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The politics and poetics of Museology

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It has become rather common to speak of the museum as a place of power. Whether one refers to it as media (Davallon, 1992), as medium (McLuhan, Parker & Barzun, 1969), or as device (Bennett, 1995), we must understand that this institution, emblematic of occidental civilization, has always aroused the interests of local political régimes, whatever they may be. The creation of the British Museum and the birth of the Louvre (Déotte, 1994; Pommier, 1995) illustrate the many different ways the public has of seeing the links between knowledge and collections. Furthermore the advent of each new political régime (from democracy in America to the Marxist-Leninist system in the Soviet Union, passing by fascist Italy and national-socialist Germany) marks museums with its imprint, as well as its system of communication, preservation and research.

Politics is always integral to the functioning of museums, affecting both directly and indirectly the neutral and objective image that this institution presents to the public. We muse on the direct influence of a local politician, who tries to force an artist upon a curator, or impose a political régime looking to transform a national narrative (Bergeron, 2014). But we can also question the indirect political influence on the biases of museum professionals and theoreticians, across museology and its different modes of communication: articles, books, conferences, symposia and teaching institutions.

The idea is not new. We find it in the first ICOFOM debates, especially in the division of participants (essentially Anglophone) who considered museology to be essentially practical and pragmatic as opposed to those who saw museology as a scientific (empirical, rational) discipline. In the 1980s the debate was certainly not settled (Burcaw, 1981). The bipolar world of the time differed considerably from that of today. At that time questioning the nature of disciplines

was based on university structures different from what we know now. From a certain point of view, Zbyněk Stránský's reasons for presenting museology as science can only be understood within this somewhat dated context. The more recent interpretations by Bruno Latour (2001), analyzing science as a process in which ideas are added within controversies, has permitted a richer vision, especially for the topic considered here. From this perspective, it is not simply a matter of developing concepts or a new vocabulary, but rather of creating new resources and laboratories of political alliances: in short, developing strategies in which the scientific arguments are just one aspect.

Following this analysis, the question of power referenced above is dominant. Whether seen as scientific or theoretic, museology (or museum studies) as a discipline should be considered to be sufficiently coherent and valuable (in results and the establishment of research capital) to merit development within the academic system. Museology should also be useful beyond the university, as much as museology claims to influence museums and the manner in which they are organized. If research-based museology can influence the world-wide teaching of museology, it seems positive (there have never been so many schools and researchers). But we have to question on one hand the type of museology being taught, and on the other hand the real influence of museology, both on museums and on those who fund museums.

Politics

If we can pretend, along with Bourdieu, that sociology is a combat sport (Carles, 2001), then what is museology? The question posed by Cameron (1971) as to whether a museum is a temple or a forum, can also be asked of museology and the padded environments in which it evolved, most often the university and a few big museums. This question hides museology's lack of influence in these debates in a significant manner. Almost any museum textbook (Gob & Drouguet, 2014; Ambrose & Paine, 2012; Zubiaur, 2004) tends to show the great distance between the stated role of a museum - historic preservation, research, training and education, and a social role - and the reasons why many establishments were actually created: as symbols of power and instruments of propaganda to the glory of a patron or a region, or as urban economic and touristic development. If we can see global politics as the development of city affairs, then who really manages the business of the museum (or the museum field)? What could be the role of museology from this perspective: to keep a prescriptive interpretation of what should be the role of the museum, risking a more and more useless point of view? Should museology seek to define, or should it seek to convince and influence? Should we mainly address our own students and colleagues, colleagues in other disciplines, and museum professionals, or should we endeavour to influence politicians? If, theoretically, all seems possible, most researchers need to make practical choices, but which ones? Should museology, from this perspective, be militant (as is new museology)? And if so, for whom - colleagues, professionals, the public or people

of influence? From this point of view, how to manage the offset between, on the one hand, classical prescriptive museology (conservation, research, communication in a research-based framework) and, on the other hand, the precarious situation faced by many museums including the need to cover the rent, develop tourism and support social inclusion?

