

Lost in the supermarket –The Traditional Museums Challenges

Mariana Lamas

INTRODUCTION

“I’m all lost in the supermarket. I can no longer shop happily. I came in here for the special offer. A guaranteed personality”. The song by The Clash, released in 1979, “Lost in the Supermarket” describes the protagonist struggle to deal with an increasingly commercialized society and the depersonalization of the world around him. The song speaks about alienation and the feelings of disillusionment and lack of identity that come through modern society.

There are different ways which one can decrease those feelings and promote knowledge, self-awareness and understanding. The museum, when used with all its potential, is one of the ways. But how to do that? That is the question museum professionals ask themselves.

This paper analyses how the traditional museum can use the new museology concepts, and the challenges of this approach, to become a vehicle for community development and empowerment, diminishing the feelings sang by The Clash.

1- SOCIAL, CULTURAL AND POLITICAL CONTEXT OF THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD

We live in cloudy times where ideological groupings and blocks of the past are not

easily noticed. The bipolarization between liberal capitalism and soviet communism does not exist anymore. Terms like "liberalism" or "democracy", "capitalism" or "socialism" no longer stand for coherent systems of ideas. Globalization is the strong signature of the new world order. The promise of technical-scientific progress impels new daily possibilities, but are not able yet to solve the structural difficulties of man's life, such as hunger, housing, health and education. The environment degradation becomes an increasing problem, but there are still few or insufficient possibilities to retrocede it. If in one hand, the post-war economic acceleration drove to a superior life standard of the middle urban classes, in the other hand, a mass of miserables tries to survive the huge social inequalities of the world (Hobsbawn, 2000).

A brief look on Africa, most of Asia and Latin America reflects a setting in which massive social contradictions reign. Even in the European continent, considered more culturally advanced than the emerging countries, intolerance and social segregation gain more power each day. It is not only the immigrant that concerns the European setting, every time more workers suffer from unemployment and lack of opportunities due to the automation of life and work.

In the USA evident development and production through exacerbate pragmatism mask the unemployment, poverty and inequality of marginalized social groups such as the African-Americans or the Hispanic immigrants that are called "Chicanos".

We live in cloudy times in which developed countries only intervene (i.e. stop a war, take down dictatorships, etc.) when there is a great possibility of profit and governments do not value human life, quoting Stalin "one death is a tragedy: one million is a statistic". Times in which the Western societies became more individualistic due to the process of modernization.

Dominique Walton (n.d.) uses the term "mass individualist society" to reflect on the unique characteristics of our contemporary society where two structural realities coexist: it values the individual and at the same time it values

the masses. “The **CRISIS OF SOCIAL BONDS** results from the difficulties involved in finding a new balance within this social model” (Walton). Primary bonds, those we associate with families, villages and trades, have disappeared, and social bonds, associated with class solidarity and membership of social or religious groups, have also weakened. The result is that there is little to distinguish between masses and individuals. Today everything is subordinated to the conflicting duality that weakens social bonds. The price of freedom has been high, and so has the establishment of mass society in the name of equality. “We are all **FREE**, even though the result is a discreet but haunting solitude that also explains the renewed focus on the issue of social bonds” (Walton, n.d.).

In one of the chapters of “The Fall of Public Man”, Richard Sennett (1993) discourses about failure. In his opinion, failure is the greatest modern tabu, it is a current social phenomenon that affects everybody. It is most of the time a confusing experience, and therefore, the solution to deal with such problem needs to be collective. It is through the shared experiences, that one may find the way out. On that account, it is necessary to have a broader sense of community and character to fight the new capitalism, in a society that people are doomed to fail.

Besides that, the great dilemma of the new capitalism: who needs me in a regime where the relations between people are superficial and disposable and the bonds of loyalty, trust and mutual commitment get weaker due to short term experiences? The problem here is that there is history, but there we do not share our narratives with each other.

No shared narrative leads to no built social identity, no sense of belonging to anything. We live in an information society in which everything is connected, but we keep getting disconnected from one another.

The term “community” is losing the meaning it once had, as Zygmunt Bauman (2001) defines it, a safe, comfortable and warm place where we are never strangers to each other and we are guided by the same wish to improve our life

together. Instead, today, in many places, it is used to define a poor or unprivileged neighborhood, implying a certain inferiority to its meaning and to the group it is being referred to.

