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“Ecomuseum”: one of the many components of the New Museology

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ABSTRACT: The word “ecomuseum” was created by H. de Varine-Bohan to translate a set of new ideas developed by G. H. Rivière. New Museology gains one of its keywords, but it is very limitative to identify the movement of New Museology exclusively with the dynamics of the ecomuseum. On the contrary, New Museology is a movement of a wide theoretical and methodological range, whose position is still crucial for the effective renovation of all the museums of the 21st century. Today, the clarity of the term seems weak, and more so because of the proliferation of other designations: postmodern museology, critical museology, sociomuseology… In this article I intend to clarify the most important strands of the New Museology. I claim that there is no need to make up a new designation – we shall keep “New Museology” – since its guidelines support either the renovation begun in the 1960s, or the much craved renovation of the 21st century.

1 INTRODUCTION

In May 1968, a group of museum professionals came together spontaneously in Paris to object to museums, considered “bourgeois institutions”. Students even demanded the suppression of all museums and the scattering of their collections across common daily places: “La Jaconde au métro” is their slogan. At the same time in the United States of America, some artists united to reject art and museums. The new artistic languages and expressions showed a non empathy for the institution and resorted to the use of alternative spaces such as huge empty warehouses, approaching an anti-museum model. Simultaneously, in several European countries, the rate of museum visitors was dropping and it became clear that the institution had transformed into nothing more than a lugubrious storage of objects.

The social context of strong questioning and change that marked the 1960s did not allow the museum to go through that period unscathed. On the other hand, the inclusion of the museum within those social movements and the dynamic analysis of its collections required a real metamorphosis of the institution. The ruling lethargy would be removed through two distinct type of renovation: the project and the political ideal of cultural democratization with the help of the museum and its practices as an area of theoretical and epistemological reflection. In both cases, the contribution of the ethnographic museums and anthropology would be paramount. From each of those renovation types, however, in the ‘80s, will result a set of developments framed within the so called New Museology, either in its French strand or Anglo-Saxon strand, respectively.
THE MUSEUM AND THE COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

The subject of cultural democratization (or “popular education”) becomes particularly relevant in France. Since the critical opinion that so far the museum had been an instrument at the service of the social and intellectual elite, the continuation of its existence is perceived as something that must be converted into an institution at the service of everyone and used by everyone. The museum can and should be a privileged instrument for a permanent education, and a cultural centre available for everyone. According to this opinion, a set of reformulations is proposed, and at a more or less slower pace, it is adopted inside and outside France.

The presence of George Henri Rivière (1897-1985) and his museological theories defended and applied in the Musée National des Arts et Traditions Populaires, in Paris, is unquestionable in this line of renovation. The fact that the museum can meet the newly assigned functions means, among other things, that some museographical experimentation can be introduced, with the underlying intention of conveying the message from the museum to the greatest possible amount of people. In the words of G. H. Rivière “(...) you can’t measure the success of a museum by the number of visitors, but by the number of visitors to whom something is taught. The museum is not measure by the number of objects it displays, but by the number of objects that might have been perceived by the visitors in its human environment.” (Schlumberger, 1989: 7). His pioneer work reveals itself namely in the refusal of sheer visual delight in the observation of isolated objects, and in the search for an exhibition itinerary or museographical language. The latter is accomplished through several techniques, among which the reconstitution of realistic settings, the “ecological units”, recreating a certain social context there, and making the exhibited objects relive. The reconstitution of complete operatory processes to illustrate a determined process of material production is another possibility. Concerning showcases, the systematic use of the nylon thread, through which the artifacts were kept in a realistic position of use, granted Rivière the title of “showcase magician” (Gorgus, 2003). We can also mention the use of several exhibition components, such as explanatory texts adapted to different publics, graphic and audiovisual resources, and allowing some of the exhibited objects to be touched.

