Challenges and utopias of contemporary (social) museology

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Desafíos, retos y utopías de la museología (social) contemporánea

1. PRELUDE. CHALLENGES OF MUSEOLOGY

Museums in our contemporary societies are undergoing a constant process of transformation. Far from being a negative thing, this is actually inherent to the historical evolution of these institutions. Museums have become social and cultural spaces and, as such, must reflect both what we were and the processes that are constantly taking place in communities. However, the way in which they reflect social changes, and the way in which they face them, means that these institutions have several faces. The most common is that which is capable of showing the richness of the cultural manifestations[2] that human beings have created throughout history. This facet is the most normative and is what has transformed museums into uchronian spaces for a ritual of contemplation (Deloche, 2010). In some cases, this fetishistic side hierarchises the assets they treasure and turns their containers into authentic places of (tourist) pilgrimage. Thus, visitors—whether members of the public or tourists—associate these entities with cultural industries and leisure, i.e., with some of the positive aspects of life.

However, the history of museums has also been shaped by their containment of all the imperfections of human nature (Díaz Balerdi, 1994; Šola, 2012). As Šola pointed out, "museums say little about despair, pain, fear, anger, guilt, loneliness, grief, anguish, difficulties, dangers (...)" (2012: 137). This is where the other side is revealed; most often hidden, but nevertheless necessary. To return to Šola: "museums tell us great stories about great events, while our lives are all small stories about small events" (2012: 50). Our societies continue to manifest social inequalities (gender, migration, human rights, (post)colonialism, etc.) and economic inequalities (unequal distribution of resources), in a system that hierarchises social rights according to economic and symbolic parameters, highlighting the imbalances of a neoliberal system that is increasingly distant from the idea of 'social justice'. This is a negative side that museums, as social and cultural agents, cannot and should not ignore.

Although it may seem utopian, museology has been working to make this other side visible for more than half a century. Theoretical and practical actions have been developed to generate dialogue and critical perspectives that enable museums to face these and other challenges of the 21st century, such as the defence of human rights, sustainability, social justice, and decolonisation, and the denunciation of gender violence, depopulation, etc. This is the side of museology that leads us to understand that "museology [and museums] that does not serve life serves no purpose"[3] . The ultimate goal, therefore, was not – and is not – other than to ensure that these entities contribute to making a better world.

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[2] The term 'cultural' is used in its broadest and most anthropological sense.
[3] This statement was the leitmotif of the Córdoba Declaration, issued by the 18th International Conference of MINOM in Córdoba (Argentina) in 2017.

The path to turning museums into mouthpieces for the needs of citizens has been a continuous challenge, a critical view that generated a counter-power within the discipline itself. Since the 1970s and 1980s, this counter-power has managed to ensure that museums cease to be exclusive spaces for discourse and judgement by experts and the establishment. Other voices were incorporated into the dialectics and practices of action, management and participation of these social and cultural entities. This article aims to highlight the challenges that marked the New Museology and those that social museology must now face. Hence, our purpose is to show how the current state of (social) museology lies in constructing a permeable epistemology between disciplinary boundaries and in concepts such as mestizaje (Andrade, Mellado, Rueda, and Villar, 2018; Turgeon, 2003), the commons (Lafuente, 2007; Rowan, 2016), decolonisation (Brulon, 2020) and coloniality (Mignolo, 2003), and that its mission is to build societies capable of facing the challenges outlined above through new mechanisms of governance of and from the commons.

2. QUESTIONING THE NORMATIVE

Despite the progress made by museums in becoming more social and inclusive, it is perhaps now more than ever that they find themselves in processes of questioning, challenging and transforming themselves. Surely, in the short life of the field of museology, this statement has been repeated in every decade, in each of its periods and in each of the vicissitudes that the history of the museum institution has undergone. However, the global landscape in which we live shows a world of regression and dehumanisation that requires us to think critically, and museums must face this challenge by encouraging critical thinking, asking questions and questioning the norm.