Following Sennett's question, how to reestablish the sense of community? How to build our narratives together in a capitalism system that values the disposable, the unsteady, the short-term, and above all, the individualism? The answer to this question is tricky, there is no easy and instant (that we are so used to and like so much) solution. The more radicals ones would say that we need a revolution. The pessimists would say that there is no solution. The politicians would say "let's change it" when they really mean "no way." The common sense would say stop complaining, that is the way things are, just get used to it. The museums professionals would say I might have a solution. ¹

2- CAN MUSEUMS SAVE THE WORLD?

Before going on, it is important to address this question. Museums cannot save the world, although some museum professionals really wish it could and some do not actually say it, but act like it is possible. Museums are not disguised knights in shining armors waiting around the bush for the maiden in a scrape to cry for help. The museum professionals should be aware of what the museum can and should do and what is its limitations. For instance, the museum should be an extension of the school and not substitute it; you cannot have everything in whole wide world museum as Grover from Sesame Street visits and one single museum cannot not reach out to all types of people.

From knowing its limitations, emerges the question: what museums can and should do? The museum definition proposed by ICOM(International Council for Museums) is:

¹Disclaimer: I'm not saying by any means that the museum professionals are the only one with an answer. I'm just trying to make a point.

“A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment”. (ICOM Statutes, adopted by the 22nd General Assembly in Vienna, Austria, 24 August 2007)

Analyzing this definition in detail, museums are indeed open to all sorts of public, the actions of acquiring, conserving and researching are well put into practice. There are plenty of theoretical frameworks and step-by-step guidelines concerning conservation and acquirement of objects. Of course, each of these subjects is not problem free, they have different challenges to overcome. Research has always been a function of the museum, in fact, some museums are known for their researches and researchers. About communication and exhibitions, there were improvements with the usage of new technologies and concepts, but museums still need, though, to figure out how to present different opinions and interpretations. Education has improved since the 1960's and the second museum revolution, new theories were put into practice and educational programmes were developed.

The balance between these functions results from the policy adopted by the institution, some have a better use of their collection, while others have stronger education programs and others have a role model storage room.

What is trying to be said is that all these functions in a way or another have been carefully thought of, each function has its own professionals, these are put into practice by most of the museums and in a lot of cases have been successfully. But when we talk about “in the service of society and its development”, it's quite different. It is like the drunk uncle at the Christmas party that the family pretends is not there, because if they pretend long enough, he might pass out on the couch. Fortunately, the societies that the museums serve are

not disappearing anytime soon, so traditional museums eventually will have to get down from their ivory towers and deal with the people. Since some museums professionals and museums are already doing it, the other museums might learn from their experiences.

3. IT ALL COMES DOWN TO THE SAME OLD THING – NEW MUSEOLOGY

For thirty years museums professionals have discussed about the social function of the museum. Many meetings and round tables were made to debate about it and endless letters and declarations which define what must be done in order for museums to be socially active and describe the process in step by step were published. During those discussions a new paradigm for museums emerged, new museology². The focus of the museum shifted from the objects/collections to the people/community. It is based on a reversed hierarchy, in other words, any museological methodology should start from the needs of society.

Community development and the principle of community participation in decision making process lie in the center of the concerns of the new museology. The objective is to contribute to the development of a community by reinforcing a sense of cultural identity (Van Mensch, 1992). In these context, presentation and preservation of the heritage is seem as a social action and change. It should be considered and developed within the context of community improvements.

² According to Peter van Mensch (1992) the term “new museology” was introduced in the museological literature at least three different times. The term was first used by Benoist to discourse about the developments of art museums in the beginning of the 20th century. In 1980 the term “muséologie nouvelle” was introduced by André Desvallés in an article about museology for the *Encyclopedia Universalis*. The term was introduced in the UK by Peter Vergo in 1989 when he published his book *The New Museology*. “The use of the term was always connected with the changing role of museums in education and in the society at large”.

According to Judite Primo (2008), the new museology conceives a broader field of action for museology in which, besides the problematic of the collections, there is a concern with society's issues and the role of the museum professional in this process. The individual becomes the active subject and society transformer. New museology is in one hand the attempt to adjust to the contemporary society and in the other hand an answer to communities' needs.