At other levels, the perception of the museum as an educational and auxiliary instrument for the awareness of citizens is equally translated in the defence of other innovations. In a comprehensive way, the opening of the museum to the exterior is advocated, meaning either the widespread dissemination of the institution in uncommon places such as fairs, or the holding of conferences or concerts in the museum facilities. The intention of closing the gap between the museum and the population, and the concern with their access to the institution equally support the establishment of the first educational services for school audiences, and of the cultural action services aimed at a wider public, as well as the creation, in 1971, of the first museum bus, at the Musée Savoisien de Chambéry.

It is important to understand that the referred museological innovations were disseminated in the 1970s, but were not widely spread. Renewal tends to appear recurrently in temporary exhibitions, however, the museographical materials tend not to be renewed in permanent exhibitions. And even this partial adhesion is quite variable according to different disciplinary areas: less effective among art historians, and more regular among anthropologists. For this reason, we should stress the contribution given by ethnographic museums and anthropology to the support of the proposed renovations. On the one hand, ethnographic museums embody an extension of the notion of museum object, since the artifacts they deal with are all sorts of everyday objects which are not qualified for the traditional “work of art” category. On the other hand, the understanding of ethnographic objects as missing their intrinsic value, since their meaning can only be comprehended by the respective socio-cultural framing where they are produced and/or used, strengthens the need to contextualize them, and, therefore, the need to place them within an exhibition discourse. In a time still far from the current heritage paradigm, proclaiming the indissoluble nature of its material and immaterial dimensions, anthropology clearly highlighted the impossibility of being otherwise.

In the 1970s, maintaining the ideal of cultural democratization and simultaneously realizing that the implementation of the required museological renovations to accomplish such a goal is not sufficient, leads one to question whether the existent institution will be capable of meeting its new purposes: being an instrument for permanent learning and socio-cultural animation,
interacting closely with people. This bringing the museum into question raises new proposals for other types of museums – the ecomuseum and/or the community museum. In the new typology, “the decisive innovation relates to the communitarian logic of the project, defined by the territoriality of the intervention area and by the population’s participation” (Poulot, 2008:178). Recognizing the importance of the social and political dimensions of the museum, the promotion of a “integral museum” (Varine-Bohan, 1976) is advocated, taking into consideration all the problems of the community that houses it, itself performing a pivotal role as an instrument of participative animation and sustainable development.

The term “ecomuseum” was invented in 1971 in the context of the IX General Conference of Museums of the ICOM – held in Grenoble (France) and dedicated to the discussion of the museum’s functions at the service of the human being – by the then Director of the ICOM, Hugues de Varine-Bohan. And his model of “integral museum” gathered momentum in 1972, during the Round Table of Santiago do Chile (carried out at the initiative of UNESCO to debate the role of the museum in Latin America), alongside the growing awareness of the attending professionals who ignore the communities where they work and where the museums are located. However, the set of practices which will be referred as museology: “active”, “popular”, “participative”, “communitarian”, “experimental”, “anthropological” and others alike, finds its predecessors once more in the 1960s. In September 1966, the well known Conferences of Lurs-en-Provence were held in France with the purpose of discussing the constitution of Natural Parks as structures capable of promoting the defence of the cultural and natural heritage. In this debate, G. H. Rivière defends that Parks should include “museographically explored compounds”, where constructions displaced from their original environments would be located, according to the Scandinavian model of *plein air* museum. The Parks are eventually created in 1967, and inside them the so called “park houses”, considered as the immediate predecessors of the ecomuseum. The Natural Park provides to the ecomuseum a decisive opportunity of development, because within the Park the connection between sustainable development, socio-cultural animation and identity references is facilitated. At about the same time, some museums in large cities begin to create antennae spread across peripheral neighbourhoods, which also foreshadows the “musee eclaté”, recognized as the prototype of the ecomuseum (Varine-Bohan, 1973), i.e., a multidisciplinary and displaced museum expanding throughout different and disperse exhibition locations. The examples still emblematic today of the pioneer movement of approaching the community in large urban centres are the Anacostia Neighbourhood Museum (1967), located in Washington D.C., and an extension of the Smithsonian Institution, as well as the Casa del Museo (1968), located in Mexico City and linked to the Museo Nacional de Antropología.