Both museums and museology have undergone several "revolutions" throughout their history (Mensch, 1996), which, if they have served any purpose, it has been to reveal, question, break down – or maintain – the stereotypes and taboos that were becoming entrenched around everything that the concept of "museum" could encompass. Hence, one of the first challenges that museology has had to deconstruct with regard to its object of study, the museum, has been what Díaz Balerdi (1994, 53-56) considered to be the alterations of the psyche that human beings have transferred to the institution, such as: amnesia, in that it collects some things but not others; manipulation, since the museum presents its collections with a specific script, telling part of the story; psychopathies, such as delinquency, since part of the history of the museum is that its 'possessions' are the spoils of war; or ritual neurosis, the rules of behaviour from the moment one enters the museum until one leaves, the silence, the almost maniacal neatness of the established order; prohibitions; psychosomatic illnesses such as obesity, whereby the museum must compulsively expand its collections to fill the gaps in its meta-narrative or to remain relevant in its historical moment; or fetishism, i.e. the museum professional's suspicious and obsessive custody of the object as a personal entity.

The challenge of confronting these alterations in the museum psyche was met in the second museum revolution (Mensch, 1996), when professionals from the discipline itself and from other fields of social science knowledge around the world were certain that the museum as it was known had to change. Critical thinking questioned the institution as useless (Varine, 1994 [1979]), unnecessary (Hudson, 1989), dangerous (Lindqvist, 1994 [1987]), a tool for acculturation (Cameron, 1992 [1968]), a cemetery (Adotévi, 1971), or a space for the transmission of cultural imperialism (Nicolas, 1985). Essentially, the criticism focused on questioning its very raison d'être (Díaz Balerdi, 2002), on the challenge of radically changing its parameters. To paraphrase Vergès[4] , the aim was to bring about a project of absolute disorder for museology.

The reality of the situation in which museums found themselves meant that a path of questioning had to be charted in the face of a 19th-century normative epistemology. This counter-power stance (Mayrand, 2009) aimed at making museums key players in the processes of social, cultural and economic evolution and transformation in any community. At the same time, it sought to establish themselves as a spaces for reflection and dialogue, responding to the needs and problems of their environment: protection of the natural environment and cultural heritage, social problems, problems arising from property speculation,

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[4] Vergès, Françoise (2024). Programa de desorden absoluto. Descolonizar el museo. Madrid: Akal.

economic or demographic decline, etc. (Hauenschild, 2022 [1988]). To this end, the museum had to be understood and structured as something organic and alive, as a utopia[5] that never ceases to mobilise.

The consequences of this different view of the institution and its epistemology translated into community museum experiences that began to emerge in various countries (Mexico, the United States, Niger, France, Canada, etc.); changes in pedagogical approaches, such as the influence of Paulo Freire's postulates; and different strategies for communicating heritage, such as those of Freeman Tilden. All this was done with the intention of establishing new ways of understanding and interacting with the natural, cultural and human environment, which were brought together in a common global thinking known as New Museology.

The emergence of museum experiences that differed from the normative museum, and of subaltern museum approaches that rose to prominence and gained visibility, were soon questioned for various reasons:

- A confrontation with traditional museum principles.
- Little attention to the functions considered basic by normative museology, fundamentally in the formation of collections.
- The scarcity of resources for these museum experiences, where moral commitment is paramount.
- A lack of technical training and professional qualifications, and of formal, institutionalised training.
- A conceptual miscellany whose approaches navigate between different disciplines and whose typologies transcend the term 'museum' and expand to other forms, such as cultural parks, interpretation centres, cultural landscapes, historical sites, etc.[6] .

These questions became the challenges that museology had to face at the time. The International Movement for a New Museology (MINOM), which brought together this plethora of experiences, activism and ideas for a different kind of museology, has strived since its inception in 1985 to challenge these challenges and iron out these issues, constructing a different epistemology under the suspicious gaze of normative museology.

From today's perspective, it may seem that its efforts have not had the desired results. Its visibility in established international contexts remains limited, and its presence continues to be that of "subaltern voices" at odds with the system. However, the birth of New Museology consisted precisely in being a movement of constant questioning, making its challenges an unfinished utopia. Although there is no apparent presence within museological circles, its proclamations, demands and neologisms have certainly had an impact. At the international level, a glance at the evolution of the definition of the concept of museum since the 1970s reveals the direct influence of decades of work from the subaltern side of museology, or the creation of the International Committee for a Social Museology (SOMUS) within ICOM, a recognition of the importance of the social function of museums, whether they belong to the 'new' or 'old' museology.

