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ARTICLE

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The Museum as Archive

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Abstract

This article reflects on the central role of the archive in our culture and shows how the tension between privatization and the public domain on the internet reveals the new dynamics that require us to redefine the role of museums and art centers. This rethinking of the function of the museum in our society, brought about in part by the crisis of metanarratives that support it, also entails establishing a new relation with the collection, which, having to display the singularity of the objects and of the artistic practices — with their consequent dematerialization and deobjectivization beginning at the end of the nineteen-sixties with the avant-garde —, has become an archive through which its users may circulate and construct multiple narratives.

Keywords

museum, archive, information society, narratives

El museo como archivo

Resumen

El presente artículo reflexiona sobre el papel central del archivo en nuestra cultura y muestra cómo las tensiones entre privatización y dominio público en internet manifiestan las nuevas dinámicas que obligan a replantear el papel de los museos y de los centros de arte. Este replanteamiento de la función del museo en nuestra sociedad, motivado en parte por la crisis de las metanarraciones que lo sostenían, implica también establecer una nueva relación con la colección, que, al verse impulsada a mostrar la singularidad de los objetos y de las prácticas artísticas—con su consiguiente desmaterialización y desobjetualización iniciada desde finales de los años sesenta con las vanguardias—, se convierte en archivo por el que transitar y en el que sus usuarios pueden construir múltiples narrativas.

Palabras clave

museo, archivo, sociedad de la información, narrativas

According to Michel Foucault, the archive is the basic structure that supports knowledge; it cannot be stated in its entirety because it contains the law and jurisprudence of all that can be said. Thus, the French author's idea has become more relevant than ever in the information society.

The function of the archive in the modern state was fundamentally fiscal, police-related and the safeguard of legitimate property rights, deriving as much from commercial transactions as from genetic continuity. The archive bound present reality with strata of past realities.

Beyond these functions, the archive had a symbolic connection with the state to which it served as registry and was considered the rock upon which the state was supported or as the anchor that kept it from drifting. The burning of archives was one of the most effective instruments in the breaking-up of a state following its invasion or the usurpation of power.

However, the archive as a central organization of the modern state is witnessing profound modifications in the process of the dismantling and privatization of the welfare state: now private firms are hired to store hospitals' medical records. In addition, on another area, privatization of the management of the old national radio and television archives has given rise to the commercialization of what until now was considered common patrimony.

In reference to the development of information management technologies, this has given centrality, quotidianity and extension in all aspects of life to the tasks of the archive, which have become capillarized and internalized to the point where the archive no longer has this almost sacred separation in relation to life, which it previously had. In reality, the contemporary archive, basically embodied by the internet, is by nature collective, permeable and in a constant state of configuration and flux.

Simultaneously, internet giants such as Google or Facebook are at once instigators and private administrators of the enormous collective archive that is the internet, and their objectives are not those which supported the modern archive.

Lastly, the decrease or complete lack of state presence in the monopoly of archives and their horizontal extension through information technologies has exposed the multiplicity of fragmentary and precarious archival initiatives that no longer correspond or remit to a homogeneous demos, but that is related with an urgent need to leave an imprint, generate memory, accumulate experience and pass the baton to future generations. Moreover, and this is the innovation, it can serve as a reference for other unknown and distant, but coetaneous, communities, in this ocean without shores that is the internet.

These kinds of archives, despite the fact that they mainly occur in the technological medium of internet, share their nature with traditional oral memory: they make and leave their imprint through the very act of dissemination, of communication. They do not have a single and fixed locus; rather they are perpetually mobile and their

contents are malleable and modular through the continuous process of displacement and reappropriation.

This type of memory, connected to issues, actions or experiences that lies outside of the central archive, now acquires a distinct nature, being devoid of this referent (which in some instances it never possessed) and aspires to be a part of this hypothetic, atomized, heterogeneous and collective archive that is the internet. An archive, however, which would in principle lack the role of sustaining a norm, a canon, of configuring.

From what has been said thus far it could be extracted that the old metropolitan institutions have quietly disappeared to give way to this atomized, autonomous and precarious archive. Not only is this not so, but such an archive cannot easily exist without some degree of institutional support, nor have large modern institutions stopped aspiring to the expansion *ad infinitum* of their collections, and have adapted their policies of acquisition and exhibition to this new "paradigm" of expanded archive.

Vuc Cosik, the pioneer of net art in the mid-nineties, recently declared in a meeting of the people who are in charge of museums in the ex-Yugoslavia, that, in his opinion, museological institutions should close because they have lost their function and because of the capacity of individuals, collectives and networks to archive and manage, without the need for state institutions, an immaterial patrimony that was by nature unencompassable within the walls of the museum.

