharskii, the People’s Commissar for Enlightenment, described the development of proletarian culture as a means of heightening proletarian class consciousness and promoting enthusiasm for the achievement of class aims.¹ At the conference on the ‘museum question’, organised by the Department of Fine Arts within the Commissariat for Enlightenment (Otdel izobrazitel’nykh iskusstv, Narodnyi komissariat prosveshcheniia—IZO Narkompros), at the Winter Palace, renamed the Palace of Arts, in Petrograd in February 1919,² Lunacharskii stressed once again that ‘it must be remembered that the museum exists neither for scholars nor for artists, but first and foremost for the people.’³

In the early 1920s, the role and function of the new Soviet museums were extensively discussed by curators, art critics and artists. Kazimir Malevich, in an article published in the journal Art of the Commune (Iskusstvo kommuny) in 1919, proposed ‘laboratories’ instead of traditional museums. He wrote,

Instead of collecting all kinds of old stuff, we must organise laboratories of a worldwide, creative, building apparatus, and from its axes will emerge artists of living forms, not of dead representations of objects. Let the conserva-

² ‘Deklaratsiia otdela izobrazitel’nykh iskusstv i khudozhestvennoi promyshlennosti po voprosu o printsipakh muzeevedeniia, prinietoi kollegiei otdela v zasedanii 7 fevralia 1919 g.’, Iskusstvo kommuny, no. 11 (16 February 1919), p. 1. All translations are the author’s own, unless indicated otherwise.
tives go to the provinces with their dead baggage, with the lecherous cupids of the bygone debauched houses of Rubens and the Greeks. We will bring I-beams, electricity and the fires of colours.⁴

In contrast, Wassily Kandinsky, in an essay published in 1920, envisaged the museum as an institution devoted to the history of painting from the mid-nineteenth century to the present, including European art. He rejected a chronological, historicised presentation of artworks, proposing instead a model in which the ‘inner meaning’ of art’s historical development might be systematically explained.⁵ For Aleksandr Rodchenko, also, the museum should not perform an archival or historicising function, and works should be grouped and sequenced according to their respective stages in the development of a particular form or method, regardless of their author or date of execution.⁶ In a diary entry of 1920, Rodchenko, like Malevich, described a museum as a laboratory, a ‘Museum of Experimental Techniques.’⁷

Although Russian avant-garde artists suggested and explored alternative models of curatorial practices, which to a considerable extent were realised in the aftermath of the October Revolution, the late 1920s and early 1930s saw radical changes in display policies. The new Soviet museum had to undergo a drastic transformation in order to accomplish its vision and socialist mission: to educate the working masses, to promote a Marxist understanding of history, and to support the rapid collectivisation and industrialisation of the First Five-Year Plan. A 1928 decree ‘On the Construction of Museums in the RSFSR’ promoted the idea that a museum should now play an agitational role, and its exhibitions should show clear ‘evidence of the nation-forming process and of national politics and national culture in the Soviet period and in the period immediately pre-