

Museum as interface:

the implosion of the white cube and radical museology

Abstract

The transformations that took place in the last century have brought about profound changes to the fields of culture and of public cultural policies. What can be noted, in the specific case of Brazil, is a progressive weakening of the role of the State in espousing cultural democratization, here understood not only as providing access to culture, but also as promoting initiatives that foster cultural diversity. In recent years, a dismantling of the policy area of culture and the arts has been noted, as is generally the case in times of economic crisis, once culture and the arts are generally regarded as having secondary importance vis-à-vis other areas under the domain of the State.

A debate over the role of the institutional context, particularly as regards the public sphere, is followed by the perception of a lack of congruence between institutional practices – which are often directed exclusively at the development of ‘spectacular’ proposals – and actions that can create dialogue with and lead to effective participation of the public in its diversity.

In this context, the question that is therefore raised is:

-What is the place of art institutions that propose more experimental strategies, different to those produced by institutional spaces driven by the promotion and dissemination of more spectacular proposals?

Keywords

Contemporary art, museum, experimental, interface

1. Decolonization of Museums: Art Collection and Power

This question has been posed by a number of thinkers and theorists for some time now. It is not by chance that in *On the Museum's Ruins*, American critic and art historian Douglas Crimp heralds the death of the art institution, and in particular of museums.

In dialogue with Hans Belting and Artur Danto, Crimp calls the modernist version of the museum into question, or, more precisely, the version of the museum that operates according to a museological belief that the representation of art is a homogenous

and purportedly universal system, and that has therefore constructed a history of art in resonance with its ‘ideal’ classification.

On the one hand, this supposed universality has allegedly been debunked, be it due to the existence of cultures that are far from identifying themselves with the Euro-Western model, or due to the fact that the traditional model of narrating history according to particular styles and characteristics, all of which linearly converge into a point in time, was no longer capable of addressing the plurality of modes of artistic production that emerged in the field of art after modernism.

It is not by chance that a surge in discussions has been observed – both within the domain of art history’s narrative and in actions related to the sphere of museums – promoting a process of ‘decolonization’ of museums and the need to liberate our collections from an imperial and hegemonic Euro-Western perspective. Javier Rezzano, coordinator of Uruguay’s National System of Museums, defines the term decolonization in its widest sense. To him, to ‘decolonize’ the museum necessarily means making it more inclusive and bringing it closer to the community that he worked for.

To declare the death of the museum has since become a tradition that has been maintained over the course of more than a century; we need only to recall the Futurists’ critique of the obsolete role of the museum. Curiously enough, though, our very century that has likewise continuously proclaimed its death has also been one that has seen an unprecedented and dramatic expansion. Only in São Paulo, we can cite the city’s Football Museum, opened in 2008, and the Museum of Sexual Diversity, inaugurated in 2012.

In any case, the point at issue here is not the increase in the number of museums, but relates instead to their fundamental role – despite its purported death sentences – in the art circuit, with regard to circulation, promotion and dissemination of that which we understand as a work of art.

2. White Cube and Museum-Temple

It is interesting to direct our attention to the role of the museum based on the image of a closed space that

is architecturally “neutral”, as contained in the term “White Cube”.

In his essay “Inside the White Cube”, originally published as a series of three articles in *Artforum* magazine in 1976, artist Brian O’ Doherty provides a critique of the modernist aesthetic of the exhibition space, as instituted by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York in the first half of the 20th century.

O’Doherty describes the modernist gallery space as “constructed along laws as rigorous as those for building a medieval church.” As he defines, the key principle behind this gallery model is that “the outside world must not come in, so windows are usually sealed off. Walls are painted white. The ceiling becomes the source of light.”

Introspective and self-referential, the white cube is a “museum-temple”, a sacralised environment, aseptic and timeless, distant from the reality of the world.

3. From Museum-Temple to Museum-Spectacle

As privileged grounds for the exhibition of cultural referents, museums have based their existence and their activities on the aura of historical and cultural authenticity of objects that were collected and exhibited over the course of many centuries.