Meanwhile, the Ecomuseum of the Urban Community Le Creusot/Montceau-les-Mines (France), established in April 1974, turned out to be a referential landmark because it extended beyond the link of the ecomuseumological project to the world of Parks and actually approach the ideal of the “integral museum” created at the Round Table of Santiago. The “adventure of Creusot” was significant from its inception, because it was an urban community strongly influenced by industrial activities, where the first industrial archaeology activity took place. The experience was equally pioneering for the way it managed to articulate the protection of the material and immaterial heritage, how the inhabitants took to this experience, and the artistic creation, materializing an approach of “culture” in its most effective anthropological sense. Briefly put, the goal of creating a Musée de l’Homme et de l’Industrie de Le Creusot is defined in 1970, designed and animated by a local Centre of Visual Arts created in 1970. The development of this project and the consequent establishment of a local Association leads to the establishment of the Ecomuseum of the Urban Community Le Creusot/Montceau-les-Mines in 1974, which seeks to organically link memory, training, collaborative management, and artistic and industrial creation.

During the 1970s, the ecomuseum spread in France and abroad, covering a broad range of formulas. In terms of organization, however, the administration model established in Le Creusot is recurrent, formed by three committees: managers, users and researchers; but their desired balance tends not to be achieved. Throughout the 1980s polymorphism would keep on growing, but the so called third generation ecomuseums would tend to strengthen the participative philosophy of the institution, insisting on its social dimension (Hubert, 1989).
3 THE MUSEUM AS OBJECT OF STUDY AND REFLECTION

The other renovation line of the museological institution taking place in the late 1960s, was enabled by the election of the museum and its practices as a field of theoretical and epistemological reflection. These developments intersect, firstly, with the emergence of a new epistemological attitude, which was rightly called "poststructuralist" or "postmodernist". If the 18th century Enlightenment led to the assertion of a positivist epistemology which proclaimed the absolute nature of knowledge, its universal applicability and the certainty of its achievement by strictly complying with the scientific method, the emergence of criticism towards this conception of knowledge gives rise to the issue of representational criticism. Certainty and trust, previously placed on the superiority of rational thought, are now changed by the perception that knowledge is always and inevitably a historical and social construction. The emerging epistemology ceases to understand knowledge as absolutely objective and disinterested, insisting, instead, on the need to unveil its political and power implications, as well as the corresponding relativity and limitations. By producing knowledge, the different disciplinary areas simultaneously generate representations about reality that need to be disassembled and questioned. The constructed representations are not harmful, instead they support and communicate meanings which help, or not, reproduce inequalities and the status quo.

Given this new poststructuralist epistemological attitude, marked by great reflexivity and sensitivity about the partial nature of knowledge and its political implications, the museum sees its own principles and concepts become targets of analysis and questioning. The museological institution itself emerges as a pertinent research object for several disciplinary areas, since the "old" narratives shown within it – representations about cultures, science, art, people, nation, empire, class, race – cease to be held as "right" or "true", being instead understood as deserving of critical analysis and reevaluation. Representational criticism affects the very concept of museum and museological studies. Translating the introduction of new approaches within the museological subject area, the discussion about the nature of the institution is established, on the nature and meaning of its collections, its modalities of cultural representation, its institutional identity, and even its mission and place in society.

Before mentioning other equally relevant factors within this line of museological renovation, it is important to understand that the new critical focus conferred upon the museum makes it emerge as the core a much broader discussion. The museum becomes a particular locus where some of the great contemporary theoretical and epistemological issues are debated and fought. Stemming from the new raised levels of reflection and interest, the museum professionals are confronted – although they don’t always engage in a dialogue – with approaches of other disciplinary areas, and forced to admit that the museum researchers are not just themselves, but also a quite widespread set of scholars. On the other hand, insisting that the museological institution and the meanings of its contents are contextual and contingent – instead of fixed – leads to the awareness of the need to include other "voices" within museological discourses, absent so far. In other words, the awareness of the need to widen the representational space of the museum keeps growing.

