



**A Review of ANDREI ZAVADSKI, VARVARA SKLEZ,
KATERINA SUVERINA (EDS.), *POLITIKA AFFEKTA:
MUZEY KAK PROSTRANSTVO PUBLICHNOY ISTORII*
[THE POLITICS OF AFFECT: THE MUSEUM
AS A SPACE FOR PUBLIC HISTORY].**

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Abstract: The review examines the new approaches to the study of museums which are the subject of *The Politics of Affect*. At the centre of attention is the very concept of ‘the museum’ and its various treatments by the authors of this collection, as are the various practices for producing emotion in exhibition spaces. The diversity of the contemporary forms of museum activity in Russia presented in the publication casts doubt on the thesis of a museum crisis expressed on the pages of the book. At the same time, the opening up of Russian museums to international discussion in the context of the ‘new museology’ is a very pressing task, important both for an understanding of the specifics of the Russian context in which museums exist, and for a resolution of global questions regarding the evolution and change of museums in the modern world.

Key words: museums, emotions, memory, exhibition, art.

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Politika affekta: muzey kak prostranstvo publichnoy istorii [The Politics of Affect: The Museum as a Space for Public History]. Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2019, 400 pp. (Intellektualnaya istoriya).

The review examines the new approaches to the study of museums which are the subject of *The Politics of Affect*. At the centre of attention is the very concept of 'the museum' and its various treatments by the authors of this collection, as are the various practices for producing emotion in exhibition spaces. The diversity of the contemporary forms of museum activity in Russia presented in the publication casts doubt on the thesis of a museum crisis expressed on the pages of the book. At the same time, the opening up of Russian museums to international discussion in the context of the 'new museology' is a very pressing task, important both for an understanding of the specifics of the Russian context in which museums exist, and for a resolution of global questions regarding the evolution and change of museums in the modern world.

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For a long time, it was principally people who worked in museums who wrote about them. This was a characteristic feature both of museum studies abroad and of the Soviet school of museum studies that had crystallised around the Institute for Local Studies and Museum Work.¹ Therefore the genesis of the *new museology*² at the end of the 1980s, discussed by the editors and contributors of *The Politics of Affect*, may be treated not only as the appearance of new topics, questions and methods, but also as the expansion of the museum into other disciplinary fields, a shift in the professional allegiance of those authors who thought and spoke about museums. At the end of the twentieth century, it suddenly turned out that a museum is not only a place for collecting, preserving and displaying the cultural and historical heritage, but also a social institution of knowledge (and, consequently, of power) that forms a system of values that interacts with various publics and

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¹ The Institute for Local Studies and Museum Work was renamed in 1955 as the Research Institute for Museum Studies, transformed in 1966 into the Research Institute for Museum Studies and the Conservation of Monuments of History and Culture, and in 1992 into the Russian Institute of Cultural Studies, and in 2014 it was combined with the Likhachev Russian Research Institute for Cultural and Natural Heritage.

² The introduction of the term 'new museology' is traditionally ascribed to the British historian Peter Vergo.

social actors, that classifies, directs and mobilises — a social institution at the centre of the political and cultural processes taking place in society. It suddenly became clear that a museum's past and present allow much to be discovered not only about the museum itself, but also about the world in which it exists. Thus, the museum came to interest a huge number of people who are not museum specialists, but who work in social history and theory, the sociology and anthropology of knowledge, historical politics and cultural memory. Over the past thirty years the museum has changed from an object of narrowly specialised research to one of the most popular topics of social discussion. The circumscribed nature of the museum space, and the existence of a curatorial concept seemingly easily read in the images of the exhibition, make it an extremely attractive object for the critical gaze, as if it invited one to see the whole world in a drop of water.

