

Archaeologies of the present and tomorrow's museums: or, how to open the relationship between Heritage and Commons

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Few areas have been more thoroughly explored than that whose borders are delimited by the notions of museum, heritage, technology and market. So it never ceases to be a paradox that we still have no explanation for one surprising and symptomatic fact: the early museums of the eighteenth century do not show exceptional pieces, but stones, bones, shells, feathers, maps, models, microscopes, looms, ploughs and so on. But what are all these ordinary things doing in a museum? They are there to reconfigure the sign of the times, to invent a common past and present. Enlightened thinkers questioned the limits of the social order by changing the arrangement of things in an open space. Things are indistinguishable from the new technologies that mobilize them for the first time as objects, independent from inherited usage and from individuals. The ordinary is analysed, dated, located, classified and preserved, making the museum a true house of the (new) Commons. These pieces evoke a common inherited world (Lafuente, 2008). This rock, for example, testifies to the crystallization processes of inert matter; this skeleton evokes a byway in the planet's history; and that cloth shows the technological level of a remote community.

Everything is both common and important. Its importance is acquired, and involves the mobilization of new cognitive tools, from the barometer and the test-tube to pressing plants and systems of classification, as well as laboratories, expeditions, salons and prizes. With the same gesture, enlightenment man discovered the role of technology in the production of objects and in the building of consensus. Things are now re-encodable. But to assign properties is to give value, and inevitably to set a price within the new growing market for civilizing objects, at the same time replacing the culture of wonders by the wonders of culture. And so, together with the plethora of amateurs who formed the Royal Society or the scientific expeditions, there arises a host of collectors, connoisseurs, dealers and appraisers. Assigning properties and

setting values for things are not disparate movements; and although they are separated in time, they are brought together by the State and then by the market, as evidenced by the drift of Commons towards patrimonialization (Miller, 1987; Strathern, 1988).

One of the most important scenes in *The Barbarian Invasions*, the film with which Denys Arcand triumphed in Cannes and which won the Oscar for the Best Foreign Language Film in 2004, shows us a priest negotiating with a young American antiquarian over the sale of chandeliers, altars, paintings of the Sacred Heart and polychromed plaster virgins, among other religious objects piled haphazardly in the basement of the Archdiocese of Montreal. The scriptwriter explains that the decline of religiosity has forced the closure of many churches and the need to sell off the surplus to keep the rest. The dealer, however, coolly responds that the American market is saturated with French religious objects, and only the eighteenth century chalices would be saleable. In short, these objects no longer form part of the heritage, but have become a mere trifle, difficult to deal with. It is as simple and clear as that: the ecclesiastical heritage of Quebec is worthless, even as an anonymous witness to the craftsmanship of the past or as a symbol of national identity.

Maintaining the value of things has a frightening cost, and again calls for an army of restorers, engineers, artists, sponsors, buildings, researchers, as well as protocols, standards, consensuses and the agreement of all the media underlying the Heritage business. Will there be enough experts for all the museums? Will there be sufficient resources for all the objects? Will there be a market for all the artefacts? Will there be enough visitors for all the buildings? The Heritage business is definitely bulimic.

To answer these questions and to propose new ones along the way, we have divided our argument into three sections. In the first we shall refer to the disappearance of Commons after the two major processes of patrimonialization: the liberal patrimonialization in the nineteenth century, and the neoliberal patrimonialization in the twentieth. In the second part, we shall address the current rediscovery of Commons, still on the fringes of the state and the market. In the third

and last, we shall set out our findings, while leaving open the question of what spaces to reserve for the care of the new heritage.

The visible and invisible hands of patrimonialization

We mentioned above that the Enlightenment discovered the simultaneity existing between the task of recoding society and recoding things. The most novel aspect of this unique connection between Commons and new technologies must be sought in the forms of sociability that it leads to: the conviction that consensus, balance and social peace are an issue that can be resolved by instruments, figures and maps. But the new Republics massively absorb communal property, including that which is not suitable for museums. Revaluing the everyday becomes a technical process whose high costs would be borne by the State. Memory, health, education and security are no longer common issues, and we are seeing the creation of state patrimonies. The diminution of Commons gives birth to the public domain. And the museum that was born to be the home of Commons now portrays the values of the new social contract. Museums, Universal Exhibitions, and major public works created the illusion that the state itself could be shown as a grand technological spectacle (Nye, 1962). There is also a drift in favour of art museums, implying a transition from the common to the exceptional, from the ordinary to the masterly, and from the objective to the aesthetic. This approach transforms the common into a synonym of backward, primitive, and residual. What is public, however, is modern, bright and functional (Deloche, 2001). So it is not surprising that the objects in the museum are subject to all the vagaries of the rhetoric of identity. The liberal heritage was thus obliged to look down on the Commons.