This second renovation strand of museology – focused on the critical study of the museum and its representational practices – also intersects with the introduction of theoretical perspectives, namely anthropological, in the study of the museum as a social institution. Within this framework, the contributions of anthropology must be stressed once more, because since the 1970s they have manifested either through the renovation of material culture studies, or the emergence of what can be called an anthropological museology (Kaplan, 1984). Perhaps it needs reminding that anthropology has been the only social science with a strict relationship with the museological institution since its establishment in the 19th century. Subsequently, in the 1920s, those relationships suffered a quite radical break related to the adoption of a structural-functionalist conceptual and methodological position, as well as to the creation of anthropology departments in the university. However, this dissociation between anthropology and the museums would be overcome in the 1970s (Duarte, 1997). This reappraisal and correlative resurgence of an anthropological museology are closely connected to the assertion of an interpretative approach in anthropology, and the corresponding perception of social phenomena as processes of construction of meanings, as proposed by Clifford Geertz [1973].
In order to account for this new interpretative attitude, namely the reorientation effects it allowed within the multiple areas of cultural studies, some authors (Milner & Browill, 2002; Mason, 2006; Anico, 2006) use the expression “contemporary cultural theory”, as if the “culture” they talk about were a totally new construct. However, the outlines of such a “cultural theory” are not understandable if the anthropological affiliation of the utilized notion of “culture” is not recognized, nor its connection with the interpretative approach. Thus, it is crucial to clarify how the interpretative perspective, noticeable in anthropology since the 1970s, helped corroborate the direction of the identified museological renovation. With the interpretative perspective, cultures are understood as “webs of significance” that social beings themselves spin and to which they are tied, and the cultural analysis is understood as a “search of meaning” (Geertz, 1989: 4). Anthropological interpretation aims to construct a reading of what happens through the analysis of the social discourse, which manifests itself both through words and actions. It should be highlighted both the semiotic nature of the formulated concept of culture and the relevance given to the consideration of processes of production and the communication of meanings. These are understood as taking place in different situations and spaces through different practices and behaviours, performed by multiple agents. Even the analytical results produced within the numerous disciplinary areas are interpretations from which it is important to unveil the social and political implications.

The increasing importance conferred to processes of meaning construction strengthens the perception of the museum as a privileged research object. The museum is a social institution that produces meaning systems and that communicates them publicly. On the other hand, value constructions and narrative discourses undertaken in the museum are not timeless or absolute. They are attributions of meanings that, because they involve the possibility of alternative meanings, always involve power struggles. Under this perspective, the museum is rediscovered by anthropology as a locus of research and reflection (Duarte, 1998). Accepting that the production of interpretations and the acknowledgment of meanings depend on the context has direct repercussions on the understanding that the museum object and its exhibition have no internal meanings. On the contrary, these meanings depend on the respective context of exhibition and interpretation. In other words, the interpretative turn in anthropology strengthens the recognition that the museum object is polysemic and that no exhibition is neutral. The activities of the museum and particularly those related to the arrangement of its objects in the exhibition deserve attention, sustaining a textual approach of the museological institution. The museum is a discursive space whose strategies and exhibition narratives deserve a close analysis in order to disclose both the constructed and communicated meanings and their ideological, political and ethical implications.

4 “NEW MUSEOLOGY”: THE ARRIVAL OF A THEORETICAL MUSEOLOGY

The two previous points in this article sought to show – in a reasonably exhaustive way – the many aspects of the museological institution which, from a certain period on, were under scrutiny. Before 1960, we can talk about a traditional (or “modern”) museology that had been developed in strict articulation with the establishment of the modern Nation-state and the European colonial empires, and the corresponding education of their citizens (Bennett, 1995), but which lacked the whole self-questioning or self-criticism about the foundations and the social and political role of the museum. The situation changed radically in 1960/70 because of the many areas that professionals and academics begin to consider as in need and/or deserving debate and renovation. It is important to understand that it is as a result of that movement that in the 1980s one will speak about New Museology, a name chosen precisely to translate the theoretical and reflexive turn that was being made – or seen as something that still needed promotion – in contemporary museology.

