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Museums as Carrier Bags. A Short Story Around Collecting.

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Since the beginning of human time we have gathered things. According to writer Elizabeth Fisher in her 1975 seminal book *Women's Creation. Sexual Evolution and the Shaping of Society*, the first ever invented cultural device was not a weapon, not even the wheel, as popular consensus might lead us to believe, surprisingly, Fisher says: “The first cultural device was probably a recipient... Many theorizers feel that the earliest cultural inventions must have been a container to hold gathered products and some kind of sling or net carrier”. Probably used to gather food and transport it home — wild oats in Ursula K. Le Guin’s fictional account of this part of history — the bag, sling or net is the original container for the things human beings are prone to collect. The container took many shapes: medicine bundle, which included all sorts of healing elements, shrines, for the sacred, cabinets, for curiosities, and so on. In the 18th century, the container took one of its most iconic formats: the museum.

In her short essay “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction”, Le Guin tells us how the story of the carrier bag — or its invisibility, I might say — could also be the story of how we tell History and how we write and read novels. To be more precise, those novels and stories filled with Heroes instead of people, killings instead of sustenance, and Men instead of communities. She tells us how the History of Hunters and Heroes has toppled the story of the carrier bag and the gathering of wild oats. This semi-fictional version might also help us think through how it is that

we went from gathering seeds, pebbles and other tiny treasures and placing them “into a bag, or a basket, or a bit of rolled bark or leaf, or a net woven of your own hair, or what have you” to creating temples and museums filled with Heroes and grandiose gestures that render every other story invisible to History.

It might be useful, to explore how this happened, to turn to what has been historically accepted as the “birth of the museum”. I refer to those colonial-modern-patriarchal devices known as *wunderkammer* and *studiolo*, *museion* and *galleria* in their different thematic iterations and geographic locations. Devices that gathered all the wonders of the newly discovered world that laid way beyond western civilizations known until the 15th century, and the objects of the old but resignified Europe. Since the 16th century these private spaces of collection, of leaves and bones, and insects and shells, of scientific instruments and “magical” contraptions, of birds and human beings, played their role in organizing the novel global narrative providing evidence to fill hierarchical categories of accepted forms of knowledge and being, conceived by the engineers of Enlightenment. This is, the creation of otherness and a world-systems.

The discovery of America reshaped the western world view by giving birth to “otherness” in the name of categories such as race, the colonization of languages, memories, and of space, and re-organizing the world according to the new values constructed through the imperial use of these notions. It resulted in a new division of labour and knowledge associated to racial categories, the primitive accumulation of capital created through extractivism and exploitation, and an emerging global capitalism. These process brought along a series of institutions and the institutionalization of this power structure that still today shapes our world, this is what Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano called “the coloniality of power”. The museum is one of these powerful colonial institutions, the one for collecting the “other”.

The first thing we should notice, writes Sharon Macdonald, is that collecting is an act of intention, and thus a collection “is a set of objects that forms some kind of meaningful though not necessarily (yet) complete ‘whole’”. Collecting is then an object-oriented activity that tends to form a new thing and new meaning, meaning that exceeds that of a series of individual items. Collecting creates new shapes, be it a museum or a carrier bag (though Macdonald might disagree with this point). The first collections took the form of small private rooms, hidden away from the public eye. In the darkness, they conspired to create a new world, but also new knowledge

and scholarship on all topics science could get a hold of. Out of this dark rooms new disciplines and fields of knowledge were born. The French Revolution took a big leap towards bringing private collections into the public realm, opening the Louvre to anyone willing to visit it. This transformed the idea of the museum as a collecting institution forever. Now collections were not only creating wealth and demonstrating power of the already powerful monarchies or the nascent nation states, they were creating memory and building identity for the people it represented.