The first challenge of social museology therefore lies in breaking with tradition, shaking up minds, defamiliarising our conventions and, in doing so, 'hacking the museum' and museology. The aim is to construct a different kind of museology that is composed of pluralistic thoughts.

3. HERITAGE AS MORAL PROPERTY

In 1972, Hugues de Varine presented the preliminary draft of what would later become the first community ecomuseum, the *Ecomuseum of the Urban Community of Creusot-Montceau-les-Mines*, at a seminar organised by ICOM in Dijon. One of the pillars for the promoters of this initiative was not to create permanent collections, as it was understood that the territory, the cultural and heritage elements it contained, and the inhabitants of the communities that made up that space were what could be called the

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[5] One of the most important characteristics of this museum is its utopian nature. For New Museology, utopia is the essence of the project; it is the measure that ensures the continuous reinterpretation and evaluation of the project (Mayrand, 2004).

[6] Hugues de Varine: *Le musée communautaire est-il hérétique?* 16 February 2005. Unpublished document.

"collection". The then director of the museums of France and vice-president of ICOM, Jean Chatelain, responded to this idea by saying that "there can be no museum without a collection"[7] .

From that moment on, it was very unlikely to hear Hugues talk about collections in any of his speeches or read about them in any of his writings; he spoke instead of living heritage. The former, the collection, was associated with normative museums, selected for technical characteristics and by an elite group of curators and museologists, representing scientific, taste or aesthetic aspects. The latter, on the other hand, are elements recognised by the members of a community; they are the collective capital of the community and shape its social and territorial dimension.

This idea of Hugues and his team of promoters posed a challenge for museology, a disturbing dissonance in the minds of museologists: the ownership of heritage. Faced with the idea of legal ownership of the assets housed in museums, they sought moral ownership of these assets. An act of responsibility.

The dissonance – and boldness – of what was proposed in those ecomuseums and community museums became another achievement that is still alive today, and has even come to be considered "established"; but this does not mean that the challenge is over. New Museology presented the challenges as a utopia, and social museology takes them up with the same idea, like Sisyphus' rock that must be lifted again and again. Where does the challenge of responsibility and ownership of heritage lie today? On the one hand, in continuing to raise awareness of citizens' responsibility for heritage assets; on the other hand, in constructing narratives that emanate from the memory of these assets; and finally, in incorporating theories of the commons into their management.

Image 1. Palaeolithic shelter. La Ponte-Ecomuséu.
Source: Óscar Navajas Corral.

If we look at initiatives such as La Ponte-Ecomuséu[8] , we can see reflected the idea of responsibility for the heritage assets of a territory, as well as the questioning of its legal basis. One of its first actions upon becoming an association and an ecomuseum was to highlight a rock shelter with cave paintings declared a Site of Cultural Interest (BIC)[9] . The site was closed due to a lack of resources on the part of the public authorities to make it accessible. The Ponte-Ecomuséu submitted a project to the competent authority for its management. The request caused confusion and uncertainty within the administration itself, as there were no precedents for transferring the management of a BIC to a cultural association. We are used to "delegating" responsibility for heritage management, creating an idea of "public property" that is alien to citizens, when in reality it is part of a "whole", a form of commons that should be managed through dialogue and horizontality between communities, public authorities and the different agents in a territory. The Ponte-Ecomuséu was able to establish these spaces for dialogue and negotiation, creating a link between the

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[7] Original quote: "il ne peut y avoir de musée sans collection". Taken from: Hugues de Varine: *Le musée communautaire est-il hérétique ?* 16 February 2005. Unpublished document.

[8] La Ponte is a social initiative that arose from the concerns of a group of people from Los Valles del Oso (Asturias). It is a self-managed project conceived as a means of interpreting this territory and a driving force for promoting research, dissemination and conservation of cultural heritage. Its mission is to serve the community and contribute to endogenous and sustainable development. More information at: https://laponte.org/ [Accessed on 14 August 2025].

[9] The category of Assets of Cultural Interest (BIC) is the highest level of protection granted by the Spanish State and the different regions for their heritage assets.

administration and society and eliminating the idea that they are two separate worlds, but rather a shared responsibility.

