

ART, CENSORSHIP AND HISTORICAL REVISIONISM

MINING THE MUSEUM, AFRO-ATLANTIC HISTORIES AND QUEERMUSEUM

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In 2018, the French press reported¹ that the Government would start the repatriation of African artifacts to where they once belonged. Starting with Benin, this announcement has turned into a huge debate on the decolonization of contemporary museums and the return of looted objects taken during the colonial era, namely from the African continent.

The situation makes us reflect on the genesis of the museum institution. It is well known that the formation of Modern museums is linked to the idea of preserving objects and artifacts in order to tell a particular story: the one that will be presented in the future in such a way as to establish 'the official history'. In order to turn this narrative into a valid one, it is necessary to fill the museum space with elements that can illustrate it. Thus, to offer a view on topics such as sovereignty over other nations, objects and artifacts taken from exotic countries would be displayed in exuberant exhibition arrangements: first in Cabinets of Curiosities (seventeenth century), and then, a few hundred years later, within a physical space open to the general public and run by the State: the museum as we know it.

In this sense, the concept of museum that is still extant to this day is from the eighteenth century, mainly because most of those collections have survived. Although there is always room for critical reassessment, like the French government's decision, there has been little mobilization around this discussion because it is sure to expose political fragilities. Which in turn could open a whole *can of worms* regarding the functioning of existing museums and their future survival. On the other hand, to disclose the institutional backstage means to deal with the equally problematic relationship between museums (their procedures for validation and valuation of art objects) and artists. As Walter Benjamin (2003, 392) states: 'There is no document

¹ The news was reported in many different newspapers. One example is the article 'França irá devolver à África obras de arte saqueadas durante período colonial' posted on RFI, November 2018, available at <http://br.rfi.fr/franca/20181121-franca-ira-devolver-obras-de-arte-africanas-tomadas-durante-colonizacao>.

of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another’.

From the 1960s onwards we can find a tendency within the artistic practice towards what would become known as *institutional critique* two decades later. Andrea Fraser (2005, 281) conceptualizes the term *institution*²:

From 1969 on, a conception of the “institution of art” begins to emerge that includes not just the museum, nor even only the sites of production, distribution, and reception of art, but the entire field of art as a social universe.

It is precisely this notion of a *social universe*, the institution and the art exhibition as a field of forces, that will be thought critically to re-examine the rules of exhibiting and the symbolic set of interpretations that is generated by such presentations in museums and art galleries.

Many artists have addressed that debate through installations, curatorial projects, and writings. These gestures would, in turn, uncover the barely visible ‘backstage’ of negotiations between museums and galleries, its boards of trustees, art dealers, and investors, to the point of questioning even the figure of the curator as we know it today – as an important vector of decisions in the game between institutions, artists and the audience. An emblematic case is that of artist Daniel Buren, who broadly theorized the ideological issues behind the functioning of museums in essays such as *Function of Studio* (1979) and *Function of the Museum* (1983). Fraser would also make important reflections in this direction while addressing gender, sex and politics in her works. One of them is the 1989 performance *Museum Highlights: A Gallery Talk* (that would later become a book with a collection of her essays and works), in which she performs a guided tour of the Philadelphia Museum of Art under the codename of professor Jane Castleton, while quoting seemingly random phrases taken from philosophy books, museum archives and art reviews.

Many artists around the world chose to reflect upon the displacement of utilitarian or religious objects to the museum environment (shifting them with its specific codes and narrative devices).

In *Museum of Modern Art* (1968-1972) Marcel Broodthaers plays the roles of museum director, curator, critic and others while managing his own version of a museum. In one of its sections, Broodthaers featured an eagle representation (*Department of the Eagles*) in a number of photographs, stamps, illustrations, sculptures and other objects. The installation-museum is a strategy to make a critical comment about the validation procedure of art institutions. As Bishop (2007, 17) clarifies: ‘by appointing himself the museum’s director, Broodthaers ensures that he cannot be spoken for, and curatorial ventriloquism dislodges with twofold authorship – selection/creation, but also mediation’. All sorts of examples can be found in works that also make a critical examination of institutionalizing procedures, namely by artists such as Hans Haacke, Louise Lawler, Michael Asher and Daniel Buren. For this particular matter, we will be focusing on two important contributions made by artists of African descent: Fred Wilson (United States, 1954-) and Meschac Gaba (Benin, 1961-).