Therefore, understanding that the dynamics and strands of museological renovation mentioned before are the main concerns of New Museology, it is now possible to pay closer attention to its outlines. It is probably clear by now through the strands enhanced in this article that we need to understand the designation “New Museology” as embracing either the developments of the French strand or the Anglo-Saxon strand, which are not contrary but complementary. Beginning with the history of the construction of this designation, one cannot
evade, either the reference of the Quebec Declaration in 1984 and the creation of the
Mouvement Internationale pour la Nouvelle Museologie (MINOM),12 in 1985, or the

The international document known as the Quebec Declaration has the subtitle “basic
principles for a new museology” and it was produced within the context of the I
Ecomuseum/New Museology International Atelier. Dedicated to G. H. Rivière and held in strict
collection to the Ecomusée of Haute Beauce, in Quebec (Canada), this Atelier assembled the
members of the ICOFOM13 who advocated international acknowledgment and the promotion of
new museum forms, and therefore had disagreed with the position undertaken in the XIII
General Conference of ICOM – held in London in July 1983 – where the acknowledgment of all
the practices which did not fit into the established museological frame had been formally
rejected. The Quebec Declaration begins by establishing the relation between the movement of
the new museology and the Round Table of Santiago do Chile, stressing the importance of the
declaration of the social function of the museum. Then, it proceeds with the systematization of
the movement’s principles, stating the need to widen the traditional duties of the museum and to
integrate the population in its actions, specifying as well that the new museology comprises the
“ecomuseology, the communitarian museology and every other form of active museology”. In
terms of resolutions, the document finishes by inviting the international community to recognize
the movement and to accept every new existing museum typologies, appealing to the creation of
permanent international structures that can ensure their development. The proposition of the
creation of an International Committee “Ecomuseum/Community Museums” will never be put
into practice, but the creation of an International Federation of New Museology would become
effective through MINOM, established in 1985 in Lisbon, during the II International Atelier. In
that meeting set of positions subscribed in the Quebec Declaration was also recognized, leaving
no doubt as to its role as founding document of the MINOM, the new affiliated institution of the
ICOM.

Concerning the affirmation of this strand of the New Museology movement, some aspects
must be stressed. On the one hand, it is convenient to notice the scope of the advocated
renovation, explained in the clear acknowledgment of several new museum forms and not only
the ecomuseum. The active museology being defended is clearly a multiple museological
movement which encompasses not only the ecomuseum but also the community museum, the
neighborhood museum and the local museum. On the other hand, the priority given to the
participation and the integrated development of the population requires that professionals adopt
a renewed conceptual apparatus to help them fulfil the change from a museum focused on its
collections to another focused on its social functions. The extension of conceptual instruments
and the resort to mechanisms such as interdisciplinarity or new management and
communication methods are the other side of the advocated innovative experiences and of the
new demands of the museum as an institution involved in the lives of the population.

With regard to the other unquestionable landmark in the construction of the designation New
Museology – the publication of the book The New Museology, edited by the art historian Peter
Vergo in 1989 – it has other specificities. One can claim that the appearance of this work was
motivated by a similar appreciation regarding the need to renovate the established museological
framework, explained in the words of its editor in a rather corrosive way: “Contemplating the
history and development of the museum profession (…) the comparison that springs irresistibly
to mind is with the coelacanth, that remarkable creature whose brain, in the course of its
development from embryo to adult, shrinks in relation to its size, so that in the end it occupies
only a fraction of the space available to it.” (Vergo, 1989: 3). But some differences have to be
highlighted. From the very beginning, it is a publication composed of only nine chapters, an
introduction and the respective selected bibliography, the authors of which are equally divided
between the museological institution and the university, in professional terms. Although one can
claim that it also translates the existence of a collective movement, the production of the book is
not motivated by the goal of seeing the accomplished analysis or the positions undertaken to be
recognized by an international body with a regulating role in the museology area. This
institutional and international dimension is absent from the book, and is even expressly referred
in the Introduction that the scope of the volume is limited to the United Kingdom with a few
actions done in Australia and United States. The other substantial difference relates to the fact
that the reflections are not aimed at the social functions of the museum and their potential to
transform the surrounding environment, but to the “choices” which, irrevocably, the museum must make in order to acquire and publicly present its collections. The impacts produced by the museum are also felt within the institution, through its exhibitions and its underlying options. This is the central issue of the considerations here produced under the designation of the New Museology.