In Cesár Lopes's (2003) opinion, founder of MINON (International Movement for a New Museology), new museology is a concept that started in Latin America connected to the experience of museums in service of development. It's a program for development that tries to involve people. The "new" professionals than realized that in order to promote development, it was necessary to recovery heritage and that this recovery had to do with the recovery of people's identity and community involvement. It was understood that the museum had a new function to perform.

As time went by "an increasing dichotomy between the new and the traditional museology took shape as new museologist firmer their politic position against what they accused of being an impermeable and monolithic museological environment" (Dos Santos, p. 53, 2008). Of course this was the point of view of the new museology, but the traditional museums showed to be rather impermeable to the speed and dimension of the changes proposed by those related to the new museology.

Until the 1990's the proposals of the new museology were restricted to the new concepts of museums that emerged with the movement from the late 1960's: neighborhood museums, the most well-known and also the first museum of this type is the Anacostia Neighborhood Museum in Washington DC; ecomuseums which came to life with the experiment of the Ecomuseum of Le Creusot; and the integral museum which intends to provide the community a integral view of its material environment and culture, it's a dynamic instrument of social change and community development. It is

committed to the present and directly connected to the future. This concept of museum was introduced in 1972 in the Declaration of Santiago, one of the precursors of the new museology.

In the 1990's what we see is a boom of projects relating to communities in the traditional museums. Suddenly the word "community" became the biggest hype in the traditional museums world. In some countries, specially in the UK, for museums to obtain better funds it had to mention in their mission statements anything related to community and grass root participation. Despite some traditional museums efforts, from the 1990's until today, when looking at the big picture, it is still a small number of museums that are trying to involve the community into their projects. The education and leisure roles of the museum are more recognized than its social potential. Until today museums usually are considered as institutions whose aim is cultural rather than social. Besides that, most of the museums seem not to recognize or ignore their social function.

There are many reasons why the traditional museums have adopted this posture. One of them is museums, apart some exceptions, have always come across as elitist. Therefore, a place for the elite where the elite's perspectives of things are portrayed and the official history is represented, so it has no interest to show anything that is not consistent with that. The political setting in which the museum is inserted, may limit the professionals actions, i.e. they have the desire to work with the community, but cannot due to political interests. Another reason is the lack of interest of the museums professionals in promoting a more democratic and diverse museum have also a great impact in the fulfillment of museums' social function.

4. I AM HE AS YOU ARE HE AS YOU ARE ME AND WE ARE ALL TOGETHER

Before doing anything, the traditional museum should get rid of the "traditional". Traditional means something old-

fashioned, stuck in time, static, prisoner of the past, out of touch with the present, not at all adjectives used to describe the traditional museum. Traditional museums are usually described as refreshing, exciting, in sync with the present, towards the future. In Cazuza words “um museu de grandes novidades”³. Right?

Independent of which side of the fence one might place himself or herself, it could also be on the top of the fence, one thing is for sure traditional museums have a long way to go towards community participation and development.

In the past years, with the boom of “community”, one could notice several initiatives from traditional museums to involve more actively the community in their projects. There was an increase in the use of advisory boards, focus groups (with members of the particular community) and display of personal stories in exhibitions. Actually, it seems like that is the way the traditional museums found to work with the community.

Despite some successful cases, it is certainly a challenge for the traditional museum. The first question that arises when trying to work with a community is: which community? Which community should the museum work for and with? A national historical museum, for example? When we talk about ecomuseums and community museums the community is already pre-determined and since it is a bottom-up initiative one presupposes that the community is interested in being part of the project. Should then the traditional museum choose a particular community? If so, what is your criteria to choose? Once you choose a certain community to develop a project with, you are excluding all the rest. Returning the ICOM definition of museum “institution in the service of **society**”. One community does not represent the society, it represents a part of society. But as said in the

³ Cazuza was a Brazilian singer and song writer, whose words translate as “a museum of great novelties”.

beginning, museums have limitations, there cannot be a everything in the world museum that is able to reach out all types of people.

Museums have to make choices and these choices depend on funds, stakeholders, sponsors, political context, museum director, museums professionals, etc. So museums have to choose which community, the same way they choose everything else like exhibitions themes, conservation procedures, objects to collect, objects to deaccession, educational activities, among others. The choice of the community is subordinate to the same elements and related to the museum's agenda.

