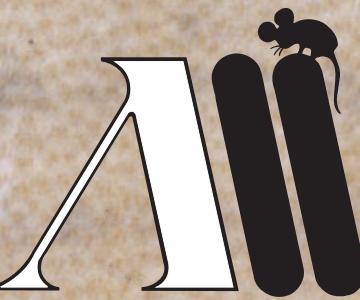


# ANNALES



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*Annali di Studi istriani e mediterranei*  
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## ABOUT DINOSAURS AND CHAMELEONS, OR THE REPRESENTATIONAL ROLE OF MUSEUMS: PLACE-HOLDERS FOR WHAT, FOR WHOM AND UNDER WHICH CIRCUMSTANCES?

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### ABSTRACT

*Taking the International Council of Museums (ICOM) recently revised museum definition by its word, this essay reflects on the history of the museum's representational role to consider possible ways forward to implement its new emphasis on inclusivity and community participation. Drawing mainly on institutional critique, new museology, and decolonial thought, two curatorial approaches are analysed that could lead the way towards a placemaking approach to museology: artist's José Miguel González Casanova's curatorial project Jardín de Academus [Garden of Academus] (2011) at the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) in Mexico City, and the curatorial approach of the first co-directors of the Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (MAM-RJ) Pablo Lafuente and Keyna Eleison.*

**Keywords:** museums, representation, curatorial, *placemaking*, socially engaged art, inclusivity, community participation

## DINOSAURI E CAMALEONTI, OVVERO IL RUOLO RAPPRESENTATIVO DEI MUSEI: COSA, PER CHI E IN QUALI CIRCONSTANZE?

### SINTESI

*Prendendo spunto dalla definizione di museo recentemente rivista dall'International Council of Museums (ICOM), questo saggio riflette sulla storia del ruolo rappresentativo del museo per considerare le possibili vie da percorrere per implementare la sua nuova enfasi sull'inclusività e la partecipazione della comunità. Attingendo principalmente alla critica istituzionale, alla nuova museologia e al pensiero decoloniale, vengono analizzati due approcci curatoriali che potrebbero aprire la strada verso un approccio "placemaking" alla museologia: il progetto dell'artista José Miguel González Casanova, Jardín de Academus [Giardino di Academo] (2011) presso il Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) a Città del Messico e l'approccio curoriale dei primi co-direttori del Museu de Arte Moderna do Rio de Janeiro (MAM-RJ), Pablo Lafuente e Keyna Eleison.*

**Parole chiave:** musei, rappresentazione, curoriale, *placemaking*, arte socialmente impegnata, inclusività, partecipazione comunitaria

## INTRODUCTION

If there is one institution in the art world that has been fiercely criticised for over half a decade, it is the museum. Continuously accused of not being up to date (a dinosaur),<sup>1</sup> of misrepresenting or not representing at all,<sup>2</sup> of silently sitting on bad old decisions from imperial and colonial times<sup>3</sup> or of collaborating with shady funders or having suspect board members while preaching democracy, inclusiveness, and human rights (a chameleon),<sup>4</sup> there seems to be little margin for museums today to get things right. In this scenario, in which criticism towards the institution will most surely come, it seems to be only a matter of time and format. As I will be discussing throughout this essay, much of this criticism is and has been related to what we expect the museum's role to be in society, and when thinking about this question it is impossible not to address the museum's representational role. In this sense, I ask: for what and in consequence, for whom, should the museum hold space for? And especially, under which circumstances? Or, taking on the questions from artist José Miguel González Casanova posed in the context of his curatorial project *Jardín de Academus. Laboratorios de Arte y Educación* [Garden of Academus. Art and Education Laboratory] (2011) at the Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (MUAC) in Mexico City: "[...] if art is a system of representation, who do the artworks represent? Who produces them and who reads them? If art creates collective identity spaces, which identities gather around it, and which are the signs that identify them?" (González Casanova, 2011, 12).<sup>5</sup>

What this essay then, aims to reflect upon, is the museum's potential as place-holder for precisely these collective meaning-making and identity pro-

cesses, discussing how socially engaged art practice and decolonial curatorial approaches could lead to long-lasting changes in the way the museum uses its representational power by holding space for community participation.

Although claiming that the museum is a contested representational space is far from being a new idea (Anderson, 1983; Karp & Lavine, 1991; Hall, 1997; Vergo, 1997; Mignolo, 2011; Bennett, 1995), these questions continue to be relevant today. As curator Mahret Ifeoma Kupka has recently once more underlined: "Museums are in crisis. To be relevant, as sites of encounter, cultural education, and joy, in constantly transforming societies, they need to change" (Kupka, 2023). Although Kupka's work focuses particularly on the restitution of looted African objects and artefacts from former colonies, her diagnosis is timely in a much broader and ongoing discussion around the definition, mission, and relevance of museums today. Indeed, it was just very recently, in August 2022, that the International Council of Museums (ICOM) adapted its definition of what a museum is – and should be, now officially recognising "the importance of *inclusivity, community participation and sustainability*" (ICOM, 2022, my emphasis). Therefore, if inclusivity and community participation are now acknowledged as key to the development of museological practice, what possibilities does the institution have to make these two aspects central pillars to their work?