Geopolitics

The history of museology, as well as that of museums, shows a considerable evolution of the museum landscape as well as the methods used in museum work. If all members of ICOM see themselves (more or less) in the definition of museum and the code of ethics, most of them could not understand the broad heterogeneity in the ways of thinking about museums today. We can, however, identify a certain number of zones of influence more or less important in the world that are linked to specific trains of thought: a few celebrated universities (Leicester University); a few big museums (the Louvre or the Metropolitan); or certain important authors (Stephen Weil, John Falk, Tony Bennett, Georges Henri Rivière, Hugues de Varine, Roland Arpin, Filipe Lacouture etc.); a consulting organization (Lord Cultural Resources). How to determine and distinguish these zones? Should we speak of museological imperialism (Scheiner, 2016) to recognize certain dominant forms: Anglo-saxon and to a lesser extent Francophone and Hispanic? How, from this perspective, can we find other ways of conceiving of the museum field, from Oceania, Africa, the Middle East, Asia or the far North?

So, from this point of view, the origin of most of the big museum concepts, as well as the museums themselves, is occidental. The evolution of the world suggests considerable political and economic changes in the decades to come, presaging more or less radical transformations in global geopolitical activities. It would be difficult to believe that these changes would not affect museums and museology. How will notions, such as heritage, conservation, the inalienable nature of collections, or the relationship of museums to profit evolve, if a number of countries have conceptions that are, at times, diametrically opposed to those dominant today, especially concerning the materiality of heritage as well as its authenticity and access?

Poetics

If we can risk defining poetics as the theory and analysis of artistic creation (notably literature), we must decide that there exists a poetics of museology (the art of exposition) as shown by numerous authors, such as Altshuler (2013) or Karp and Lavine (1991). But can one really speak of a poetics of museology? Without doubt we could analyze the museological discourse according to its aesthetic or ornamental dimensions, but most contributors privilege a methodical rhetoric in which most of the time sobriety leaves little room for poetics.

Alternatively we can posit a hypothesis that what creates the originality and pertinence of the great museum thinkers is at the heart of a creative process in which the concepts as much as the ways of evoking them contribute greatly to the quality of the message by inscribing in them certain poetics of museology. The lyricism in Duncan Cameron's (1992) foundational articles contribute greatly to their notoriety, and the same goes for the energy evident in the contributions of Hugues de Varine and of the numerous authors of new museology (Desvallées, 1992-1994). Humour as well as John Cotton Dana's style is a non-negotiable aspect of his iconoclastic work. Can we find in museum literature an admirable creative breath among the great museum thinkers today, or are we doomed to gloomy and technocratic gibberish? From this perspective, can we find a poetics of museology and who would be the creators who propose new concepts and notions in synchronicity with our society?

The politics and poetics of museology

Politics, geopolitics and poetics were therefore at the center of discussions at the 40th ICOFOM symposium held in Cuba in October 2017, to clarify how these notions can currently be considered in the field of museology. The contributions in this issue provide an insight, certainly not exhaustive, but nevertheless particularly interesting. Unsurprisingly, it is first the term politics, in its relations to museums, which has most directly inspired the authors. Many of them, using case studies, have often discussed national museum policy issues. The ICOFOM international network promotes the diversity of approaches, contributing to the development of a panorama of original proposals. Ayanda Ngcobo, in *The Politics of Representation in South African Museums*, using two detailed studies of museums (the Old Court Museum and the Bergtheil Museum) – through the representation of the races, but also that of the genres – evokes the transformations of the last decades in South African museums. This country, whose museum discourse has considerably changed in parallel with political upheavals during the 1990s, is the subject of a second analysis, the study of a particularly symbolic diorama. Patricia Davison's *The Politics and Poetics of the Bushman Diorama at the South African Museum* evokes and analyzes the conservation choices of one of the most famous dioramas of the South African museum representing a Bushman family, and the stakes or the political orientations underlying its withdrawal. In a completely different context, Olga Zabalueva, in *Museology and Museum-Making: Cultural Policies and Cultural Demands*, presents the radically different political stakes of two European museums: the Orthodox Church museum located in the Monastery of New Jerusalem, near Moscow, and the National Museum for Democracy and Migration in Malmö, Sweden. The museum, as a public space but above all as a media, thus appears as a particularly favorable ground for the evocation, in a more or less underlying way, of the political visions of those who finance them. It is obviously in the same context that the Museo del Ejército dedicated to National Defense, in Mexico City, analyzed by Maai Enai Ortiz Sánchez in *Museos militares: dispositivos exhibitorios y el borramiento de la memoria de la*

