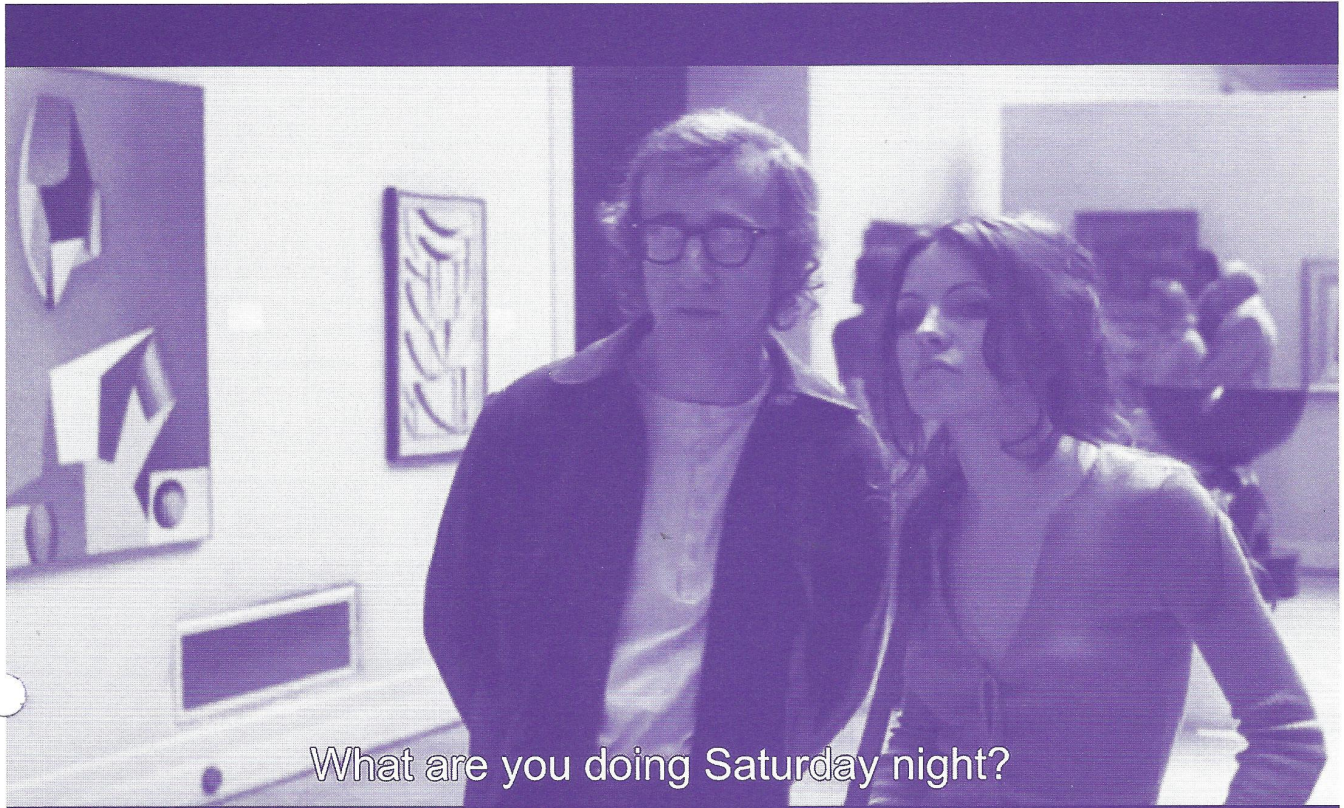


**Primary Sources at Work.  
Art Collections and Museums  
in Present Times**

**Journal de l'Université d'été  
de la Bibliothèque Kandinsky**

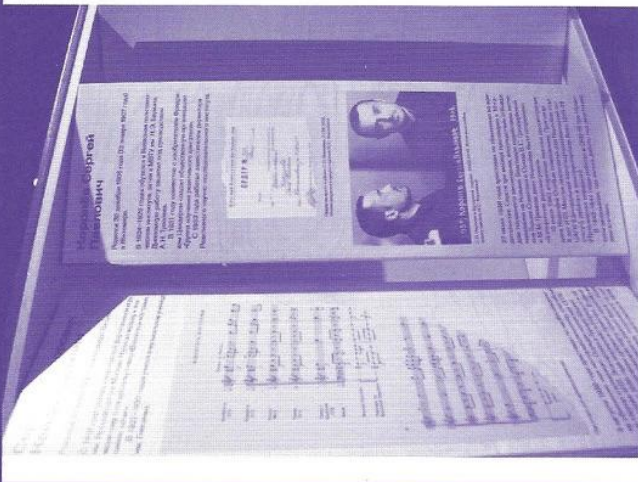


What are you doing Saturday night?