Much has been written in Russian about museums, but works inspired by the principles of the new museology are still few and far between. Against a background of thousands of English-language articles, collections and monographs devoted to the social aspects of museification, Russian-language publications of this sort are still rare, and therefore easy to spot. The collection *The Politics of Affect* is one of them. With one exception its authors are not museum specialists, but work in the social sciences and humanities at various universities in Russia, Europe and the USA. Their closeness to the new museology is easy to divine from the references: a reader familiar with the key Western research will easily recognise the names and titles in the notes. The extensive introduction, devoted to an overview of the basic directions of current museum research, serves as an excellent excursus through contemporary museum theory and the new directions that are broadly discussed in today's world, and the articles in the collection allow an evaluation of the wide diversity of current museum forms.

The Politics of Affect is the expected continuation of the work of the conference 'Public History in Russia: Museums for the Past or the Past for Museums?', which took place in 2017 at the Public History Laboratory in Moscow, the aim of which, in the words of its organisers, was 'an attempt "to come to some agreement" and begin a dialogue between academic researchers and museum practitioners' (p. 25). One of the results of this conference was a shift in emphasis from public history to 'affect', reflecting the general tendencies of the contemporary social sciences, where, in recent years, there has been an active elaboration of questions of the emotionalisation and affectivation of various phenomena and processes. Many of the questions asked by the editors in the introduction sound at once clear, and recognisable, and relevant. 'The focus of this collection,' write Andrei Zavadski, Varvara Sklez and Katerina Suverina,

‘is based on a broadly outlined concept of “affect” and is connected with the combination, distinctly perceptible in today’s museums, of the individual strategies for the reception of the past created in them (realised through appeals to personal histories, everyday experience, interactive involvement of the visitor, work with the space, etc.) and their function as places where different forms of identity are constructed’ (p. 27). ‘In this way,’ they continue, ‘the question arises of how to define the commonalities, the memories constructed by museums. Employing research into affect and emotions makes it possible not only to trace how such commonalities are formulated, but also to raise the problem of how to define the boundaries according to which we recognise what is “individual” and what is “common”’ (p. 28).

Outside the introduction, unfortunately, these questions are by no means always sustained by the authors. Moreover, the actual topic of the affect, emotionality and emotional communities created by museums is by no means central to all the articles; in some cases it is not raised at all. It is, effectively, the phenomenon of the museum that is really the topic that unites all the contributions. All the texts are about the museum, and, as a rule, about the museum in its contemporary, new forms and manifestations.

Since the word ‘museum’ is a commonly used one whose meaning is, as it were, taken for granted, the authors do not define it, evidently assuming that they are all talking about the same thing. However, this is not entirely so. The inclusion of particular cases and objects in the contextual framework of the discussion of museums is in itself an act of classification. A memorial, a virtual archive, or street graffiti placed alongside art galleries, historical museums, local studies museums and museums of memory both expand the concept of ‘the museum’ and destroy the accepted taxonomy of museum institutions. This process sets off a search for, and construction of, a new museum topography with new boundaries and a new network of coordinates. And, as the articles published in *The Politics of Affect* show, a central place in this construction is occupied by the emotional load of museum spaces.

Zinaida Bonami, a well-known researcher into museums and, it seems, the only representative of the museum community among the authors of *The Politics of Affect*, uses the criterion of emotionality to distinguish between the museum and the postmuseum. Although she does not directly define either of them, their contours can be divined from the text. The museum is primarily ‘a classifier, and above all an interpreter, a maker and promoter of academic knowledge, a creator of the so-called “great narratives” of world history and culture’ (p. 51). The postmuseum relies ‘rather on emotional and sensual forms of communication than conceptual ones’, and its

aim is ‘viewing as such’ (pp. 54, 69). The museum is guided by the politics of meaning, while in the postmuseum the politics of affect are triumphant. Here it should be pointed out that while examples of postmuseums that correspond to the designated contours are not hard to find in the collection itself, the situation is a lot worse when it comes to museums. The public museum that totally corresponds to the ideals of the Enlightenment haunts the lines of many of the authors like the phantom of the Louvre, but never do we come face to face with such a museum on the pages of *The Politics of Affect*.