A similar experience in this act of responsibility is the *Museu das Remoções*[10] , which emerged in the struggle for the community's permanence during the eviction process of Vila Autódromo during the land speculation that occurred with the construction works for the 2016 Olympic Games, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. As one of its main activists defines it:

The Museu das Remoçoes (...) is a museum experience that was born out of community action, out of the struggle of a social group called a minority (...). A social group that is denied the city. A population that for centuries has had to fight for freedom, equality or simply to exist. After all, what is the origin of the favelas? Who are these people we are talking about? The slums are the result of slavery, colonisation and the invasion of this land by Europeans. What we have, then, is a society built on inequality and exploitation. This has been maintained for centuries through the massive destruction of cultural elements and the imposition of external values" (Teixeira, 2020: 227).

Teixeira's words show the contemporary challenge we face in our view of what heritage is and the value we place on it. The initiative is based on a conception of museum assets not as a collection but as a living heritage (Varine, 2017), thus overcoming the idea of a normative collection. What it preserves in its museum-territory are the remains of the actions carried out by the established power against a minority and subaltern voices. The failure of the established system to take (heritage) memory into account gave rise to critical thinking among the population, with the result that those "remains" were in fact the memory of its inhabitants. This museum is an example that has effectively challenged the shift in the conception of collections towards a conceptualisation of heritage understood as remains that human beings discard and, at the same time, collect for what they represent (Debary, 2019: 136). This perspective eliminates the prevailing heritage hierarchy based on technical specifications and standards established in Western Europe, and instead offers a vision from the subject-memory as the producer of tangible and intangible heritage assets.

4. INTO THE LIGHT

The declaration issued in the context of the Round Table in Santiago, Chile, understood that the territory is where the heritage of the place finds its roots, as well as the basis of the socialisation of its inhabitants. It was from this conception that the idea of the Integral Museum was formed (and its links with the ecomuseums, community museums, etc.), which directly confronted the still reductionist approach that existed in museology and normative museums operating within the confines of the "four walls". The *upside down* for museology consisted of breaking down the spatial, social and political vision in which the museum should be involved. Going out to work in broad daylight.

If we look at museum practice, together with community participation, eliminating the concept of the "four walls" of the normative museum was one of the pillars on which New Museology was based and which remains key to Social Museology. The first ecomuseum experiences did this by creating a nerve centre and a series of "antennae", i.e. significant heritage elements scattered throughout the territory that were part of the cultural identity of the population and the historical evolution of the territory itself.

In Spain, the Ecomuseu de les Vals d'Àneu is an example of this structure. Located in the Pallars Sobirà region (Catalonia), it covers 407 square kilometres and is home to around 1,300 people spread across twenty-four towns. The project began to take shape in the late 1980s and in 1991 it held its inaugural exhibition, whose title was already significant: *L'Ecomuseu de les Valls 'Àneu: la Identitat d'un territorio (The Ecomuseum of the Àneu Valleys: The Identity of a Territory).* From the outset, the ecomuseum's headquarters were established in Casa Gassia, a restored building in the town of Esterri d'Àneu, and a series of branches were set up, such as the hydraulic sawmill in Alós, in Alt Àneu, and the heritage site of Son, linked by a series of natural and cultural itineraries that run through the territory. The idea was to create spaces that would serve as testimonies, structuring the territory and acting as axes of identity for a community scattered across various localities (Abella and Abella, 1993; Abella, 1995).

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[10] See: https://museudasremocoes.com/ [Accessed on 12 August 2025].

Image 2. Territory of the Ecomuseu de les Valls d'Àneu.
Source: Óscar Navajas Corral.

Today, the ecomuseum has maintained its initial structure, but has expanded its outreach and testimonial spaces in the territory, as well as forging alliances with other agents in the area. One of its objectives was (and still is) for the ecomuseum to become a space for dialogue and understanding in a region with diverse stakeholders who sometimes have conflicting views and interests, such as the tourism sector, the authorities responsible for managing natural spaces, and the population engaged in agricultural activities, etc. The ecomuseum has established itself as a hub for interaction with the territory, as a landscape for socialisation.