The first part of the essay will consist of a short historical overview about the complex history of the museum's representational role, leading to the conclusion that this institution has been the target of ongoing criticism for almost about a century – although with increased pressure from the 1980's onwards. The second part will then focus on two curatorial case

- 1 Cf. for example one of the first and most well-known critical artist's statements against the museum: Ad Reinhardt's *How Modern is the Museum of Modern Art?* (1931), in which the artist demands that MoMA shows more contemporary US artists and not just art from the archive. After this, a large number of artists working within and in the tradition of institutional critique, such as conceptual and performance artists, especially during the 1960's and '70s, called out art institutions and their representational power as a political act in itself. Such are, for instance, the Fluxus Group, Situationism in Europe, Allan Kaprow, feminist art in the US, and Latin American Conceptualism. The museum (as well as other established places for the circulation and commodification of artworks such as galleries) is discussed, attacked, ignored, reinvented, and metaphorically destroyed through different artistic proposals, destabilising the until then predominant understanding of the museum as an (archival) object-based collection and compulsory exhibition space.
- 2 One of the most well-known examples in this respect is the work of Guerrilla Girls, an anonymous feminist artist activists collective exposing gender as well as ethnic bias', discriminatory policies and corruption in the art world through disruptive headlines, statistics, and visuals.
- 3 Cf., for instance, the ongoing debates about the restitution of human remains and looted objects from formerly colonised territories.
- 4 The Free Palestine/Strike MoMA action organised in 2021 is one such example. Among the critique that this letter addressed towards the institution, the following stands out: "With figures like Lauder, Crown, and Tananbaum on its board, MoMA cannot pretend to stand apart from the attack on Gaza or the Occupation of the West Bank and Jerusalem more broadly. Because the corporate power and wealth that sits atop the museum suffuses all of its operations, there are no clean hands. Given these entanglements, we must understand the museum for what it is: not only a multi-purpose economic asset for billionaires, but also an expanded ideological battlefield through which those who fund apartheid and profit from war polish their reputations and normalize their violence" (Social Text Journal Online, 2021).
- 5 My translation from the original in Spanish: "Si el arte es un sistema de representación, a quién representan las obras? quién las produce y quién las lee? Si el arte conforma espacios de identidad colectivos, qué tipo de identidades se reúnen en su entorno y cuáles son los signos que las identifican?" (González Casanova, 2011, 12).

studies that might indicate possible ways forward to start thinking about museums as active placemakers within society. The first example will be González Casanova's already mentioned curatorial project *Jardín de Academus. Laboratorios de Arte y Educación* (2011) at MUAC in Mexico City, which worked with thirty-one socially engaged artistic projects; while the second example will be the first co-directorship of the Museu de Arte Moderno in Rio de Janeiro (MAM-RJ) since its reopening in 2020 by two curators, Pablo Lafuente and Keyna Eleison. By looking at these two curatorial approaches, I will argue that contemporary socially engaged art practice and decolonial approaches to curating and institutional directorship carry the potential to facilitate community participation and inclusivity to positively redefine the museum's (not only representational) role.

#### ABOUT DINOSAURS AND CHAMELEONS

When speaking about the museum's representational role, it seems necessary to start by recalling what art historian Carol Duncan has taught us. In her understanding, museums can be:

[...] powerful identity-defining machines. To control a museum means precisely to control the representation of a community and some of its highest, most authoritative truths. It also means the power to define and rank people, to declare some as having a greater share than others in the community's common heritage – in its very identity. [...] What we see and do not see in our most prestigious art museums – and on what terms and whose authority we do or don't see – involves the much larger questions of who constitutes the community and who shall exercise the power to define its identity. (Duncan, 1991, 102)

It is against the backdrop of this knowledge that I would like the reader to follow the argument I will develop throughout the next few pages. If acknowledging that the museum holds a privileged power position in terms of defining, negotiating, and delimiting a people's identity and sense of belonging (or not) to a community (and as we will see, this is a power that has historically been used as a mechanism of control, invisibilisation, and othering), the question is what options it has at hand to change these dynamics today. It is in this sense – of signalling an acknowledgment of the long history of power abuse and exclusion on part of this institution in Western art history – that I use the terms 'dinosaur' and 'chameleon' to speak about

a concept of museum (and its corresponding museological practices) that no longer serves the societies we live in today. On the one hand, the term 'dinosaur' refers to a disapproval of a structure that in most cases has not managed to keep up and respond to the present reality in a meaningful way – a certain slowness or even resistance to change that leads to a perceived inadequacy with the times. The 'chameleon', on the other hand, describes an institution that changes its standing points as it seems convenient in their own interest without having a strong core of public values and objectives that benefit its community and that are coherently defended throughout its programmess and decisions.

From a Western art historical perspective, museums have been considered the public institution of the welfare state that carries the responsibility to collect, preserve and exhibit a nation's heritage. Parting from Monika Sommer's analysis of the museum's history (cf. Sommer, 2013), in which she identifies three key moments in the West's narrative that can be considered the birthing moment of this institution as we know it today – Hellenistic Antiquity, the cabinets of curiosities during the Renaissance, and if we speak about the modern museum, the Louvre and the French Revolution – curator and educator Nora Sternfeld proposes a fourth such moment. In her view, we cannot speak about the museum without acknowledging the constitution of the International Council of Museums, better known as ICOM, following the Second World War in 1946 (Sternfeld, 2018, 40–41). As Sternfeld emphasises, it was only through the formation of this association, which is tightly linked to UNESCO, that a transnational definition of the museum first took place and continued to be negotiated throughout regular conferences (Sternfeld, 2018, 40–41). As might already have become clear, these four proposed constitutive moments of the museum overlap with moments in history that are closely related to the history of the West as told by the foundational myths and the West's self-understanding as 'civilisation' (Sternfeld, 2018, 41), a notion certainly drenched with problematic associations. In 2011,<sup>6</sup> for instance, Walter Mignolo, scholar at the forefront of the modernity/coloniality working group, argued that museums did not only have "a particular role to play in the colonization of knowledge and of beings" (Mignolo, 2011, 71), but what seems much more important in this context: that they continue to do so today. In one of his first essays on artistic decolonial approaches, an analysis on Fred Wilson's *Mining the Museum* (1992) at the Maryland Historical Society, Mignolo recalls Franz Boas' ethnographic museum and how,

