

The Informal Museology*

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No matter how elementary the level of attention that is paid to contemporary Museology in Portugal, its multifaceted character should nevertheless be acknowledged. It is a site where concepts, attitudes and aims cross, translating not only museology's general guidelines, but the role and the place that the different actors in the most diverse processes seek to occupy in society, in the affirmation of the shared right to a full citizenship.

The different forms of museology that has developed throughout the country, in particular post April 25, vouchsafes the statement that, in parallel with State museums, there came to light hundreds of museological processes by initiative of the cultural and ecological associative movements, in addition to those of the reinvigorated autonomous power.

There are tens of thousands of people who, in various ways - more or less elaborated or theorised - find in museology the privileged expression means on issues concerning so many heritages – historical, architectural, linguistic, archaeological or anthropological - within the context of the valorisation and identification of local specificities and competences.

These are no doubt museological processes, permanent or intermittent, creative or model reproducing, conservative or

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participative in the development of the communities that have given them life.

Meager in its essential, it is a museology devoid of financial resources or sophisticated knowledge, often also featuring out-of-date ideologies and paradigms.

But it is also a museology that expresses the cultures of our time, the culture of the mix, the expression of a society in transformation.

Such museums and museological processes are, in our understanding, the deep expression of Portugal's contemporary museology.

And, in this sense, this museology of daily life turns out to be an essential component of change itself.

It is, thus, neither rupture nor a marginal phenomenon, but instead it is the fruit and seed of a more democratic society, of a more free associativism, of a municipalism that are more aware of a new development model that favours decentralisation and the consequent valorisation of local resources – both human and natural.

Not being a marginal or a rupture museology does not mean it is structured around and founded on the image of a traditional and urban museology. Instead, this NEW MUSEOLOGY that results from the new conditions of the museological discourse - and therefore is part of the museological knowledge accumulated for generations – has demonstrated in its diverse forms a more clear conscience of the idea of participation and sparks a more evident social implication.

We speak then of an informal museology that fits into the wider concept of SOCIAL MUSEOLOGY, which translates a considerable part of the museological structures' effort to adequate itself to the conditionalisms of contemporary society.

This adaptation effort, which by the way extends over many other countries, was synthesised by UNESCO's General Director, Frederic Mayor, at the opening of ICOM's 15th General Conference in the following way: *the more general phenomenon of the cultural conscience development – be it the emancipation of the interest of the public at large for culture as the result of the widening of leisure time, be it the growing cultural awareness as a reaction to the inherent threats of the acceleration of social transformations – finds, on the level of the institution, a welcoming largely favoured by museums.*

This evolution is evidently both qualitative and quantitative. The distant institution, aristocratic, Olympian, obsessed with object appropriation for taxonomical purposes has increasingly given way – and some are distressed by this – to an organisation open to the environment, conscious of its organic relationship with its own social context. The museological revolution of our times – manifested in the emergence of community museums, 'sans murs' museums, ecomuseums, itinerant museums or museums exploring the apparently infinite possibilities of modern communication – finds its roots in this new organic and philosophical awareness.

This process was already heralded in the Santiago Declaration (1972 UNESCO/ICOM), where it was also considered: *that the museum is an institution at the service of the society of which it is an integral part and an institution that features within itself the elements that enable participation in the conscience building of the communities it serves; that the museum can contribute in leading those communities to act, situating its activity within the historical framework that helps to clarify present day problems...*

That this new conception does not imply in the extinction of present day museums nor that we renounce to specialised museums, but, instead, this new conception will allow museums to develop and

evolve in a more rational and logical manner, in order to better serve society.

Such concerns, which were renewed in the certainly most important document on contemporary museology, which is the *1992 Caracas Declaration*, makes us sure that we should consider informal museology or social museology as a fundamental element to think museology and the new paths taken by museology in Portugal.

We cannot any longer be satisfied with the eventual modernisation of traditional museums, intended mostly through the creation of a pathetic shop featuring nearly nothing to sell, or a mega exhibition of rare objects with budgets that insult the most elementary good sense and seriousness.

We think that the urge is, before anything else, in the opening of the museum to the environment in the study of its organic relationship with the social context that gives it life, facts that have sparked the need to elaborate and clarify new relationships, notions and concept that can handle this process.

A few examples of the issues derived from contemporary museological practices and that are part of a growing specialised bibliography: the widening of the notion of heritage and the consequent redefinition of the “museological object”, the idea of community participation in the definition and management of museological practise, museology as a factor of development, the issues of interdisciplinarity, the use of “new technologies” of information and museography as an autonomous communication means.

Recalling once again the *Santiago Declaration*, where it reads *That the transformation of the museum's activities demands a progressive change on the mentality of the conservative curators and those responsible for the museums, as well as the structures on which*

they depend” we should admit the need to train new museum professionals for the new museological discourse production conditions.

It is within the field of informal museology, that we certainly find innovation, change and new paths.

The biggest challenge in museology teaching in Portugal is not that of teaching what is featured in the museology manuals, but instead that of providing the future museologists with the means that will allow them to place themselves and act within a context of social change that cuts through all aspects of contemporary society.

The exhibition that simply displays without questioning, is increasingly inscribed in a kind of archaeology of an archaic museological thinking.

In museums one does not simply handle objects, but instead and chiefly with ideas. We now place the question of whether we know where the role of the curator begins and ends, and equally, where does the role of the museologist begins and ends.

This change in attitude was, by the way, referred to by Hugues de Varine in the synthesis report of the 16th ICOM General Conference: *“It became clear, in the international committee meetings, that there is a strong current geared towards opening and innovation... leading museum professionals to act in a non-traditional way and accept being influenced by multicultural concepts. The interdisciplinary cooperation that is emerging in the bosom of ICOM, the bridges built between the various disciplines and projects, and groups such as the MINOM are indications of this opening spirit.”*

To recognise this is, deep down, to accept that in the contemporary world there is a new intervention space conditioned above all by the attitude and social implication of each one of us.

A kind of interdisciplinarity of attitude, a lot more complex than the sought for and ill-loved interdisciplinarity of knowledge.

If there is a new challenge in museology, in our understanding, it does not regard in its essential to the features of its shape, but the place within it that we wish to occupy and above all the possibility of deepening and finally recognising that it is the attitude of the actors that determines the meaning of the work we do.

So much so that we cannot control nor even condition the final effect of our intervention, which in truth ends up far removed, so often perverse and alienated from our first intentions.

In the culture of the now that determines our submissions, which we rarely acknowledge and reject, we forget that time introduces, in a certain way, new conditions which escape us, transforming the pursued path, irrevocably. What is actually within reach is no more than the possibility of choosing the beginning of the direction we wish to imprint our action.

If it is so, we can more easily relativise the successes and failures, to doubt our short term evaluations and start afresh each day conscious of a new history, a new museum.

We shall continue and, increasingly, speak of an informal museology. We shall continue to speak, and increasingly, to speak of social museology.