

Cultural Heritage, Participation and Access

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Museums are the children of the society that begets them and, like all children, serve to help the 'parents' in their process of updating and recycling the world. Museums are micro-systems within the social system; they interact with each other. They can and should be the major agents in the processes connected with Humanisation and respect for Life. (Guarinieri, Instituto de Museologia de São Paulo 1991 p. 3)

This text presents partial results from the postdoctoral research entitled *Curadorias Acessíveis: Propostas de exposição e extroversão centradas na relação de diferentes públicos com o patrimônio cultural* (Accessible curatorship: Exhibition and cultural action proposals centred on the relationship of different audiences with cultural heritage) being carried out in the Postgraduate Programme in Museology at the

University of São Paulo. It focuses on theoretical and practical research into accessible curatorship practices in cultural institutions and museums, observing and analysing specific cases.

In this research, 'accessible curatorship' is defined as that which develops exhibition and cultural action projects centred on the relationship between different publics and cultural heritage, with the aim of fostering bonds and a sense of belonging to the museum.

The idea to develop an accessible curatorship methodology by encouraging representatives of the public to participate in museums and cultural spaces arose from the need to connect with various audiences. The concept aimed to attract and encourage the public to create meaning for cultural heritage, thereby enhancing cultural and

human development in their communities. By fostering public involvement in their procedures, museums affirm that their audiences are knowledgeable and capable of learning skills to help preserve and communicate cultural heritage. Brazilian museums are beginning to adopt a new attitude on this front, sharing their decision-making power about what constitutes heritage and how it should be presented by taking into consideration the knowledge of individual members of society.

In his text, *As raízes do futuro* (The Roots of the Future), which critiques the relationship between heritage conservation and the local development of communities, Hugues de Varine makes the following argument on recognising tangible and intangible heritage:

The professionals usually connected with a public institution (university, museum, archives, management administration) are useful above all, in a secondary phase, for their expertise and because of their institutional legitimacy. However, their view of heritage is partial, closely tied to their scientific discipline or to their duties. They are rarely accustomed to working with others, as holders of a subjective view of heritage.
(de Varine 2012)

Cultural heritage as a human right

According to Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the construction of cultural heritage is a civil right. According to this seminal document that sets the international standard of human rights: 'Everyone has the right to participate freely in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits'. It can thus be stated that all individuals, regardless of origin, social class, prior experience, disability or

any other socio-economic factor that may classify them as minorities or belonging to socially excluded populations, have the right to enjoy and participate in the creation of cultural heritage.

Yet in Brazil, public participation in research and communication activities related to museum collections and cultural heritage constitutes a challenge for the organisations and professionals working for museums. In most Brazilian museums, conservation and communication are still largely governed by vertical authority structures. When it comes to preserving and disseminating scientific knowledge and cultural heritage, decision-making tends to be delegated to curators and researchers, and due importance is not given to understanding or seeking to meet the needs, concerns and wishes of diverse audiences. This regrettable trend and the need for museums to include community members in the construction of cultural heritage has been corroborated in documents published by ICOM and in the thinking of key authors in the field of museums and cultural heritage, as well as in cultural public policy documents of various countries. According to Hugues de Varine, 'Development cannot occur without the effective, active and conscious participation of the community to which that heritage belongs' (de Varine 2012).

The development of accessible curatorship is also supported by the concept of sociomuseology, which encourages valuing the knowledge and life experiences of the individuals that make up museum publics. Participation in curatorial practices has the added benefit of establishing and building loyalty among new audiences, thereby fulfilling the social function of museums and the appropriation of the museum space for socialising, leisure activities and cultural growth.

Participatory practices and ICOM

The museological concepts disseminated by ICOM also support this movement towards participatory processes, providing social validation for museums to support community and human development. For the celebration of International Museum Day every year, ICOM launches a theme inspired by current concepts and challenges for museums around the world. Each theme is then explored in conferences, meetings and celebrations hosted by its National and International Committees as well as museums ranging from world-renowned institutions to small local establishments.