² The term would be adopted, from the 1980s on, by artists such as Andrea Fraser, Hans Haacke, Martha Rosler and critics like Benjamin Buchloh to characterize an artistic production interested in questioning the domains of art institutions (museums, galleries, cultural centers) and their agents (artists, curators, critics, spectators and others).

³ Three historical and revolutionary figures from Maryland, the astronomer and self-taught researcher Benjamin Banneker (1731-1806) and the abolitionists Frederick Douglass (1818-1895) and Harriet Tubman (1822-1913).

⁴ *A Change of Heart – Fred Wilson’s impact on museums*. This presentation was part of The Sackler Conference for Arts Education – *From the Margins to the Core?* An international conference exploring the shifting roles and increasing significance of diversity and equality in contemporary museum and heritage policy and practice held at The Sackler Centre, V&A, 24 – 26 March 2010, <https://vimeo.com/11838838>.

⁵ The project, although in a different arrangement, was also featured at Documenta 11 (2002, Kassel, Germany).

The artist Fred Wilson was be directly involved with the aforementioned issues in one of his best-known projects called *Mining the Museum*. Wilson, known for works that discuss the universe of museums and their collections through politically sensitive topics, would choose the Maryland Historical Society as the starting point (and destination) for this exhibition-installation.

The Maryland Historical Society is the oldest cultural association operating in the city of Baltimore (1844). Its vast collection of historical objects (including artworks, weapons, clothing, jewellery, and furniture) and documents tells the story of this State’s foundation in 1788. After seeing the permanent exhibition, Wilson was intrigued by the objects kept in the technical collection; the ones not on display. After an intense year-long research process, he chose to create frictions between the official narrative of the institution by rendering the presence of African-American historical characters visible that were previously absent in their permanent exhibition. With his work, Wilson argues their indisputable contributions to understand the present. By juxtaposing objects and identification labels in the museum, the artist meant to debate the situation of structural racism in the United States.

The installation happened mainly on the third floor of the museum, requiring visitors to walk through the permanent exhibition first. Wilson chose to start the exhibition with a golden globe (found in storage) on which the word *Truth* was engraved. Formerly a prize awarded to advertising companies, the object set the tone for the exhibition: a seemingly trivial object, lacking its author’s name, served to discuss anonymity, the story behind museums. Upstairs, objects such as a real whipping post in front of a set of wooden chairs with a clearly posh character enacted a scene of connivance and entertainment. A slave ship replica (*Baltimore Clipper*, 1940) stood on top of a showcase with signs warning of escaping slaves. Next to it, three marble busts of white men stood alongside three other empty pedestals in a sort of mirrored projection, followed by labels with the names of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman, and Benjamin Banneker³.

The artist emphasized⁴ his wish to go beyond what an ‘African American exhibition’ should look like. Here, the aim was rather about dealing with elements both absent and present in the museum’s collection as a way of investigating and questioning the history of Maryland. As he points out: ‘What is on view tells a lot about the museum but what is on storage tells even more’ (Wilson 2010). The project’s disruptive nature would have profound impacts on how the staff would deal with the collection from then on. The art researcher Terry Smith (2012, 125) highlighted the importance of this project in the artist-as-curator debate, as it contributed to provoke a twist between traditional exhibitions organized by cultural institutions and a more critical action in the exhibition space.

A few years later, this kind of critique would resonate in projects such as *Museum of Contemporary African Art*⁵ (1997-2002) by artist Meschac Gaba. In this project, the artist rethought not only the norms for exhibiting artworks, but also their content and the production of meaning about them. To do so, he transformed the rooms of London’s Tate Modern Gallery into a sort of metalinguistic installation in which he

dealt with the very constitution of 'African art'. Is it possible to determine a single predominant code or style for the entire artistic work of a continent? The artist would answer that question by creating around twelve rooms in which *Library, Museum Restaurant* and *Museum Shop* ironically mimicked the common spaces of great museums and galleries. Bringing the museum's ancillary equipment to the central discussion of his work, the artist discussed 'the nature and function of the museum and our relationship with it' (Greenberg 2013), in a similar manner to the aforementioned museum by Broodthaers. In addition to the rooms mentioned above, Gaba would also create spaces where visitors could stay, read or play, confronting the traditional notion of the exhibition as a passive, contemplative environment. Gaba has been committed to the broadening of African culture's representativeness in the world art scene. Both *Museum of African Contemporary Art* and *Exchange Market* (2014, Tanya Bonak Gallery, New York) are examples of how the artist aimed at expanding the understanding of the diversity of the African art scene, dismantling the subjugating conception of those countries, usually deemed 'exotic' or 'ethnic'.