The initial model of ecomuseums that spread in the 1970s evolved into something more organic, as we have seen in the case of Catalonia. The challenge posed by New Museology was not only to move out of the normative museum building to expand its radius of action to a territory, but also to understand the museum (whether as an ecomuseum, community museum or normative museum) as something organic. Kazuoki Ohara theorised this idea by comparing the ecomuseum to the human body (1998 and 2006). For this author, the ecomuseum was the sum of the parts of the human body: organs, mind, network of nerve connections and heart. Each of the agents are the organs that make the human body, i.e. the ecomuseum, function. The close relationship between the different organs, their systems of dialogue and socialisation, and the establishment of central spaces, such as the heart and mind, where they converge, is what makes a museum function organically. The challenge we face is to keep the humanisation of the museum alive.

5. CREATING COMMUNITIES

"And finally, we come to what is most reprehensible about the community museum, in the eyes of the professional museum world: it openly and decisively expresses its political vocation" (Pierre Mayrand, 2008).

It was Odalice Priosti who introduced the term "liberation museology". She did so at the Third Meeting of Ecomuseums and Community Museums in Rio de Janeiro in September 2004[11] . She took Paulo Freire's pedagogical precepts and applied them to a sense of self-knowledge and self-management on the part of

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[11] The theory on liberation museology can be consulted in her doctoral thesis, published subsequently: Priosti, Odalice Miranda. 2010. *Memória, comunidade e hibridaçao: museologia da libertaçao e estratégias de resisténcia.* Doctoral thesis presented at the Federal University of the State of Rio de Janeiro. http://www.repositorio-bc.unirio.br:8080/xmlui/handle/unirio/12005 [Accessed 13 August 2025].

communities with a view to social museum practice. Her approach was clearly political and activist, with the aim of creating responsible and committed communities.

The challenge of New Museology was to include the community in the museological equation: building, collection and audience (visitors). I do not believe that it ever intended to supplant the audience, but it was aware that not talking about community (or communities) was having important consequences for museums and museological epistemology. On the one hand, the concept of the public established a passive idea of the users of museum institutions, relegating them to the consumption of the actions emanating from the institution itself. On the other hand, different narratives within museums were excluded, and the inclusion of social memories and subaltern voices was diminished, meaning that the "public" could not be the representation of a society of societies or a community of communities. Finally, and linked to the two previous ideas, it did not allow for direct participation in the museum, eliminating the essence of the museum institution from the Museum of the Revolution: a political entity.

Understanding the museum as a political device for Social Museology means that the museum is a performative mechanism (Preciado, 2019) in which narratives, stories, lives, dialogues and negotiations converge in a heterotopic and uchronian space. A reality that implies a political dialogue. And it is with this dialogue that communities are created.

Last June 2025 marked the 30th anniversary of the start of the Caicena River Ecomuseum[12] , located in Almedinilla, in the heart of the Sierra Subbética (Córdoba), in a rural area of 2,600 inhabitants that brings together fourteen municipalities. The project to create an ecomuseum began to take shape in 1993, driven by the Amigos de Waska association, whose initial objective was to create a museum to house objects excavated from the Iberian settlement of Cerro de la Cruz. The catalyst for citizen mobilisation was the construction of a road that would have affected the archaeological heritage as it passed through the municipality. After an awareness campaign and a series of complaints, the association managed to have the road diverted, safeguarding the site and committing the local council to creating the Historical Museum.

This action sparked the idea of creating a global project for the region under the name of an ecomuseum. The proposal was intended to be a way of sounding the alarm about the differences between the urban and rural worlds and a global economic system that was alien to the local area (Muñiz, 2009). Its promoter, Ignacio Muñiz, was clear that New Museology had emerged to "generate complicity and commitment" (Muñiz, 1992: 72) at a time when the normative museum did not do so, nor was it concerned about doing so. The ecomuseum should therefore be a mechanism for participation between different agents and between members of the community.