After declaring that every act of collecting has a political, ideological or aesthetic dimension which cannot be overlooked, and stressing that “every juxtaposition or arrangement of an object or work of art, (…) within the context of a temporary exhibition or museum display means placing a certain construction upon history” (1989: 2), Vergo defines the “new” museology “as a state of widespread dissatisfaction” with the "old". And he specifies: “that what is wrong with the «old» museology is that it is too much about museum methods, and too little about the purposes of museums” (idem: 3). There is a severe criticism to the fact that to this day the museum professionals have not recognized their disciplinary area as a theoretical discipline and part of the social sciences, which results in a total lack of attention paid on absolutely relevant topics. Behind every option linked to the exhibition activity of the museum – the selection of objects, the captions, the information panels, the catalogue, the communication decisions – there is a discourse or “subtexts” that express conceptions, desires, ambitions, positions conveyed by all participants in the process, that have intellectual, political, social and educational implications. Those “considerations, rather than, say, the administration of museums, their methods and techniques of conservation, their financial well-being, their success or neglect in the eyes of the public, are the subject matter of the new museology.” (Vergo, 1989: 3). Oriented and endorsing the positions advocated in the Introduction of the book, every chapter – yet in very different ways – addresses processes of exhibition creation. They dismantle the construction of “texts” and “contexts” used to communicate meanings and show that the displayed objects have no intrinsic value.

Having explained the dominant parameters in each of the French and Anglo-Saxon strands of the New Museology, I would like to show how, beyond the differences, their concerns overlap and/or complement each other. Beginning by the focus on the social and political dimension of the museum, only in a rather immediate approach would we be tempted to consider this topic as endorsed exclusively by the French strand. In a less impulsive analysis, we must acknowledge that the issue is also central to the Anglo-Saxon strand. In the former, relevance is placed on sustainable development, socio-cultural animation and the participation of the population, but in the latter, the concern with the expansion of the representational space of the museum and the deconstruction of its exhibition discourses, defending the increase of “voices” represented there, can lead to addressing very similar social and political issues.14 Even if in different ways, it is always the sensitivity on the role of the museum as an instrument of social transformation that gains relevance. The same can be said about the attention given to museographic experimentation. Oriented by the intention of democratizing the access to the museum or by the intention of deconstructing the discourses of the dominant ideology represented there, in any case innovations are tested, based on the recognition that the meaning of objects is not intrinsic, which means that they are used to a lesser extent in exclusively aesthetic terms, or that the very notion of the museological object is expanded, now including more everyday objects, the manipulation of which can even be encouraged. Globally considering the French and Anglo-Saxon strands of the New Museology, their differences are mostly found at the level of their theoretical sources of support, since in the former the weight of museum professionals and their connection to the respective international bodies is more relevant, while in the latter the weight of academics and their connection to the university institution prevails.

Considering the diverse topics listed here, there should be no doubt that the New Museology is a movement with a wide theoretical and methodological range, whose positions was essential for the renovation of museums in the 20th century, and will continue to be so for the renovation of museums in the 21st century. Hoping to have been clear in explaining that the expression New Museology can refer to a very wide set of issues, problems and even museologies, to finish this approach one last effort is needed to systematize its greatest trends.