Elena Rozhdestvenskaya, Irina Tartakovskaya, Daria Khlevnyuk and Vera Dubina deal with the phenomenon of museums of memory, a relatively new type of museum which has become very widespread over recent decades. Such museums are very far removed from the classical models. There are no rich collections of unique cultural valuables, nor a long history in the form of national symbols. Museums of memory were from the first created in the spirit of the new museology, as forum museums in Duncan Cameron’s terminology [Cameron 1971], i.e. orientated towards dialogue, the maximum involvement of visitors and the rejection of rectilinear interpretations and hard narratives. Alongside the telling of stories as by the victims and the human rights element, the instrumentalisation of emotions is a hallmark of museums of memory (p. 109). But it is probably for this very reason that the boundary between this category of museum and other memorial objects turns out to be so transparent.

Elena Rozhdestvenskaya and Irina Tartakovskaya, for example, examine, alongside the Moscow museums devoted to the war in Afghanistan, Gottfried Helnwein’s installation in Cologne devoted to the Holocaust and the Memorial to the Sinti and Roma Victims of National Socialism in Berlin, which, like the museums, may be spaces for organised and / or spontaneous commemoration. Alexander Kondakov goes even further and includes a virtual queer archive among the museums of memory. ‘Emotions also have meaning for this version of the queer archive,’ he writes, ‘because it is a “museum of memory” that enables the formation of an affective link between a group of people oppressed in the past and the contemporary public’ (p. 130).

The emotionalisation of the stories they tell links museums of memory with contemporary historical museums. In a detailed analysis of an exhibition devoted to the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of the First World War, Sofia Tchouikina emphasises that the whole point of the anniversary as a state project was ‘to evoke political emotions in the visitor — to form a concerned attitude to the war as a trial that united the nation’ (p. 221). Appealing to the ‘historical memory of generations’, the curators of the exhibition also put the emotional component of the exhibits in

first place, presenting the First World War in the register of memory, and not of history. 'Memory,' writes Tchouikina, 'is an emotional attitude to the past, unlike history, which is an analytical, distanced attitude' (p. 235).

There is on the pages of the collection an interesting dialogue regarding the problem of affect between the articles by Pavel Kupriyanov and Mikhail Kaluzhsky. Both authors consider the role and place of 'the theatre' in the museum. Mikhail Kaluzhsky, who is a director, playwright, journalist, and the author of many theatrical projects, writes about his experience of putting on a show in the Tomsk Museum. In his opinion, 'the theatre is the antipode of the museum. The theatre does not preserve memory. It is more like an archaeological dig than museum cataloguing' (p. 376). Pavel Kupriyanov, who is on the academic staff of the Moscow Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology and worked for many years in the Chambers of the Romanov Boyars, a museum of early modern domestic life in Moscow, shares his reflections on participation in the dramatised programmes that have become a constant feature of the museum. At first sight his article contradicts Kaluzhsky's conclusions, demonstrating plainly that not only is the theatre not the antipodes of the museum, but it has long been incorporated into it and, it seems, quite organically: participation in dramatised excursions and quests is part of the job description of ordinary employees of the Moscow museum. But this contradiction is only apparent. Although Kaluzhsky and Kupriyanov speak of different types of theatre and different forms of its inclusion in the museum space, they are both agreed that there is a boundary between the theatre and the museum, or at least that there ought to be. Exaggerating their conclusions, one might say that the museum may provide a stage for the theatre, but it must not turn into a theatre. Without using the concept of 'affect', Kupriyanov speaks of 'the production of impressions' which is the result of dramatisation in the museum and which crowds out and replaces the production of historical knowledge, or becomes an alternative to it. Perhaps, when he notes in passing that 'not every theatrical practice is suitable for a museum,' Kaluzhsky has in mind exactly the sort of theatre that Kupriyanov writes about, the sort that creates, by means of affective immersion, an authentic reproduction that becomes for the spectator the only genuine experience of the past.