After World War II the crisis of the modern project emphasized the interest in bringing Commons within the limits of the public domain. The inconsistencies accumulated in the preparation of the World Heritage List coordinated by UNESCO encourage the search for new definitions of heritage. However, experts have no solution for the imbalances and the highly exclusionary character of the works catalogued for their 'outstanding universal value'. Advocating the democratization of the heritage, promoting an alleged duty of memory and the reclamation of intangible,

marginal and natural heritage, has converted the Heritage crusade into a bulimic business, unsustainable and in need of private resources needed to ensure its funding. De-museumization, de-artifactualization and de-expertization, along with privatization, massification and globalization, have converted Heritage into a resource at the service of the leisure market. The second wave of patrimonialization, the neoliberal, irreversibly mixes private and public, and turns nature tourism and cultural tourism into the real engines of heritage. Thus, terms such as the Disneyfication or McDonaldization of Heritage are gaining more and more followers.

Explorers of Commons

Nor, as Ostrom showed, does the privatization of public assets resolve the social, political, economic and cultural tensions generated by the patrimonialization of Commons. Neither long-tail economies, nor social innovation, nor corporate social responsibility have been able to curb the systematic proliferation of exclusive minorities and excluded majorities. Commons are not the result of an expansion of the public domain. Commons always emerge where the state and the market are absent, where life is organized in self-managed, resistant, cooperative or counterhegemonic ways, or in a unique mixture of the above. The public domain, when it works well, has too much work to do in producing protocols, standards and distribution policies. One might almost say that the state is designed to ignore what is local, situated, peripheral, singular and in a minority. The state machine does not know where or how to look at these emerging territories. The state fails; and the market even more so, even when there have been attempts to implement confused projects of philanthrocapitalism, or more recently of social innovation. To answer the question about what Commons are, we need artists- or, perhaps, a particular kind of artist, and not the very recent kind. To find Commons, explorers need to be sent to the boundaries of heritage, beyond public and private, in the same way as the Enlightenment sent its expeditionaries within the confines of the empire, beyond the known and this side of the marvellous. Then too there was a proliferation of new actors, new media and new technologies. Even then, amateur culture found a gap through which it could colour what was formal and what it had inherited. So, with the help of expeditionaries, we want to review the strategies

of travellers who are moving into the new uncharted territories of a modernity that we can now only imagine as incomplete, imperfect, unfinished, partial, confused, fragile and casual; a fragmentary modernity, whose ruin is hidden even in the margins of the public and the private. Some contemporary projects are acting as sensors of the new tensions between commons and heritage. They are disrupting the distribution of the commonplace in the public space or, as we said before, (re) programming objects, and producing other views.

From 2003 to 2012 Megafone.net, directed by the artist Antoni Abad, has mapped, with the help of different groups, thirteen emerging territories: that of Mexico City taxi drivers, young gypsies in Lleida and León, sex workers in Madrid, people with limited mobility in Barcelona, Geneva and Montreal, Sao Paulo motorcycle messengers, Nicaraguan immigrants in Costa Rica, the displaced of Colombia, young Sahrawi refugees in Algeria, the blind of Barcelona and immigrants in New York. Each group builds its own objects live, through a smartphone connected to the graphical interface of the web, rearranging public and symbolic space through their own narrative.

In the year 2000, the collective of artists, educators, scholars and activists, REPOhistory, who had been working since 1989, produced its last public project of maps. Entitled 'Circulation', it conceived the whole city of New York as a huge body and a space for exploration, in order to investigate a little-known aspect of urban physiology: the daily distribution of human blood from donors to blood banks, hospitals, recipients and clinics. This chain effectively forms an invisible circulatory system spanning multiple points, both locally and globally. The project investigated the political economy of blood material, both from a health perspective (disease transmission, surgical resources, etc.), and from the commercial point of view (experiments on new utilities, altruistic motivations, racist connotations). This preliminary assembly of human and nonhuman actors outlined an area of exchange that was experienced as common.