lucha social en México, can be considered. In *The Origins of Puritan Politics in US Museums: Nation Building and "The Arts" from 1776 to 1806*, based on a historical approach, Sheila Hoffman shows a first facet of the policy of the young US government, at that time very cautious about the funding or creating museums on its territory. We know the changes in attitudes towards museums that will accompany the American political evolution, according to the increasingly important place reserved for economic questions and the development of capitalist logic. In a certain way, the article by Karla Estelita Godoy and Sarah Borges Luna, *Museums and city aestheticization policies: controversies between the touristification of public spaces and the social role of museum institutions*, even if it refers to the museums of the city Rio de Janeiro, also illustrates the changes that have taken place in the United States and in so many other countries, with the museum becoming increasingly involved in the economic policies of states or cities in favor of creativity or the reinforcement of consumerism.

If the interference of politics appears as much in museums as in the museum policy of states and cities, it is also found, inevitably, within museum types and ways of thinking about museum professions. It is from that point of view that Yves Bergeron and Lisa Baillargeon's essays, on the one hand, and Sheila Hoffman's, on the other hand, are considered. In *The Curatorial Status of North American Museums: Geopolitical Perspectives*, Bergeron and Baillargeon attempt to describe the functional changes of museum officials, particularly the curatorial profession, to discuss the differences between these functions in Europe and North America. Hoffman, in *Practicality and Value: Historical Influences on Museum Studies in the United States*, discusses pioneering training policies in museum staff during the first half of the 20th century in the United States. Such policies inevitably have a direct influence on the way museums are conceived. But they are in turn conditioned by the thinking of the great figures of the museum field: Bergeron, Baillargeon and Hoffman obviously refer to it them, noting in particular to the figures of Brown, Goode or Sachs. The most detailed and certainly the most geopolitical analysis of this matter, in this issue of *ICOFOM Study Series*, is certainly that developed by Bruno Brulon Soares and Anna Leshchenko. In *Museology in Colonial Contexts: A Hall for Decolonization of Museum Theory*, the authors do not observe the particular context of a particular country – rather, they emphasize the areas where museology is implanted and, in particular, the way Anglophones on the one hand, the Francophones on the other, think of the museum field. They observe a kind of hegemonic use of some of the literature in this area, to the detriment of others, through quotes and references, conditioning the reader. Brulon Soares and Leshchenko, in this perspective, note – from the analysis of some major reference works, such as the *International Handbook of Museum Studies* or the *Dictionnaire encyclopédique de muséologie*, how the museological output of many countries – especially that of Latin America – is underrepresented.

Although the notion of politics is clearly apparent in most articles, that of a poetics of museology seems to have attracted less interest from the authors.

Certainly, as many contributors have pointed out, the exhibitionary complex – especially the dioramas – participate in a particular poetics of museum work. Nevertheless, the idea of a poetics of museology seems less obvious. The article of Tereza Scheiner, *Museología - Poética, Política y Ética: Dimensiones transformadoras de las relaciones entre Humano y Real*, aims at articulating these two notions, from an ethical viewpoint. By emphasizing the dual nature of museology – creative and reflexive on the one hand, active on the other – Scheiner highlights, in a sense, the dualism of philosophical thought, which can be found at the heart of the Renaissance debates, Neo-Platonic thought and the emergence of the modern museum.

In a more practical way, Elizabeth Weiser emphasizes the articulation between poetics and rhetoric, evoking the importance of style and creativity in museological literary production. In *Crafting a Poetic Museology*, Weiser analyzes, from the rhetorical framework, numerous quotations or extracts from museological texts, notably from some authors published in of the *ICOFOM Study Series*, suggesting many ways for developing a persuasion impact (one of the objectives of the rhetoric) of an article.

If this selection of articles can lay the groundwork for a reflection on the links between (geo)-politics, poetics and museology, it does not exhaust the subject. This axis of reflection of ICOFOM, as evidenced by most contributions, however, proves to be of great fertility, all over the world. It is hoped that it will be enriched in the years to come by other points of view in order to clarify the specific relations binding these different concepts to museology.

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