In recent years, the themes have focused on the importance of social participation in the construction of cultural heritage. In 2013, the overall theme for ICOM's 23rd General Conference, held in Rio de Janeiro, was *Museums (memory + creativity) = social change*. This theme encourages social change through the preservation of memory and the development of creative language for cultural action, both inside the museum environment and beyond. During the National and International Committee meetings, presentations and other activities that took place during the General Conference, we noted that participants were strongly inclined towards participatory practices that grant visitors an active role in the development of museums.

According to the 2014 International Museum Day theme, *Museum collections make connections*, museums are constantly facing changes that push them to reconsider their traditional mission and find new strategies to attract visitors to their collections. Consequently, many museums are thinking of new ways to present their collections, taking into consideration the involvement of

community members in museum processes as a strategy for connecting with new publics.¹

The research

This research has been in progress since December 2013² and the programmed activities analysed during the project will run through December 2015. Postdoctoral research in Brazil takes the form of an internship programme for candidates who have completed their Ph.D. and wish to work as titular professors in undergraduate and postgraduate university programmes. Candidates must undertake an investigation that contributes to research conducted by the department, also involving teaching activities and practical benefits in the field of the research – in our case, for museums.

In the framework of this research, we are offering extension courses open to community members and classes for M.A. and Ph.D. students on accessibility and participation in museums, associated with the Postgraduate Programme in Museology at the University of São Paulo. We are also helping to develop accessible and participatory curatorship in new exhibitions and educational programmes in order to benefit the university's museums.

Upon completion of this article, we had analysed a total of 19 cases of accessible and participatory curatorship in Brazil and elsewhere, conducting our research through magazines and reports on museum websites, visits to exhibitions and museums and interviews with curators and participants. Eleven of these cases were projects³ developed in Brazilian museums and cultural institutions housing different types of collections in a number of places, ranging from major cities to secondary cities, islands and the Amazon

rainforest. We have also analysed eight cases of museums and cultural organisations in other countries⁴ that are carrying out projects that facilitate the participation of different audiences. We have used academic articles and reports on these projects as sources, with the exception of Tucume (Peru), where it was possible to visit and talk with a museum director who also oversees archaeological excavations.

In order to demonstrate some successful practices of accessible and participatory curatorship, we have selected three Brazilian cases, which we were able to analyse using two or more kinds of data, including articles, museum visits and interviews with curators and project participants.

Accessible curatorship projects

Museum science of the future or museum sciences in the near future will perhaps be a collective domain and true social practice. Perhaps the world itself will be seen as a large museum of humankind and the so-called traditional museums will have a socially recognised role as conserving rather than appropriating and expropriating cultural assets. (Guarnieri, Instituto de Museologia de São Paulo 1991)

Some collection curatorship, museum creation and exhibition projects in Brazil may serve as examples that accessible curatorship – inviting the participation of visitors and the surrounding communities where the cultural assets were collected – provides quality results and guarantees visitor satisfaction, while also meeting the institutions' wishes.

The following are three proposals analysed in our research that show positive effects where

other agents are involved in curatorial processes, alongside museum professionals and researchers.

Centro de Memória Dorina Nowill, Fundação Dorina Nowill para Cegos, São Paulo, Brazil

We had the opportunity to develop exhibition and cultural action projects that applied accessible curatorship at the Fundação Dorina Nowill para Cegos, a pioneering Brazilian institution in the struggle for social inclusion for the visually impaired. Here, we established and curated the Centro de Memória Dorina Nowill from 1999 to 2013, together with Dorina Nowill (1919–2010), a great leader, teacher, researcher and thinker in the field of social inclusion.

The Centro de Memória Dorina Nowill is a museum focusing on the development of the social inclusion movement for the visually impaired in Brazil. It carries out cultural action projects and programmes to encourage the inclusion of visitors with disabilities and other new audiences through the participation of representatives from target publics.