<sup>6</sup> This is the same year in which José González Casanova asked the questions mentioned in the beginning of this essay and curated *Jardín de Academus* at MUAC.

in the metropolis, museums were divided into two types. On the one hand, the museums that focused on building Europe's history and identity (Roman and Greek history being the forebears) and on the other hand those that told the history of the 'Other' – essentially everything that was considered external to Europe's self-understanding. As Mignolo highlights, this included, first and foremost, the histories of the colonised territories, but also that of the Chinese, who although never colonised by Europe were considered strangers (Mignolo, 2011, 73). Art museums, as we know them today, are, as Mignolo stresses, the epitome of those that built European history (Mignolo, 2011, 73). It is in this sense that museums (along with universities) must be understood as part of the central institutions that exerted the West's hegemonic power over other forms of knowledge and being. As such, they should also be institutions that we, today, confront with a certain scepticism and with an expectation of accountability expressed through a critical analysis of their own historical positioning.<sup>7</sup> Especially so, because whenever this positionality is not acknowledged and openly discussed leading to a shared, public reflection about the institutions' own implication in these historic circumstances, they tend to replicate the coloniality of knowledge and beings (Mignolo, 2011, 71).

What Mignolo discusses in his essay, quite clearly follows the line of thinking of the so-called reflexive turn in museological studies, or what became better known as 'new museology' throughout the 1980s – defined by tranzit.hu<sup>8</sup> in their online Curatorial Dictionary<sup>9</sup> as the moment in which:

[...] the museum as a public institution of political ideology started its "own" critical discourse, in which such themes appeared as post-colonialism, the "nation" as a construct, or the interpretation of "race" and "gender" as a social, ideological, and cultural construct. New correlations were constituted between authors, artworks, and meanings in the museum, which also influenced the collection and curatorial practice related to the collection. (tranzit.hu, n.d., New Museology)

And although the '80s are long gone and many of us would have wished for these discussions to have a

longer-lasting and more radical impact on present-day museological practice, many of these issues persist.

Taking on the conversations held throughout the '80s, in the 1990s a field of curatorial practice, institutional reform and debate known as new institutionalism started taking shape. As Claire Doherty describes it, this approach to curatorial practice was "concerned with the transformation of art institutions from within" (Doherty, 2004), but as opposed to the critique that addressed the institution beforehand, especially the artists from the '60s and '70s, followed by the new museological approach in the '80s, new institutionalism is associated with a few curators who bring their critical independent practices into the institutions they (temporarily) work at. As Alex Farquharson reminds us, institutional critique was a phenomenon that developed in specific geographical areas, mainly in north-central Europe, including the Nordic countries, the Netherlands and Germany (Farquharson, 2006). Adding to this, Jonas Ekeberg has argued that new institutionalism was an effort of "some agents of the art of the nineties" (Ekeberg, 2013, 20) to adapt the institutional frameworks to the workings of contemporary artists. As I have argued elsewhere, we can take from Farquharson that "new institutionalism [...] clearly connected to a handful of individuals that are presented as the drivers of change" (Steinvorth, 2023, 45). One such example is Maria Lind, who worked at the Kunstverein München and then moved on to take the lead of Tensta Konsthall in the suburb of Tensta in Stockholm. Another now very popular agent of new institutionalism is Charles Esche, who has been the director of the Van Abbemuseum in Eindhoven since 2004 and whose critical curatorial approach has turned the institution into one of international reference when it comes to a critical, decolonial approach to curatorial practice. However, despite the institution being an interesting example in terms of what becomes possible when curators-directors are granted the framework for a long-term critical engagement with an institution and its past, Claire Bishop also calls our attention to the fact that "the Van Abbemuseum has failed to embed itself into the local culture in Eindhoven and the region" (Bishop, 2013, 55). Speaking about the director's role in an institution, the duration of their engagement is important to consider as these positions normally don't allow for a longer-term engagement due to their rapidly rotating

7 Regarding the discussion around positionality cf. Haraway (1988) and Rogoff (2000).

8 Tranzit.hu is a network of independent initiatives working in the contemporary arts field across Austria, Czech Republic, Hungary, the Slovak Republic and Romania. The network was established in 2002 and as described on their website, its "experience with self-organized activities in progressive cultured dates back to the authoritarian society of the 1970s and '80s and has continued through the hypertransformational period of the comprehensive reform of all strata of society in the 1990s and up to the present" (tranzit.hu, n.d., About).

