

LA BOÎTE-EN-VALISE
CONCEPTUAL ART AND MUSEOLOGIC HERITAGE DISPLAY

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ABSTRACT

In the context of the recent shift that contemporary art has gradually determined in the field of museology, my article aims to point out the revolutionary role that conceptual art had on the understanding of heritage. I develop that conceptual art had an essential role for the critical redefinition of the nature, value, display, role and agency of the heritage object. Due to the specific understanding of the 'object' and the institutional critique discourse it established, conceptual art played a significant role in the development of new methodologies in museologic practice since the beginning of the 20th century. Although new museology counts with the implication of contemporary art, a theory of its specific *modus operandi* in this context and – as I argue – the particular role of conceptual art, have not been systematically pursued so far. The article will demonstrate how the involvement of conceptual, performative, multi-disciplinary artistic practices and display strategies have contributed to the elaboration of innovatory, critical and inclusive transmissions of heritage. Concluding, I consider two case-studies: a modernist work of art and anthropological installation by Andre Breton and a recent artistic and social research project curated by Kathryn Weir – both exhibited at Centre Pompidou Paris.

KEYWORDS: new museology, heritage object, display, conceptual art, performativity, decolonising studies.

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INTRODUCTION

In the context of the recent progressive introduction of contemporary art into the field of museology as a means to reconsider material culture heritage, it is surprising how little analysis has been devoted

to the theoretical contribution that contemporary art has made for the discipline. This article is not aiming to fill this gap by drawing a history of cases in which contemporary art and anthropology have met inside the museum since the beginning of the 20th century and the repercussions of these encounters, that suppose complex delimitations and also contaminations. What I would like to demonstrate in the context of these debates, is that specifically conceptual art (from all other contemporary art forms) had a revolutionary role to play for the recent understanding of heritage – which has (as to my knowledge) not been analysed so far. On one hand due to its specific understanding of the object, and on the other hand as a working tool to revisit heritage, conceptual art determined a significant reconsideration of museologic practice and display. Both these factors contributed in my view to the shifts towards what has been called a ‘new museology’. Since the beginning of the 20th century, conceptual art has played an essential role for the critical redefinition of the nature, role, value and display of the heritage object and equally in the context of institutional self-reflexivity, which had revolutionary repercussions upon heritage understanding. The article is titled after a work of the great thinker of conceptualism, Marcel Duchamp’s – *La boîte-en-valise* (1936) – which represents a mobile, personal and dynamic museum. To my knowledge, it has not been so far observed that this work rethinks what a museum can be with new forms of storing, displaying and using heritage items. The article will conclude with an analysis of two case-studies: a modernist work of art/ anthropological installation by Andre Breton and a recent artistic and social research project curated by Kathryn Weir – both exhibited at Centre Pompidou Paris. Building on these two case-studies we will follow how the involvement of conceptual, performative, multi-disciplinary artistic practices and display strategies have contributed to the elaboration of critical, processual, performative and inclusive forms of transmission of heritage.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

1. KEY POSITIONS FROM THE DISCIPLINES OF ANTHROPOLOGY, NEW MUSEOLOGY AND THOUGHTS ON THE ROLE OF ART

New Museology

As Kevin Hetherington so clearly puts it (Hetherington 2020, 21), while old museology is concerned with the academic study of the content of museums, new museology is rather concerned with the social role of the museum, which includes the constitution of knowledge through museologic discourse and the practices of power exercised through the institution. As in the discipline of new museology itself, throughout this article the notion of ‘heritage object’ refers both to material and intangible heritage. In the following I will relate fundamental theories for the definition of a ‘new museology’ with thoughts and experiments initiated in the field of conceptual art.

In ‘The Cultural Biography of Things’ (1986), Igor Kopytoff draws for the first time attention to the fact that commodities should be read as results of cultural and cognitive processes, beyond their nature as material objects. He also questions the consideration of the status of the object or the subject as fixed. Arjun Appadurai, drawing on the work of Igor Kopytoff explains that what determines the link between exchange and value is politics (The Social Life of Things 1986). His major theory is that commodities, like persons, have social lives and that in order to understand the human-ascribed value of a commodity, one must analyze “things-in-motion” (the routes which objects take in time and space). Appadurai’s theory established the emancipatory potential of objects – their capacity to free

themselves from their instrumentalisation by human politics. Appadurai talks about the tendency of commodities to break relations of privilege and social control (Appadurai 1986:57), talking about the active role of commodities in the relation between knowledge and value (Appadurai 1986:56). As Fowles writes (2016, 20), in Appadurai's work postcolonial critique is met with post-humanist methods – or at least with the early hints of what would grow into a quasi-posthumanist anthropology in which objects freely assume the position of subjects. For Fowles this turn towards non-humans and away from humans was necessary and justified in the context of calls of decolonisation.

Applied to the museologic object, these two theories were fundamental in that they demonstrated that an object's identity goes beyond its material form exhibited in a museum, therefore the knowledge on it is partial, contradictory and differentiated. This in turn determined the need to develop a new type of display that can make visible the object in transformation and in motion – which in turn reveal a broader social and economic history.

James Clifford initiated in the late 1980's the discussion around the crises of representation and the imminence of giving voice to objects with a post-colonial agenda. In 1997 he established the defining understanding of museums 'as contact zones' (1997, 193). The concept, borrowed from Mary Louise Pratt (1992) is referring to colonial encounters and to co-presence between subjects previously separated by geographic and temporal disjunctures, towards interactions and interlocking of understanding and practices. He warns nevertheless against the dangers of turning such contact zones into a field of 'ethnic spectacle', exotisation and 'paternalist condescendence' (Clifford 1997, 198), as it happened in exhibitions such as *Les Magiciens de la Terre* in Paris (1989) or as it can happen in more recent large scale exhibitions featuring 'third world cultures', possibly funded by neocolonial relations and economic investors (Clifford 1997, 204).

