We’re All Curators: Collaborative Curatorship as a New Museum Experience

La conservation à la portée de tous : conservation collaborative et co-création pour une nouvelle expérience muséale

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Abstract

Over the years, the Museu da Pessoa (Museum of the Person), founded in São Paulo in 1991, has developed tools to document people’s life stories in order to build and sustain a collective social memory. Recently, the Museum presented a pilot project designed to give curatorial authority to the community. Using technologies readily available to the general public, and employing the Internet and social media, Monte sua Coleção (Build your Collection) allows individuals to develop their own collections based on the Museum’s online archives. The project promotes participation and awareness in the community about the means through which social memory is constructed and about tools available through cultural institutions that make it possible to safeguard these memories.

Keywords: social memory; technology; Internet; participatory practice; media; life story; social inclusion; digital

In 2012, Orhan Pamuk, Turkish writer and winner of the 2006 Nobel Prize in Literature, published The Innocence of Objects, a modest manifesto that he said should be used to guide museums in the twenty-first century. “The future of museums is in our own homes,” he wrote, adding that “the measure of a museum’s success should not be its ability to represent a state, a nation or company, or a particular history. It should be its capacity to reveal the humanity of individuals” (Pamuk 2012:55-58).

His comments were in keeping with a series of significant transformations regarding the role of museums in our society, which have been taking place since the 1980s. Collection, curatorship, participation, territory, community and virtuality are key ideas that form part of a new cloud of tags related to a series of concepts currently being revisited in the museum world. One important element often presented in the form of a question addressed by cultural and heritage institutions is: In what way can new technology be used to influence the transformation of museum practice and ideas? Over the past 20 years, advances in technology, globalization and communication have shifted individuals’ roles in the production and dissemination of information, placing greater value on people’s life stories. In this context, the Internet and social networks have profoundly changed the role that people play in the production of content, a phenomenon which has had a major impact on the collective production of memory. The notion that life stories constitute an important cultural heritage is no longer disputed, and preserving and disseminating life stories is an essential means of promoting and effecting change (Thompson 2000). Blogs, TV programs, radio and books have all begun to include personal accounts
and the experiences of individuals and social groups in their content and programming. ‘Story circles,’ a traditional element of oral societies, have been revitalized as a basis for the production of digital stories, a resource used to mobilize social groups throughout the world (Lambert 2009). According to Joanne Garde-Hansen (2011:80), YouTube, the third most visited site on the Internet, has become a platform where writers, artists, lawyers and social entrepreneurs can act and be heard without the need for the infrastructures of large institutions. The same phenomenon is now occurring in the way personal memories are produced, shared and exchanged. Indeed, there are myriad ways to record, preserve and, above all, disseminate memories.

Joanne Garde-Hansen et al. (2009) recently showed how, for the larger part of Western history, the preservation of collective memory required a great deal of effort by society. In this context, museums – especially Western museums – played a key role by offering spaces that societies “understood” or could readily “consider” as being of great value. However, it has since been largely recognized that such museum endeavors as selection, preservation and exhibition always carry political inflections, and perhaps more importantly, have often been addressed to specific segments of society.

With the advent of new technologies however, such selection and preservation have become commonplace, even banal. It is now possible for anyone to record an event or even a show using a mobile phone. But what does this transformation mean? How can we differentiate these recordings and define which should become part of our social memory? How can we differentiate their content in the midst of the wellspring of banal recordings and information with which we are bombarded every day? Selection, it could be argued, does not necessarily presuppose a dominating power of resources, although this certainly remains a common assumption. Selection does however require processes of concept, validation and legitimacy. To whom, then, should the responsibility of legitimizing content be bestowed? In museums, this was traditionally the role of the curator. With the advent of new technologies, democratization, and new ideas in museology, who else can take on such a role? This has been a fundamental question for the twenty-first century museum, which has been called to become more inclusive, collaborative and digital: How can museums move away from being the sole “guardians” of cultural authority and social memory and instead become actors/facilitators in promoting and sustaining the memories that arise (nonlinearly) in our day-to-day lives?

An open and collaborative virtual museum founded in São Paulo, Brazil, in 1991, the Museu da Pessoa is dedicated to finding answers to such questions and to developing new tools to highlight and safeguard life stories (Figures 1–2). It is dedicated to changing perceptions about how museums operate and to defining their role and contribution to society. Museu da Pessoa came into being with the premise that anyone can become more than just a visitor: Anyone can become part of, and be actively involved in, the construction of the Museum’s collection.

Since its founding, the Museu da Pessoa has conducted more than 250 projects in institutional and organizational memory, education, communication and community development. Its team has helped nearly 90 of the biggest unions and companies in Brazil to tell their stories, and those of their workers. It also developed the social memory technology whose approach and methodology has been applied in more than 5,000 public schools in 30 cities in Brazil (Figures 3–4). Social memory technology enables communities and local groups to collectively – and autonomously – share, document and safeguard their memory (see Worcman and Garde-Hansen 2016).

Over the years, the Museu da Pessoa’s collection – comprised of digital recordings, photographs and written testimonies – has grown to include more than 17,000 life stories, 7,000 of which are currently accessible through the Museum’s web portal (www.museudapessoa.net). These life stories have been viewed over one million times (1,108,920) by visitors from all over the world, and the Museum’s Facebook content has received nearly six million visits (5,854,101) (Figures 5–6).
Figure 1. The Museu da Pessoa, located in Vila Madalena, São Paulo. Photo: Márcia Zoet.