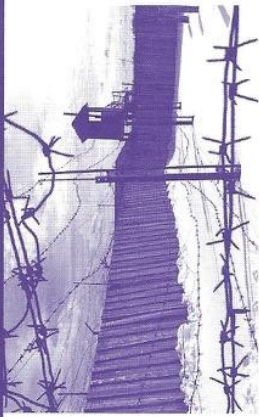
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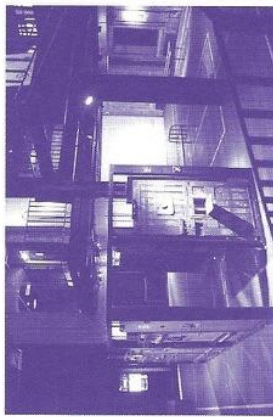
N° 4



Part of the permanent exhibition of the GULAG Museum, Moscow (Photo by M. Mikaelyan, 2017).



GULAG camp Perm-36 transformed in a museum site in the 1990s.

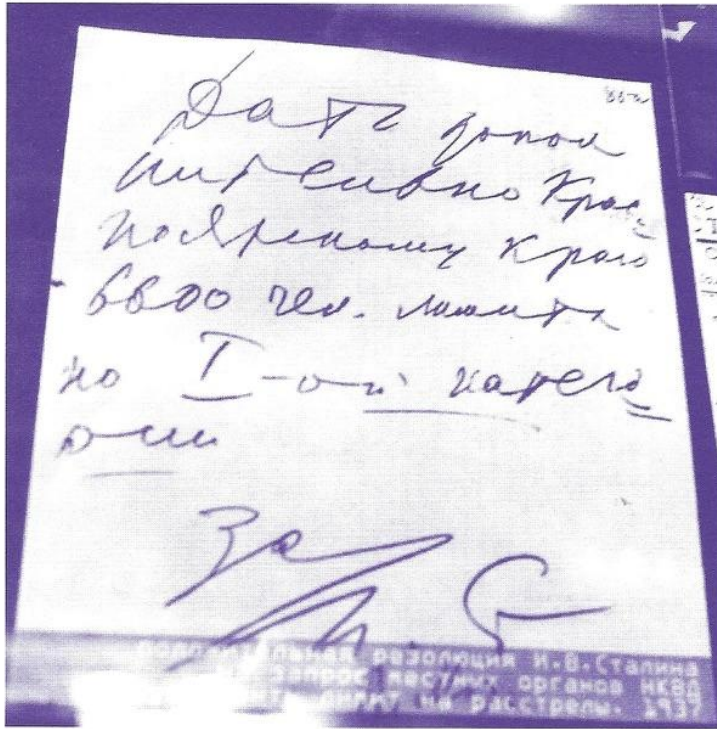


Part of the permanent exhibition of the Sakharov Center, Moscow (Photo by M. Mikaelyan, 2017).



Part of the permanent exhibition of the GULAG Museum, Moscow (Photo by M. Mikaelyan, 2017).





**Josif Stalin's resolution on the required number of executed political prisoners, 1937 (Sakharov Center, Moscow. Photo by M. Mikaelyan, 2017).**

**Prisoners of the Perm-36 GULAG camp during the work, 1930s.**



**Facsimile of case proceedings of a GULAG prisoner from the KGB Archives (Sakharov Center, Moscow. Photo by M. Mikaelyan, 2017).**

Remembrance and commemoration of traumatic historical past has become one of the major issues of the international museological practice over the last decades. By means of architectural and exhibition design the contemporary museum poses questions concerning history, memory, identity, alternative perceptions of the past and the present. These questions become crucial not only for the self-consciousness and self-identification of certain groups of people, but of the whole nations, or even of the entire society.