One recent exhibition, inaugurated in 2013 and entitled *E tudo começou assim: Idéias, histórias e projetos que mudaram a vida das pessoas com deficiência* (And so it all began: Actions, projects and stories that changed the lives of people with visual impairment), was developed with the cooperation of a team of curators. All of the research and development of the core themes arose from a heritage education programme involving all members of the institution's staff – some 120 people of different ages and backgrounds, including a large number with visual disabilities and some with other physical disabilities.



General view of the exhibition *And so it all began: Actions, projects and stories that changed the lives of people with visual impairment* at Centro de Memória Dorina Nowill, São Paulo

To begin the curatorship and design of the exhibition, all of the employees were involved in the planning of the new Heritage Educational Programme, which aimed to teach educators and collaborators to improve the communication strategies used for the exhibition. Importance was placed on highlighting the particular talents of each employee in constructing this culture of accessibility.

The programme's educational activities began a year before the opening of the exhibition with a course for the institution's employees. During this phase, meetings were held involving staff and volunteers (with and without disabilities) in order to ensure that everyone felt implicated in the history of the inclusion of people with visual

disabilities in Brazil. These meetings encouraged the participants to contribute their own memories to the collection of oral memory and to help develop the new exhibition and educational programme.

The course addressed a number of themes: the definition of the terms 'museum' and 'memorial'; the recognition of participants' own histories; and the development and preservation of collections and communication procedures through exhibitions and educational activities. The activities also included a visit to a museum chosen by the participants and the collective organisation of a preliminary exhibition with their ideas, oral memories and space to record feedback, as well as the possibility of



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Blind visitors and educators in the exhibition *And so it all began: Actions, projects and stories that changed the lives of people with visual impairment* at Centro de Memória Dorina Nowill, São Paulo

contributing to developing tasks for the final exhibition and educational programmes.

This course made it possible to identify those interested in participating in the curatorship of the exhibition and the educational programme. As a result of this process, two groups were created, directly collaborating on the curatorship of the new exhibition and educational activities: one to develop participatory curatorship, coordinated by curator Viviane Sarraf, and another to train educators for exhibition visits, coordinated by educator Juliane Rega.

The entire exhibition was developed with the collaboration of professionals from different areas of expertise within the institution, from the recording studio to rehabilitation and social services. The proposals for educational visits and activities were drawn up and carried out by a group of educators from different areas in the organisation (with specialisations as diverse as revision of Braille books, human resources, production of accessible digital books, event-planning and recording) under the coordination of the educators in the Centro de Memória.

The exhibition's participatory curatorship project, inspired by the Heritage Educational Programme, achieved better results than expected. Those involved in the collective construction of the exhibition and educational activities developed new ideas and ways of talking about their experiences as individuals with visual disabilities or as professionals who work directly with such audiences.

The exhibitions featured environments that simulated different situations in the daily lives of people with visual disabilities, such as school classrooms with equipment available for inclusive educational activities from the past and present;

workstations with technologies for faster communication and connectivity; a darkened living room to experience watching television without the ability to see; and the closet of a woman whose make-up and accessories were marked with Braille labels.

The group of educators developed special visits with activities to help visitors experience and think about the conditions of individuals with disabilities. These included audio-guided visits in the dark; visits with a coffee break in the dark to teach visitors about the importance of visual guides and descriptions in blind people's daily activities; and visits with Braille writing workshops, focusing on the importance of this invention in the education of blind students.

This experience did more than reinforce heritage recognition and feelings of belonging for the Fundação Dorina's employees. It provided an innovative and lively cultural experience based on different voices for the memorial's visitors.

Museu Água Vermelha, Ouroeste Municipality, São Paulo, Brazil

The creation of the Museu Água Vermelha began in the late 1990s in the municipality of Ouroeste, inland in the state of São Paulo, through an agreement between the company AES Tietê⁵ and the Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia de São Paulo. The project was coordinated by teacher and museologist Marília Xavier Cury and placed great emphasis on working methods for the development of participatory curatorship. Marília Cury had been a student of the great Brazilian scholar and museologist, Waldisa Russio Camargo Guarnieri, who was responsible for disseminating the concepts of new museology in Brazil, and who expanded the reach of Brazilian museological thinking to the rest of the world.



