

The taboo of the collection between museums and ecomuseums

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The concept of collection and the idea of collecting can be problematized in several ways. In this contribution, we move from Mathilde Bellaigue's notions of institutional collection and operational collection, applied in the Creusot Ecomuseum, and subsequently spread among Brazilian ecomuseums and community museums.

Based on such notions, we argue that ecomuseums and community museums are not museums without collections. Rather, they adopt extended categories of collection (Duarte Cândido, 2003). In our interpretation, these categories can contribute to the process of decolonization of knowledge and practices in the field of Museology, leading to ruptures with sedimented barriers. Some experiences are considered to be “not-museum-like” because they are not based on traditional collections, namely: movable material objects that are acquired and managed within a museum institution. On the contrary, we argue that the categories of collection need to be rethought in-depth. This is evident for example in the case of Italian Ecomuseums using community maps and participatory inventories to explore and construct the idea of territorial heritage (Magnaghi, 2020), that could be intended as an extended concept of the collection without possession.

The attachment to the materiality of things and aspects such as antiquity, exceptionality, numerical volume, or financial value, takes museums away from

the possibility of representing different cultures and social groups in a less asymmetrical way, contributing to the maintenance of privileges and invisibilities.

Opening the notion of collection to things that are not possessed, and decontextualized (often violently) by museums, seems to open up some possibilities. It is worth remembering that some museums, or at least ecomuseums, allow themselves to use terms that would be considered heretical in mainstream Museology, like the idea of intangible collection¹.

The classical notion of the collection is defined by Pomian (1984) as objects removed from their context and their original function that are subjected to special protection and exposed. According to Desvallées & Mairesse (2011), to obtain the status of a museum collection, objects must be preserved in a museum-like institution. However, the practices of ecomuseology and community museology opened other possibilities for dealing with the notion of collection, which would not be exclusively linked to institutionalization.

Inspired by Mathilde Bellaigue and Hugues de Varine, many other musealization experiences began to adopt the ideas of institutional collection and operational collection:

Institutional collection is that constituted by systematic collections of movable objects that make up the collection formally registered by the museum under its documental character. In addition to the institutional collection, museums may work with other heritage references not incorporated into their collection, called operational collection. It can be constituted by spaces, landscapes, structures, monuments, equipment, cultural manifestations, socially appropriated knowledge, and practices. (Caldarelli & Duarte Cândido, 2017, p. 202)

¹*L'Écomusée constitue depuis son ouverture des collections matérielles et immatérielles représentatives des modes de vie de la société rurale grand'landaise*" (Écomusée Marquèze, undated).

The idea of operational collection was originally developed at the Ecomuseum of Creusot, and widely spread in Brazil in courses taught by Mathilde Bellaigue influenced generations of professionals in the field of Museology in Brazil, such as Santos (1996, p. 117), Meneses (1984-1985; 1994), Duarte Cândido (2018a, p. 16) and the practice of Brazilian ecomuseums and community museums, even though she did not develop the concept in publications. This notion was also included in official museum institutional planning documents, at least in France and Brazil, in this case, not only ecomuseums but also so-called traditional museums (Museu da Cidade de São Paulo, 2021). In Canada the idea was also developed with the use of a specific form of collection, called the ecomuseum collection – “collection écomuséale” (Ecomusée du Val de Bièvre et de l'Écomusée du fier monde, 2018). Mathilde Bellaigue even mentions Tomislav Sola's idea of the "total museum" in one of her texts (Bellaigue, 2000, p. 04). In addition to this, the well-known Round Table in Santiago de Chile (1972) ended with a statement that highlighted the notion of integral museums or integrated museums (Duarte Cândido, 2003).

Different ideas of immaterial collection, and operational collection put in contrast museums with collection and museums without collection. Breaking taboos and boundaries, we argue that there are not museums without collection, but museums that work with a broader notion of collection.

All these reflections lead to problematize the notions of artworks or artifacts collections, bringing closer to new categories in the Anthropological domain concerned with the relationships between humans and non-humans.

The power of the metamuseology

Current times ask for institutional criticism and self-reflexivity. The bridge between Museology and Social Sciences, especially Anthropology, gives remarkable contributions (Soares, 2015), opening problems a Museology – focused on Art History – tends to ignore. This is probably because the core of the reflections are the objects (rare, exceptional, of aesthetic value, etc.) and not the social relations they raise. Today, several museums are deciding to share with

their audiences the decision-making processes, and to present transparently in their exhibits the choices and processes behind being heritage factories. In some cases, this is called metamuseology (Schärer, 2018; Collineau, 2020). In this framework, museums start to admit discussing, in their exhibits, the violence of acquisition and the unsustainability of accumulation.

Even when not shared with society, these concerns are part of the reflections in the field of Museology (Balerdi, 2008; Duarte Cândido, 2018b; Benkass, 2012), and are starting to take over the museums' backstage. Contemporary museums need to establish other collection practices and other relationships with the material world – rationalizing, being frugal, minimalist, acting sparingly, being aware of their ecological footprint.

However, discarding is still a taboo in several countries (Mairesse, 2009), and the idea of acquisition present in the museum's definition (2007) is understood as a systematic enlargement of collections, which to us seems very reductive. That is to say, this text also indirectly problematizes the dispute around some words that should or should not be present in the new definition of museums because the problem may not be in having the words collection or acquisition, for example, but in the understanding that they gain in the different international contexts of application of the definition.

If the acquisition is adopted as a synonym of accumulation, having this as a mission establishes – in our view – a disconnection between museums and the future emerges, reinforcing conservative aspects (in its different meanings) linked exclusively to the past. Owning less can allow more space for reflection and the construction of the new. This can make the difference between what is called biophilic museums and necrophilic museums (Varine-Bohan, 1994).

To conclude, we'd like to draw attention to the fact that collections sometimes disappear and only documentation remains - e.g.: fire at the Museu Nacional, Rio de Janeiro, 2018 (Duarte Cândido *et al*, 2019). Today we can consider that the information about museum collections is just as important as the things themselves. With this awareness more widespread, much of the panic

generated in some museums about the demands of restitution would be mitigated by the realization that a collaborative process of restitution is a potential generator of new data and collections, created in a much more ethical way.

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