Alfred Gell (1998) constructs an anthropology of visual art as instrumental action and shows how art objects embody complex intentionalities and mediate social agency.

I place all the emphasis on *agency, intention, causation, result* and *transformation*. I view art as a system of action intended to change the world, rather than encode symbolic propositions about it. (Gell 1998, 6).

He defines the nature of the art object as a function of the social-relational matrix in which it is embedded. It has no intrinsic nature independent of the relational context. He argues that from an anthropological point of view everything can be an art object, even living persons, as art objects are the equivalent to social agents. (Gell 1998, 7). To illustrate his theory he talks about the work of Marcel Duchamp, who influenced by the Cubists wanted to show what the objects are like, contrary to what they look like, that is as a process, rather than as a 'thing'. (Gell 1998, 244). Duchamp's work shows, according to Gell, that each artwork is a place where agency assumes visible form (Gell 1998, 250).

The anthropologist Tim Ingold (2007) regards the objects as active, not because they are imbued with agency, but because the properties of materials are not fixed, but processual and relational. In a brilliantly witty texts he contests previous material-culture theories that regard object's agency separated from the material and he argues that 'we have to direct our attention from the materiality

of objects to the properties of materials' (Ingold 2007, 11). For him 'things are in life, rather than life is in things' (Ingold 2007, 12), as objects are alive as they 'belong to the generative flux of materials'. Materiality emerges from the object's involvement in his surrounding, while 'the properties of materials are not attributes, but histories' (Ingold 2007, 15).

The themes addressed in the past decade by critical or new museology (Karp, Kreamer and Levine 1992; Macdonald 1998; Macdonald 2003; Message 2006; Macdonald 2015) span between the critique of the discipline itself through methodological questionings of classification, display and value attribution, objects' biography and institutional history, institutional and cultural policy, archive work, to uncovering material that was excluded from the writing of history and the reintegration into the actual cultural and social space of marginal and repressed histories and objects.

The field of postcolonial studies is an integral component of new museologic theory. Overbey (2012) understands it not as a chronological indication (the period after the end of the colonial rule), but rather as an ideological, critical term, that reflects on the encounter between imperial authority and local subjectivity and the resulting hybrid condition.

In a more recent critique Janice Baker discusses (2020, 73) the 'affective turn' that took place in the new museology not as an affective approach to the museologic objects and narratives, but rather as a post-humanism, in which the distinctions and the hierarchy between human and non-human objects, as well as the hierarchies between natural and cultural (as a result of technological advancement) are effaced. In this post-human museum (Baker 2020, 73) the existence of *actual* material objects is extremely significant in the context of the *virtual* affectivity that characterizes our time. By their capacity to resist classification altered, damaged or minor object are excluded or exclude themselves from subordination to museologic frameworks. This power was seen by postcolonial criticism as the object's potential to resist to colonial rhetoric (Baker 2020, 65).

In the context of the crisis of the 'ethnologic project' frequently declared in the last decade (Macdonald 2015, 213) and intimately connected to postcolonial thinking, anthropologists turned their attention to the possibilities offered by contemporary arts in the context of museology. With creative means, initiatives were developed for uncovering colonial rhetoric perpetuated in today's institutions and were recently invested in the research for restitution processes (Message 2009). As Witcomb and Message (2020, XXXVI) point out, by fusing practical work, research work and cultural policy, museums can become interdisciplinary sites. Therefore meaning produced for an audience in a museum, can only be the result of an inclusive encounter and not of a predefined agenda that imposes hierarchies between cultures and reinforces relations of dominance. (Witcomb and Message 2020, XLIV).

Contemporary art has been punctually identified in the field of new museology as a creative factor that, once introduced in museums as a tool to rethink display, can stimulate a critical involvement on the part of the audience in the assimilation of museologic content. As Haidy Geimar (2015) observes there is surprisingly little discussion on the interference between anthropology and contemporary art and their capacity to represent the social world as material genres. In her approach, she is nevertheless putting in cause 'what art can do for ethnographic collections' (Geimar 2015, 184) and critiques art based on the assumption that contemporary art continues to be based on the principles of modernism, namely a 'Eurocentric confident universality'. Also she claims that modernism 'negates

cultural difference’ – a surprisingly categorical statement ignoring the complexities of modernism’s dialogue with extra-European cultures and its specific hybridity.

This article understands itself as a response to these and similarly general approaches of contemporary art. Therefor we will analyze the developments of the early avantgarde and Neo-avantgarde and put into light the revolutionary role that conceptual art and theory played in the cultural field. The intention is to show, that due to its analytic, performative and interdisciplinary approach, conceptual art had a major contribution to decolonizing practices. Re-thinking the role of the institution museum and its display were a main tool of manifestation of this agenda, due to the fact that conceptual art shifted the understanding of the object and forwarded the importance of art as social and cultural practice.

As Cass, Nick, Powell (2020) resume, museums shifted in the past decade from being object-based to being audience and practice focused. Similarly heritage should be understood today as a dialogical intertwining of people, objects, places and practices (Cass, Nick, Powell 2020, 3). In their introduction they discuss the fact that even in recent bibliography a separation of the notions of art and heritage is still prevalent: art is attributed to the present, while heritage is seen as belonging to the past. The role of art practices in the context of ethnographic display is mentioned by a authors such as Deliss, Macdonalds, Davidson (2017). In this context Davidson (2017, 62) debates on the shifting status of any object which can be seen as anthropological (if placed into a museum context) and artistic if placed and traded in the context of an art gallery.