For the researchers whose work we discover in *The Politics of Affect*, the instrumentalisation of emotions becomes simultaneously a pretext for including one or another cultural project in the museum category, and a reason, by contrary, to contrast it with the traditional museum. Galina Yankovskaya, for example, speaks at the beginning of her article of the logic of the 'affective turn' which is noticeable in contemporary museums, but as she ends her analysis of the

PERMM Museum of Modern Art, she notes their ‘non-museality’ or ‘new museality’, the sign of which is the absence of ‘a hierarchy of facts, evaluations, dates or external evidence’, ‘regulations’, ‘event-based political history’ and ‘analytical reflection’, which have given way to ‘the people’s archive’, ‘informal sides of life’, ‘the intersubjective reality of everyday life with all its elusive ephemera’ and ‘the emotional experience of the past’ (p. 319).

Anna Savitskaya, analysing contemporary urban art in Nizhny Novgorod as a form of ‘distributed museum’, speaks of how the gaps that have formed in social discussions are being filled by ‘affective works not identified from the position of academic history or urban research practices’ (p. 210), which at the same time are capable of turning a former museum, in fact, into a museum: ‘In 2017 Artem Filatov, in collaboration with the street artists of Nizhny Novgorod and invited artists from other towns devised a project that was intended to re-encode by means of art the space of the former museum and make it public again’ (p. 205).

This paradox is particularly clearly visible in the research by Roman Abramov, who works with informal museums of Soviet socialism. He examines two cases in his article: the Museum of Industrial Culture (Moscow), and the Museum of Soviet Arcade Machines (Moscow, St Petersburg). In both cases we have before us the formal signs of the ‘classical museum’: the space, and the collections, and even the very word ‘museum’ in the name. It seems all the more surprising that the other expected appurtenances of ‘museality’ are lacking — no catalogues, no labels by the exhibits, and, above all, no experts to tell you what to look at, how to look at it, and what exactly to see in it. Abramov shows beautifully how the creators of the Museum of Industrial Culture in Lyublino, while calling their space a *museum*, deliberately try to distance themselves from the disciplining technologies associated with it: ‘[T]he organisers of the museum are sure that there is no need of any further “museification” of their exhibits. The explanations are contained in the special nostalgic-affective contact with the material manifestations of the late Soviet past, when instead of the symbolic distance that a table of information inevitably creates, there is a spontaneous recognition of the object and a discovery of its connection with a person’s own recollections or the stories told by the older generation’ (p. 285). It is not only the creators of the museum, but Roman Abramov too who carefully sets such museums apart from the accustomed models: ‘The absence of a catalogue or any explanations of the exhibits refers one to a particular understanding of the “interactivity” of the museum, where the usual hierarchy with the expert position of the professional museum workers and the visitors disappears, and what happens is a joint emotional grasping of the past through interaction with objects from it. Of course, this raises many questions about the

status of the exhibit and the very prospects for the existence of such a museum model, but it is evidence of the nostalgic pull of material objects from the late Soviet period' (p. 286).

In practically all the texts one may notice an attempt to define the correlation between the museum and something else — something more emotional and less rational, more democratic and less disciplining, more malleable and ephemeral and less restricted in space. For Zinaida Bonami this correlation is expressed in the opposition between the museum and the postmuseum, the conflict between the politics of meaning and the politics of affect. For Pavel Kupriyanov, it is in the dilemma of academic knowledge and historical impression, for Daria Khlevnyuk, the relationship between the museum and the museum of memory, for Galina Yankovskaya, between the museum and the 'non-museum', and for Sofia Tchouikina in the use of the registers of memory or history. In all these conceptual schemes emotionalisation and affectation¹ serve as markers of the boundary which does not so much identify the differences between different types of museum spaces and practices as it answers the authors' aim of setting apart and separating the new museums from the old — those public museums à la Louvre that Duncan Cameron placed in the category of temple museums.

