

WILL MUSEUMS MAKE US BETTER? WILL MUSEUMS MAKE AS HAPPIER? WILL MUSEUMS MAKE US CIVILIZED?

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This text results from my opening remarks at the First International Meeting on Museum Education and Research that took place at Museu do Douro, an event that is now (in 2019) preparing its second edition.

The event was organized by i2ADS – Research Institute in Art, Design and Society, which I was, and am, directing, and by the Museu do Douro. The idea for the first edition came from Marta Valente, a PhD student, and as part of her research project². I was, at the time, one of the persons opening the Meeting, and this text, as explained before, was prepared for that occasion. However, and as I stated at that meeting, my specialization is not in museum education and my interest in museums is merely theoretical and speculative. It is true that I work in arts education, and that I am interested in thinking about the kinds of education that take place, are reproduced, or are being (re)invented, within museums and cultural institutions in general, but I always try to raise questions more than to find answers or solutions. I remember at the Meeting someone coming to me and saying that if I was working in the field, maybe I would become less critical in relation to museums as power institutions, and that the past is important but that what is happening in the present is much different from the past. In a way, I agree and, in a way, I completely disagree with such affirmations.

I work at a University, and we all know what universities are becoming in the present. It is not only the marketing languages that invade our daily teaching and researching tasks, but also a kind of catering that today marks what we are supposed to do, to deliver and to evaluate. And it is precisely within this context that I find the opportunities to question what is assumed as being the natural and inevitable

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development of things. In a Derridean sense, my aim is to think the possible impossible; that space where thinking tries to go beyond its present contingencies.

I try to look into the present with an eye to the past. Not that I am a kind of Angelus Novus, that looks to the past while he is being taken into the future, but I think that it is important to historicize the present in order to understand better who we are, how we came to be what and who we are, and to think about the possibilities and impossibilities of becoming something that is not yet known.

I think that the field of the arts – and the museums also occupy a central place there –, is very easily captured by different kinds of power and establishes itself as a field of power.

I will travel, briefly, to the 19th century.

The argument of the arts as a moral and civilizing technology was part of a way of reasoning about government, territory and the making of citizens as part of a new body called ‘population’. Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1991) called this new art of government, ‘governmentality’. The neologism is useful to evidence the ‘government of mentality’, or, in other words, the conduct of the conduct by each person, transformed into a citizen. Citizens are not born, but made. In modernity, museums, as well as schools and the family (as an institution), were those places in which citizenry as the belonging to a community and to a nation were fabricated.

The museums were thought in close connection with a rationality for the government of the populational body, working as an antidote for risky behaviours and even more to the possibilities they could open for an inner transformation of each individual. During the second half of the 19th century, the effects of the arts were being discussed in various fronts and to serve several purposes. For the new industrial society, the arts, particularly drawing, was a kind of technological sublime, providing a grammar to invent, read and work with machines, but the arts were also explored as a field of leisure that, separated from the field of labour, would give the working class the opportunity to contact with the values of ‘culture’. As Tony Bennet argues, in the minds of 19th century politicians and reformers, art, “not necessarily of the highest quality, would assist the purposes of reform so long as it started the working man off on a course of aesthetic and, thereby, moral self-cultivation” (Bennet, 2007, p. 94). The government of each citizen articulated discipline with

the idea of freedom and autonomy. In most of the European states, the rhetorical mobilization of the arts as part of a public improvement provided “a moral rhetoric, a secular equivalent for religion that linked the experience of the works of art to the promise of liberty” (Taylor, 1999, p. xiv).

Art museums represented the shift from a classical episteme to a modern episteme in which a new order of things (which implied a new way of seeing, saying, and acting) appeared along a chronological and developmental line, being equivalent to the progress of civilization. The notion of history became articulated with the trilogy of the past, present and future, being the future imagined as the progress and civilization to come. In these histories – from the history of a nation to the history of art or the history of the ‘race’ –, many exclusions were in the making and, simultaneously, different kinds of citizens were being fabricated. Art museums were produced as salvation institutions whose mission was not only to preserve a certain memory and narrative of collective history, but also to enlighten those that were perceived as in need, and marked as potential threats to a certain idea of civilization, or to cultural and moral order.

During the 18th century, as part of a colonial enterprise, many European nobles started to develop practices of collecting, buying, selling, displaying and viewing art not only as part of their nobility’s power, but also as a cultural and symbolic practice that was equivalent to their superior and civilized status (Mörsch, n.d.). At a national level, the national galleries and museums were established also as one of the ways of exhibiting the nation and its greatness through the display of man’s top achievements. The Louvre Museum, as a product of the French Revolution, marks the beginning of a path that brings to the present the naturalization of the civic rituals of museums as secular institutions. Carol Duncan argues that museums, whether we are talking about the aesthetical or the educational museum, are ritual structures “designated as reserved for a special quality of attention” (1995, p. 4). The birth of the museum operated through a certain distribution of the sensible and the making of different positionings between the possibilities of contemplation or learning. Within the museum, a certain behaviour was, and still is, expected. Museums were there to affirm the nation as a modern civilization and to civilize the working class, producing a civic seeing and civic rituals. Simultaneously, a memory was being produced for the

nation and its citizens.