Considering any human productive activity an *institution* (of political, sociocultural, or economic nature), museological practice may offer a *restitution* of the past, which is translated through consistent architectural syntax and meaningful exhibition design. The multipronged conceptual framework of the museum in this case will contain numerous strategic issues that may be divided into two main categories: issues regarding consumption of the memory (political and ideological standpoints, models of mediation and dissemination of museum contents, public criticism and debate evoked by the museum program, etc.), and issues regarding architectural composition and interior design (typological, morphological, technological, functional properties, volumetric and spatio-temporal composition, aspects of exhibition design, etc.). The present essay briefly examines a number of these issues in relation to several memorial museums of the last three decades, and poses theoretical questions concerning future museological perspectives on the realm of difficult memories.

**Museum and consumption of memory** In any society and in any period of time, the domain of memorial institutions is inevitably connected to historical, political and ideological issues, which entails a whole series of matters related to objectivity (Preziosi, 2012, *Narrativity and the Museological Myths of Nationality*; Steyn, 2014, *Vicissitudes of Representation: Remembering and Forgetting*). Museological practice of the 20th century demonstrated that the memorial museum tends to not only pose questions, but to give evident and often indisputable responses to them at the same time. Thus, the problem of methodological approach to the creation of museum narratives becomes crucial in this perspective. What the necessary criteria for selecting and structuring of museum contents are? Which artifacts or testimonies are appropriate for an exhibition narrative of the memorial museum, especially in the realm of difficult or controversial memories of traumatic historical events (e.g. museums of Soviet occupation in the Baltic countries, which are not accepted by the contemporary Russian society, or memorials dedicated to the Armenian Genocide, which is totally contested by the Turkish government)? Should the museum narrative be rigorous and unarguable, or it may articulate contextual alternatives?

The memorial museums established directly at the genocide sites are customarily focused on the witnessing of the crime. The exhibition didactics in this case are often based on a presumption that all visitors would recognise the horror and immorality of memorialised events. Thus, their narratives are not destined to represent the full historical context (collateral circumstances of memorialised events, a detailing of political, economic, and sociocultural factors, historical prerequisites, etc.) of the tragedy. The narratives are determined by the respect for victims, a thorough compassion and an unqualified promotion of human rights values. The memorial museums, which are built independently from the site of tragedy, often give a wide range of possibilities for investigation, debate, indictment, and even a partial justification. This commemorative model may be less expressive, but more efficient from the standpoint of reflective judgment development and learning through critical thinking.

The museum of the Saviour Monastery of St. Euthymius in Suzdal, Russia, which during the World War II hosted a prison camp for Italian and Romanian soldiers, can be an example of such a tendency. The museum exhibition represents Italian and Romanian war prisoners as Nazi collaborators deserving their imprisonment, malnutrition, hard labour, and even death (Fig.1). At the same time, the temporary exhibition 'The Return on the Don 1941-1943', organized in 2012 by the History Museum of Trento with the collaboration of the Suzdal prison camp museum and held in the Galleries of Piedicastello, aimed to represent Italian soldiers not only as invaders, but also as victims of political alliance between Mussolini and Hitler (Fig.2).



Fig.1. The exhibition of the Suzdal prison camp Museum (Suzdal prison camp museum, 2016).



Fig.2. Exhibition 'The Return on the Don 1941-1943' at the History Museum of Trento (Faggion, 2012).

Another issue is related to the possible criticism and debate over ideological bias that may be evoked by the memorial museum in the society or within its parts (Williams, 2012, *The Memorial Museum Identity Complex: Victimhood, Culpability, and Responsibility*). The major question is whether the model of the universalist public museum aiming to unite different social groups and single people with sometimes diametrically opposite points of view, or the model of an insightful museum focusing on private matters, problems of minorities, or historical events that are controversial for the part of the society, should prevail in the museological field.