9 The Curatorial Dictionary is a long-term collaborative research project initiated in 2012 by tranzit.hu. It attempts to "interpret the most frequently used but hardly clear-cut concepts of curatorial-contemporary discourse, which has been ever expanding since the 1990s" (tranzit.org, n.d., About).

character, which in many cases leads to institutions with volatile programmes. This fact can also lead to the perception of museums as chameleons instead of reliable partners in a community. One such example is the MAAT museum in Lisbon, which in its short life has had three directors who took on totally different approaches to leading the institution. For instance, despite Beatrice Leanza's efforts to turn the museum into one that is open and relevant to the city's larger community through a varied programme including workshops, concerts and exhibitions that hosted artists and publics from the suburbs who are, under prevalent circumstances more often than not excluded from museological (and many other) dynamics in the city,<sup>10</sup> the institution itself did not commit to these values and with the change of director a change of priorities followed. This is a perfect example of what happens when institutions themselves do not change from within and how the positive efforts of a director in terms of inclusivity and community participation run the risk of turning into a replication of coloniality in the larger scheme of things: inviting artists and certain communities to present their work and be involved in the programmes of the institution but not committing to this objective in the long term. This specific aspect of curatorial practice has been acknowledged by curator and current director of the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro (MAM-RJ) Pablo Lafuente, who until mid-2023 worked out alongside co-director Keyna Eleison a framework to change the institutional approaches via internal policies that would survive their co-directorship of the institution.

Coming towards an end of this brief discussion about the museum's historically understood representative role, especially since the 1980's, I would like to turn again to Nora Sternfeld, who developed the notion of a radically democratic museum and is one of today's most well-known defendants of the idea that museums should serve their communities – and not just a privileged sector of it. Sternfeld describes assertively that:

[...] as a public institution the museum belongs to everybody, which means more than the understanding that it should merely be open to all. The museum gives us the possibility to ask ourselves who 'everybody' is and who is left out; it allows us to engage with what happened and to debate about what this means for the present and how, starting from there, a future that is more than just a prolongation of the present could be envisioned. (Sternfeld, 2018, 21)<sup>11</sup>

Notwithstanding the fact that museums continue to be spaces that may be open to all in theory but that are not even perceived as welcoming to all sectors of society yet, I believe it is from this point of view that we need to constantly ask ourselves how our understanding and expectations of the museum need to continue evolving. When, for instance, Sternfeld speaks about an engagement "with what happened", this entails a responsibility from the museum towards its collection and its institutional history considering that the museum, as a national, Western institution, has in practice translated its representational role into an expression of hegemonic power, perpetrating exclusions rather than being a space that serves their community. Furthermore, as Sternfeld also notes, museums today must be understood within the context of an ongoing transformation of the public sphere. According to the author, if once museums used to operate under the principles of the welfare state, today they have morphed into neoliberal institutions (Sternfeld, 2018, 15). As 1980s demands for the museum to actualise itself and be socially relevant were met with the implementation of structural and institutional management strategies, these brought along a growing economisation of the institution and as such, their effect results in an anti-democratic tendency in which competition, economics and visitor's numbers become the institutional priorities above questions concerning public, conservational and research matters (Sternfeld, 2018, 15). These concerns have previously been addressed by authors

10 Examples are MAAT Mode's Episode 3: Freedom Practices. Visions of a world in various states of emergency, with programmes developed throughout 2020 such as *Terra Irada* curated by Pedro Gomes, and *I am sparse in dense fluidity* curated by Marta Lança, *MAKA Lisboa* by artist Francisco Vidal, *Essa palavra presa na garganta*, a series of film screenings about freedom and *KUDURO-ÁXIS - Luanda, Lisbon & beyond*, a conversation and two hours of DJ sets. As one can read on the museum's website, these programmes were an important step for the museum "to solicit new forms of support and expanded outreach to local communities and contextual debates that touch upon processes of decolonialisation, cultural and political activism" (MAAT, 2020). Another, more recent programme that reflects the director's efforts to open the museum to the larger community of Lisbon was the exhibition entitled *Interferences. Emerging Urban Cultures* (2022) curated by António Brito Guterres, Carla Cardoso and Alexandre Farto. As the curators explain: "The cultural diversity that characterises Lisbon does not soften the many stories of a segmented and antagonistic metropolis. *Interferences* affirms different expressions of urban culture, exploring narrative itineraries of the city through dialogues that prioritise the museum as a critical space, a place where various communities and sensibilities come together – those part of the establishment who frequent it and those subordinate who are unfamiliar with it – as a starting point for new beginnings" (Cardoso et al., 2022)

11 My translation from the original in German: "als öffentliche Institution gehört das Museum allen – was mehr meint, als dass es bloß allen offenstehen sollte. Es verspricht die Möglichkeit, sich zu fragen, wer 'alle' sind und wer davon ausgeschlossen bleibt, erlaubt, sich damit auseinanderzusetzen, was geschehen ist, darüber zu verhandeln, was dies für die Gegenwart bedeutet und wie sich davon ausgehend eine Zukunft imaginieren lässt, die mehr ist als bloß die Verlängerung der Gegenwart" (Sternfeld, 2018, 21).

such as Paul Werner in his book straight-forwardly entitled *Museum Inc.* (2006). Also Andrea Fraser, and other artists such as Gregory Sholette<sup>12</sup> have called our attention towards this reality. As Fraser states: "That the art world, now a global multibillion-dollar industry, is not part of the 'real world' is one of the most absurd fictions of art discourse" (Fraser, 2005). It might come as no surprise that this development goes hand-in-hand with an ongoing transformation in which a logic of privatisation of contemporary art museums becomes dominant, in the West as well as in other geographies. As Bishop notes, Latin America is no exception:

[...] although publicly funded institutions of contemporary art have existed since the 1960s – for example in São Paulo and Lima, where two museums form part of university campuses (MAC-USP and LiMAC) – the highest-profile contemporary art spaces are all private: Jumex in Mexico City (established in 1999), MALBA in Buenos Aires (2001), Inhotim near Belo Horizonte, Brazil (2006). (Bishop, 2013, 11)

Acknowledging the current situation, and that privatisation often comes with strings attached – for example in the form of self-censorship due to compromises towards its funders<sup>13</sup> – what strategies do we have at hand to change towards a museological practice that is more inclusive, holding space for community participation as well as collective identity and meaning-making processes?