Criteria such as originality, language specificity, universal historical narrative and consecrated exhibition spaces were used to hinge the construction of narratives upon the cultural authority of the museums of modernity.

The impact of new and sophisticated means of communication and the advent of digital culture as a phenomenon of globalization brought about profound changes to the sphere of culture, and consequently to the realm of museums.

The more pessimistic analysis of this new moment defend the idea that the globalization process simultaneously began to drive culture further away from pre-established spatial constraints in radical ways, while also promoting a process of cultural homogenization.

This, in turn, would entail that economic globalization has become inextricably linked to cultural globalization, within a framework in which culture transforms itself into a commodity that is produced and consumed in a global scale. And hence, this led to a process of displacement from the “museum-temple” To the “museum-spectacle”.

In an interview to the newspaper *Folha de S. Paulo* granted in the 1990s, American postmodern critic

Fredric Jameson diagnostically points out that the field of culture forms one of the main cornerstones of what he terms “late capitalism”.

As he says in the interview, “an overwhelming ‘dedifferentiation’ occurred, wherein the traditional boundaries between economic production the cultural life of people began to be effaced. Culture is (now) business, and cultural products are created for the market (...) mass culture is no longer a set of radio comedies, Hollywood musicals and romantic comedies. It involves a much more sophisticated production, made by talented people (...) following the logic of ‘reification’, whose final goal is to transform objects of all types into commodities. It does not matter whether these objects are movies stars, feelings or a political experience.”

The ‘dedifferentiation’ to which Jameson refers is not limited to the disappearance of old boundaries between infrastructure and superstructure, but also hauled into the realm of mass consumerism a group of manifestations that until this point had been tagged as elitist – for example, art exhibitions – but which now project themselves in the mediated programmes as mega-events. They occupy museums, cultural centres and outdoor spaces, attract sponsorships and public and private funding that benefit from tax incentive laws. Itinerant exhibitions by Monet, Rodin, Cézanne and Picasso provides the lure for major business investments that begin at box offices and unfold into the sale of catalogues, reproduction of paintings, films, posters, calendars, t-shirts and other souvenirs.

Many of these institutions tend to resort to a spectacular dynamics in which the number of visitors is one of the key indicators of the event’s success – or lack of it.

On the other hand, in some of the more recent shows it is possible to observe a completely different behaviour from the public towards the exhibition and the actual exhibition space. Many people stand in front of the artwork displayed as mobile phone or tablet cameras record their presence in the exhibition; a presence that will later be thrown into the spotlight by way of subsequent sharing of the recorded images on social media, imploding and dispelling the notion of the modernist white cube.

4. Experimental Museums and Radical Museology

Yet it would be an error to believe that this is the only possible model for contemporaneity, especially because the very idea of contemporaneity points towards a non-homogenous panorama. Rather, it signals to a heterogeneous, hybrid perspective, with the aim of encompassing the variegated configurations and formats of present-day museums.

Far from depleting the topic, I would like to refer to the essay titled *Radical Museology, Or, What's Contemporary in Museums of Contemporary Art*, by the English art historian and critic Claire Bishop. In this essay Bishop departs from a critique of a text by Rosalind Krauss "The Cultural Logic of the Late-Capitalist Museum", wherein the American critic, in dialogue with Fredric Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, posits the view that contemporary museums are the expression of a consumerist logic enacted in the domain of art and culture of present times.

In a first instance Claire Bishop acknowledges the inherent difficulty in determining what is contemporary, and the impossibility of consistently making sense of the uses of this notion within a universal or global perspective, not only in light of local conditions and particularities but also of the different museum typologies of our times.

Bishop calls the changing experiences of museums that at present can be regarded as contemporary, and which somehow managed to disentangle themselves from the museum-spectacle model "radical museology". In other words, they represent an alternative to situate the museum institution in the 21st century.