© Marília Xavier Cury Images

Long-term exhibition at Museu Água Vermelha, created with participation of young students from the city of Ouroeste in the state of São Paulo

The creation of the museum was financed by AES Tietê as a compensatory measure for the environmental damage caused by the construction of a hydroelectric power plant in the region. During building work, archaeological sites had been discovered and destroyed, and many of the objects in the museum collection were recovered from them.

The museum opened to visitors in 2003 with a museological and expographic project involving pupils from public schools in the region, who contributed their opinions and knowledge to the curation of a long-term exhibition.

Cury's participative work method consisted of meeting with 12–18 year-old students at their schools and using roundtable discussions to investigate the young people's knowledge of and interest in basic archaeological concepts, Brazilian and local archaeology; their understanding of the history of the occupation of Brazilian territory and of native Brazilian peoples, and their wishes for the museum.

This research gave rise to various fundamental ideas that were included in the exhibition narrative, namely: the presentation of basic archaeological concepts; facts about archaeology



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Long-term exhibition at Museu Água Vermelha, created with the participation of young students from the city of Ouroeste in the state of São Paulo

in the Ouroeste region; information about the occupation of the country's inland regions prior to colonisation; and information about the region's indigenous population.

According to Cury, this study made it possible to carry out the participatory dimension of the project, since one characteristic of this method is to investigate the ways in which the public interacts with the museum. She concluded that it would not have been possible to propound an effective form of communication in the exhibition without basing it on the wishes of the region's inhabitants, who are the museum's target public.

The success of the Água Vermelha's exhibition process demonstrates how valuable public participation, through focus groups or other forms of involvement, can be in designing museum activities. The main contemporary challenge of museology lies in making connections with visitors through museum collections, and one effective way of achieving this goal is to ask the audience why and how these collections create meaning in their lives.

140 Characters Exhibition, Felipe Chaimovich

The *140 characters* exhibition, which took place in São Paulo's Museu de Arte Moderna (MAM) in



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The building of the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, located in Ibirapuera Park, São Paulo

2014, also adopted the participatory curatorship method.

The idea to mount an exhibition with the participation of the public came from the institution's directors. The original intention was to provide students enrolled in the museum's training programme with a true experience of museum processes, and museum curator Felipe Chaimovich created the one-year 'Curatorship Laboratory' for this purpose. The course was designed to expose students to readings, debates and analyses that would culminate in a curatorship and production project to develop an exhibition consisting primarily of contemporary Brazilian art works from the museum's collection.

Students were enrolled on a first-come, first-served basis. No preconditions were required other than tertiary-level training and an interest in curatorship. As with many of the other courses offered by the museum, this one was open to every visitor interested in getting involved with contemporary art. The 20 available spots were filled on the first day.

Working individually and in groups, the students wrote and rewrote texts until they discovered a common desire to mount an exhibition that would provoke reflection on political mobilisation through social networks.

According to Chaimovich (2014), the coordinator of the Curatorship Laboratory



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The *140 characters* exhibition at the Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, with collective curatorship by 20 participants from the Curatorship Laboratory course

and the participatory proposal, the main idea proposed by the curation group focused on a particular social development in Brazil:

What happened in June 2013? The public demonstrations that shook Brazil last year remain unexplained. The political force of the tens of thousands of citizens occupying public spaces with multiple complaints evaded traditional forms of collective representation. Day after day, the actions were repeated in new cities, and whether large, medium or small, they were always unpredictable.