Confluences of Artistic and anthropological approaches of the heritage object

How to deal with museified objects without reloading at the same time the colonial rhetoric which constituted their status as objects of heritage (Macdonald, Deliss, Ang)? Fowles (2016) argues that a recent object oriented critique – the ‘material turn’ – is essentially connected to post-colonial awareness (Fowles 2016: 12): In ‘the run towards things’ (2016: 10) dominant in the 1990’s and related to the emerging postcolonial critique of the 1980’s, on one hand objects are treated as extensions of humans, but on the other hand this opens also the possibility for objects to liberate themselves from humans.

Since the 1980’s collaborating with indigenous communities in the making of museologic exhibitions by introducing their recent art into the display of historic pieces, had been at the origin of processes of creatively rethinking display (Witcomb and Message, 2020). The objective was to elaborate a museologic object which is in the process of reconsidering its own past and break with the inherent colonial heritage (Brown and Peers 2003). Candice Lin, which works both as artist and theoretician writes that the agency of objects over humans, should be in museums a political insight that destroys the paradigm of power as we know it (humans instrumentalising objects) (Lin 2016, 104). She talks about the fact that the object in the museologic context is a hybrid being, resulted from a ‘creol’ identity, one that is the result of mixing and of plural interactions. In the same direction argues Sandra Dudley (2020) who analysis the museum encounter between people and objects from the perspective of the object. As Shelley Butler shows (2020, xliii) to be successful, reflexive museum practice should be aligning with other forms of activism, such as postcolonial practices, urban practices, participatory models of democratic citizenship. In this context, artistic projects, experiments, performative and

collaborative practices were engaged to 'make visible' aspects of heritage which have been effaced by history, neglected, misread or distorted by historic museology. Ruth Phillips (2009) writes about the hybrid relationship between art history and anthropology, manifest in worldwide museums:

There has been a notable merging of the modernist display paradigms of art and artifact; art museums such as the Metropolitan increasingly provide extended labels, maps, and contextual photos that instruct viewers about the meaning of iconographic motifs and ritual contexts, while anthropology museums regularly exhibit contemporary art as a way to incorporate indigenous perspectives on history and culture and as cultural artifacts that evidence both living world views and participation in international art markets. Yet in other museums, such as the Louvre's Pavillon des Sessions, the old paradigms seem to have reasserted themselves in particularly pure forms that seem strangely reactionary following more than two decades of deconstruction and postcolonial critique. (Ruth Phillips 2009)

Further on in the same article, Phillips explains that despite the apparent dichotomy between art history and anthropology, 'both judged value in terms of similar standards of aesthetic quality grounded in Kantian aesthetics, and both imposed a characteristically Western hierarchy of fine and applied arts on objects produced in other times and by other cultures. In the early twentieth-century, through the parallel projects of Franz Boas and Alois Riegl, both disciplines also began to move toward more historically contingent and relativist modes of analysis and understanding. (...) These convergences are obvious in large-scale projects such as Museum of Modern Art's *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art* (1984) at MOMA or the Centre Pompidou's *Magiciens de la Terre* (1989).

Contemporary art and questions around institutional practice

Various international funds, programs and European institutional programs have been implemented in the last ten years, whose aim was to stimulate equitable education, inclusive and non-discriminatory communitarian practices, non-authoritative history writing in a post-colonial spirit and a creative and emancipatory appropriation of heritage. The role of art has been considered crucial across these programs for stimulating civic participation and promoting cultural diversity and cultural justice in the field of heritage. With the objective to provoke critical and creative responses from the part of the large audience to heritage transmission and collective forms of history writing, artistic initiatives were promoted that developed strategies of re-appropriation of heritage with the objective to include individual and hitherto marginalised voices into grand narratives. We can differentiate between independent and institutional initiatives, which are often correlated. Independent and often activist projects originating in research, anti-colonial movements or other forms of critical content-production have been among the first initiatives to be generating and disseminating critical forms of re-consideration and re-appropriation of heritage. Institutions (museums, public galleries) themselves contract and involve contemporary artists in order to reformulate or reshape publicly their own symbolic capital and as a solution for the institution's re-integration in urban circuits and for revitalisation. Some of these initiatives are oriented towards a self-reflexive institutional critique. Others are oriented towards formal interventions, implementing new media display solutions for the

updating of display technology with the collaborations of artists and designers. Taylor and Gibson (2017) observe that digitalisation is wrongly perceived as a form of democratisation: media interfaces are presented as creative approaches to heritage, even if concretely they do not shift the institutional presentation of heritage (Taylor and Gibson 2017, 408).

As Soh Bejeng Ndikung (2017) points out these latter are not per se negative, but some questions should be considered: what political or cultural agendas are guiding such initiatives and do the museums that take part in such projects have a genuine interest in diversifying their collections and programs, as well as questioning the canonical artworks and discourses that prevail within their institutions? Or is the fact of guaranteed funding the bigger bait that enables participation, but does not result in substantial engagement in pursuing this interest in their future programs? Following a thematic show dedicated to so far unrepresented cultures ("the Africa show," "the Arab show,"), there is little engagement with the local context and communities outside of the framework of the museologic program (Soh Bejeng Ndikung 2017). Ndikung suggests that for acting efficiently in the social field, institutions should reflect the diversification in their *projects*, their *publics*, and their *personnel*.