5. Paço das Artes: Livro/Acervo, MaPA and Ex-Paço

Some of the strategies pursued by the Paço das Artes include questioning traditional museum standards and practices, creating more experimental curatorial *dispositifs* and enhancing access to the collection, creating more active and experimental strategies for opening new channels of dialogue and engagement with the public.

Founded in the 1970s, the Paço das Artes, an art institution run by São Paulo State Secretariat for Culture, has over the years been creating a space that centres on experimental art, namely on that produced by younger artists, and the wide diversity of languages being explored.

Seeing the Paço das Artes is not a "museum" in the strict sense of the word, and for this reason, does not have an art collection, precisely in light of its work related to the promotion and dissemination of an entire range of a young Brazilian contemporary art production, the fundamental axis of its 'collection' consists of the endeavor of recording and archiving.

It could be said that the actions performed by the Paço das Artes constitute a sort of Imaginary Museum, as described by André Malraux: the 'collection' of the Paço das Artes takes shape through

the engagement of artists, curators, art critics and educators, as well as through the activities proposed and the participation of the public.

It is within the perspective of promoting a debate over the institutional 'collection' of the Paço das Artes, which is not a museum in the strictest sense but is nevertheless set up within the museology division of the São Paulo State Secretariat for Culture, and problematizing its status, and also with the aim of giving voice to other narratives, namely ones that unfold from the young Brazilian contemporary art production that has yet to gain representativeness within the main art circuits, that I conceived a curatorial series centred on Paço das Artes' archive and collection, with exhibitions aimed at giving visibility and creating a space for reflection about the issue.

Livro/Acervo [Book/Collection]

Livro/Acervo [Book/Collection] project used the archival material of the Paço das Artes (images, information, catalogue, documents) to propose an itinerant and portable exhibition inside a file box. *Livro/Acervo* was conceived by Daniela Bousso and myself in 2010 to mark the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Paço das Artes. The initial idea of the project was to develop an extensive curatorial project that rekindled the memory of the Paço das Artes, but also gave the public access to a curatorial endeavor that extended beyond the traditional exhibition space.

It was from this perspective that the idea was born to develop not only a curatorship in the space of the book – as a kind of portable and circulating curatorship – but also to develop a curatorship from the institution's "archive" and "collection" based on one of the most important of all Paço das Artes' projects: the *Temporada de Projetos* [Projects Season].

Livro/Acervo was composed of three main parts¹. In the first one, 30 artists who participated in the *Temporada de Projetos* were invited to develop a new piece of work on paper – such as the flip book *Naufrágio* [Shipwreck], developed by the artist Laura Belém. These works were printed as copies for distribution and bound together in sets with the other items that composed the project. The second part of the project, titled *Enciclopédia* [Encyclopedia], was included in the same booklet as the artists' workbooks, and contained information about each of the artists, curators and members of the jury that

¹ Based on the initial idea for the project, we invited artists Artur Lescher and Lenora de Barros to assist in the conception development of *Livro/Acervo*'s first curatorial proposal.

participated in the *Temporada de Projetos* since its first edition in 1997. The third part of the project was a sound work with a running time of up to one minute, developed by the artists and curators who participated in the *Temporada de Projetos* and incorporated to the volume in the form of CD-ROM. It should be noted that the project (consisting of these three parts) took the form of a box/file, alluding precisely to the idea that this *dispositif* contains an important part of the history of the Paço das Artes and of a portion of Brazilian art produced by newer, often younger names, frequently absent from the official and hegemonic narratives of Brazilian art history.

MaPA

Giving continuity to the *Livro/Acervo* project, in November 2014 we launched an online platform for contemporary art called *MaPA: Memória Paço das Artes* [MaPA: Paço das Artes Memory], which brings together all artists, art critics, curators and jury members that participated in or collaborated with the *Temporada de Projetos* since its inception in 1996.

The platform comprises a database containing over 870 images of works that have been exhibited at the *Temporada de Projetos*, as well as roughly 270 critical texts and video-interviews, all of which were especially created for this project since 2014. Encompassing more than 240 artists, 14 curatorial projects, 70 art critics and 43 jury members, the platform was built as a relational apparatus and as a work-in-progress, providing researchers with the opportunity of accessing information developed from or pertaining to the existing relations arising from the *Temporada de Projetos*.