This new public shape continued to be the same temple-like shape that the modern collecting practices created, and this meant that it continued to reproduce the meanings and values produced by those first explorers of the world, and those first monarchs that claimed land that wasn't theirs to claim, and those who obliterated peoples, languages, cultures, traditions and histories in the name of modernity and civilization. Ironically, the remains were then transported to their modern temples of collecting in order to exhibit them detached from their contexts of origin, their situated meanings and their social and practical functions.

Times changed and museums changed with them, mostly in appearance. It changed its dark interiors for bright white cubes, but continued to add items to their collections, mostly in the same evolutive line of a white male gaze-production of future. It took these institutions many decades, since the birth of the Modern Art Museum, to start questioning their cores. Some slightly tickled it, others tried to break into it. But many of them have been left wondering where their collections came from, what they really mean, and, most importantly, what to do with them.

I want to propose a story about museums and collections that might bring us closer to Le Guin's theory of the carrier bag approach. One that leads us through the tiny, and less visited, back streets of museum history, where the Heroes have never even arrived: some of the little deviant institutions of Latin America. By telling these stories I seek to find a new understanding of what a museum and a collection could be, when they, voluntarily or accidentally, refuse their inheritance of plundering, exoticism, colonialism, and elitism in order to just be what they want to be or what their context needs them to be. What does a collection do when its meaning-creation function is allowed to roam free? What does a museum look like when it has no references or does not respond to mandates? Is a museum still a museum when it has no building? Or when its collection disperses around the world? When its objects are all mixed up without hierarchies to organize them? Or when they

gather all the things that have been left out of the colonial-patriarchal narrative?

What happens then?

The floating museum

The Museum of Modern Art of Buenos Aires, was founded by municipal decree on April 1956. The decree stated that the museum would be housed in the San Martín Theatre, however, the theatre's building was not completed until late 1960.

Therefore, for the following four years after its foundation the museum had no building, no collection and no budget, but yet, it existed. From an office in the attic of another museum, the Museum of Modern Art, led by its director Rafael Squirru, organized its first exhibition, a floating one, on the first commercial cruise to depart from the port of Buenos Aires. There's little documentation to explains how this happened, most probably it was an arrangement between Squirru and Cecilio Madanes, a well known theater director and producer, in charge of the Cultural Department of the cruise agency, and a response to the urge to make a museum happen at any cost, even if its just a floating one. On September 28 1956 the *First Floating Exhibition of 50 Argentine Painters* left the port of Buenos Aires to begin its tour around the world aboard the Yapeyú. It carried the work of not 50, but 54 painters, some modern and contemporary, some more traditional, and it set the tone for the way in which the museum would operate even after it settled down in its galleries at the theater.