In the context of heritage practices that confront with a colonial past, Knudsen and Kølvrå (2021) talk about 4 main types of commemoration: repression, removal, reframing and re-emergence. The authors also warn against situations in which reframings of the colonial past through creative practices are constructed from the sites of power, used in order to 'domesticate' and socially control the voices of the formerly marginalised. (Knudsen and Kølvrå 2021, 4 and 19)

The own limits of artistic agency is also a fundamental question that is inherent to a sound analytic process within institutional critique. Hal Foster talks as early as 1995 about the dangers of these approaches in his article 'The Artist as Ethnographer' (1995). Not only the institutional context, but the artistic initiatives themselves are being taken under scrutiny by him. Regarding what he calls 'the ethnographic turn', he discusses the recent contamination between the domain of art and anthropology. He describes how the model of the artist as militant for the rights of the proletariat and the underrepresented of the time of Walter Benjamin is replaced in postmodern times with the artist as fighter for the postcolonial subject (Foster 1995, 302). He critiques the fact that 'the subject' continues to be regarded as a cultural 'other' (as he was regarded also in modernism for example) – while the artist is the figure that renders access to him. He shows that the coding of the postcolonial subject as 'the other which holds a truth' is defining identity by difference and otherness as outside-ness – which is propagating the cultural politics of marginality (Foster 1995, 304). He points to the fact that most of these initiatives are launched by institutions and funding bodies for self-legitimation and for accumulation of cultural and economic capital, building up a pseudo-ethnographic critique.

Biennials or other important art events concerned with post-colonial questions have intensively problematised heritage objects, for example the 2015 Venice Biennale curated by Okwui Enwezor, the 12th Manifesta (2018, Palermo) and the Documenta 14 (2017, Athens and Kassel). One of the first museologic platforms that systematically introduced contemporary artists to work on ethnologic heritage is the Humboldt Lab in Berlin functioning between 2013-2015 which was part of the

Ethnologic Museum Dahlem, Berlin. It was meant to function as a rehearsal cabinet and to develop solutions that should be implemented into the future and controversial Humboldt Forum, that will host the German national anthropology and natural history collections of mostly colonial origin. Not yet opened to the public, it will be housed in the controversially reconstructed baroque Berliner Schloss – reiterating an ambiguous confrontation with the imperial past. The future museum and the lab have been financially supported by the same state body (Stiftung Preussischer Kulturbesitz).

The Weltkulturenmuseum in Frankfurt (while being led by the former director Clementine Deliss), the Voelkerkunde Museum Leipzig (director Nanette Snoep), or exhibitions such as 'Fetish Modernity' at the Tervuren Museum also engaged in analytical consideration of their own heritage in temporary exhibitions.

2. CONCEPTUAL ART

In the above mentioned projects and texts, although the role of art is pointed out for offering a new, anti-hegemonic practice of heritage, of my knowledge an analysis of art's specific *modus operandi* in the context of heritage studies and display and especially the role of conceptual art practice are missing from the current debate. In the following, this article rises the question of what makes conceptual art a valuable tool in this context, and follows the significant contribution of conceptual art toward performativity, participation, inclusion and processuality in heritage studies.

Paraphrasing Thomas (2010) who talks about 'museum as method' I will discuss *conceptual art as method* in the context of museologic practice. Similarly as he describes museums as sites to generate theory by including the factor of unpredictability (Thomas 2010: 7), I consider conceptual art a method in museologic practice that can generate new knowledge especially due to its non-prescriptive nature. Recent museologic debate advocates that museums should turn into sites of communitarian, multicultural encounters, building social cohesion and stimulating a democratic understanding of citizenship (Dahlgren and Hermes 2020, 117-138). Contemporary art that problematises and re-enacts heritage demonstrated its efficiency in offering direct expression of people's knowledge and memories (Garder 2020, 511-531). How did that come about?

What is conceptual Art

Conceptual art is not the same as new art or contemporary art, affirm Goldie and Schellekens (2010) in their volume *Who is Afraid of Conceptual Art*. The Tate art term dictionary states that:

Conceptual art is art for which the idea (or concept) behind the work is more important than the finished art object. (...) Although the term 'concept art' had been used in the early 1960s (Henry Flynt of the Fluxus group described his performance pieces as 'concept art' in 1961) (...) the term conceptual art was first used to reference this distinct movement in an article written by Sol Le Witt in 1967. (...) Conceptual art can be – and can look like – almost anything. This is because, unlike a painter or sculptor who will think about how best they can express their idea using paint or sculptural materials and techniques, a conceptual artist uses whatever materials and whatever form is most appropriate to putting their idea across – this could be anything from a performance to a written description. (...) As a definable movement conceptual art is associated with the 1960s and 1970s, but

its origins reach beyond these two decades. Marcel Duchamp is often seen as an important forefather of conceptual art, and his readymade *Fountain* of 1917 cited as the first conceptual artwork.

While conceptual art is a current in the history of art, *conceptualism* is a cross-temporal critical attitude towards the object (Newman, Bird 1999: 5) – the understanding of the term that I involve throughout this article.

One of the most prominent theoreticians of conceptual art, Peter Osborne (1999), classifies historic conceptualism into: light (incipient forms of conceptualism developed during the early avant-gardes), radical (that led to the dissolution of the visual and material forms of the work of art into the field of pure idea and philosophy in the neo-avantgardes of the '60s), and 'generic'. The latter is for him the generator of today's conceptualism and incorporated other domains, like space, identity and social presence, becoming a tool of interdisciplinary agency in the cultural field, contrary to what had claimed the early radical conceptualism, that excluded visibility from conceptualism (Osborne 1999, 64–65).

Tony Godfrey (2006) also talks about the new visibility that has emerged in contemporary conceptualism beyond the initial puritan conceptualism. Along with it, painting has also come back into consideration, whereas hyperrealism and conceptualism can merge. In general a pluri-medial approach is dominating conceptualism. Godfrey identifies the connection to a context (in which the works are intervening) as a defining feature of this new conceptualism. He has launched, therefore, another term that would be more inclusive for post-conceptual art: 'Contextual Art', which is definitory especially for the later post-conceptual art of the '90s to today – where art emerges as a reaction to its social and political context.