Coming back to Fraser, she argues that "moving from a substantive understanding of the 'institution' as specific places, organizations, and individuals to a conception of it as a social field, the question of what is inside and what is outside becomes much more complex" (Fraser, 2005). Through this broader understanding of the institutional field of art, it follows that not only the museum, the gallery and other physical places for collection, display and commercialisation become the target of institutional critique, but the values of the artists (and today I would necessarily add curators)<sup>14</sup> that stand behind it as individual actors and as a collective. As Fraser continues to clarify: "It's not a question of being against the institution: We are the institution. It's a question of what kind of institution we are, what kind of values we institutionalize,

what forms of practice we reward, and what kind of rewards we aspire to. Because the institution of art is internalized, embodied, and performed by individuals [...]" (Fraser, 2005).

Following this understanding of the institution as a superstructure made up of social processes and a collection of values and actions that together form what we commonly refer to as the art world and its physical spaces as representative of the institution, it becomes important to question our personal positionings within it as constitutive parts of the whole. But not only this, we need to acknowledge the importance that social processes and collaborative negotiations regarding the museum's representational role should take within museological practice.

In the now following second part of this essay, I will speak about two recent curatorial approaches that challenge the institution's representational role. Both projects are great examples of the absolute necessity of including socially engaged practices into institutional programmes considering their (and their communities' and collaborators') own terms and needs as well as about the importance of the curator-director to work on long-term changes to an institution that will in most cases only be lead for a short period of time. As we will see from these still exceptional cases, understanding the museum as a platform for inclusivity and community participation is still rare and exceptions continue to be linked to singular actors within the field that prioritise placemaking in their curatorial practice.

#### ANTI-HEGEMONIC AND DECOLONIAL SOCIALLY ENGAGED ART AND CURATORIAL PRACTICE: CRITICAL APPROACHES TO THE MUSEUM'S (REPRESENTATIONAL) ROLE

Speaking about the ethnographic museum and pinning down its role in the modernity/coloniality dynamic, sociologist and theorist Rolando Vázquez explains that in the ethnographic museum we find representations of the ones considered 'other' according to colonial differentiation systems, "classifying them, speaking *about* them, but not serving them and considering them as spectators: they are the ones that are seen, not the ones that are privileged to see" (Vázquez, 2019, 2). Touching upon the power relation between the one who sees and the one who is seen, in

12 Sholette has written extensively on the relation between art and activism, focusing particularly on the elitist, established art system which incorporates artists that are at first considered radical outsiders into their closed circles (cf. Sholette, 2011; 2022).

13 Naturally, the sole fact that an institution is publicly funded does not make these questions obsolete. However, considering the nature of its character, it becomes easier to hold a publicly funded institution accountable in relation to its representational role.

14 As curator and editor of the online publication *OnCurating* Dorothee Richter has recently highlighted in a special edition dedicated to documenta fifteen, "curating takes place as part of the representational space, and it therefore develops a biopolitical power, an emanation of specific concepts for a worldview for a bigger part of society. What happens in the curatorial sphere might present a specific problem, a specific solution, or a specific concept of the relationship between subjects and communities" (Richter, 2022).

other words, the one who represents and the one who is represented, Vázquez picks up on a crucial point in relation to the way imperial, colonial and hegemonic control is maintained through the undermining of self-determined identity-building processes. There are plenty examples of how the look from outside misrepresents the 'Other', be it through an ethnographic gaze, the widely discussed male gaze as shown in John Berger's meanwhile classic *Ways of Seeing* (1972) and more recently, Nicholas Mirzoeff's decolonial "right to look" (Mirzoeff, 2011). Mirzoeff has written extensively on decolonisation in relation to visual culture and has most recently focused especially on the museum and the university as contested arenas involved in maintaining hegemonic regimes of visuality. Countering these practices, the author proposes a right to look, which, as he explains:

[...] is not about seeing. It begins at the personal level with the look into someone else's eyes to express friendship, solidarity, love. That look must be mutual, each person inventing the other or it fails. As such it is unrepresentable. The right to look claims autonomy, not individualism or voyeurism, but the claim to a political subjectivity and collectivity. (Mirzoeff, 2011, 1)

I believe it is this possibility that inspires anti-hegemonic and decolonial socially engaged artists and curators, whose practice recognises the value of social platforms and moments of encounter. Consequently, artistic objects and documentation become results to a process that is first and foremost, one of social character. It is through the creation of such platforms of encounter that we can even start thinking about a possible dismantling of modernity's and coloniality's toxic hierarchies and that the process of imagining collective identity spaces begins.

In this panorama, it is certainly no coincidence that the interest of a new generation of artists in socially engaged practice has revived the discussion around the representational role of art and museums. First and foremost, about how to include these artistic practices, which usually develop on a very local scale<sup>15</sup> into the institution itself but also about how to include the communities they work with.

Although there are different reasons that could be noted when looking for explanations to the persistence of these artist's marginal position in their local art scenes as well as in the context of global art circuits, I believe that the museum's complex institutional history regarding its representational role and our not-yet internalised understanding of its role as catalyst for inclusivity and community participation stand in the way of a much-needed change in the arts ecosystem. I'm especially interested in the ways some contemporary practitioners are experimenting with processes of place-making, in which artists and curators become facilitators of a community-oriented space in which a framework for self-determined representation and identity-building processes can take place.