Nevertheless, despite the power of the Cosic's point of view, it is evident that in reality the scenario is far from what he describes. Museum institutions are undergoing important mutations, but from this it does not necessarily derive that they have lost (at least the museums of the old colonial metropolises) their accumulative, centripetal and even depredatory impulse. Instead, what is occurring is an instrumental adaptation to new conditions, both technological and geopolitical, in order to continue expanding.

Hans Belin says that the present coexistence of the logic of the museum and the database is paradoxical, a symptom of the anachronisms and imbalances of cultural changes. Museum and archive have traditionally been concomitant structures, but different in nature. The museum is an apparatus of visibility, a theater in which the embodied canon was portrayed, represented by pieces, selected decontextualized objects, separate from both the world they came from and before that which they were being displayed.

The relation of the museum with the world was based on exemplarity and pedagogy. The rare selected objects that comprised it were valuable by virtue of their significance in this great canonical narrative, the narrative of nation, of civilization and of the history of art. The value of these objects was accumulative, and, in aggregate, the objects belonging to the museum, the collection, constituted the patrimony of the nation or empire, the sign of its cultural richness, but also of its political and economic power. The collection, although

not visible in its entirety, constituted the community's true reserve of value.

Compared to the theater of the museum, the traditional archive was a blind mechanism, the value of whose objects stemmed from the information they contained and the reality they formulated, not due to their specific nature. These items, despite documenting events that were temporal in nature, were structured by very diverse topological laws, not by narratives. This structure resembled geological or archeological strata.

The crisis of metanarratives that sustained the museum in so-called postmodernism can be understood in certain measure as a result of the growing hegemony of the logic of the database. If the discrediting of the canonical narrative of art history did not cause all of the paintings to fall off the walls of museums, it was owing to cultural inertias, the growth in cultural tourism, the coincident tertiarization of the economy, the spectacularization of culture and a new ideology of creativity allied with neoliberalism and which once again placed value on individual genius.

Furthermore, as explained by Craig Owens, the laws of the market would have guaranteed the economic value of works of art regardless of any other standard, as the supreme fetish of the new consumer society of the eighties. Nevertheless, other phenomena occurring in the internal ambit of art were going to give rise to a simultaneous and gradual adaptation of the old museum. Beginning at the end of the sixties, the avant-garde dematerialized and disobjectualized their practices, and mutated them toward recordable processes by means of text, photography, video, or, directly, in information and documentation whose natural place was the archive, more than the museum.

In reality, self-archiving processes would appear along with practices using the forms and procedures of the archive as medium, and which would reflect on them, as if it were a conscious or spontaneous reaction to the new dominant logic of culture.

The museum is experiencing then its own anachrony, in an era like that of the archive, whose inclusive logic not only permits these contradictions, but promotes them. The new situation radically changes the relation between the museum/theater and its collections. Inasmuch as there no longer exists a single narrative that configures and gives unidirectional meaning to the collected objects, we find ourselves with a situation similar to that of the protomodern *wunderkammer*, in which each object appears again in all of its uniqueness and full of strata and facets. The poetic and aesthetic quality coexists with

the documentary and testimonial, with the referential or cultural, uninterrupted.

In contrast to that single narrative, now relations between distinct objects may be contrived through contingent and positional narratives, which do not emanate from a necessary structure of things, but from a process of interpellation or dialogue from the present, similar to that which was revindicated in the nineties, with respect to the past, the new cultural history, or Stephen Greenblatt's new historicism at the end of the previous century.

These narratives can be put on a level with browsing the internet. They do not preexist in the database, but they are what activate it and the trail they leave affects future browsing, future narratives. The National Museum of American Art in Washington devotes an entire wing to showing visitors thousands of objects whose internal organization is dependent upon the subjective decisions of the visitors.

This situation also affects the collecting practices of museums, not only because they have to admit those works produced since the sixties that are basically archival registers, but because simultaneously documents, testimonies and fragments become important, which are no longer a mere contextualization of the artistic object, but a component of the collection in its own right, now transformed, increasingly, in archive.

The hybridization of the traditional notion of collection with that of archive brings up a new situation whose meaning is far from being clear. The logics of display of the museum are qualitatively different from those of access, imposed by the logic of the archive. The pedagogical mission of the museum is also quite different from the discretionary use of the information contained in an archive.

The possibilities of universal access, of collective intervention and the rhizomatic growth of new archives seem to collide with the walls of the museum, but not only this. The documents in an archive and the archives themselves become infected by the mercantile structure of the art system when they are "museumized". The expansion of the notion of intellectual property, particularly acute in the field of art, makes it so that the document, the register, by definition ownerless and collective, is subject to a capitalization that goes against its very nature.

We did not wish, however, with all of this, to paint an irremediable situation, but rather to point out the fact that the museum institution can only exercise the necessary role, even if only provisionally, of facilitating the consolidation and activation of these new archives, if it implements a profound redefinition of its institutional foundations, which necessarily involves a radical change in practices.

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