Both cases prove the existence of new objects and forms of exchange. Within them there emerge unknown territories. Their existence is not antagonistic, but counter-hegemonic: worlds embedded in our present, hybrid forms of sociability,

demanding the eye of the artist and the techniques of the archaeologist (González Ruibal, 2012). An archaeology of the present should be able to show us what many artists, acting as early warning sensors, experience as new enclosures of the Commons (Boyle, 2003). These two examples could be two archaeologies of the present (Harrison, 2012), testifying to the imminence of a new heritage, now seen as extended as a result of the participation and convergence of the experts with those affected. Both cases also shape new anonymous patrimonies, and cover hybrid spaces where the ordinary intersects with the patrimonialized, both public and private. But there is more. Every day on the internet we find new experiences, born where modernity fades or- worse still- is absent altogether. The latter are no longer woven, as in the cases mentioned before, by preconceived strategies of participation by an artist or an interdisciplinary collective, but by collaborative transverse networks that weave in a spontaneous and autonomous way. This happened in New Orleans when Katrina showed up all the spatial deficiencies, imbalances and injustices that had sustained and romanticized this Creole town, this boisterous city, the capital of jazz. There, Katrina is not tucked away comfortably in the past. Katrina is everywhere. We are all, we know, waiting for Katrina.

Fukushima is another perfect case in point. After the tsunami and the meltdown of several nuclear reactors there was an information blackout. Big Data passed to No Data. The Japanese government and TEPCO, the company that owns the plants, were trying to save face by giving incomplete and irregular reports on PDFs that irritated several governments. The Japanese crisis went global. It needed the work of several groups of hackers world-wide, including Tokyo hacker space members, who in record time designed, financed, produced and distributed a radioactivity Geiger counter based on free protocols and hardware. Data were standardized, as well as the process of collection, purification, treatment and normalization by *Pachube* (today, *Cosm*), the first major Commons tool for the Internet of the things that, combined with Ushahidi, began to produce real-time visualizations of radioactivity, making a mockery of the energy corporation and of the public administration. And what we have said about new regimes of the production of knowledge and sociability in the city environment also extends to the environments of the body.

The Braintalk Communities are another example of decentralized networks, which act by mapping completely unknown territory. Formed by mental disorder patients tired of pills and eager to improve their quality of life, they have organized a massive clinical trial with the aim of discussing what happens to them, in order to identify likely symptoms, tentative remedies, side effects, recommended treatments and, finally, to take any action that meets certain conditions, among which are a willingness to test all hypotheses, the determination that the experiment should remain open, and the conviction that no response will be final. These are not self-help communities, oriented towards the exchange of encouraging words and well-intentioned phrases, but true communities of learning and the production of substantiated knowledge (Hoch & Ferguson, 2005) There are studies showing the epistemological and organizational importance of these ‘research--in-the-wild’ projects, as Michael Callon & Rabehsrisoa (2003) called them. Many people have noted that they are not participatory initiatives enhancing the functionality of institutions or the robustness of our knowledge; but self-managed enterprises, gaining a reputation and building a common body, post-anatomical and post-liberal, that is open, distributed, democratic, objective, inalienable and recursive (Kelty, 2008). The two cases described are impressive, and show that the new assets constructed, an atmosphere free of radioactivity and sovereignty over the body, are unimaginable without the infrastructure to support the community that mobilizes them.

New charts and other heritage

Located in an unfinished or absent modernity, these archaeologies disrupt social space and hack into it in order to map uncharted territory, turning them into graphical interfaces that support and are supported by the constant flow of contributions among their users. But unlike the first two cases, where the expansion of the heritage is determined by a heterogeneous set of mediators, in the latter two the demand for new heritage arises from the direct mediation of communities of concern. We are speaking, therefore, of a type of archaeology whose *raison d'être* is not unearthing fragments, but revealing the lively assemblage of common property, shared and not exclusive: property coded as dynamic and liminal objects, which map out counter-

hegemonic territories, and not just expanded heritage. It is not simply a matter of proposing the dynamics of participatory governance. The new Commons are always there when and where the recursive accumulation of the property and communities concerned is indistinguishable from the technologies with which they are activated. While old maps outlive the inhabitants of the territory and their cartographers, the viability of the new interface is entirely dependent on the survival of the community. If the exchange of contributions stops, the object thus assembled vanishes, taking with it the space produced by its multiple pathways. Today many museums, especially those dedicated to contemporary art, are working with an expanded patrimony that ends up forgotten in their cellars. But unlike what happened in the Enlightenment, we have no physical infrastructures that can accommodate the new Commons. Perhaps the museum cannot at this moment be transformed into an interface to host objects as vast as toxic air, and which have no existence outside their use and the individuals who mobilize them. But sooner or later, we shall have to build a space that can protect the new Commons without patrimonializing them.

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