One such example is José Miguel González Casanova's project *Jardín de Academus. Laboratorios de Arte y Educación* (2011) held at MUAC in Mexico City. The artist-curator invited thirty-one socially engaged projects, amongst them his students from the *Medios Múltiples* [Multiple Mediums] course he led at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), to intervene in the gallery for two days at a time with a series of workshops. The proposal was that each artist works with a group of people they had already been involved with before and included other potential visitors that came to the institution. After every process-oriented workshop the material outcome of these gatherings would remain in the space, adding to the exhibition space.

When curator and secretary of MUAC Jorge Reynoso Pohlenz reflected on the project, he highlighted the following:

[...] if the museum is a signifying system that is saying something, what is it that it is saying? And, to whom? Regardless of the complex operations of *Jardín de Academus*, of the tensions that it generated in the changing definitions of who are them and us regarding creators, coordinators, producers, participants, and spectators, I hope that the questions mentioned above<sup>16</sup> continue influencing the reflections of MUAC, which is defined here as an association of people, rather than a group of professionals or an institutional organism. (Reynoso Pohlenz, 2011, 11)<sup>17</sup>

15 As Luis Camnitzer has rightly noted: "Those works that deviate from the canon because they introduce elements [...] of local interest or relevance are ignored [...] or seen as less important. Ironically, it is often those works that are not necessarily accessible outside their primary audience that have a greater local impact and cultural importance" (Camnitzer, 2007, 23).

16 He refers here to questions paraphrased from González Casanova: "if the museum is a signifying system that is saying something, what is it saying? And, to whom is it saying it?" (Reynoso Pohlenz, 2011, 11).

17 My translation from the original in Spanish: "Si el museo es un sistema significativo que está diciendo algo, qué es lo que está diciendo?; y, a quién se lo está diciendo? Más allá de la complejidad operativa de *Jardín de Academus*, de las tensiones que generó en las cambiantes definiciones de quiénes eran *ellos y nosotros* en lo tocante a creadores, coordinadores, productores, participantes y espectadores, espero que el par de preguntas mencionadas arriba perduren reflexivamente en el MUAC, definido aquí como una asociación de personas, antes que como un grupo de profesionales o como un organismo institucional" (Reynoso Pohlenz, 2011, 11).



**Figure 1: Daily activities. May 21, 2010. Participants in Rosângela Rennó's Menos Valía (2010). Asistentes: Alexis Azevedo, Fernando Caridi and Andrés Jurado. Auctioneer: Darío T. Pie. Participants: vendors of the Martín Carrera, Portales, Santa Cruz, La Lagunilla, San Felipe and Santa Marta markets and general public (Photo: José Miguel González Casanova).**

Interestingly, this statement speaks directly to Fraser's previously mentioned understanding of institutional critique, which she would rather frame as a dynamic and ongoing institution of critique. Both authors acknowledge and build on the importance of understanding the institution not as an organism that is separate from persons, but as made up of persons, who embody and perform values and relations before anything else.

In accordance with this understanding of an institution, the project by González Casanova shows us a possible way forward when it comes to welcoming socially engaged practices and the communities they work with into the institution. This does not go without challenges towards the same institution and its usual ways of operating. As González Casanova highlights: "every project provoked a negotiation between the habits of the museum and the will to inhabit the space as expressed by the creators-participants of the workshops" (González Casanova, 2011, 22).<sup>18</sup> The project did not only allow for a

clear negotiation between the institution and the artists, but also between the artists and the participants of the workshops. As González Casanova explains, the concept emphasised that:

*The artist is a sculptor who creates a social form. An identity. On the other hand, the interpreter or reader gives it a meaning. In this case, the aim was to incite a creative collaboration that would revert the passive role of the reader to generate instead an active participation of signification, of knowledge, and acknowledgment. (González Casanova, 2011, 16)*<sup>19</sup>

This curatorial approach led to a vivid negotiation of the representational space of the museum. But as the artist-curator also emphasises, this would not have happened would the publics not have felt compelled to participate and create their own iden-titarian narratives:

18 My translation from the original in Spanish: "cada proyecto provocó una negociación entre los hábitos del museo y la voluntad de habitación de los creadores participantes de los laboratorios" (González Casanova, 2011, 22).

19 My translation from the original in Spanish: "El [artista] es un escultor que crea una forma social. Una identidad. Por otro lado, el intérprete o lector es quien le da significado. En este caso se trataba de provocar una colaboración creativa que revirtiera el papel pasivo del lector para generar una participación activa de significación, de conocimiento y reconocimiento" (González Casanova, 2011, 16).



**Figure 2: Daily activities. May 29, 2010. Pins created in the framework of Mónica Mayer and Víctor Lerma's Yo no celebro ni conmemoro guerras (2010). Participants: Nelly César Marín, Lyliana Chávez, Orly Cortes, Ivonne Gallegos, Isabel Hernández Mújica, Aldo Juárez, Xochi Lechuga, Adán Lerma, Mauricio Morales, Adriana Raggi, Pierina Ruas, Italo Ruas, Sachiko Uzeta and Yukari Uzeta (Photo: José Miguel González Casanova).**

The participants integrated because they were included in a process of constructing their own identity and being acknowledged by the world through a creative affirmation of learning and signification, of knowledge and communication. As spectators or as students they didn't become the empty receivers of information, or its mere reflection, because they participated in the creation of the experience. (González Casanova, 2011, 18)<sup>20</sup>

Based on Paulo Freire's lessons on education, González Casanova created a space within the institution that developed its own ways of working and strategies to bring in people who would normally not have felt compelled to go to a space that, under normal circumstances, does not speak to them, even less with them. Through the transformation of the space into a participatory platform the institution developed the potential to become relevant to a broader and active public.