The biased way in which African artists have been placed into collections and exhibitions worldwide makes us understand this work as a critique of the conceptual conflicts of representation in exhibitions such as *Magiciens de la Terre* (Grande Halle de la Villette, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, 1989), by curator Jean-Hubert Martin. Despite the effort in bringing visibility to non-Euro-American artists, the project was criticized at the time for not taking into critical consideration the economic and political issues involved in its elaboration. The curatorial project became known for selecting works for their visual aspects while presenting them from a neo-colonial point of view that allegedly looked upon them as 'primitive'. Smith (2012, 118) claims that, fortunately, some works managed to exceed the curatorial framework that aimed to leap across the yawning gap between indigenous and Euro-American worldviews by recourse to a generalized notion of 'magic' and a string of poetic speculations concerning "spirituality" around which each of the sixteen subsections of the exhibition was organized.

In the following examples, the exhibition is a powerful tool to raise and renew a critical social debate. It not only faces the challenges of addressing complex topics in the form of an exhibition as it also relies on the power of artistic mediation strategies to achieve its ultimate goal.

As huge as the discussion that it intended to pursue, *Afro-Atlantic Histories* was organized in the Museum of Art of São Paulo – Masp and at Tomie Ohtake Institute in 2018. It was curated by Adriano Pedrosa, Lilia Schwarcz, Ayrson Heráclito, Hélio Menezes and Tomás Toledo, in a vast partnership with art institutions around the world. The exhibition is an unfolding of *Mestizo Histories*, held in 2014 at Tomie Ohtake Institute, also curated by Pedrosa and Schwarcz, whose research process lasted almost two years and generated a publication that comprised over seventy essays.

⁶ A transcript of the interview was published in the Afro-Atlantic Histories website and it can be retrieved from: <https://www.institutotomiohtake.org.br/exposicoes/interna/historias-mesticas>.

The curatorial project adopted strategies combined with overlapping thematic sections (*Maps and Margins, Rituals and Rhythms, Afro-Atlantic Modernism, Emancipation, and Activism and Resistance*, to name a few), organized without temporal linearity, in order to discuss symbolic exchanges between civilizations and featuring works from Africa, Europe, the Americas, and the Caribbean. Brazil stands out as the converging point of these exchanges since it would receive around 40% of the total number of enslaved people coming to the Americas (it is important to mention that in 2018 the country reached the 130-year mark of its belated abolition of slavery).

In *Maps and Margins*, the curators aimed to explore the migratory flows of slavery, both externally, with the slave ships, and internally, within the African continent. They sought out other possibilities of cartographic representation to tell these stories (some works were commissioned especially for the exhibition *Mestizo Histories*). A centrepiece of this section was *Africans in America, a place to call home* (2009) by African-American artist Hank Willis Thomas. The work reflects on questions of belonging and identity. It is comprised of a metallic map painted in black that shows the full extent of the American continent and, replacing the conventional representation of South America, there is Africa.

In addition to the massive exhibition with over four-hundred and fifty works by two-hundred and fourteen artists, the project included an important artistic mediation project that comprised several activities, such as conferences, courses, and videos. One of the conferences, *Art, Religion and Ecology in the sacred forest of Oxum* (Nigeria), coordinated by the researcher and anthropologist Moisés Lino e Silva, reflected on the intersection of such ancestral knowledge as a way of confronting the contemporary capitalist system. The film and video screenings featured works such as *Conakry* (2016), by Filipa César with Grada Kilomba and Diana McCarthy, (made from little-known documental records on the liberation of Guinea-Bissau and Cape Verde headed by intellectual and anti-colonial leader Amílcar Cabral); and *Soul in the Eye [Alma no olho]* (1973), by Zózimo Bulbul, an important landmark in the Brazilian film industry. The latter, an experimental short film, presents the performance of its own director and tells the story of African people through the processes of slavery, subjugation, and social liberation.

The curatorial team chose to overlap narratives rather than to focus on each formerly slave-based country. Commenting on *Mestizo Histories*, Pedrosa⁶ would remind us that the word *history*, in Portuguese, can mean both 'history' and 'story'. The concept of miscegenation was told using this strategy of double meaning: the mixture of lived and created reports, daily life and fiction, that can amplify, distort and reconstruct a seemingly official narrative.