The object in Conceptual art

Conceptual art is characterized by a shift from the object to the concept (Newman, Bird 1999: 6), even if during the 1980s conceptual art re-emerged with new-image based media such as painting and photography (Newman, Bird 1999, 8). With Sol Le Witt and Joseph Kosuth in the '60s –'70s the thinking processes of the artist became more important than the existence of a final work. By consequence, the routes that an object experiences in time and space, its transformations became more important than a material form, as these processes reveal larger cultural, political and social aspects. If a final object nevertheless emerges out of these interconnected fields, it could manifest in an infinite plurality of media and temporalities (according to Sol Le Witt, 1969). Conceptual art introduced therefore into the history art objects that are not accomplished, narratives that are not presented as definitive and shifted the accent from material, aesthetic objects and display forms towards an 'analytical', even immaterial 'object'. Newman and Bird explain in their introduction to 'Rewriting Conceptual Art' (1999) that by demolishing medium-specificity and promoting inter-disciplinarity, conceptual art aimed at becoming a tool of scientific enquiry, and turning art into an investigative and cognitive process that can be invested also in other domains (Newman and Bird 1999, 5). The object as the sum of complex factors in the cultural field and as agency in the social space or within institutions is meant to act in the cultural and political space. It is context-dependent and interactive. This 'conceptual object' has had major repercussions on other disciplines dealing with artistic objects – notably museology. In this context it contributed to the formulation of a museologic

display that is not based on a fixed identity of the objects, stimulating critical, controversial discourses on the transformations and alterations of objects in time. Conceptual's art relational approach changed also the demands placed upon the viewer, as explain the same authors. (Newman and Bird 1999, 7): the viewer should feel included into the exhibited piece as a co-creator and an active co-thinker of the object.

Performativity and Practice in Conceptual art

The conceptualism of the neo-avantgardes established *performativity* (or *agency*) as an important attribute of the artworks to manifest themselves, to articulate in an expressive way what they represent. Performativity is not only a quality of the artistic or cultural object but represents its main function: its power to create a reality in a certain context, simply by being there, independently from its narrative or aesthetic content. As Dorothea von Hantelmann (2007) shows in 'How to do Things with Art', contrary to previous art forms that were valued rather for themselves than for their agency in the social space, performativity establishes a connection between the work and its social and political environment. It embodies the effects that any object can have upon its surroundings, that it influences and shapes.¹ The idea of performativity shifts also the attention from the object as a fixed presence, towards its capacity to relate and to react to its context. Its impact is measured in a processual way, that overpasses physical conditions. The performative turn that followed in all cultural domains rethought the cultural object, especially in regards to its power of emancipation from its institutional context – which had major repercussions in the debate around a new museology.

The avant-garde of the 1960s which advocated the disappearance of the work in its material form, experimented with the complete abolishment of documentation of the work of art (reproductions of any form, recording etc.) as it was perceived as a means of prolonging the work's material form and its economic value. Michael Newman (1999: 214) shows that recent (or post-) conceptual art, on the contrary, raised documentation as autonomous work. Newman shows that the recent interest of conceptual art for documents derives from the fact that it augments content and builds up a palimpsest of information. Art can acts as a tool of analysis and investigation in these past forms of a given object or situation and in the processes in which they were entangled. As a consequence, contemporary art started progressively to integrate other disciplines (as sources of information on plural contexts of the objects), use their methodologies and operate more and more pluri-disciplinary. Museology, especially ethnologic museology became a favourite field of investigation for conceptual artists, as it deals with art objects as historic documents. In this context, contemporary art digs and interprets information around origin of the object, functions, transformations, ownership, collectors, the way in which objects have been successively valued and traded – questions of interest for both disciplines. As it will be shown in the examples more down, the result is not the production of new artistic objects, but the generation of thinking processes, of cultural processes that involve local communities and of new ways to appropriate and integrate the heritage into daily life and into the present.

RESULTS

1. CONCEPTUAL ART AND HERITAGE

¹The term 'performativity' comes from John Austin in his 1955 lecture 'How to do Things with Words' (Austin 1962) where he defines a 'performative utterance' as one that brings an action into being, solely through its expression

Interventions in the Art Museum – selected historic positions

Without aiming to make an exhaustive chronology, I will mention early artistic position that were groundbreaking in their dialogue with museology, determining the fundamental principles of recent museologic critique. Installations that question museological display were first oriented towards the art museums and appear with the beginning of the 20th century. Elena Filipovic (2011) shows how the emergence of conceptual art and especially the work of Marcel Duchamp launched sustained reflections around the art 'museum'. While Duchamp personally rejected art museums, his first ready-mades such as *The Bottle Rack* (1914), *Fountain* (1917) or *Air de Paris* (1919) contest the hierarchic display system of the museum and its accent on representativity. By working with quotidian, author-less and serial objects (and not crafted, singular, author-made pieces) the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp gave significance to objects according to the ways in which information about these objects is constructed and mediated – and not according to formal, thematic, aesthetic or essentialist qualities. These early ready-mades define the art object, according to ambiguous, unfinished aspects and represent some of the first attempts to challenge museologic display with its predilection for singular, representative objects. Firstly directed towards the authority of the art museum, these 'artistic project' progressively affected other branches of museology.

Besides his ready-mades Duchamp has also developed the first installations in the history of arts. His *Mile of String* installation shown at *First Papers of Surrealism*, New York, 1942 connects with a continuous string all the objects existing in a museum hall. The artwork consists of the relations between the museum objects and not the objects themselves (Kachur 2001, 187), challenging the understanding of the value object. As is shown by Lewis Kachur (Kachur 2001, 8-12) in 'Displaying the Marvelous', the role of Marcel Duchamp was essential in defining the main principles of installation art: the artwork lost its pedestal and therefore lost its representativity, the artwork filled the entire exhibition, therefore became spatial, the artwork does not consist of a singular piece, but of a complex of pieces, while the relations between them formulate the meaning of the artistic work.