20 My translation from the original in Spanish: "Los participantes se integraron porque se incluían en un proceso de construcción de su propia identidad y de reconocimiento del mundo, por una afirmación creativa de aprendizaje y significación, de conocimiento y comunicación. Como espectadores o como estudiantes no fueron al receptor vacío de una información, o su mero reflejo, porque participaron en la creación de la experiencia" (González Casanova, 2011, 18).

21 My translation from the original in Spanish: "Es muy importante la experiencia de comunicación para quien ha sido limitado, ignorado y hasta encerrado, y ésta comienza con el reconocimiento de su existencia por parte del 'exterior', del mundo normal y normativizado que ha hallado en esta alteridad una razón para excluirlos e incomunicarlos" (González Casanova, 2011, 20).

Acknowledging the importance of the communicative act for inclusion to become possible, González Casanova reminds us of the importance of being seen and acknowledged as we are, especially if we have been denied this right for a long time:

*To experience communication is very important for whoever has been limited, ignored, or even locked away, and this experience begins with an acknowledgement of this person's existence from the 'outside' world, the normal and normalized world who has found a reason in their alterity to exclude them or cut their communication ties. (González Casanova, 2011, 20)*<sup>21</sup>

This approach, which centres on communication and social encounters, especially for those who have been denied the public spaces to experience a healthy acknowledgement of themselves and their identities, reflects

Mirzoeff's understanding of the importance of what he calls "the right to look" (Mirzoeff, 2011). Through a curatorial approach that acknowledges the potential of encounters and creates platforms for socially engaged practices, the institution that is open to negotiating its usual ways of operating can become relevant to a broader segment of society. In this sense, socially engaged art can potentiate an institution's inclusivity and community participation. Especially, if this is conceived of as in the form of longer-term institutional commitments, both with the artists and the larger community.

A recent and interesting example in this regard is the work that started developing by the hand of the co-directorship at MAM-RJ since 2020. Pablo Lafuente and Keyna Eleison<sup>22</sup> made it their goal to make this long-standing institution relevant to the present days, by consciously thinking about inclusivity and community participation. To start with, their curatorial approach acknowledges the system's historically inherent racism and exclusionary politics to think about a long-lasting change via succession planning. As Lafuente explains:

*We could bring in the passistas from Mangueira<sup>23</sup> to do something, but we don't want them to come, have them perform and that they leave and the museum is left with some photos... This the museums know very well how to do, incorporating without it affecting the functioning of the museum. We have to modify the modes of operating, we have to put the institution at risk: in its convictions, in its ways of working and operating. (Lafuente, as cited by Royo Gual, 2020)<sup>24</sup>*

Following this approach to directing an institution, and with the clear objective of bringing the museum closer to the city's peripheries and its inhabitants, one of the first changes the co-directors introduced after taking on their positions at MAM-RJ

was to get rid of the institution's entrance fee. Thus, the museum now counts on voluntary contributions. As Lafuente explains: "The inequalities in Brazil are rampant. A museum that charges the same entrance fee for everybody is abstracting itself from the reality in which it is inserted" (Lafuente, as cited by Royo Gual, 2020).<sup>25</sup>

Furthermore, and coming to speak about their curatorial approach in leading the museum, Lafuente and Eleison radically questioned the centrality of the exhibition within museological practice. As Lafuente describes in an interview organised by the Brazilian initiative *Museu Sem Paredes*:

*Museums are more than just a place for presenting. It sounds simple, but we need to understand the density of this: museums are also a place for custody, a place for education, a place for creation, [...] a place for formation and maybe even agency. It's complicated. [...] Withdrawing the central role of the art exhibition is a provocative way of giving space to all these other actions that are also part of the institution museum. (Lafuente, 2021, min. 8:30)<sup>26</sup>*

He continues to explain that their decision to work on this specific matter is not new. In his own words:

*It's interesting to compare the ICOM congress of 1972 in Santiago, Chile with examples of texts written in the '70s in Europe by museums and curators. And it's interesting to see how the emphasis on the social function of the museum as well as on its educational role, of its necessity of relating to the policies of the ministries of education, etc. was an issue that was very much present in the museum definition that was proposed in Latin America during the '70s. (Lafuente, 2021, min. 9:20)<sup>27</sup>*

22 In July of 2023, Keyna Eleison left her position at the museum and Pablo Lafuente took on the sole directorship of the institution that they previously shared.

23 Lafuente's comment references an anecdote about artist Hélio Oiticica's and Mangueira's planned performance at MAM-RJ in 1965. Oiticica, in an attempt to bring together his avant-garde artistic practice with the best of popular culture of the time, had invited the dancers from the samba school of Mangueira to perform. Yet the museum guards did not let the dancers, the so-called *passistas* – mostly black inhabitants of the favela – enter the institution.

24 My translation from the original in Spanish: "Podríamos traer a los *passistas* de Mangueira para hacer algo, pero no queremos que vengan a hacer un espectáculo y se vayan y que el museo tenga unas fotos... Eso los museos lo saben hacer muy bien, incorporar sin que afecte en nada al funcionamiento del museo. Hay que modificar la manera de funcionar, hay que poner en riesgo la institución en sus convicciones y en sus formas de trabajar y de operar" (Lafuente, as cited by Royo Gual, 2020).