Figure 2. Entrance of the Museu da Pessoa made from recycled materials. Design: Marcelo Larrea. Photo: Márcia Zoet.
In 2015, the Museum launched *Monte sua Coleção (Build your Collection)*, a new online tool designed to allow anyone to become a curator of the Museum. *Monte sua Coleção* enables individuals to build their own collections based on the Museum’s archives – to describe them, tag them, and publish them on the Museum’s website in order to share them through social networks. To build their collections, users can conduct searches to identify and display profiles, stories, photographs and videos based on their chosen theme. Searches can be performed using keywords including author and/or title, or through the archives.

*Monte sua Coleção* was first promoted by the Museum team by publishing a series of thematic collections such as the 50th anniversary of the 1964 *coup d’état*, an important moment in Brazilian history that would lead the country into a military dictatorship lasting 20 years. This collection brings together 15 stories by journalists, students, artists and educators whose lives were deeply affected by the event. ([http://www.museudapessoa.net/pt/conteudo/colecao/golpe-de-64-97503](http://www.museudapessoa.net/pt/conteudo/colecao/golpe-de-64-97503)).

In the months that followed, the tool was taken up by Internet users who began assembling and disseminating their new collections. To date, less than a year after inaugurating the project, more than 40 new collections have been created and shared by the community, and 300 personal stories have been uploaded by users and included in their collections. Among these collections is Valeria Tessari’s *Tecidos, roupas, sapatos, moda: memória material (Fabrics, clothes, shoes, fashion: material memory)*, which includes nine life stories, six images, and videos selected from the Museu da Pessoa’s collection ([http://www.museudapessoa.net/pt/conteudo/colecao/tecidos-roupas-sapatos-moda-memoria-material-97442](http://www.museudapessoa.net/pt/conteudo/colecao/tecidos-roupas-sapatos-moda-memoria-material-97442)). A doctoral candidate in the Universidade Federal do Paraná’s design program born in 1976, Tessari described her creation as a “collection of memories based on everyday objects, produced by people, which produces human relationships” (*our translation*). She indexed the collection herself, using keywords to allow Internet users to easily find it through words such as ‘clothes,’ ‘shoes,’ ‘fabric culture’ and ‘memory.’ Tessari completed the collection by uploading some of her own life stories ([http://www.museudapessoa.net/pt/conteudo/pessoa/valeria-tessari-28198](http://www.museudapessoa.net/pt/conteudo/pessoa/valeria-tessari-28198)).
Another collection, *Ensinoamentos brasileiros* (Brazilian teachings) ([http://www.museudapessoa.net/pt/conteudo/colecao/ensinoamentos-de-brasileiros-100158](http://www.museudapessoa.net/pt/conteudo/colecao/ensinoamentos-de-brasileiros-100158)), was created by Dalvaci Porto. An educator and daughter of a mechanic and a seamstress, Porto was born and raised in the semiarid region of the Bahia state, in northeastern Brazil. In her own words, the collection brings together “stories of Brazilian educators, in the process of constructing paths toward an emancipative education of the Brazilian people” (*our translation*). “I’m a Gemini. I like to read and write. I like gardening and playing with dogs. For a few years now, I’ve been embroidering and sewing by hand. I enjoy making *arpíleras* (Peruvian wall-hangings). I like art in general. I’m learning Tibetan Buddhism” (*our translation*). In addition to assembling her collection, Porto shared her life story, as well as that of her mother, a survivor of the Holocaust.

Amanda Lais Teló, born in 1995 in Maringá, in southern Brazil, created another beautiful collection, *Histórias que só existem quando contadas* (Stories that only exist when told) ([http://www.museudapessoa.net/pt/conteudo/colecao/historias-que-so-existem-quando-contadas-101012](http://www.museudapessoa.net/pt/conteudo/colecao/historias-que-so-existem-quando-contadas-101012)). A communications student, she explains that she always loved the stories that her grandparents told her. “They were so fantastic and surreal,” she wrote, “that they made my imagination go far beyond my daily life. These are the stories I would love to pass on from generation to generation. And this is why I created this project” (*our translation*). Teló’s collection brings together many interviews with elders telling their stories. “I hope you get inspired,” Teló wrote, “and that you go and record your grandparents’ stories, too” (*our translation*). Her collection includes six videos, all produced by her.

Tessari, Porto and Teló’s experiences with Museu da Pessoa tools enabled them to become active participants in the construction of a collective memory. None of them reside in São Paulo, nor are they professional curators, but they all share an interest in making the Museum open and participatory. And, indeed, Teló is among the Museum’s youngest curators.

Their experiences, as well as those of many others, are part of a work-in-progress in its early stages, whose positive responses and active involvement by the community have caused the museum team...
to envisage numerous other developments. Through projects such as *Monte sua Coleção*, the Museu da Pessoa offers new possibilities for museums to expand their activities by reversing the traditional institutional organizational logic still perpetuated by a majority of Western museums. By providing the community with possibilities to become curators of a museum’s collections, such methods provide greater opportunities for the collective – and collaborative – construction of new memories, along with new spaces that challenge society’s established perceptions and structures. Such initiatives should not be seen as attempts to invalidate or override the work of specialist curators whose role and contributions remain very significant, but rather as innovative and collective efforts to promote and enrich public participation. Such projects create new horizons and possibilities for museums to reinvent themselves – not only in the digital world, but also in the physical and symbolic spaces of society in the twenty-first century, helping them to engage and perhaps partake in Orhan Pamuk’s vision: that museums are places for representing people and their means of expression.

**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