But what all the actions had in common was a new form of mobilization: social networks. This virtual

communication tool is decentralised, and evades control, using anonymity and redirection as information multipliers. Thus, the demonstrations that began in June also approximated Brazil to similar political phenomena in other parts of the world, such as the Arab Spring. Political mobilization through virtual media is, in fact, shaking up the powers that be. (Chaimovich 2014)

The curators came to the conclusion that political mobilisation through virtual communication is upending traditional forms of constituted power. The language employed during the movement was new, aiming to mobilise people through social networks by using short phrases, locations of protests and extremely synthetic themes or 'hashtags'. Slogans were adapted for the format of

social networks in order to take advantage of existing virtual communication platforms. The most succinct social network is Twitter, accepting a maximum of 140 characters per message, and so, this language scale became the leitmotif for the exhibition.

In order to carry out the exhibition, students were split into groups to explore tasks such as selecting works, holding meetings with professionals in the areas of conservation, documentation, education, communication and expographic design, writing texts, mounting and identifying the works, and holding events during the exhibition. Some 140 works related to the theme of political mobilisation were selected from the MAM collection and the accompanying texts and comments were provided by the Curatorship Laboratory students. According to Chaimovich:

Within a collective, individual authorship is diluted for the benefit of joint actions. This premise has recently gained strength on social networks, where online groups share thoughts and opinions, as well as in demonstrations on the streets, where individuals lose their identities in the crowd in order to strengthen the cause.

As with the exhibitions at the Centro de Memória Dorina Nowill and the Museu Água Vermelha, *140 Characters* managed to successfully implement accessible and innovative curatorship that benefitted from the participation of individuals from outside the museum. Exploring visitor expectations was key to achieving successful exhibitions and, more importantly, to developing new forms of communication to connect with the audience, which is the very reason for the existence of museums and cultural heritage.

Since the beginning of the 21st century in Brazil, cultural policies, institutions and social movements have been creating closer relationships between museums and underrepresented audiences through accessible educational and cultural actions. Involving these underrepresented publics in participatory curatorship projects helps museums understand their wants and needs, a goal which can only be accomplished by inviting them to share their knowledge and experience. By inviting representatives of these audiences to spearhead the communication of cultural heritage, we can transform museums into more accessible spaces for all visitors.

Notes

1. Passage freely adapted from the website of the International Council of Museums, www.icom.museum
2. The present article was completed in October 2014.
3. Museu Kuhai, Oiapoque, Amapá, Amazon rainforest; Museu do Marajó, Cachoeira do Ariri, Ilha do Marajó, Pará; Museu da Maré, Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro; Museu de Arte Moderna de São Paulo, São Paulo (*140 Caracteres* and *Mitologias por Procuração* exhibitions); Museu de Arqueologia e Etnologia da Universidade de São Paulo, São Paulo (Collection Xikrin Kayapó); Museu da Indústria, Comércio e Tecnologia de São Paulo, São Paulo (*Percepção e Criação* exhibition, Museu Mobral and *Semana da Criança* projects); Estação Ciência, São Paulo, São Paulo; Centro de Memória Dorina Nowill, São Paulo, São Paulo (*E tudo começou assim: Idéias, histórias e projetos que mudaram a vida das pessoas com deficiência* visual exhibition and educational actions); Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, São Paulo (*31ª Bienal de Artes* exhibition); Museu Água Vermelha, Ouroeste, São Paulo; Museu Índia Vanuíre, Tupã, São Paulo (*Tupã Plural* exhibition and new education and cultural action proposals).
4. Tropenmuseum Junior, Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands; National Museum of the American Indian, Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC, US; Världskulturmuseerna/Museum of World Cultures, Gothenburg, Sweden; Tate (Tate collectives project), London, Liverpool, St Ives and online, UK; Inatura, Dornbirn, Austria (Bionics exhibition); Santa Cruz Museum

of Art and History, California, US; Bibliotheek Haarlem Oost, Haarlem, Netherlands; Museum and Archaeological site of Tucume, Lambayeque, Peru.

5. AES Tietê is a private company that builds hydroelectric plants to produce and distribute energy for Brazilian citizens.

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