Once on MaPA's homepage, the user is presented to a series of names of all those involved in the *Temporada*. When clicking any one of the hyperlinked names, MaPA highlights in bold font the other names involved in that particular edition of the *Temporada*. This way, a research path opens up, acting as a relational *dispositif* that enables the user to get to know each artist's trajectory, along with information on and comments made by the critic or jury member who evaluated and/or selected him or her. The emphasis ascribed to these 'relational' histories conveys the idea of dialogue implicit in the *Temporada de Projetos* itself, once it acts as a 'revealer' of talent within the artistic scene. For this reason, the organization of the information and the creation of a reference system embedded in the platform are linked directly to the names of the artists, curators and critics, prominently featuring the individual trajectories and creative development of all those involved in contemporary art production and its system.

MaPA can be regarded not only as an apparatus that rekindles part of Paço das Artes' trajectory and of its

'collection', but also functions a research *dispositif* for all those interested in the paths being pursued and explored by young Brazilian contemporary artists.

Finally, but no less importantly, MaPA is a triggering vehicle for the construction of other narratives of Brazilian art history, and particularly of narratives related to a younger generation of Brazilian artists, which often find no space within or are simply neglected by the 'official' discourses of the history of art.

Ex-PAÇO

As a final project in this trilogy, I would like to call attention to the work-in-process Ex-PAÇO conceived and idealized by Sérgio Nesteriuk and myself as a result of the loss of Paço das Artes' main building, previously located in the University of São Paulo campus.

Ex-PAÇO is a three-dimensional virtual replica of the Paço das Artes², with inlets and outlets (local and online) for computers, mobile phones, cardboards and virtual reality goggles. Three-dimensionally modelled based on the last building to house the Paço das Artes, Ex-PAÇO is not only a 'memorial' space, and therefore an endeavour to recapture the institution's old space/building through virtual reality, thus a political space, a space of resistance, so to speak, but an online museum conceived to 'house' different curatorial proposals and contemporary art manifestations.

This new navigable space, suggestively allocated in 'outer space', is the starting point for formulating new curatorial and exhibition-oriented dynamics, potentialized by the latest technologies. However, this does not imply simply exhibiting digital art in a museum or on a website; rather, it refers to the actual exhibition space that becomes digital space, therefore virtual. And this, in turn, opens up myriad new creative possibilities within the exhibition field.

If in *Livro/Acervo* and on the online platform *MaPA* the focus of attention lay in the strategies for access to the 'collection' of the Paço das Artes and all related information, with the ultimate aim of contributing to the construction of a narrative of a younger generation making Brazilian contemporary art, in the Ex-PAÇO project currently being developed the objective is not only to create an online museum, that is, a museum without walls for the development of online curatorial projects, but above

² At the end of 2015, Paço das Artes had to vacate the building it had occupied since the 1990s, located in the University of São Paulo campus. Created in the 1970s, Paço das Artes was never housed in a permanent location. At present, the institution functions and operates in a temporary location, where the Museum of Image and Sound (MIS) is situated.

all to shed led on the importance of the Paço das Artes as a space for artistic creation and experimentation.

In this sense it can be seen not only as a mobile space, but also as a virtual space that is both political and critical towards the factors implicated in the loss of the building that housed the Paço das Artes, all of which are reverberations of deeper, underlying present-day issues.

Conclusion

It is in this sense that we understand this museum, which I refer to here as museum-interface, a museum that implodes the concept of white cube” and presents museum/museological and curatorial strategies which somehow project other voices that are not present in traditional spaces – or in those hinged upon a spectacle-oriented culture.

The concept of interface arises from the need to reconceive the museum neither as a temple, nor as a place for entertainment or for the workings of the cultural industry, but as a space that becomes a social interface, fostering a dialogue with its public that is more experimental and closer to everyday social existence.

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