The memorial museum should first of all be a place for sociocultural reconciliation and collective commemoration of victims, and not for ideological dispute. This standpoint can be reinforced by the words of M. Hirsch, who mentions the United State Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. in her book 'Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory':

*«The museum was created not primarily for survivors and deeply engaged children of survivors like me, but for an American public with little knowledge of the event. At its best, the museum needs to elicit in the visitors an imaginary identification – the desire to know and to feel, the curiosity and passion that shape the postmemory of survivor children» (Hirsch, 1997, Family Frames: Photography, Narrative, and Postmemory: p.249).*

The most effective way to fulfill these conceptual objectives is to introduce pedagogical dissemination of meanings into the programme of a memorial museum. Being the primary and fundamental source for education, museum should not lend itself to «*the global rush to commemorate atrocities*»<sup>1</sup>, but offer to the visitor multifaceted information, high didactic potential and liberty to evaluate, accept or contest established ideologies and judgments.

**Architectural and spatio-temporal composition of memorial museums** Representation of difficult memories by means of architectural and interior design has become one of the keystone concepts of remembrance and commemoration in the architectural discourse of the last decades (Neuman, 2014, *Shoah Presence: Architectural Representations of the Holocaust*). Thus, expressive architectural dramaturgy and monumental rhetoric were predominant in the design of Holocaust museums of the United States of America and Europe in the past century (Alba, 2015, *The Holocaust Memorial Museum: Sacred Secular Space (The Holocaust and its Contexts)*; Bernard-Donals, 2016, *Figures of Memory: The Rhetoric of Displacement at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum*). The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM) in Washington, D.C. can be seen as an example of this tendency. The opposite strategy has been realised in 2005 in the architectural and spatio-temporal composition of the new Yad Vashem Holocaust Museum in Jerusalem, which influenced a large number of subsequently established memorial museums all over the world. It has demonstrated that concepts and strategies of collective victimhood narratives can successfully operate with austere, and yet eloquent architectural grammar.

One of the prominent recent examples of a well-articulated, but sober architectural and interior design that forms an appropriate framework for the museological reconstruction of traumatic memories is the Shoah Memorial in Milan designed by G. Morpurgo and A. De Curtis. Being a part of the Milan's Central railway station, the museum spaces were used as a sorting depot till 2007. In 1943 the depot has been used for the deportation of prisoners, Italian Jews mainly, to the German death camps. The architectural composition is coherent, consistent, linear, and yet meaningful in order to avoid indifference. Great attention is paid to the succession and superimposition of architectural forms; the interior structural tissue is featured by the accurate balance between reserve and expressiveness.

The commemoration here is strongly related to the multipronged identity, history, and the existing spatio-architectural representation of the place. The architects were aiming at the coincidence of the structure and the form, which would reveal the enormity of the historical trauma in relation to a single person. By visually confronting the new concrete and the cleaned original structure – an architectural *document*, a *transmitter* of memories – architects maintain the distinction between what existed in times of deportations, and what has been introduced later.

The spatio-temporal composition of the museum interior is also essential to the creation of commemorative spirit, especially in the realm of difficult memories. If the memorial narrative cannot be retranslated through tangible witness, it can be scenographically recreated, staged inside a new architectural body. The Tower of Faces at the USHMM is an example of a spatio-temporal framework, where the dynamic sequence of varied spatial forms is used in order to accentuate certain points of the museological narrative (Fig.3). After a narrow, low-arched corridor the visitor enters the three-storey-high, skylit well that becomes one of the most affective experiences of the entire museum display.

As regards the exhibition dramaturgy, the museum itinerary should lead the visitor towards the culmination point of both an interior composition and a scenario of museum contents. The *Place for Reflection* of the Milan's Shoah Memorial – an isolated circular space for collective remembrance – is an example of such a strategy (Fig.4). The itinerary of the memorial becomes a kind of symbolical *Via Crucis* that requires mental and emotional self-sacrifice. That is why the aforementioned culmination point should be meditative, inviting further reflection upon memorialised historical events.

...

It is important to recognize that the architectural and spatio-temporal composition of a memorial museum represents an evocation of difficult, sometimes contested memories, but still sacred for certain groups of people. Hence, even when it employs the model of an universalist public museum, it still remains closely related to its specific historical and cultural context.