The second question that arises is: if we live in times when people do not know who they are, how can the museum represent them? The museum offers the visitor different ways of perceiving the world, and of living in the world. Museum experiences allow us to flirt with alternative ways of being. When visiting an exhibition visitors search for features of their personal lives, both actual and imaged selves, during their exploration of objects in the museum their searches may lead to confirming, disconfirming, elaborating understanding of their own identities (Paris and Merces, 2002). When working with a particular community, through the museum its members solidify the connections among them and find out what they have in common, reaffirming their roots and values, locating them in society, culture and history.

The third question that arises is: how can traditional museums promote community development? At first the word "development" may seem too much for the museum to do, but there are several ways a museum can promote community development. It can help the community to overcome a problem, coming up with different solutions, putting things into a new perspective; providing confidence to the community and legitimizing it; it can incentives the community to take action to improve its quality of life; it can fortify the bonds between the members of the community and reaffirm their identities making them feel more secure about who they are; and give them a

chance to tell their own version of their history to “outsiders” which empowers them.

The fourth question that arises is: How will the museum be able to keep up with the community changes? Communities are always changing themselves and museums are known to be static and have a hard time trying to update themselves. In this context the difficulty that faces the traditional museum is that, differently from the ecomuseum and the community museum, most of the time it is not located in the community, so it is not part of peoples every day life. Though it is not a condition to able the museum to keep up with the changes, it would certainly make it easier. The museum, then, should stop being frozen pieces of history and it should become a stream, a sequence, a continuum of past, present and future events. In order for this to happen the museum should not be afraid to make a statement and display controversy, which involves most of the current issues. Controversies enrich the dialogue and the museum experience.

The fifth question that arises is: should the relation between the museum and the community be short-term or long-term? It depends on the project and the museum’s intention. Usually it is short-term, it would be almost impossible for the museum to get funds to maintain projects with several communities at the same time and for a long period. It’s important for the museum at the beginning of the project to be honest about its expectations, so the community does not feel deceived and used by the museum like it is just part of the museum’s social diversity agenda. However, the museum can maintain the relation in an informal way, updating the community about its events and projects and invite them to participate, starting volunteers programs, keeping updated about what is happening in the community. This kind of relation is important because allows the museum to find out if the work with the community promoted any changes and developments. The idea here is that working with a community is not a check from the list of things that the museum needs to do. It is to build a relation that makes people feel that they are

part of the museum, they are represented there and become frequent visitors.

The sixth question that arises is: how should the museum professionals be like? How their profile should be? As mentioned earlier, one of the reasons that traditional museums do not engage with the community is its professionals. In order for you to change the museum professional, you need to change their training. What is important is to shape a professional that is aware of the current issue, wants to work the communities, knows the potential of the museum as a cultural heritage institution, is open minded, does not make assumptions, tries to put the theory into practice, continues learning (it is not only the museum that needs to update itself), has knowledge of diverse groups within society, acts according to the codes of ethics, has knowledge of the issues involved in museums as learning centers and has knowledge of the museum and its role in the society.

5. POWER TO THE PEOPLE – THE TETRA-PARTITE MUSEUM MODEL

Having in mind all the challenges that the traditional museum face when trying to fulfill its social role, it's been proposed a new museum model that would help the museum to overcome these challenges, become an active participant instead of a passive collector better engage with its visitors (they are now part of the process, not only passive receivers) and be able to represent different opinions and interpretations. However, first it's suitable to discourse about the bi-partite and the tri-partite model.

In the 19th century due to the massive growth of the collections, the bi-partite museum model was introduced. It consists of dividing the museum's collection into a display collection and a reserve collection. The exhibition's organization followed a scientific system rather than objects arranged according to scientific principles. The tri-partite is an attempt to combine educational purpose and taxonomic

strategy, it consists in the division of the collections into three parts: exhibition, storage and the open storage or visible storage (Van Mensch, 1992).

The tetra-partite museum model is an attempt to promote a participative approach and a forum for discussions. The visitors can intervene in the exhibition. They can add information to the objects labels, rearrange the order of the exhibition, suggest other objects to display and new approaches of the theme of the exhibition. It's advisable to have a follow up to find out and understand why the visitor made those certain changes and to know his/her opinion and suggestions about the new approach.