Unequivocally, under the influence of the New Museology every activity of the museum becomes an object of theoretical and political reflection. In many ways, the museum is an institution that builds value definitions. Whatever it chooses to research or ignore, the cultural assets it selects to keep or exhibit to the detriment of others, how it fulfills those tasks and
justifies them, with whose help, is a set of decisions which deserve to be questioned. Museums are public spaces that build social representations which support particular power regimes, but such representations can also be deconstructed and/or contested and/or diversified. It is understood that the museum is a cultural institution as much as the objects it keeps. Meanings produced and communicated not only can, but should be, questioned.

As an essentially reflexive and critical museological practice, the New Museology is capable of leading a research agenda closer and more receptive to the contemporary problem of social sciences. Considering the museological institution in terms of its history and its purposes, the New Museology unfolds, namely in the consideration of its social function, and of its narratives and exhibition strategies. As a social institution, the museum has certain social responsibilities towards the community where it is located, whose well being and fulfilment of numerous needs should be a part of its mission. Tensions and socio-cultural problems of various kinds, as well as evident processes of exclusion are not issues to be ignored. On the contrary, the museum can be an agent of social change, regeneration and empowerment of the population, as it becomes more aware of the surrounding community and an effective space of congregation for that community. The consolidation of the museum’s social function assumes either the abandonment of its traditional isolation in relation to entities such as schools, libraries or local associations, with which it is important to establish partnerships bearing in mind the interest of the population, or the redefinition of its organization that no longer focuses on collections, rather on subject matters and histories that make sense for their population. In turn, the new exhibition narratives are more and more materialized through objects and many other exhibition devices. These tend to result from the growing activation of participative methodologies, whose level of enforcement can go from the simple listening or inquiry of different community subgroups to the establishment of agreements with those subgroups bearing in mind the concession of materials or their effective integration in the curators’ team. By adopting these strategies, the museum avoids its close discourse and opens itself to the inclusion of new and diversified “voices” which become a part of its museological narratives.

As a product of synthesis of a movement that includes the introduction of theoretical perspectives in the study of the museum and its approach as a vehicle of empowerment of the communities, the New Museology translates further in the renovation of different other dimensions of the museological institution. On the one hand, the idea that the museum should represent society within the diversity of the subgroups it comprises leads to and supports an expansion of the notion of museum object. This also includes a material culture of everyday life, from a more recent past and from classes and ethnic groups previously unmentioned. On the other hand, the widespread understanding that the meanings of the objects are situated – i.e., changing according to their contexts of use – justifies and strengthens the growing attention given to the contextualization of the representations built in the museum. In an understandable way, the emphasis shifts from the presentation of isolated and “unique” objects to representations which seek to attend to and clarify the socio-cultural contexts where the meanings of the objects are generated. Continuing along the same logic, the tasks of exhibition and community animation gain relevance and development to the detriment of the tasks dedicated to the preservation of the collections.

As the prime example of the radical revision undertaken on the every activity of the museum, one must mention the matter of the return requests from several countries and ethnic groups over objects held by countless museums for a long time. The act of exhibition is always an act of definition and attribution of value, which deserves analysis and discussion in order to highlight the respective political and ideological subtexts. But if the constructed representations use certain objects which are perceived by some as being “stolen” and obtained illicitly, embodying deeply culturally limiting narratives and reproachable in ethical terms, then the controversy may reach very critical levels. The use of objects from outside Europe and/or of an indigenous nature – usually collected in contexts of colonial situations and political domination – has fuelled the controversy. On the one hand, one cannot avoid the debate about the legal statute of these objects and the ethical implications of their use by current owners. On the other hand, more and more countries and ethnic groups demand “their” objects back and, often, an official apology.