Schwarzc argues that

This transatlantic way of thinking has been gaining momentum, as exchanges have been revealed not only among the enslavers but also among the black populations of the Diaspora: religions, rites, philosophies, and many other exchanges that have taken place in this process. The exhibition seeks to bring this

kind of perspective to reflect on the visual conventions that circulated through this transatlantic universe. (Schwarcz 2018, 01, own translation)⁷.

Another recent case of historical re-examination happened with the exhibition *Queermuseu – Cartografias da Diferença na Arte Brasileira* [Queermuseum: Cartographies of Difference in Brazilian Art] (Porto Alegre, 2017). The project, financed by Spanish bank Santander, was curated by Gaudêncio Fidélis and launched a great discussion about censorship in contemporary Brazilian art. The show was on during the queer debate, featuring a selection of two-hundred and seven works by modern artists such as Alfredo Volpi and Cândido Portinari, as well as by contemporary artists such as Lygia Clark, Leonilson, Adriana Varejão, and others. The event became a kind of tragic landmark for the uprising of conservatism in Brazil led by political parties linked to religious groups. Some works were deemed excessively erotic, depraved and disrespectful of religious symbols, which led to the premature closing of the show.

The main sources of irritation were works that allegedly represented zoophilia and paedophilia. The former accusation refers to the work *Interior Scene II* [Cena de Interior II] (1994) by Adriana Varejão, a painting that presents several sexual practices in *Shunga* style (a type of Japanese pictorial representation that emerged in the seventeenth century, celebrating pleasure and sexuality), which, among other things, showed a scene in which two male figures hold a goat; the latter refers to Bia Leite's *Queer Child* [Criança Viada] (2013) series, inspired by an eponymous account on the Tumblr platform for the sharing of photographs of children (sent by the subjects themselves) whose habits deviated from heteronormative patterns. Some authors consider that the censoring of the exhibition, an episode also marked by an apologetic and empty press release from the organizing institution, is explained by the recent *cultural wars* phenomenon. The term, coined by American sociologist James Davison Hunter in 1991, can be generally understood as the altercations between liberal/conservative and democratic/progressive segments of society, especially using social media as a way for spreading their thoughts. In Brazil, the MBL (Movimento Brasil Livre), a new political movement founded in 2014, gained exposure during this event and became very popular during former president Dilma Rousseff's impeachment (2015-2016). The MBL is connected to an international organization called Students for Liberty, and present themselves as free neoliberal thinkers, not connected to any political party. Using the same tactics as in the United States, i.e., strategically creating content through social media, starting a series of mass public shaming of artists, cultural workers and left-wing politicians. The movement also argued that the resources, obtained through public funding, were misused and served to finance an event that did not reflect the moral values of most of Brazilian society. All kinds of graphic content was generated to misplace and decontextualize information about the artworks and artists in the exhibition, creating a rapid and misinformed public opinion reaction. The show remained closed, though it was visited by a State Prosecutor who claimed that the sole problem was the lack of age-rating signs. Later, in 2018, the exhibition

⁷ Schwarcz, Lilia. 'Entrevista concedida à Theo Monteiro', 2018, <https://www.institutotomiohtake.org.br/participe/post/histasrias-af-ro-atlacnticas-entrevista-com-a-curadora-lilia-schwarcz>.

⁸ Mbembe, Achille. 'La vérité est que l'Europe nous a pris des choses qu'elle ne pourra jamais restituer'. *Le Monde*, 1 December, 2018, https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2018/12/01/achille-mbembe-la-verite-est-que-l-europe-nous-a-pris-des-choses-qu-elle-ne-pourra-jamais-restituer_5391216_3212.html

⁹ Here I am referring to the exhibition at SESC Pompéia (São Paulo, Brazil), in which Bo Bardi argues about value judgments built around popular and erudite art. The manifesto, in Portuguese, states: 'A expressão Kitsch surgiu na Alemanha no fim do século XIX quando a Revolução Industrial tomou definitivamente o poder. É o estigma da alta burguesia culta contra os setores da mesma classe', ao "Belo". Esta pequena exposição não é uma – Integração do Kitsch – é apenas um pequeno exemplo do DIREITO AO FEIO, base essencial de muitas civilizações, desde a África até o Extremo Oriente que nunca conheceram o "conceito" de Belo, campo de concentração obrigado da civilização ocidental. De todo esse processo foram excluídos uns ainda menos afortunados: o povo. E o povo nunca é Kitsch. Mas esta é uma outra história'. (In: Almeida, Eneida de. 2010).