The arts were meant to be equivalent to a civilized status through a rhetoric of beauty and perfection that represented the highest level of human creation and, thus, as an instrument to act in problematic social zones. Poorness, drunkenness, criminality, sex, gaming, were just some of the threats to an efficient government of the state. This government did not depend on the use of coercion or force, but rather on a detailed knowledge of each of these fields that the social sciences were rationalizing as ‘social questions’ (Popkewitz, 2008). The English social reformer and philosopher Jeremy Bentham, the author of the panopticon, stated that:

“All the arts and sciences, without exception, inasmuch as they constitute innocent employments, at least of time, possess a species of moral utility, neither the less real or important, because it is frequently unobserved. They compete with, and occupy the place of those mischievous and dangerous passions and employments, to which want of occupation and ennui give of birth. They are excellent substitutes for drunkenness, slander, and the love of gaming.” (Bentham, 1825, p. 207)

The view of the arts as a powerful technology for self-regulation was soon perceived by politicians, reformers and educators. It was the open of an avenue for a will to change, both as a gun against vicious and an alternative way of spending free time, but also by the relation that a romanticized view of the arts effected within each individual (as a spectator or a producer).

Even if, in its claims, the art museum was born from the principle of talking to, and for, all citizens, it acted as a mechanism of distinctions in the making of different kinds of people.

Museums as well as schools, hospitals or the prisons emerged as, and through, new forms of social government in which new techniques of regulation and self-regulation were being enhanced and improved. It was, thus, under the moral and civilizing argument that the arts appeared as a terrain for a biopolitical strategy, and also as an instrument for the enactment of the technologies of the self in the making of a civilized being. The device of ‘civilized’ inscribed the differentiation of those who possess ‘reason’ from those who did not (Martins, 2018).

The civilizing process corresponded to a line of development in which culture and the state of being civilized were the opposite of savagery and barbarism. It implied a comparative reasoning that normalized some patterns and pathologized certain traits. This process had different nuances in different Western countries, but it corresponded to a colonial project in which hegemony was calculated through the governing of differences.

I know that, today, museums, or, at least, some museums, seem to be different. Mainly because the kind of language and the technologies of government being used are not so close to a disciplinary power, but much closer to the technologies of the self.

Neoliberal language affects all fields of our lives and this is also visible in the rhetoric that today establishes the rules of participation in museums. If we examine the discourse that today is part of museums' missions and agendas, it seems it is all about the critical, reflective, autonomous, responsible, creative and participatory citizen. It seems that museums not only open their doors, but that they rather have the great capacity to make us better, happier and more civilized. It goes almost unquestioned the idea that museums and their programmes must increase opportunities for citizen's active participation, that they have to invite us and give us the possibility of having great experiences. This, to me, seems as a consensual practice that almost makes unquestionable the 'good' and almost 'innocent' side of participation as it usually puts into play other notions that seem also to be naturalized: inclusion, negotiation, democratic decision-making.

One of the topics of this meeting that I find most interesting is that of 'participation', that buzzword: participation! I have to confess that I am tired and bored with this word that today, along with the words 'creativity', 'autonomy' and 'freedom', is an ingredient in all the speeches, from the political to the educational or artistic.

Who defines who participates? Who has the power of enunciation? Who defines the rules of the game? Who defines what is good, for what and for whom? Are museums really interested in putting their own agendas, that respond to more general international agendas, at risk, by opening up the possibility of a political activism?

Who are those that are defined as the target groups for participation? Marginalized groups? Communities? Migrants? Groups thought in terms of a social or chronological hierarchy? Aren't those the groups

that are defined in social, economic, political, educational terms, as needing something that they seem to ignore yet, but that these salvation institutions and experts will soon tell them and explain? Isn't art being instrumentalized once again in history, not by its political force, but by the common-sensical, romanticized and psychologized notion and assumption that it possesses a vital role for creating the conditions for kindness to grow, to increase the levels of happiness or wellbeing? Despite best intentions, aren't these practices part of a more general one of anaesthesia for the fabrication of the productive and efficient citizen and worker who has the illusion of being participating in, and for, a great cause?

As Nora Sternfeld argues, "today, art and culture are no longer supposed to merely be there 'for all', rather, under the banner of 'participation', art is now supposed to be done 'with everyone'". Some target groups are invited to participate, but "they are expected to be available as objects of representation. Within this context, art and cultural education are ascribed the role of a bridge between these target groups and the elitist themes of the institutions. They are expected to close the gaps in the (educational) responsibilities that the institutions have failed to fulfil – and to ensure that the institution remains as fully intact as possible. Within this context, participation usually means interaction" (Sternfeld, 2013, p. 2).

What is the very notion of participation doing, in terms of its effects? Again, I want to stress that museums, as well as other power instruments, are constantly making certain kinds of subjects. Discourse is not only the surface of language that describes objects and people, but it acts by making those objects and people. Those that are seen in need of rescue, of being empowered by the benefits that the museums offer, actually are constantly being deprived of their political agency.

What to say when museums and their educational programmes think and say that they are being inclusive, collaborative and empowering, increasing the wellbeing of the under-represented? How, and for whom, are the museums' engagement practices useful?

I said in the beginning that I am much more interested in raising questions than in delivering recipes. I think that questions can make us think within the practices and institutions in which we are involved and can make us more conscious of the powers that we are always activating, and also of those that are being activated upon ourselves. The past mat-

ters much more than we usually think for understanding what is being naturalized in the present. My main concern over the participatory agendas of museums is related to their effects in the making of people and in inscribing, maintaining and even reinforcing the structures of power. It is not a power exercised through brute force, but a power that is exercised through the 'soul' of each citizen.

Isn't participation being instrumentalized through the good intentions and salvation rhetoric of institutions, as a societal-sedative? This is my main question.

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