In 1999, a municipal board was created to manage the initiative. Since its inception, the ecomuseum has sought to bring together all the administrations and institutions to carry out each of the activities. This experience has been one of the few that has succeeded in making the local associative movement part of the comprehensive management of the municipality and the territory. The local population has become increasingly involved in the project, making the community feel connected to its heritage and territory. The municipality is currently one of the local councils that allocates the most budget to culture and heritage in Spain. The political and community vocation of the ecomuseum has succeeded in creating a community that understands that heritage and culture are not an expense or an investment, but a way of understanding their own future.

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[12] See: http://www.ecomuseoriocaicena.es/ [Accessed on 12 August 2025]. A chronicle of the 30 years of the ecomuseum can be read at the following link: https://www.ecomuseoriocaicena.es/2025/06/la-paja-y-el-grano-valoracion-de-las-jornadas-por-el-30-aniversario-del-ecomuseo-del-rio-caicena-almedinilla-cordoba/ [Accessed on 12 August 2025].

Image 3. FESTUM. Caicena River Ecomuseum.
Source: Óscar Navajas Corral.

This ecomuseum is also an example of the challenge of including diverse narratives. The common thread of the project was the Caicena River, which runs through the municipality and the territory and, as such, is an active part of the memory of its inhabitants. The river flows through the memory of the different towns and their inhabitants. Its course has shaped the historical evolution of the landscape in which the ecomuseum is located. The irrigation channels that water the orchards, the old washing places, the different water mines, the Iberian settlement of El Cerro de la Cruz, the Roman villa of El Ruedo, the sites where episodes of the Spanish Civil War took place, and the actions for contemporary creations.

These two challenges lead us to reflect that social museology is a basis for the production of experiences and initiatives that establish areas of contact between people, communities and agents. This means that museums are places where tensions, contradictions, disagreements, debates, dialogues, achievements and failures occur.

6. EPILOGUE. THE NEXT CHALLENGE: MUSEUM ACTIVISM.

Balanced, intuitive, impulsive, combative, revolutionary, reflective, critical, ideological, inclusive and utopian. The above adjectives may be more characteristic of a passionate spirit than a scientific and disciplined one. What do they have to do with museology? The link on this occasion is Pierre Mayrand, the impetuous spirit of contemporary museology:

I hope I have not offended my friends too much with my impulsive interventions, which gradually led me to define myself as an ideologically entrenched polemicist [...]; they lead us to the following questions: Born out of solidarity and friendship in a context of protest against the museum institution and the liberation of society, what kind of successors will its ageing members be, twenty-five years later? Do we see new leaders emerging on the horizon? What vision? What actions (...)? Can we still call ourselves "revolutionaries" or have we become mere collectors of shipwrecks?[13]

Mayrand became synonymous over the years with the most combative and irreverent expression of New Museology. The constant instigator. The one who kept the potential passivity of social museology on its toes. He himself defined this field of knowledge as a spirit: rebellious, anti-institutional, free and combative; a method: accessible, informal and inclusive; and a vision: focused on people, denouncing inequalities, injustice and violence in democratic values[14] .

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[13] Pierre Mayrand's personal email address: *Minuit Express d'un altermuséologue.* Published in late August 2008. Unpublished document.
[14] Personal email from Pierre Mayrand: *Minuit Express,* 10 June 2009, Moulin Bernier, Beauce. Unpublished document.

With the foundations of the enlightened project dismantled and reduced to ashes, museums now face challenges related to their social functions, in order to confront a hyper-mediatised society in a voracious market system. To put it bluntly: "I don't want a museum with a small shopping centre next to it; I want a large shopping centre with a small museum." These words—unconfirmed—by Margaret Thatcher have marked the latest stage in the museum landscape and the one facing the social museology of the future. This progressive inoculation of mercantilist policies has undermined the social and public service of museums, their interpretative vision in favour of spectacle, and their sense of identity in favour of leisure consumption.

The challenge is to dismantle the current interpretation of the museum and understand it as an act of collective healing. We must consider and debate whether we want museum institutions that promote education for income or for democracy (Nussbaum, 2010), or whether both have a place within institutions that are "at the service of society and its development", as stated in the 2007 definition, and "democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the past and the future", as stated in the 2019 proposal.

We must keep alive the challenges faced by New Museology fifty years ago and expand them to address the violations of democratic values that are taking place today. We must continue to promote (heritage) memories and plural narratives, bring them to light, and encourage critical individuals and communities.

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