

## Avant-Garde Museology

By Arseny Zhilyaev (ed)

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Avant-Garde Museology is an anthology of documents, prose, fragments and experiments from the period of post revolutionary Soviet Union museum practice which until now have been dispersed and unavailable in English. The translated collection draws together ideas that share as editor Arseny Zhilyaev suggests a common theme that is the project to reconstitute the museum as an institution of hope as opposed to the old order that ordained their own ideals and objects to the cost of the majority. The unfinished project heralded in this collection – which with the advent of Stalinism reversed what achievements had been made – is an approach to the museum that is active and alive, alongside the undertaking to rebuild a fairer society.

The anthology aimed at art historians, archivists and cultural theorists brings together a lightly curated selection of documents and projects. It represents a missing compendium to the movements that are recognisable as the outputs of the Russian revolution such as constructivism and social realism, and to the dominating narrative of the museum as a Western modernist enterprise. The book is divided into six sections – *Museum as Common Task*, *The Museum of Avant-Gardism*, *The Materialistic Museum*, *The Museum Outside of the Museum*, *Museum of the History of the Revolution* and *The Atheists' Museum* – expounding various principles and concepts that were being developed towards the notion of avant-garde museology that Zhilyaev postulates as the framing device for this collection. The anthology as a whole as Zhilyaev acknowledges in his introduction is not an academic text as such, it is not a rigorous analysis of the project proposed in the title of the book, it is rather an attempt to open up for the reader the field of museum studies alongside art history to an invaluable moment in our cultural, aesthetic and historical heritage which has not been so readily available.

The first section of the book spends much time with the work of Nikolai Fedorov whose ideas resonate throughout the book's entirety, as well as in part with Zhilyaev's notion of avant-garde museology. The religious philosopher Fedorov was one of the major contributors to Russian cosmism, the movement that saw the fusion of science, nature, religion and technology promoting the evolution of human beings beyond the earth and into the

cosmos. For Fedorov the museum becomes a site from which humanity can transcend both physical and social limitations. The museum must collect everything that is produced. The current model of the museum is not unified; it is full of discord and disunity and hence mirrors humanity. There must be a movement both in society and in the museum towards brotherhood. This is achieved through the building of museums as churches where investigation into the human condition is essential; the scholars of the museum are its congregation that seek answers through its commission, a place to resolve humanities discord.

Another example, which resounds with the organizing theme of the book, is an excerpt from Platanov's novel *Chevengur "The Revolution Memorial Reservation"*. A satire on the years following the uprising, the "memorial reservation" holds on to all that was good from the revolution, concepts of brotherhood and equality that were the lifeblood of revolutionary action. The newly conceived post revolutionary town has none of this energy, creativity and fraternity rather the banalities and bureaucracies of law making and order persist. The excerpt points to the contradiction of holding the revolution as an eternal moment, the conundrum is resolved in a way by the witty optimism of the reservations warden and Platanov's idiosyncratic prose.

There are many proclamations within the collection, such as *The Museum of Avant-Gardism*, which should address itself to that which lives according to the artist Kazimir Malevich. His denunciation of the museums of old reflects the declarations of the Futurists, the new museums should dedicate themselves to that which is alive or can produce new forms of life. The collection also highlights the various struggles and attempts to approach museology as a dialectical materialist enterprise. The documents and papers from museum conferences and congresses as well as Luppol's *Dialectical Materialism and the construction of the Museum*, ask the question as to how one can show the complex relations between things and objects in their actual movement, and to do so not just in a theoretical context but with practical applications.

What stands out from the anthology are the various lived experiments in curation and exhibition such as the first *World Exhibition of Interplanetary Spacecrafts and Mechanisms*, *The Catherine the Great Exhibition at the Voronezh Regional Museum*, *An Experiment in Marxist Exhibition-Making at the State Tretyakov gallery* or the experience of developing mobile exhibitions and the *Museums of the Revolution*. Avant-garde museology, it transpires, reflects the editors belief that in appraising these documents the Soviet museum, like conceptualist art not only seeks to go beyond medium specificity but also transcend institutional boundaries to examine the material conditions that underline how we see and experience art.

There are lessons to be learned from the professional revolutionaries, philosophers, archivists, artists who in the wake of the revolution sought to marry the necessity of a progressive existence with how we store and retrieve our lives through objects. This book offers up a body of evidence that, beyond Zhilyaev's correlation between the experiments of the revolution and

conceptualist art practices, suggests the notion of avant-garde museology and its history is a developing one, one which this anthology through its translations brings to a wider audience.