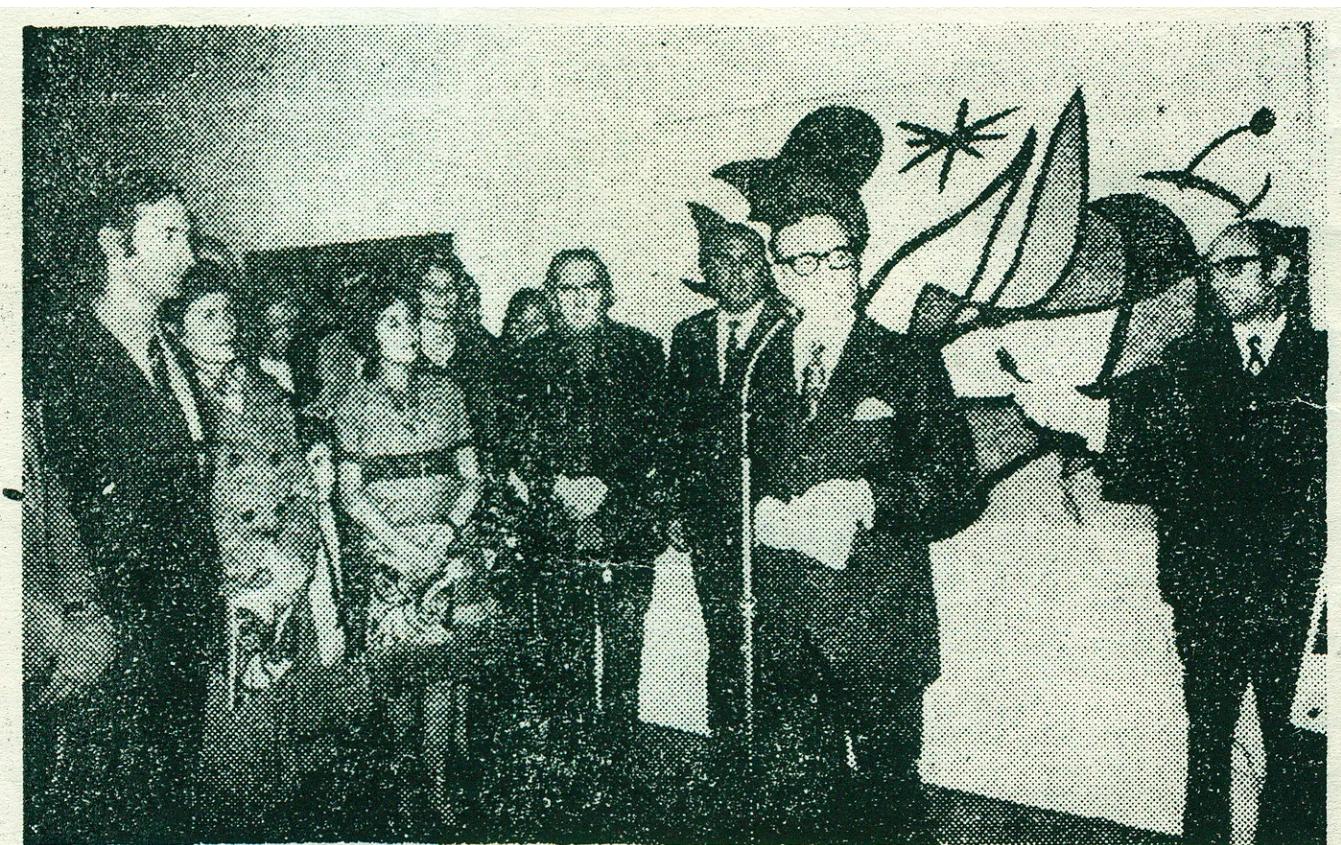


After the floating exhibition, Squirru continued to organize exhibitions that he later called “lightning actions or ambushes”: a truck that travelled around the country during 1960, carrying a traveling art show and occasionally giving conferences in parks and other public spaces, he organized sculpture exhibitions in the open air in the Botanical Garden, in the gardens of the SAAP, an artists association, and any other museum or gallery that would be willing to temporarily lend its space for the museum to hold its exhibitions and therefore, exist. According to Squirru’s own account, the museum even held impromptu actions on the street, to the surprise and commotion of the unsuspecting passer by.

Over time the museum moved to its assigned space and started building a collection, which much as its early nomadic history responded to the whim of its director, to the scarcity of resources and the willingness to build something out of nothing. Today the museum’s collection tells an odd story of Argentine art, with a small core of artists and movements crowned by art history, and thousands of works by little known artists whose work contributed in different ways to the local art system, little art that supported and made the Heroes existence possible.

The exiled museum

Originally named Museum of Solidarity of Chile (1971–1973), later Museum of Resistance Salvador Allende (1975–1990) and finally Museum of Solidarity Salvador Allende (1990-today), this museum was founded in 1971 in order to garner local and international support for the government of the political coalition Unidad Popular and the presidency of Salvador Allende, as well as for the people of Chile. With the president's support an international committee was formed to make an international call for artists to donate works that would become the museum's collection. A museum for the empowerment of people of Chile, that would back the socialist alliance.