Although contesting the institution, these early conceptual experiments have been nevertheless assimilated by the art museum, which initiated an ambiguous relationship between mutual reinforcement and controversy. Boris Groys explains the early absorption of conceptual art into the art museum through the duality of the dominant/central – marginal/external paradigm in cultural policy. For him the new is the alive/the vivid in art, which is considered to be outside the museum, the archive or the library. Groys argues in his essay 'On the New' (Groys 2008, 23–43) that the act of collecting in museums determines that 'art' always has to seek the new, the alive, the real, in order to museify it (Groys 2008, 25). The repercussions are recognisable in today's principles of 'new museology' with its accent on inclusion and dialogic display, but also in the still persisting controversy over the relation between art as representing 'the new' and heritage as 'the old'.

Although Andy Warhol is considered the father of Pop Art his work is essentially conceptual in nature. He confronted systematically with the process of museologisation and art's capacity to resist to the authority of the institution. In 1969 he was invited for a solo exhibition at the art and history Rhode Island Museum and decided to 'curate' a selection of items from the storage rooms of the Museum. As it is pointed out by Huberman (2015), Warhol took out almost all items from the museum's archive

and exhibited them serially, mixing different criteria of display: showing the objects and their representation (his own polaroids of the objects together with the objects themselves), showing the packages in which the objects are stored, without showing the content, showing the objects placed on the ground and all the items classified by the museum under one category. Celebrating the museum as a container of objects and its role to be an inclusive repository, he uncovers unexhibited material, annuls museologic curatorial authority, 'neutralizing any individual or social body's ability to discern and determine value' (Huberman 2015).

Like a conceptual curatorial manifesto was also Harald Szeemann's intimate exhibition held in his apartment (1974) as a counterpoint to the auctorial 'masterpieces' displayed at Documenta 5, that he curated himself in 1972. In this exhibition he showed his grandfather's tools for hairdressing, arranged in a museologic display. While presenting minor objects, without any particular claim at representativity, Szeemann fused display principles of contemporary art with those of ethnology museums, at the same time subverting their principles and questioning the authority of the institution (Schjeldahl, 2019).

In the 1980's Group Material started to show their work under form of *Timelines*, replicating the universal museologic display criteria into the field of contemporary art, nevertheless by distorting it: including into the official historic narrative anarchic movements and subversive acts. Inserted in an intertextual display of works of art, artefacts and found documents this alternative history writing challenges official narrative with multiple and contradictory narratives.

Progressively absorbed also into other cultural fields, these innovations introduced emancipatory principles into museology. Coupled with de-colonising efforts implemented into museology, these methodologies turned into valuable tools of reconsidering colonial hegemonic cultural relations, object appropriation, distorted history writing that have been left out from regular museologic display. Conceptual art can therefor have an important role to play for what Benoit de l'Estoire calls: the uncovering of 'colonial legacies' (Estoire 2008, 268). He differentiates between the writing of colonial history and the revealing of colonial legacies: the first focuses on the colonial past, while the former is explicitly focused on the various uses of the past into the present. For him, following this legacy means taking the citizen of the post-colonial world from the position of a passive inheritor of colonial history, into an active confrontation with relations that reach from the past into the present and affect us all – even if we did not directly participate at this history.

Decolonising Interventions – selected contemporary positions

More and more artistic positions engage to uncover what Tunbridge and Ashworth (1997) called 'dissonant heritage', which they considered intrinsic to any heritage. This attention for political aspects of ethnologic heritage is presents in the work of artists such as: Kader Attia, Sergio Verastegui, Peggy Buth, Thomas Hirschhorn, Yinka Shonibare, Danh Vo , Mathieu Kleyebe Abonnenc, Sammy Baloji, Otobong Nkanga, Bouchra Khalili, Adam Pendleton, among many others. I adopt the term politics in the sense defined by Andrea Witcomb and Kylie Message (2020) in their recent volume *Museum Theory*, in the sense of uncovering conjunctural politics and discovering relations between culture and

politics, while 'every aspect of a museum is – and has always been – political' (Witcomb and Message 2020, 28)

The artistic work of the Afro-American artist Fred Wilson born 1954, has been groundbreaking in de-colonising museology since the 1990's, in that it developed a paradigmatic conceptual methodology to reveal the colonial foundation present in American history museums that excluded the history of slavery from its display (Correia 2011, 642). His artistic interventions inside the museum display consisted of changing the positions between the exhibited museologic objects in the glass cases and therefor constructing new historic narratives, and alternative causal relations between the objects – which are typical conceptual methodologies of work. He was also rewriting museum labels, and manipulating museum lighting to reveal histories often hidden by what Wilson has called "the trompe-l'oeil of museum space." (Helfand 2003,1). He was systematically digging into the museum's archives for unexhibited items, often connected to colonialism and slave history, that had never been considered 'representatives' and researching on the reasons for which they had been left out the 'grand narratives'. What he called 'mining the museum' – his lifelong artistic methodology – was based on an early project developed at the Maryland Historical Society in Baltimore in 1992. One of his works was introducing in a display box of crafted silverwork a pair of slave cuffs found in the museum's archive, offering them a right to memory. Pointing to how the display of arts and craft of the white class was made possible by the enforced exploitation of others, signified by the display of traumatic artefacts such as slave shackles. In another work, he placed antique Victorian chairs, obviously destined for the whites and initially exhibited as examples of craftsmanship, close to a whipping post probably used for slave beating, turning them into grotesque spectators seats. (Stokes Sims 2011, 12)

His work is a trend-setting example of conceptual practice in the material culture museums: he treats museologic objects according to the relations in which they are entangled and not as aesthetic prototypes. Without creating new artistic work, he appropriated the heritage object and exhibited it again in the same museum context as a ready-made. Without operating any formal intervention upon it, he altered the object's meaning. Detournement is a main methodology in conceptual art, revealing that an object can have plural meanings that can be reinforced or silenced according to the context in which it is situated. While its original meaning can be diverted by the artists or the public, the complexities of visual policy can be revealed. By uncovering the invisible aspects of Afro-American history and the misleading museologic discourse, while simply re-appropriating museologic objects, Fred Wilson puts into use the impact of this conceptual strategy.