was reassembled at EAV – Escola de Artes Visuais do Parque Lage, Rio de Janeiro, financed by the largest-ever national crowdfunding campaign. Despite the quality of the curatorial project and its lack of proper signage, the success of the campaign and the exhibition's reopening can be seen as a democratic victory, especially if democracy is perceived as a place of *dissent* instead of consent (Deutsche 1996). Finally, as the article mentioned at the start of this paper reports, the news of the return of more than forty thousand artifacts was followed by a debate on whether African institutions were properly equipped to receive them. The matter is extremely relevant. If we want to expand critical reflections on the colonization story/history and its reflections on contemporary society in order to render possible the existence of multiple historical narratives, it is crucial that such objects and documents remain intact. On the other hand, this seems to indicate that the return of these collections is more than a change of place: it must come with a sustainable return project that also involves financial contributions for the physical renewal of the institutions, management of the collections and professional training of specialized staff. As the philosopher and historian Achille Mbembe warns us, *what has been taken can never be returned*⁸. The restitution of African works to their countries of origin is not an act of benevolence, but an obligation. This first step, Mbembe continues, can be seen as the beginning of the reconstruction of the fragile ties between Europe and Africa.

The countries that have lived through battles keep in their language, traditions and in their people, traces of a brutal history that still lives on. While Brazil did not experience the tragedies of war, or great natural disasters, that European countries did, it nevertheless suffered the violent colonization of its native population. It is about time we talk about such a brutal past and understand that many of the problems Brazil (and other colonized countries) faces as a modern nation (corruption, depletion of its natural reserves, tax evasion, the extermination of people of African descent, etc) are closely tied to this not-so-distant past. The fact that there is still some infatuation with the caprices of the ruling elite, probably reminiscent of the colonial period, alongside with a constant rejection of popular culture reminds us of how much the reflection proposed by Lina Bo Bardi on the occasion of the exhibition *The Beautiful and the Right to the Ugly* (1982) remains topical⁹.

As Fred Wilson pointed out with his work, institutional silencing can also be understood as a form of censorship. Exhibitions such as *Mining the Museum* and *Afro-Atlantic Stories* are interesting examples of how contemporary art institutions can play a decisive role in transforming the present (and the future). The spectrum ranges from not addressing these topics at all to generating a complex and multi-layered debate, where not only artists, curators, museum directors and so on have a saying on the matter, but the entire society as a whole. The aforementioned exhibitions highlight the important contributions that artists, curators, and art researchers have made to contemporary society, allowing issues that were previously relegated to oblivion to resurface for public discussion. In this sense, by understanding current museums as a place for deepening social discussions, this

reflection can also help design future museums. If there is a fear that European historical museums will lose their collections because of the return of war spoils, one must think of alternatives for their existence. As mentioned earlier, if the idea of museums as cultural platforms already fits in contemporary art institutions, we can certainly imagine ways of facing this new challenge.

Alternatives can be found in already existing museums worldwide. In Spain, the exhibition *Intangibles* (2019-2020), curated by Colección Telefonica, presented the digital versions of renowned works by artists such as Torres Garcia, Tapiès, Picasso and Magritte. Reflecting upon impact of the digital revolution art collections, the exhibition also tackles the issue of artistic mediation through the abstraction of a few concepts present on the selected works, engaging the audience in an immersive experience.

In Brazil, the institutions dealing with intangible cultural heritage, such as *Museum of the Portuguese Language* [Museu da Língua Portuguesa] and the Football Museum [Museu do Futebol] (both in São Paulo) focus on the use of audio-visual elements, such as projections and interactive installations. Worldwide, the partnerships between museums and collectors can also produce relevant temporary exhibitions in the same terms.

Exhibitions such as *Mining the Museum*, *Afro-Atlantic Histories* and *Queermuseum* go beyond the mere presentation of physical objects. They are a focal point from which several mediation activities coordinated by the curatorial project can emerge, in events that resonate inside and outside the museum. In that sense, it seems paramount to highlight the important work developed by curatorial and education teams in art institutions, especially the ones that really do intersect these two fields. Artistic mediation has become an audience empowering audience, bringing together conceptual, aesthetic and critical aspects of works, aiming at the deepening of social debates and reflections that go beyond the exhibition itself.

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