PRESIDENTE INAUGURÓ MUSEO DE SOLIDARIDAD CON CHILE

El Presidente de la República, Salvador Allende, inauguró ayer el Museo de Solidaridad, cuyas obras se exhiben en nuestra capital y fueron donadas por artistas plásticos de todo el mundo. La muestra fue habilitada temporalmente en el Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de la Quinta Normal. La donación consta, por ahora, de 600 obras por un valor aproximado al millón de dólares, incluido un cuadro de Miró valuado en la mitad de esa suma. Este Museo será trasladado posteriormente al edificio que actualmente ocupa la UNCTAD III. EN EL GRABADO, el Presidente Allende se dirige a los asistentes a la muestra. Mario Pedrosa, presidente del Comité de Solidaridad Artística Internacional con Chile, ofreció las obras en nombre de los donantes.

Even though it did not have its own space to operate from, the newly assembled team found shelter at the Instituto de Instituto of Latin American Art located at the Art School of the Chile University. Between 1972 and 1973 the museum received over 600 works from all over the world which included renowned artists such as Joan Miró, Frank Stella, Alexander Calder, Lygia Clark, Roberto Matta and Joaquín

Torres-García, along with artists from Mexico, Spain, France, Argentina, and many other countries. And in 1972 it held its first exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art of the University of Chile. However, after the military coup in September 1973, the museum was shut down, the local members had to leave the country, and much of the collection was kept in hidden at Museum of Contemporary, others were added to the collection of the Fine Arts Museum, and many were lost and probably destroyed. A few of the works fell into military hands and ended up decorating the offices of the regime they were actually meant to oppose. A couple of them managed to escape by camouflaging themselves as furniture — the Miró turned into a rug and the Fran Stella into a table top.

In 1975 the museum regrouped and restarted operations, mainly from Paris, where they created the General Secretary, presided by Mário Pedrosa, and from Cuba, where Miria Contreras coordinated the Support Committees. During this long resistance period not only artists continued to donate their works to the exiled museums, but they also contributed to different exhibitions and actions meant to show their support to the people of Chile, now under the dictatorship of Augusto Pinochet. Between 1975 and 1990 the museum received over 1.000 works, again, from all over the world, including those by Victor Vasarely, Helen Escobedo, Julio Le Parc, Pierre Soulages, Wilfredo Lam and Kjartan Slettemark.

Only after the return of democracy to Chile in 1991, the museum managed to return to its country of origin. Finally bringing together the two groups of works donated during the “Solidarity” and the “Resistance” periods, merging them into one single collection that now operates as an archive of memory, a reservoir of solidarity and an active force of resistance against authoritarianism and other forms of institutional violence in Chile and the world.

The muddy museum

The Mud Museum. Center for Visual Arts of Paraguay originated from the initiative of artists Olga Blinder and Carlos Colombino, who in 1972, in the middle of the military dictatorship of General Alfredo Stroessner (1954–1989), created a moving exhibition of their private collections of prints and drawings which they called the Circulating Collection. In 1979 the Collection split into two different programs: the Paraguayan Museum of Contemporary Art and the Mud Museum, which, in time grew their respective collections of contemporary, modern and popular arts and crafts. Each project operated in separate spaces that their founders built with their

own funds and the collaboration of their community and a some international support. In 1987 the museum finally came together as one institution on the same grounds under it current name, bringing together the collections donated by their founders.