The work of the French-Algerian artist Kader Attia is a more recent example of conceptual artistic practice in the context of museologic heritage and collections. Across his work, Kader Attia is preoccupied with notions such as reparation and contamination, creating a connection between the individual body, collective memory and global history and showing how individual perceptions of the colonial wars are left out regular museologic display. In this installative work for the Documenta 13 (*The Repair from Occident to Extra-Occidental Cultures*, 2012), he introduces personal works and documentary photography and texts on the Franco-Algerian War (1954 - 1962) into a typically

museologic display, supplementing museologic information with the traumatic information that is associated to historic facts. He shows by these means the perpetual wounds and recuperation dynamics that the colonial processes generated and that are linked to individual experiences and biographies which are usually left out the historic narrative. He shows that on both sides of the North-South colonial confrontations, amputated parts of the body and amputated elements of culture can be replaced with foreign elements, but remain painful absences, which damage and alter identity. Cultures are for him a product of dynamics of cannibalisation and reparation – processes which remain invisible in most museologic displays. In other works (for example *Mirror Mask*, 2014) he alludes to the constitution of European modernism: the absorption of African masks in the cubism reveals that modernism emerged from a distorted awareness of the cultural other and the European consciousness got also modified by the clash with the extra-European cultures. His conceptual approach consists mainly of reproducing the museologic display system, but diverging from it, while introducing elements that put it in cause and reveal its hegemonic bases. He also traces a rhizomatic methodology of work, characteristic of conceptualism, in which every object initiates unpredictable connections to other objects and subjects, which goes beyond the self-referential museologic context including personal references of the viewer into the narrative.

These and other contemporary work engaged in museum practice show that conceptual interventions on heritage objects can challenge the norms concerning singular criteria of classification of collections, euro-centric narratives, questions of labelling methodology and the transmission of certitudes, as well as perpetuated colonial perspectives. As conceptual art promotes object-specific analysis it can be also invested in making visible to the audience processes of provenance research.

DISCUSSION

5. CASE-STUDIES. Thinking the relationship object-context

In the following I will present two case studies in which the categories between heritage and contemporary object, curatorial and artistic process, conceptual object, media-installation and performative work merge: the *Breton Wall* (1922-1966) exhibited at Centre Pompidou Paris and the ongoing exhibition and event 'cycle 'Cosmopolis'', initiated 2017 at Centre Pompidou Paris with further editions in 2018 and 2019.

Both of them integrate, analyse and display a plurality of forms, ideas, artefacts, actions devoted to their cultural, social and political actuality, but also reframe, reinterpret and bring onto actuality a related cultural heritage – according to methodologic tools proposed by conceptualism. They both rise important questions regarding museologic paradigms and the politics of negotiation of the relationship between the cultural 'self' and the 'other'. They both develop innovatory models and reflect thinking paradigms related to colonial questions. As the Breton Wall represents a historic way to think the definition of the cultural self through extra-European heritage integration, Cosmopolis brings about very recent understandings of global citizenship, the role of art and the movements and exchanges between the 'museum' and the social space in a pluri-disciplinary and cross-cultural perspective.

The Breton Wall (1922-1966)

The 'Wall' was part of André Breton's atelier in 42, Rue Pierre Fontaine, in Montmartre Paris from 1922 until his death in 1966. Preserved and exhibited at Centre Pompidou, it functioned as a 'moodboard' for Breton. On it he placed contemporary art objects of his time (artistic works by Breton's contemporaries: Picabia, Dali, Kandinsky, Miro, Charles Filiger, Giacometti, Jean Arp, Tinguely, Man Ray), juxtaposed with ethnologic objects collected by Breton during his travels from Papua New Guinea, Marquise Islands, Oceania among others. It also contained photographs, minerals and vegetal objects. The Wall can be considered a 'work in progress' as Breton constantly updated it with new content and changed the position of the pieces on the wall, creating new visual and semantic configurations. The Wall contains hybrid cultural data – product of the subjective interests and passions of its author.

Although the first images of the Breton Wall date from the '60s, it was developed from the 1st World War until the Colonial Wars and the emergence of the new global space. In this sense, it carries 'in micro' principles that have radically subverted the discipline of museology and critiqued its very foundation. Inspired by the principles of Surrealism, the Wall represents a deviation, a polarisation of meaning from the 'ethnographic' museologic model. The fact that no causal narrative can be constructed in the arrangement of succession of objects and that the Wall is personal and therefore subjective, reverts the classic museologic model: the heritage objects are not seen as 'documents' or accounts for a reality that is beyond them. Contrary to the classic museologic display format, the Wall's material culture objects are not joined on the criteria of their excellency or uniqueness as heritage objects, but juxtaposed with contemporary works of art, they reflect their personal, subjective value for André Breton. A multi-medial aggregate corresponding to the spirit of its time, the Wall expresses also the idea of the ready-made and incipient forms of installation art. It also effaces dominant hierarchies between disciplines, between 'high, cultivated art' and 'tribal' or collective art, between natural versus cultural product. Nevertheless, from an ethnological point of view, Breton's Wall is a typical product of its time, as it builds the 'self' (the European intellectual author-collector) by constructing a fictional, exoticized and collective 'other' (a body of Extra-European magic objects) and effacing their individual histories by juxtaposing them with the art objects. The bringing together of ethnologic and contemporary artistic objects which are not based on formal resemblances, but rather on the basis of reciprocal spiritual contaminations, create in this case a hybrid with a new significance and creative power. This can be seen also in the context of the discourse of the avant-gardes, which separated art from the aesthetic of 'beauty'. In fact we could say that the incipient development of conceptual art happening in this epoch, where art ceases to be relevant for its aesthetic qualities, but for its ideatic content, makes itself heard in the background of the Wall.