Hypothesizing future trends of museum practice in relation to difficult memories, multiple questions need to be answered. For instance, what the museums of today's humanitarian tragedies could be (e.g. a Syrian war museum, or a memorial dedicated to migrants dying in the Mediterranean Sea)? What architectural and interior compositions may be designed for them? What exhibition narratives and scenarios of museum contents may be elaborated? However, it is a fair assumption that among the major objectives of a memorial museum the following will remain: creation, dissemination, and institutionalization of historical, memory, identity, heritage discourses, production of cultural meanings, as well as promotion of solidarity and humanitarian sensitivity.

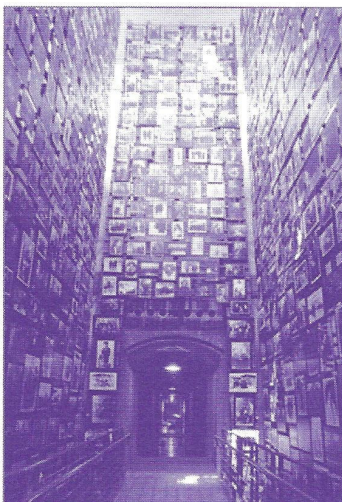


Fig.3. Tower of Faces, USHMM, Washington, D.C. (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2013).

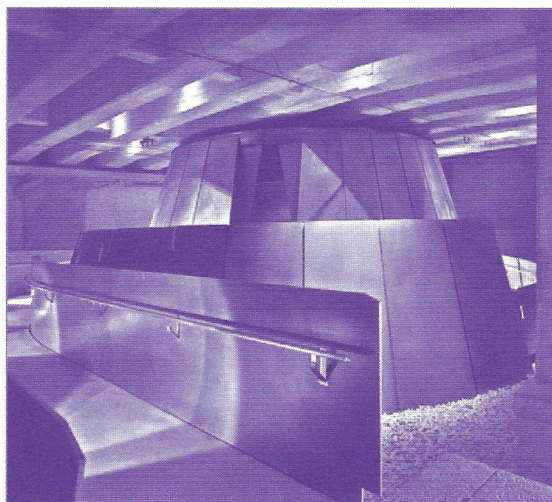


Fig.4. *Place for Reflection*, Shoah Memorial in Milan (Martiradonna, 2015).

<sup>1</sup> An excerpt of the book title «*Memorial Museums: The Global Rush to Commemorate Atrocities*» by P. Williams (2007).

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L'Université d'été de la Bibliothèque Kandinsky  
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la Médiathèque de l'architecture et du  
patrimoine (Département de la photographie).

Ces travaux ont été réalisés avec le soutien  
du Laboratoire d'Excellence « Création,  
Arts, Patrimoines », portant la référence  
ANR-10-LABX-82. Ils ont bénéficié d'une aide  
de l'État gérée par l'Agence nationale de  
la recherche.

Remerciements:

Christian Briend, Camille Morando, Nathalie  
Ernoul, Tatiana Champion, toute l'équipe  
de la Bibliothèque Kandinsky, Stéphane  
Guerreiro, Lydia Poitevin, Nicolas Gerbier,  
Serge Guichard et l'équipe de Sûreté du  
Centre Pompidou, Benoît Sallustro, Anne  
Thomas, Pierre-Emmanuel Potey, Vahid Hamidi  
et les équipes de production du Centre  
Pompidou, Caroline Ziani, Camille Weber

Jean Philippe Garric, Zinaïda Polimenova,  
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Marc Vauday, Maxime Guitton et  
Laurence Dalivoust

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Hervé Magro, Frédéric Baleine du Laurens,  
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Imprimé à 1000 exemplaires,  
en juillet 2017 sur les presses des imprimeries  
STIPA (Montreuil, FR),  
Druckerei Mack (DE),  
Print 24 (FR),  
Corep (Paris, FR)

ISSN: 2427-4119

*Le N°4 du Journal de l'Université d'été de la  
Bibliothèque Kandinsky vous est offert.*

Avec le soutien du Laboratoire d'Excellence  
Création, Arts, Patrimoines

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des Archives diplomatiques,  
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