In the tetra-partite model there is an inversion of roles, the visitor becomes the curator and the museum becomes the visitor.

Certainly this museum model would find a lot of resistance, since the museum is afraid to lose its authority. Some will say that the public has no proper training know-how knowledge to be given such position. Maybe the public doesn't have training and knowledge, but the museum should not underestimate it. If the museum works in service of the society, one would assume it is essential to know what the society wants and needs and that the society should have a voice.

Other possible critic is that with this model the museum would become a chaos and the objects would be in risk. It is not necessary to use the model in the whole exhibition, it can be just a room or two. In fact, it could be a temporary exhibition. The objects displayed in these rooms would have to be replicas so there is no risk of improper handling and damages to the object.

The tetra-partite model will not work for all types of museums and all types of visitors. Every situation is different, every visitor is different and every museum is different and it requires different actions and measures. What might work for a visitor, may not work for another and that makes it difficult to come up with a certain method for a relation between them.

It's up to each institution to figure out what works best for it and how to implement it.

This model could change the way visitors see and behave in the museum. Usually people do not believe in politicians or law enforcement, but they do believe in museums. When they come to a museum they are not aware that what is being displayed is not neutral, that is involves choices about what to forget and what to remember and political positions and that the museum usually only show one side of the story. This model can make the visitor be aware of these issues and assume a critical position when visiting museums, once they will encounter different informations and interpretations about the objects and they will have the power to decide how to display the exhibition.

6. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

In a world that values the disposable, the unsteady, the short-term, and above all, the individualism and is loosing its sense of community, the traditional museum needs to step up and fulfill its social role. A way to do it is to adapt and use the new museology's concepts promoting social inclusion, community participation and development and people's empowerment.

In recent years there was a movement of museums into this direction. Many articles and books have been written about it, but when trying to put it into practice museums encounter challenges on how to implement the concepts and make it a reality.

The tetra-partite museum model comes as a solution to some of this challenges and an attempt to make the museum aware of the visitors' desires, needs and wants and take into a more participative approach.

Going back to the question asked earlier, can museums save the world? No, but they can definitely change it. As The Beatles used to sing: "You say you want a

revolution, well, you know, we all want to change to world". Including the museum professionals.

REFERENCES:

Bauman, Zygmunt (2001). *Community: seeking safety in an insecure world*. Malden: Blackwell Publishing.

Hobsbawn, Eric. (2000). *Era dos extremos: o breve século XX: 1914-1991*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras.

Lopes, César. *O museu é um aparelho ideológico*. Personal interview made by Ferro, Pedro. Maio, 2003

Mensch, Peter van. (1992). *Towards a Methodology of Museology*. PhD Thesis, University of Zagreb.

Available: http://www.muuseum.ee/et/erialane_areng/museoloogiaalane_ki/in_gliskeelne_kirjand/p_van_mensch_towar/

Last viewed on: 02/12/2009

Paris, Scott and Mercer, Melissa (2002). *Finding Self in Objects: Identity, Exploration in Museums*. In: *Learning Conversations in Museums*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Primo, Judite. *Museus Locais e Ecomuseologia: Estudos do Projeto para o Ecomuseu da Murtosa*. In: *Cadernos de Museologia*, nº 30. Lisboa: Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades de Tecnologias.

Santos, Paula dos (2008). *Museology and Community Development in the XXI Century*. In: *Cadernos de Museologia*, vol. 2. Lisboa: Universidade Lusófona de Humanidades de Tecnologias.

Sennett, Richard. (1993). *The Fall of Public Man*. London: Penguin.

Walton, Dominique. *Mass Individualist Society*.

Available at:

http://www.walton.cnrs.fr/EN/dwcompil/glossaire/societe_ind_mass.html

Last viewed on: 26/11/2009

About the author:

Mariana Lamas holds a BA in Museology from Universidade Federal do Estado do Rio de Janeiro and is currently doing her master's in Museology at the Reinwardt Academie. Her experience in museums includes collection research in the context of material cultural. Her main interests are the social aspects of the museum and the relation between museum and conflicts.