The Wall subsumed various museologic paradigms. Turning around the figure of a collector and owner (who accumulates in a private ambient according to subjective choices and not to scientific principles) the Wall can be perceived also as a late example of *cabinet of curiosities*. Extrapolating the cabinet of curiosities model into their contemporaneity, many artists connected at that time to André Breton, launched the idea of the *portable museum*: the personal, heteroclitic object of knowledge meant to circulate in a more and more expanding and fast transforming modern world. From 'La Boîte-en-valise' of Marcel Duchamp (first version 1936), to 'Scatoli Personali' (1952) of Robert Rauschenberg and the 'Sentimental Museums' of Daniel Spoerri (of which first was shown in the Centre Pompidou in 1977), these miniature museums are augmenting the identity of an object by associating it with objects from other contexts. The sentimental museum of Spoerri for example has also a rather personal dimension bringing on scene epic and nostalgic urban histories, where common objects witness the life histories

of Parisian characters close to Spoerri, therefore blurring the distinction between the museum dispositive and the quotidian life.

Cosmopolis – a Recent Exhibition at Centre Pompidou

The recently developed multidisciplinary artistic platform at Centre Pompidou – *Cosmopolis* (2021), curated by Kathryn Weir, focuses on research-based, collaborative and interdisciplinary conceptual art practices. Through residencies, exhibitions, discursive programs and publications, it engages with artists who problematise heritage with its objects, contexts, personalities, narratives and the present global exchange of knowledge. The three editions (2017 and 2019 in Paris and 2018 in Chengdu, China) problematised collectivity, artificial and ecological intelligence, inclusive urbanism, social value, humanism, collectivity. The platform Cosmopolis shifted the functions of Centre Pompidou as an institution that *displays* art, to a dispositive that *produces* solutions that unfold an agency and intervene – intellectually and physically – in the social space.

The project opens also the question of a global, collective heritage and the partaking to it which can be understood as a cultural cosmopolitanism. Eric Gable (2010) examines cosmopolitanism from the point of view of its origin: is it a Eurocentric concept, is it specific to privileged flâneurs, or does it invest itself in the solving of global problems?

In his recent E-flux article, Nikos Papastergiadis (2018) elaborates on the shifting functions of the museum in this cosmopolitan world:

It is an effort to gain differentiation from the classical museum's accumulative logic that aspires to maintain an encyclopedic grasp on world culture, collaborative institutional turn cannot be measured in terms of increased productivity. It must generate new knowledge about the historical place of the museum, adopt alternative models of institutional governance, rethink the spaces of aesthetic production, and ultimately accept the role of the public as constituents.' (Papastergiadis 2018).

During an interview that I conducted in January 2018 in Paris with the chief curator of Comspolis, Kathryn Weir, we talked about emerging innovatory practices of appropriating heritage through cultural self-definition. Our conversation turned mainly around methodology: how we can understand and operate with the institution museum and the format exhibition as a mechanism that enables intervention outside of its parameters, into the social space?

There are lots of new forms of artistic networks being developed at the moment and facilitated by new communication technologies that make possible a process of going back and forth and navigating between international conversations and that specific 'local' which I see as the core of the new cosmopolitanism. (...) Yes, one of the main questions is how is it possible not to have in an exhibition just a restitution of things that happened elsewhere (...) During this project we saw how through the human relations that were created during these processes, the institution (Centre Pompidou) functioned in a more flexible way. (Kathryn Weir)

CONCLUSION

This article carries the title *La boîte-en-valise* as a homage to Marcel Duchamp, the thinker of conceptualism. I aimed to show that his influence has vast repercussions in the recent rethinking of the discipline of museology and of heritage practice. To my knowledge conceptualism's influence upon the emergence of the *museologic turn* has not been developed so far and neither the importance of *La boîte-en-valise* (1936), which represents a mobile, personal and dynamic museum. We can think in this context as well of Duchamp's other work that revolutionarized the understanding of museologic space and display: *Mile of String*, 1942, mentioned above. My main aim when writing this article, was to propose that the developments of conceptual art since the beginning of the 20th century had an essential role in the rethinking not only of the role of the culture institution, but also of the heritage object, insights that were further absorbed into museology, and which reflect in the recent discipline of 'new museology'. Practices around the display of heritage, that are at the core of 'new' museologic practices – such as inclusive historical narratives, interactive heritage conceptualisation, social interventions, interdisciplinarity, critical re-thinking of heritage – declare the viewer a co-creator of the heritage object (if it is a material or an immaterial object). I believe that it is precisely at this point that conceptual art can operate as a tool of constructing a link between the conservation of a past inside the archive of the museum and its legacy into the present. As conceptual art deals with the object by approaching it not from a formal and aesthetic point of view, but by its meaning in particular contexts, it can turn into a valuable tool that can mediate between audience and the institution museum. This new approach can present heritage objects in its processual, transformative condition that testifies of conflicting or overlapped histories and includes previously marginalised narratives.

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