25 My translation from the original in Spanish: "En Brasil las desigualdades son brutales. Un museo que cobra una entrada igual para todo el mundo se está abstrayendo de la realidad en la que vive" (LaFuente, as cited by Royo Gual, 2020).

26 My translation from the original in Portuguese: "O museu não é só um lugar de apresentação. Soa muito simples, mas é necessário entender a densidade disso: o museu é um lugar de custodia também, é um lugar de educação, é um lugar de criação, [...] é um lugar de formação, de agenciamento talvez até. É complicado. [...] Tirar a centralidade da exposição de arte é um jeito de polemicamente criar ou deixar espaço para todas essas outras ações que também são parte da instituição museu" (Lafuente, 2021, min. 8:30).

27 My translation from the original in Portuguese: "É interessante comparar o congresso do ICOM em 1972 em Santiago de Chile com por exemplo textos escritos nos anos '70 na Europa por museus e curadores. E é interessante ver como essa ênfase na função social do museu e a função educativa do museu, a necessidade de relação do museu com as políticas educativas dos ministérios de educação, etc. era uma questão que estava muito presente na definição de museu que se propôs nos anos '70 na América Latina" (Lafuente, 2021, min. 9:20).

Taking away the exhibition's centrality within the museum and openly defending that not all resources need to be invested in public moments of presenting, opens up the possibility to advance other types of community engagement such as MAM-RJ has done through its recently implemented residency programmes. This way, the institution acknowledges the importance of considering other moments that are less public in its nature but in which the institution is – or at least should – also be involved. Following this line of thought, MAM-RJ has implemented five types of residencies, for artists, artists with disabilities, school and high school teachers, teenagers, and curators from areas considered peripheral. All the residencies are understood as moments in which learning can happen both ways, meaning for the residents as well as for the institution who shows itself open and eager to receive feedback from the residents in relation to their work with the aim of being able to continue developing their critical questioning of the institution and its ways of operating. In this sense, the museum presents itself as an institution that wants to listen to its public to better adapt itself to their specific interests and necessities.

## CONCLUSION

Although critical discourse about the complexities of the museum's (representational) role is ongoing (Bishop, 2013; Sternfeld, 2018; Kupka, 2023), there seem to be interesting curatorial strategies being developed to respond to these institutional challenges, revealing the museum's potential as place-holder for collective identity-processes and

as active placemaker. Through the creation of platforms for social encounter and participation, cultural institutions can hold space for segments of society that have, for many centuries, not had access to representational spaces – even less so as subjects and narrators of their own stories. This demands the institutions' acknowledgement of its responsibility in these historical processes as well as a long-term commitment to change these dynamics. As the two discussed examples, *Jardín de Academus* (2011) at MUAC and the institutional changes implemented at MAM-RJ have shown, there are feasible ways for museums to move towards a realisation of ICOM's new museum definition. As both projects focus on the importance of process and the creation of platforms for social encounters, both building on the impact of collective learning experiences and the importance of institutional listening, they open the possibility to dismantle hegemonic dynamics through counter-practices. If, as Raymond Williams has claimed, "a lived hegemony is always a process. It is not, except analytically, a system or a structure. It is a realized complex of experiences, relationships, and activities, with specific and changing pressures and limits" (Williams, 1977, 112), then anti-hegemonic and decolonial artistic and curatorial processes seem the only possible practice to dismantle historically exclusionary systems from within the institution. It is in this sense that I would like to call attention to these practices, encouraging further thought and action acknowledging the urgency for museums to consider anti-hegemonic and decolonial socially engaged artists and curators as allies to think about better ways of doing museum today.

## O DINOZAVRIH IN KAMELEONIH ALI O REPREZENTATIVNI VLOGI MUZEJEV: KAJ, ZA KOGA IN V KAKŠNIH OKOLIŠČINAH?

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### POVZETEK

*Dani prispevek obravnava nedavno revidirano opredelitev muzeja, ki jo je pripravil Mednarodni muzejski svet (International Council of Museum, ICOM) in govori o vlogi in možnih načinih za vključevanje in sodelovanje javnosti in lokalnih skupnosti. Obravnavani so pojmi nove muzeologije, de-kolonialno mišljenje ter diskurz o zgodovini reprezentativne vloge muzeja ter njegove institucionalne kritike. V prispevku sta obravnavana dva kuratorska pristopa, ki bi lahko spodbudila večje sodelovanje in vključenost skupnosti, pri čemer bi omogočila usmerjanje prostorskih posegov in umeščanje prostorskih praks v širši kontekst. Sprva je predstavljen pristop umetnika José Miguel González Casanove s kuratorskim projektom Jardín de Academus (2011) v Museo Universitario de Arte Contemporáneo (Ciudad de Mexico), v katerem je v galerijski prostor povabil enaintrideset del družbeno angažiranih pobud. V drugem delu analiziramo kontekstualno usmerjen in sistemsko ozaveščen kuratorski pristop Pabla Lafuenteja in Keyne Eleison, prvih voditeljev muzeja the Museu de Arte Moderna v Riu de Janeiru. Antihegemonska in dekolonialna družbeno angažirana umetniška praksa in kuratorsko delo sta predstavljena in obravnavana kot možna zaveznika, ko gre za ponovni razmislek o današnji muzejski praksi skozi prizmo ustvarjanja prostora in njegove reprezentacije.*

**Ključne besede:** muzeji, reprezentacija, kuratorstvo, *placemaking*, družbeno angažirana umetnost, inkluzivnost, sodelovanje skupnosti

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