The presence of the topic of emotionality in some cases and its complete absence in other makes one wonder whether we are not in fact reading into the new museum representations a 'special', heightened emotionality. For example, Maria Silina tells us in great detail of the lively discussion in the museum milieu in the late 1920s and 1930s of the theories of the 'psychophysics' of perception and the methods of producing the correct and effectual emotional impact on museum visitors. The examples she gives are impressive, and I shall allow myself to quote one of them: '[A]t the Passion Monastery in 1928–1929, in order to unmask "speculation, deceit and charlatanism with bodily remains, so-called relics", the museum workers organised "a special department of decay and decomposition of animal objects". In this department the mummified remains of St Joasaf of Belgorod were placed beside the mummified corpses of a forger, a rat and a bat "to show the similarity of the processes of decay in these corpses"' (p. 171). Modern museums, I think, are still a very long way from such refined methods of emotional impact. At the same time, in her work on local studies museums of the same period, Sofya Gavrulina maintains that the analysis of the emotional-affective component of exhibition spaces is inapplicable to local studies museums, because they 'rarely made it their aim to create "experience" in the modern sense' (p. 177). Where these two chapters

¹ None of the authors distinguishes between these two concepts.

are concerned I have the feeling that if the authors swapped cases Maria Silina might find the psychophysics of perception in local studies museums too, while Sofya Gavrulina might have failed to find any 'emotional thinking' outside them.

Yulia Liderman only partially touches on the topic of the museum. Her article is devoted to the problem of the 'documentary nature' of the visual language and the limitations consequent upon its use. The topic of emotions and affect is also absent, but as one reads her work one can easily imagine an affective treatment of the same material. Does this mean that one just has to wait for a professional affectologist to get his / her hands on this case? Or is the search for affect, perhaps, an attempt to establish a new taxonomy of museums, to draw a new museum map and locate on it the whole diversity of museum initiatives that we encounter not only on the pages of *The Politics of Affect* but in real life? And, if we admit just for a minute that the latter proposition is correct, does not analytical reflection turn into a process of reorganising the hierarchical relationships in which the ghostly temple museums are the sample models, in comparison with which other museums are not only other, but a bit unreal? Such logic inevitably gives rise to the topic of devaluation (Bonami speaks of the 'devaluation of the markers of value', p. 53), the observation that the ideal is imperfectly and incompletely realised ('Nevertheless, it cannot be said that this practice [the use of devices to provoke emotions in the visitors. — E.M.] is widespread in Russia or used in the majority of such museums', p. 120), and leads in the end to the expected conclusion of a museum crisis.

This thesis, expressed in the opening article by Zinaida Bonami, recurs in the conclusion, headed 'The Boundaries of Affect as Boundaries of Identity: The Crisis of the Public Museum', by Egor Isaev and Artem Kravchenko. I must admit that after learning of all the diversity of living and working museum projects discussed in the articles, I was baffled by this heading. Of course, it is hard to disagree with the authors' contention that the digital revolution and the growth of consumerism affect the perception of museum objects and, accordingly, visitors' use of museums. But can the whole multiplicity of the forms of museum production that we observe, of the social processes both mobilising and disintegrating that surround the museum today, as well as the ways in which the museum space is actually used by visitors, really be reduced to the banal conclusion of a crisis of the public museum? And besides, was there ever a museum that entirely corresponded to the ideal, 'precrisis' model? Even the Louvre, at the time when it was first opened, bore some resemblance to a department store and an amusement park.

The discussion of a museum crisis may of course be regarded as tribute to the rhetorical tradition of alarmism and the result of

attempts to generalise the diversity of approaches and topics that appear on the pages of this collection. But it still seems to me that the new museology (and we too) could gain from looking at ‘the museum as it is’, free of the weight of the ideal models which we ourselves invented fifty years or so ago.

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