With time the collection continued to grow in size and in diversity, specially adding an important section of contemporary art and a collection of both popular and archeological ceramics (which lend their name to the institution), and other traditional forms of folk crafts, and Jesuit and Franciscan wooden sculptures and carvings. And in 1989, with the return of democracy and under the directorship of Ticio Escobar, one final conceptual addition completes the museum's collection and exhibition programs: the incorporation of indigenous art. Under its newly formulated mission of bringing together a wide range of artistic productions, understood as equal, the museum slowly and with huge effort started building a new space in the capital, Asunción. However, a tornado in 1992 blew off a large part of the new galleries, leaving part of the collection under the rubble and mud left by the storm, the institution with a lack of space and exhausted resources. This accident, however, brought the attention of the art community and neighbors, social movements, government agencies and political parties that came together to respond to the emergency. First squads were organized to salvage the missing pieces of art, and later everyone rallied to rebuild the lost galleries. By 1995, the museum had tripled its space and gained a community and loyal audience.

With the leadership of Escobar, the myriad objects that form the collection stand together as equal, avoiding traditional classification and exhibition canons, and therefore, the museum is forced to rethink categories and ways of exhibiting that focus on artistic status without deviating from the objects of their histories and identities. This way of building and growing a collection feels more like a communal gathering than a modern device of classification and exhibition. It creates bonds between the objects and between the communities that produce them and divulge them.

The queer museum



The Transvestite Museum of Perú is a long standing project by artist, philosopher and drag queen Giuseppe Campuzano (1969–2013), that defies the institutional canons for the construction of Peruvian history and identity. The project took the shape of a museum in order to challenge it by turning it ephemeral and mobile, performance and protest, and by occupying the streets as well as parasitizing other museums. The museum began as a result of Campuzano's research and life experiences, activism, theoretical writing, sexual practices, cultural production and personal rituals. In his own words:

“The Transvestite Museum of Peru was born from the need for its own history — an unknown history of Peru -, rehearsing an archeology of makeup and a philosophy of bodies, in order to propose a more productive elaboration of metaphors than any exclusive cataloging. It is a ‘false museum’ -like the appellation of ‘false woman’ with which this Manichean language adjectives us. A muffled museum, whose masks - handicrafts, photocopies, billboards, banners, these mass production systems — do not hide but, on the contrary, show. They do not camouflage but cross-dress.”

In the 80s Giuseppe started gathering objects instinctively, trying to make sense of this story, wondering who his queer ancestors were in the long Peruvian history and how his own body and the body of the queer community related to them, an intuitive and affective archeology of his origins, that connects past and present of transvestism. The collection/archive is composed of a wide range of materials: art works, anthropological objects, images, texts, press clippings, legal documents, oral testimonies, everyday and personal objects. These materials are organized in three chapters: Display or Exhibition, which weaves together images and objects, both artistic and anthropological, legal documents and personal stories, past and present, in an attempt to undo the extreme progression of historical narrative; Glossary, which compiles the different terms that have named, represented or surrounded the transvestite community in history; finally, Archive, the last chapter, brings together press clippings that document the life of the LGBTQI+ community in Peru since the 60s, as well as a register of deaths of transvestite people.

The museum’s collections and activities have long researched the multidisciplinary trace of transvestism in Perú, in order to subvert the fragmentary and hygienist History, as well as the social norms that this form of history has created for current Peruvian society. By bringing together these materiales and looking at them through the lens not only of history but of queer theory, decoloniality and feminism, the museum becomes not only a gathering of objects but a tool for empowerment, social inclusion and the transformation of social space.

Coda

These are just a few stories of how different carrier bags can create different collections of objects with multiple meanings and ways of impacting their environments and communities. A story of deviant institutions that would not, or could not, adhere to the norm, and thus, created their own personal narrative and definition of what a museum is, does, and collects.

As the Declaration of the Bureau of Santiago de Chile 1972 estates:

“The museum is an institution at the service of society, of which it is an inalienable part and has in its very essence the elements that allow it to participate in the formation of the conscience of the communities they serve and through. This awareness can help bring these communities to action, projecting its activity in the historical field that must end in the current problem: that is, tying the past with the present and committing to the prevailing structural changes and causing other within the respective National reality.”

Sofía Dourron is an independent researcher and curator based in Buenos Aires. Dourron holds a BA in Art History and Management, an MA in Latin American Art History and was a participant in the De Appel Curatorial Programme 2018/2019. In 2019 she was an International Research Fellow at the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art of Korea.