The main goal of this article is to provide the best possible overview of the initial influential sources and the subsequent dynamics of the New Museology. The intention and ambition is to
be able to contribute to the comprehension of the New Museology as a large scale theoretical and methodological movement. I sought to show how the New Museology is a product of synthesis resulting from two initial renovations strands. As a result of the two mentioned strands, which at a certain point are no longer logical or possible to distinguish, the expression New Museology refers to a wide set of issues and problems that remain central for the desired contemporary museological renovation. Today, the clarity of the expression often appears to be lacking, even by the proliferation of other designations: postmodern museology, critical museology, sociomuseology... Recognizing that there is not enough room here to focus properly on any of those designations and corresponding analytical philosophies, I call, however, attention to the limited heuristic ability inherent to them in virtue, namely of embodying approaches that are insufficient because they are partial. For the same reason, none of these approaches can fully demand to be the heir or the logical development of the New Museology movement. Currently, as in the last century, the museum and museology continue to be both needed and deserving of critical attention. The analysis to be made, however, should be not only careful and reflexive but also thorough and questioning every field of action of the museum. Therefore, I advocate that there is no need to make up new designations. Let us continue with the “New Museology”, since its guidelines seem to be able to support both the renovation initiated in the 1960s and the desired renovation of the 21st century.

5 CONCLUSION

As a final statement, I would like to reaffirm the importance of the New Museology contributions. If today it is possible to effectively confirm that museological research “has come of age” (Macdonald, 2006: 1), simultaneously one cannot hide the extent to which the achieved developments are a result of the contribution provided by the multiple dynamics of renovation covered by the New Museology. The growing articulation between museum and academy – and the correlative reinforcement of the theoretical and critical perspectives – which seems to be the label of the current expansion of museological studies, is itself an ineffaceable mark of the theoretical and political reflection instigated by the New Museology movement. It is thanks to it that the museum has ceased to be, at least in general terms, the lugubrious storage room it was before. If it is true that too many museological institutions and their activities still need greater theoretical and methodological sophistication, all the more reason to show the depth and comprehensiveness of the renovations proposed by the New Museology. Recurring or not to this designation, its teachings seem to be a good means of acquiring a type of museum that can be “a place where the visitor's imagination is stimulated, where he or she is made to see things in a new light, where some sort of stretching – conscious or unconscious – occurs in the way they see the world” (Houtman, 1987: 7).

ENDNOTES

1 Anthropologist – alice_duarte@hotmail.com
2 “The Jaconde/Gioconda in the underground”. This student movement echoed the statements of some of the directors of the French “Houses of Culture” who, after a joint meeting, stated their refusal by the “public”, claiming to exclusively recognize an interest for the “non-public”, i.e., those who traditionally did not visit museums.
3 Its ideological roots can be found in the programmatic positions of the Front Populaire – a left wing coalition that took charge in the 1930s in France.
4 Even though less mentioned, equally deserving the label of pioneers are Duncan F. A. Cameron (1968), from the Art Gallery of Ontario (Canadá) and Jean Gabus who, as director of the Musée de Ethnographie de Neuchâtel (Switzerland), was particularly committed to hold temporary exhibitions, seeking to create what he termed “dynamic museum” and “spectacle museum”.
5 Something very similar started in 1970, in London, in the Museum of Mankind (ethnographic department of the British Museum, existing until 1994), with the so called “contextual exhibitions” which used elaborated scenographies to recreate the social contexts within which the ethnographic objects had been used.
7 I.e., “disperse museum”, with several dependencies or antennae.
8 Kenneth Hudson (1987: 163-167), in his work Museums of Influence, elects the Ecomuseum of Le Creusot as one of the 37 museums within 13 countries that have influenced contemporary museology.
9 Between the cities of Le Creusot and Montceau-les-Mines it is possible to mention the industries of metallurgy, coal mining and production of ceramics and glass.
10 Centre de Recherche, d’Animation et de Création en Arts Plastiques (CRACAP), of which G. H. Rivière is one of the founders.
11 It is under the influence of the same poststructuralist epistemological posture that, according to a few authors, studies within the museum area should prefer the designation “museum studies” replacing the term “museology”, since it is through that option that the plural nature of approaches is explained (Macdonald, 2006).
12 International Movement for a New Museology.
13 International Council of Museology of ICOM (International Council of Museums)
14 The approach of issues such as ethnic, gender or class inequalities are obvious examples.

REFERENCES

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