From 2015 to 2018 she was a Curator and Curatorial Department Coordinator at the Museum of Modern Art of Buenos Aires, where she curated exhibitions by Edgardo Antonio Vigo, Sergio Avello, Elba Bairon and Lino Divas, among others. Since 2011 she has been a member of La Ene, Nuevo Museo Energía de Arte Contemporáneo, an independent art space founded in 2010 in Buenos Aires, which she directed from 2015 until 2018.

Her current work researches the relationships between the Latin-American decolonial perspective, the notion of the decolonization of the unconscious, and artistic practices. She also continues her on-going research on art institutions in Latin America, focusing on the museum as a colonial device, and designing alternative genealogies that scape the modern universalist canon.

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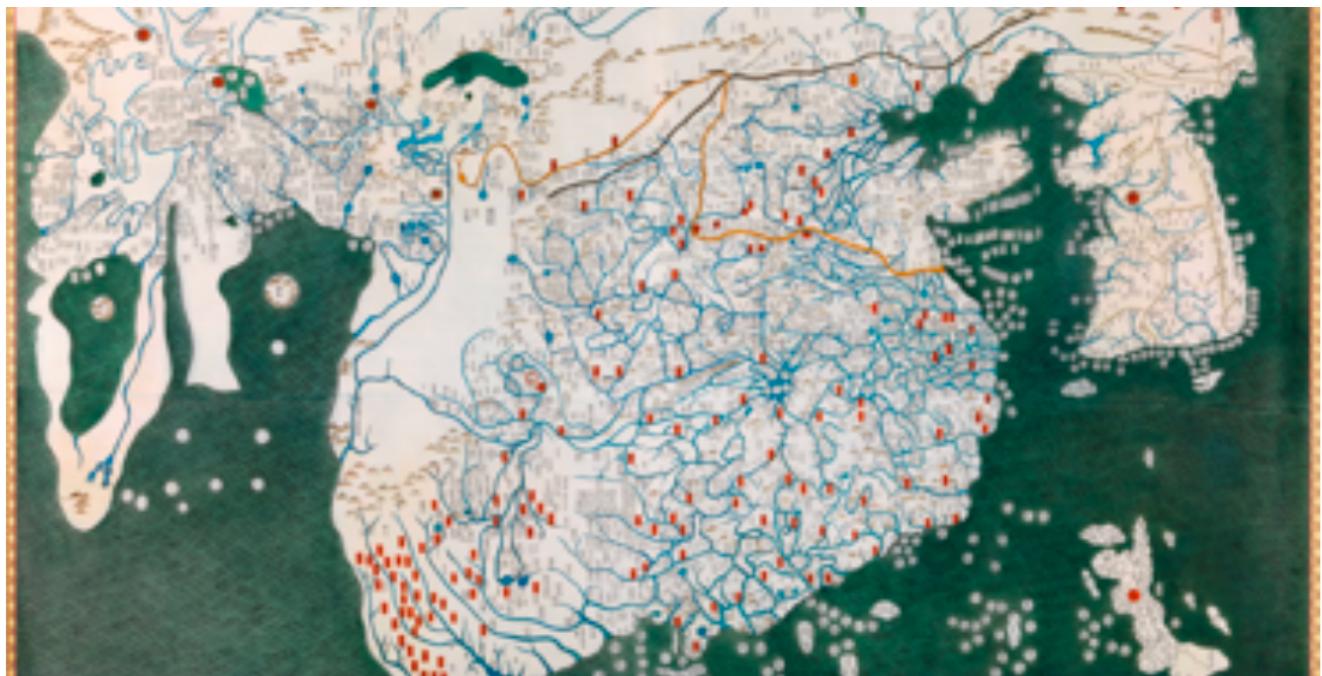
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